

EXPLORING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD
BY YOUTH WHO HAVE AGED OUT OF FOSTER CARE AND
IDENTIFY AS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, OR TRANSGENDER

By

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ABSTRACT

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Thousands of young people in the United States are terminated from foster care services each year because they have reached the age of ineligibility, commonly referred to as “aging out.” These young women and men face the challenges of adulthood with whatever survival skills they have acquired during childhoods marked by abuse, neglect, loss, and instability. Studies indicate that a significant number of these youth are not prepared to secure and maintain the resources they need to succeed in adulthood such as stable housing, steady employment, and continued education.

Among those who age out of foster care are young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). Although research has increased an understanding of the experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care, studies focusing on their experiences while transitioning out of this system and into adulthood have been largely absent in the literature. This qualitative study is an effort to address this gap in the research. Using a modified grounded theory approach, this study explores the experiences of 10 ethnically diverse LGBT youth, between the ages of 18 and 25, as they attempted to obtain housing, employment, and education after aging out of foster care. Also examined were study participants’ perceptions about the preparation they received during foster care and the support they were given after foster care to successfully transition to adulthood. Of particular interest to this study were the youths’

perceptions about whether their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression had an impact on their experiences of aging out of foster care and achieving self-sufficiency.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 ethnically diverse youth, between the ages of 18 and 25, who had aged out of foster care, and identified as LGBT or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. Results from this study support previous findings that youth who age out of the foster care system have a difficult time transitioning to adulthood, particularly in their efforts to obtain and maintain housing, employment, and education. Furthermore, the majority of the young people in this study reported discrimination and rejection because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression while they were in foster care or transitioning to independence. This discrimination came from peers, birth families, foster families, as well as child welfare staff. More research and education is needed at all levels of the foster care system regarding the needs of LGBT youth who are in or aging out of care. More education is needed for policymakers, foster care workers, foster parents, and biological family members regarding the needs of LGBT youth who are aging out of care. Implications for policy, research, and practice are also discussed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Problem	6
Increasing Rates of Young People Aging Out of Foster Care	9
Poor Outcomes for Young People Aging Out of Foster Care	10
LGBT Youth in Foster Care	13
How Many Youth in Foster Care Are LGBT?	15
What Do LGBT Foster Youth Experience While in Care?	17
The Experiences of LGBT Youth in the General Population	18
Homelessness and Associated Risks	18
Suicide and Abuse	19
Current Trends Regarding LGBT Foster Care Youth	20
The Gap in Information about LGBT Foster Care Youth Who Are Aging Out of Care	22
Addressing the Gap in Information	22
Relevance to Social Work	23
Theoretical Framework	24
Ecological Systems Theory	25
Resilience Theory	25
Emerging Adulthood	27
Purpose of the Study	27
Research Questions	27
Chapter Summary	30
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	31
What the Literature Reveals	31
Literature on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care	33
Early Inquiry	34
The Barth Study	36
The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth	37
Summary of Findings	40
The Experiences of LGBT Youth While in Foster Care	42
Summary of Findings	44
New Literature on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Aging Out of Foster Care	45
The Study's Theoretical Framework	46
Ecological Systems Theory of Development	46
The Microsystem	47

The Mesosystem	47
The Exosystem.....	47
The Macrosystem.....	47
The Chronosystem	48
Interdependency	48
Reciprocity	49
Adaptation.....	50
Resilience Theory	50
Emerging Adulthood.....	52
The Policy Environment for Youth Aging Out of Care.....	55
The Independent Living Initiative - Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986.....	56
The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999	56
Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001	57
Fostering Connections to Success And Increasing Adoptions Act Of 2008	57
The Policy Environment for LGBT Youth in Foster Care	58
Chapter Summary	59
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	61
Introduction.....	61
Research Design Overview.....	61
Rationale for Qualitative Methodology	62
Conceptual Framework.....	64
Interview Protocol and the Eco-Map	67
Recruitment Strategies	68
Personal Contact as an Effective Recruitment Strategy	71
Use of incentive as an Effective Recruitment Strategy	71
Attaining the Sample Size.....	72
The Data Collection Process	74
An Unexpected Finding: The Eco-Map Completion.....	75
The Data Analysis Process.....	76
Member Checking and Peer Review.....	77
Rigor and Trustworthiness.....	79
Confidentiality and Protection of Participants.....	80
Chapter Summary	81
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	82
Introduction.....	82
Description of Participants.....	83
Age, Gender, and Race	83
Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression.....	83
Experience in Foster Care	85
Current Housing Location and Duration.....	85
Current Education Activities.....	85
Current Employment and Duration.....	86

Findings from the <i>A Priori</i> Coding Data Analysis	87
Experiences with Housing after Aging Out of Foster Care	89
Frequent Moves and Short-Term Living Arrangements	89
How Did They Find This Housing?	92
Barriers to Finding Housing	93
Living Alone or Living With Others	94
Summary of Findings: Housing Experience	95
Experiences with Education after Aging Out of Foster Care	95
Assistance in Preparing for School after Foster Care	96
An Unexpected Lesson	97
Barriers to Education	97
Summary of Findings: Education Experience	99
Experiences with Employment after Aging Out of Foster Care	99
How Did They Find Employment?	100
Barriers to Employment	101
Summary of Findings: Employment Experience	102
Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood:	
Services Received Before Aging Out	104
Who Provided These Services?	105
Gaps in Preparation Services before Aging Out	106
Summary of Findings: Preparation Services before Aging Out	106
The Experience of Aging Out of Foster Care	107
Adjusting to the Suddenness of Aging Out	107
Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood:	
Services Received After Aging Out	108
Types of Services	109
Who Provided These Services?	110
Summary of Findings: Preparation Services after Aging Out	111
The Impact of Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender on	
Aging Out of Foster Care	112
Coming Out Experiences While in Foster Care	112
The Pre-Disclosure Hinting	112
The Trial-Run Strategy	113
Who Did Youth in the Study Disclose to First and	
What Was Their Reaction?	114
Disclosing to Foster Family Members and Their Reactions	115
The Experience of Discrimination While in Foster Care	118
Summary of Findings: The Impact of Being LGBT on	
Aging Out of Foster Care	119
The Impact of Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender on	
Obtaining Housing, Education, and Employment	119
The Impact on Education	120
The Impact on Employment	120
Summary of Findings: The Impact of Being LGBT on Obtaining	
Housing, Education, and Employment	121

Findings from the Selective Coding Data Analysis	121
First Impression and Long-Lasting Experiences from Foster Care	121
What Helped These Young People Succeed?	122
Recommendations from Youth to Service Providers.....	123
Recommendations from Youth to Other Foster Care Youth	125
Unexpected Findings	126
Snowball Sampling Ineffective As A Recruitment Strategy	127
The Eco-Map: One Data Collection Tool Provided More Information than Expected.....	127
Chapter Summary	128
 CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS	129
Introduction.....	129
Review of Research Questions with Key Findings.....	129
Research Question 1	130
Housing	130
Education	131
Employment.....	132
Summary of Findings for Research Question 1	133
Research Question 2	133
Research Question 3	135
Research Question 4	138
Research Question 5	140
Summary of Research Question Findings.....	141
Implications for Practice.....	142
Preparing Child Welfare Agency Staff and Volunteers.....	142
Preparing Foster Families	143
Preparing Other Foster Care Youth for Living with LGBT Youth	144
Preparing Current Social Workers	144
Additional Issues to Consider	145
Implications for Education.....	146
Preparing Future Social Workers.....	146
Implications for Further Policy Development	147
When Should Youth Be Terminated from Foster Care Services?	147
Recommendation 1	149
What Services Should Be Offered for Extended Foster Care?	149
Recommendation 2	150
What Protections Should Be Provided for LGBT Youth in and Aging Out of Foster Care?	151
Recommendation 3	151
Implications for Further Research	152
Recommendation 4	153
Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study	154
Lessons Learned.....	155
Researcher Reflections.....	157

APPENDICES	158
Appendix A - interview Questions	159
Appendix B - Eco-Map Diagram	162
Appendix C - Recruitment Flyer.....	163
Appendix D - introductory Letter/E-Mail to Solicit Volunteers.....	164
Appendix E - Research Participant information and Consent Form.....	166
REFERENCES	169

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1:	Definitions of Terms Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.....	14
Table 2:	Dissertation Theories and Question Comparison	29
Table 3:	Summary of Literature Review on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care.....	41
Table 4:	Study Participant Recruitment Locations and Contacts with Results.....	70
Table 5:	Comparison between Computer Generated Codes and Manually Generated Codes.....	78
Table 6:	Demographics and Experience in Foster Care of Study Participants	84
Table 7:	Current Housing, Education, and Employment Status of Study Participants.....	86
Table 8:	<i>A Priori</i> Categories for Phase 1 Data Analysis.....	88
Table 9:	Housing History, Current Housing, and Who Helped Find Housing	90
Table 10:	History of Employment, Current Employment, and Who Helped Find Employment.....	103
Table 11:	Coming Out and Disclosure Experiences of Youth.....	116

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework.....	26
Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for LGBT Youth Aging Out of Foster Care and Transitioning to Adulthood.....	66
Figure 3: Eco-Map Diagram.....	162

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For many young people who are aging out of foster care, the transition from dependence as an adolescent to independence as a legal adult can be abrupt and unsettling (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). Thousands of foster care youth face a milestone birthday each year, the day they reach the legal age of majority, with ambivalence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012a; Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011). On one hand, they have attained the age when they are considered adults and can enjoy their long awaited autonomy; on the other, they must leave behind many belongings that have become familiar to them over time. These belongings – or places to belong – include their home, school, friends, neighborhood, and a system to which they have learned to adapt during their time in state-sponsored care. Foster care can be a transitory existence and many children and adolescents experience the loss of people, places, and things during their time in care; however, aging out of foster care provides a sense of permanency that few youth are prepared to encounter.

Research studies indicate that the future for a significant number of these new adults is not promising (Anderson, 2003; Collins, 2004; Collins & Ward, 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Dworsky, 2008; Leigh, Huff, Jones, & Marshall, 2007; Pecora et al., 2006a; Stein, 2006; Stott, 2013). Simply put, too many young people who age out of foster care are not ready for life on their own at the age of 18 or 21. Discharged from the oversight and responsibility of the state foster care system, they struggle to belong to a new system, a system of work and financial responsibility, of accountability and long-term consequences.

This new system of adulthood presumes self-sufficiency and offers a dramatic decrease in the support they have come to know and expect through foster care. They must juggle work, school, transportation, bills, groceries, health care issues, shifting relationships, and a host of other stressors, all without the familiar safety net of foster care services. A growing number of studies demonstrate that without this support thousands of former foster care youth each year experience consequences such as unemployment or chronically low paying jobs (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006a), reoccurring homelessness or unstable living conditions (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Reilly, 2003), and a stagnation of their educational attainment (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, Wyatt, 2005; Pecora, et al., 2006b; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). These circumstances can lead to increased poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, early parenthood, sexual exploitation, involvement with the criminal justice system, and, in some cases, hopelessness and even suicide (Collins, 2004; Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2011; Jones, 2011; Masten et al., 2004; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

As if these challenges to survive and thrive are not enough, within the population of youth who are aging out of foster care are individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression are in the minority. These young people identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). There are also youth, who are included in this group, that are questioning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression; therefore, the term is often seen as LGBTQ. Although some research studies continue to deepen our understanding of what happens to all young people once they age out of foster care (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Pilliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Festinger, 1983; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006a; Ragg, Patrick, & Ziefert, 2006; Stott & Gustavson, 2009), and other studies provide insight into the experiences of LGBT youth while in the foster care system (Elze

& McHaelen, 2009; Estrada & Marksamer, 2006a; Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Gilliam, 2004; Gallegos et al., 2011; Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006; Mallon, 1998; Mallon, 2001b; Mallon, Aledort & Ferrera, 2002; National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2006; Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006; Wornoff & Mallon, 2006), little is known about the specific experiences of LGBT youth once they age out of care (Dworsky, 2013; Lenz-Rashid, 2006).

An extensive literature review revealed that, to date, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression have not been investigated as primary factors in outcome studies of individuals who have aged out of foster care. In fact, a recent report by Dworsky (2013) states, “The lack of research on the relationship between self-sufficiency and sexual orientation represents a major gap in the literature” (p. 1). Dworsky was a principal investigator on the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al., 2011), one of the few longitudinal studies on the outcomes of young people who have aged out of foster care. Using the extensive database from the nine-year study, Dworsky’s (2013) recent issue brief is the first attempt to draw a comparison between the self-sufficiency of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who have aged out of foster care and their non-LGB counterparts. More on the findings of this report will be presented in Chapter Two.

What is known about the experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care is not encouraging. Several studies report a tendency on the part of the child welfare system to either ignore the sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression of these youth in care or to actively discriminate against them because of it (Mallon, 1998; Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006; Wornoff & Mallon, 2006). In addition, Craig-Oldsen, Craig and Morton (2006) report that meeting the developmental and emotional needs of youth in foster care can be even more challenging when these young people are facing the issue of understanding their sexual

orientation and gender identity in a non-supportive environment. Whether as a result of inadequate knowledge and training about LGBT issues, or because religious and social beliefs hinder culturally competent care, we know this neglect and/or abuse influences the experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care. What we do not know, however, is what impact, if any, these responses to their being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender have on these young people once they age out of foster care, or during their transition from foster care to adulthood.

The overarching question for this research is how these youth manage the transition from foster care to a life beyond care, a yet unstudied phenomenon. To address this gap in the research, a modified grounded theory study was conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and have aged out of the foster care system in the United States. A total of 10 young women and men participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews and their responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. These young people were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old; they had aged out of the foster care system within the past five years or were receiving extended foster care services in their state; they identified now or in the recent past as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation; and, they were willing to be audio recorded in an interview.

Of particular interest to this exploratory qualitative study were the participants' experiences in attempting to obtain independent housing, continue their education, and secure gainful employment once they were terminated from full foster care services. These key variables – housing, education, and employment – have been identified by previous studies as important indicators of self-sufficiency and the successful transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2011; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012a; Dworsky et al., 2012; Pecora et al., 2006a

Stott, 2013). Furthermore, this study sought to examine whether the participants perceived reactions to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to have affected their experiences of being in foster care, aging out of foster care, or of obtaining the previously mentioned success indicators.

The purpose of conducting this qualitative study was to provide former foster care youth an opportunity to share their experiences and insights in a more profound way using their own words. Grounded theory methodology for data collection and analysis was utilized because it offered a means of developing critically needed theoretical foundations for policy and practice in the area of foster care services, particularly in relation to working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Several child welfare and social work researchers have identified the absence of a strong theoretical approach to social services, particularly with vulnerable populations such as foster care children, as a detriment to competent care (Avery, 2010; Freundlich, & Avery, 2005; Stein, 2006; Van Breda, Marx, & Kader, 2012). Therefore, this study endeavored to turn the rich, descriptive feedback provided by the young men and women who participated in the interviews into both building blocks for emerging theory development as well as practical information for professionals in the child welfare system. This two-fold approach is intended to help shape appropriate services, programs, policies, and future research that can assist all young people who are aging out of foster care to successfully transition into their adulthood.

To accomplish these previously stated goals, this dissertation provides the following:

- The remainder of this chapter contains a discussion of why this particular study was undertaken and the evidence used to support the need for exploration in this area of social services and with this population. In addition, there is an introduction to the

issues facing LGBT youth, in general, and those in foster care, and a brief discussion of the study protocol and the theories informing its development.

- Chapter Two provides a review of relevant literature related to the research studies on the effects of aging out of foster care and the experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care. Of particular interest are the studies addressing the three identified success indicators – housing, education, and employment – and how effective former foster care young adults are in obtaining these indicators. In addition, the theoretical framework for the study is explained in depth.
- Chapter Three describes the qualitative methodology used to conduct the current research study, as well as the rationale for using this method of inquiry and strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis phases.
- Findings from this research are presented in Chapter Four, with descriptive passages using the study participants' own words and charts and tables to illustrate findings.
- Finally, Chapter Five offers a discussion of the implications of the findings for practice and policy, what these mean for child welfare and the social work profession, as well as recommendations for future research efforts.
- The appendices contain all relevant documents for this study, including the letter of consent, recruitment materials for participants, the interview protocol, and an example of an eco-map, which was another data collection tool used in the study.

Background of the Problem

Foster care has been in existence in the United States for 160 years, with a mission to provide a safe haven for all children who have been neglected, abused, orphaned, and otherwise

dispossessed by their birth families or principal caregivers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a; Children's Aid Society, 2013; Schene, 1998). More specifically, foster care is seen as a temporary measure to protect children, with the ultimate goal of returning them to a safe and permanent family situation whenever possible (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012b). The accomplishment of this goal has been entrusted to state or county operated child welfare systems that administer a variety of services for hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents each year. Although the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides oversight and funding for foster care services throughout the country, each state or county sets its own policies and eligibility requirements for the programs and services it offers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012a).

Foster care is provided in home settings with relatives, fictive kin, or in families that are not related to the child. Care is also provided in congregate settings, from small houses to large residential complexes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012b). Some youth are housed in locked-down facilities, where they are provided with necessary mental and behavioral health treatment. Throughout its history in the United States, the care of children and adolescents who have lost or been removed from their birth parent(s) has experienced its own evolution. The idea of what is "best practice" for protecting and, in many cases, raising these vulnerable individuals has changed with the times. Accepted practice has shifted from placing children in workhouse orphanages in order to teach them a trade, to sending them on orphan trains across the country to provide a healthier environment, to reunifying them with their birth families as soon as possible, to terminating parental rights and securing appropriate adoptive homes as quickly as legally feasible (Myers, 2006). Regardless of the current thought on the most effective methods, the lives of thousands of children and adolescents are affected by foster care each year.

According to the most recent report from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), more than 400,500 children and adolescents were in the foster care system as of September 2011 (DHHS, 2012b). The positive news is that the vast majority found a permanent connection to caring adults in their lives through either reunification with their birth family, adoption, or permanent guardianships. In 2011, 52% of all foster care children returned to their birth parent(s) or primary caretaker(s), another 20% were adopted, 8% were living with other relatives, and 6% obtained a legal guardianship (DHHS, 2012b). The news is not positive for all foster care children, however, and many reach the age when they are no longer eligible for services even though they have not achieved permanency through reunification, adoption, or guardianship. In these cases, the process for relieving the foster care system of responsibility for the continued care of these young people is called by many terms including, emancipation, termination, care leaving, or aging out. Regardless of what it is called, these young people are no longer eligible for support from the foster care system and must assume sole responsibility for their own care and future. Some are successful with the transition, while others are not able to maintain their independence from government-provided services. Often, this means that these young adults end up receiving services from other state-sponsored social welfare programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), Section 8 housing assistance, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, if they have children (Courtney, Hook & Lee, 2012).

As a result of federal legislation, some states offer extended foster care services to young people through age 21; however, these services are limited in scope and funding. Furthermore, some states and counties do not participate because of the increased financial burden on their already taxed child welfare systems (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b).

Increasing rates of young people aging out of foster care. Tens of thousands of young people in the United States age out of care each year. The age at which this occurs is usually between 18 to 21 years old, depending upon each state's foster care policies (Dworsky & Havlicek, 2009; DHHS, 2012b). Regardless of their financial, educational, or emotional readiness for life without the support of foster care services, these young women and men are declared legal adults and discharged into their own care. According to the most recent estimates by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (DHHS, 2012b), in the year 2011, more than 26,000 young people were terminated from foster care services across the country. This brings the number of those who have aged out of the system in the past decade to more than a quarter of a million people (McCoy-Roth, Freundlich, & Ross, 2010).

In 2000, 7% of the adolescents exiting foster care were listed under the “emancipated” category; by 2010, that percentage had risen to 11% (DHHS, 2012b). The latest AFCARS report indicates the rate remained steady at 11% in 2011, meaning that more than one in ten adolescents left foster care without a successful permanency outcome (DHHS, 2012b). During the same ten year period, the total number of children in foster care each year gradually decreased; however, the number of youth aging out of care steadily increased (DHHS, 2012b; McCoy-Roth, Freundlich, & Ross, 2010). Child welfare professionals have interpreted this to mean that child abuse and neglect prevention strategies over the past few decades have effectively worked to reduce the need for children to enter foster care in the first place or, when they do come into care, to promote permanency through reunification with their parents, adoption, or guardianships (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). During the same period, however, efforts to improve permanency outcomes for older youth through policy and practice have not been as successful (Avery, 2010; Simmel, 2012; Stott, 2013). The result is that more young people each

year face the challenges of leaving foster care and transitioning into adulthood without a permanent place to call home.

Poor outcomes for young people aging out of foster care. For young people who are aging out of foster care, the shift to independence is often sudden and traumatic (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). As Vaughn, Shook, and McMillen (2008) explain, “Youths aging out of the child welfare system undergo two transitions. One is from the care, protection, and supervision of the child welfare system to personal autonomy and responsibility; the second is from childhood to adulthood” (p. 419).

Most individuals who reach the age of legal adulthood in the United States do so with a sense of excitement and expectation, as this milestone brings with it both rights and responsibilities. The majority of fledgling adults are not alone in their new journey. They have parents, other family members, friends, and the community to encourage and guide them along the way. In addition, most adolescents have the benefit of easing into adulthood at their own pace with a safety net of social supports to catch them in the event of hard times, misguided decisions, or “growing pains.” Youth emancipating from foster care, by contrast, have a drastically reduced social safety net during this transition because many of the people who surrounded them in their childhood and/or adolescence were foster care case workers, foster care families, residential staff, court personnel, and other professionals who worked for the foster care system (Atkinson, 2008). Whether they were ready or not to face the challenges and responsibilities of independence, once they reached the legal age of adulthood, as determined by their individual states, they were considered adults and no longer eligible for state-supported foster care services.

It appears that many of the youth who age out of the child welfare system into their own care have an accumulated set of issues that can make a difficult childhood an even more difficult

adulthood. An increasing number of studies demonstrate that many of these young people are not able to successfully manage the transition from foster care to adulthood (Anderson, 2003; Barth, 1990; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Settersten, Rumbaut, & Furstenberg, 2005; Shirk & Stangler, 2004; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). Research reveals a host of negative outcomes for foster care alumni/alumnae, including higher rates than their non-foster care peers of homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, teen pregnancy, and HIV/AIDS infection. In addition, these young people are at increased risk of sexual exploitation, victimization, dropping out of school, and experiencing long stretches of poverty (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006a; Pecora et al., 2006b).

Yates and Grey (2012) innumerate many of these results in their study of the risk and resilience characteristics of young people who are aging out, and the numbers are troubling. Academically, fewer than 50% of the youth aging out of care graduate from high school; and while 30% of these young people enroll in college, fewer than 5% earn a 4-year degree (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Yates & Grey, 2012). This is well below the most recent report from the U.S. Department of Education (2013), which shows the national high school graduation rate at 78.2%. In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) reported that 66.2% of those who graduated from high school in 2012 were currently enrolled in colleges or universities. In the area of employment, greater than 67% of youth who have aged out cannot maintain steady employment in the first few years of leaving foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2008). This leads to periods of housing insecurity, and some studies have shown that more than 50% of these youth struggle with homelessness at least once after they leave foster care (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006a). These rates are much higher than the national range of 2.5 to 6.5% of people who are homeless in this age range (Ammerman et al., 2004).

According to a report from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), one of the largest longitudinal studies of youth who have aged out of foster care, many problems with adjustment to adulthood tend to persist over time (Courtney et al., 2011). Four years after aging out of care, the majority of Midwest study participants continued to lag behind their non-foster care peers in educational attainment, continuous employment, annual income, and adequate health care. At the same time, they had higher rates of criminal justice involvement, victimization, and receiving needs-based government services (Courtney et al., 2010). The impact of aging out of foster care appears to have both short and long-term consequences for these young adults and their communities.

The reasons for poor outcomes for many of the youth aging out of foster care are complex, as this is not one homogenous group. These young people come into foster care with a variety of experiences; most, of course, as a result of abuse and/or neglect by their parents or primary caregivers. Once in foster care, their experiences also vary greatly. Some are in care for a short period of time; others remain in care for many years until they age out (Courtney et al., 2010). They may live in a range of housing situations, often moving from one placement to another (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012b). Regardless of their previous living situation, these young people no longer belong to a system that has housed, clothed, fed, educated, counseled, and made small and large decisions for them. Once they age out of care, they are disconnected from familiar routines, rules, and relationships. This disconnection often results in poor decisions that may have long term consequences for their future.

In response to the growing number of studies that point to poor outcomes for young people who age out of foster care at 18, the federal government enacted several child welfare policy reforms such as the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, otherwise known as the

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001, and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, all of which allow states to extend many important support services to youth ages 18 to 21 who have aged out of foster care (Stott, 2013).

In particular, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, was an attempt to improve permanency outcomes for older foster care youth. In addition to allowing states to extend foster care services to age 21, it requires several measures to help prepare young people for either adoption or aging out. These provisions include requiring states to coordinate with schools in promoting educational stability; to develop a 90-day individualized transition plan for youth who are age 18 through 21 and ready to age out; and, to extend adoption incentives five more years, in an effort to promote the adoption of older youth. One additional benefit to this legislation is the expansion of monies to cover the cost of training individuals who are not public service employees but still involved in a foster care youth's life, such as attorneys, private child welfare agency personnel, court appointed special advocates, and guardian ad litem.

Despite this attempt to legislatively promote permanence for older foster care youth, the number of youth who age out continues to increase (DHHS, 2012b). A few studies have shown that some young people age out because they cannot find adoptive homes, while others choose to age out rather than extend services or consider adoption (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Why they make this choice has yet to be determined, but some insight might be gained from exploring the experiences of the youth who have aged out of care. One group of these youth is those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

LGBT youth in foster care. In an effort to ensure clarity, a few definitions or explanations of terms used throughout this study are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Definitions of Terms Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Term	Definition
Bisexual, Bi	An individual who is physically, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to men and women. A bisexual person need not have had sexual experience with both men and women; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all to identify as bisexual
Coming out	The process of first recognizing and admitting one's sexual orientation or gender identity to oneself. For some, this may be a lifelong process.
Disclosing	The process of revealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity to others. This, to, can be a lifelong process.
Gay	This is an overarching term, but usually refers to a boy/man whose primary emotional, sexual and romantic attraction is to other boys/men
Gender expression	External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through "masculine," "feminine" or gender-variant behavior, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, whether or not it matches their birth-assigned sex.
Gender identity	Refers to a sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender. When one's gender identity and biological sex are not congruent, the individual may identify as transsexual or as another transgender category.
Intersex	Describing a person whose biological sex is ambiguous. There are many genetic, hormonal or anatomical variations that make a person's sex ambiguous (e.g., Klinefelter Syndrome). The term intersex is not interchangeable with or a synonym for transgender.
Lesbian	A girl/woman whose primary, emotional, sexual and romantic attraction is to other girls/women
Questioning	This term refers to people who are exploring or questioning issues of sexual orientation and who may not be certain about their own sexual orientation or gender identity.
Sexual orientation	Describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Studies show that sexual orientation is on a continuum and often fluid throughout one's lifetime.
Transgender	A worldwide term used to describe people who do not fit into either the masculine or feminine box. A transgender person's gender identity may not match and/or their gender expression is non-conforming to their biological gender. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. For example, a man who transitions from male to female and is attracted to other women would be identified as a lesbian or gay woman.

The definitions are a compilation from several sources, including the American Psychological Association (2011), Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) (2013), McHaelen (2006), and Mallon (2001a). Although some of the research is dated, numerous studies have shown that sexual orientation appears to occur less as a static category such as heterosexual or homosexual and more on a continuum (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Klein, 1993; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolff, 1985; Shively & DeCecco, 1977). Today, many adolescents and young adults embrace the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, genderqueer, and pansexual to identify their sexual orientation or gender identity (Calzo, 2011; Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012; Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009). In fact, the term LGBTQI2-S has been used to embrace all of the possibilities, and stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and 2-Spirited (a Native American term for gay, lesbian, or bisexual people). It is important to note that the term or terms an LGBT individual prefers to use to describe him or herself can be very personal and sensitive.

How many youth in foster care are LGBT? The number of youth in foster care who are LGBT has been difficult to determine. It had been widely accepted that the percentage of individuals in the general population of the United States who are LGBT ranges from 5 to 10% (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991). However, a 2011 review by the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy at UCLA School of Law examined five large population-based studies and found that the proportion of all individuals in the U.S. population between the ages of 18 and 44 who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender is closer to 3.7% (Gates, 2011). At the same time, this study showed that 11% of respondents between these ages reported at least some same sex attraction or behavior without identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Gates, 2011).

In keeping with previous estimates for the percentage of LGBT individuals in the general population, some studies propose that between 5 and 10% of the total population of foster care youth identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2001; National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2006). However, Jacobs and Freundlich (2006) argue that the percentage of LGBT youth who age out of foster care is even greater because these young people do not benefit from permanency efforts to the same degree as do their non-LGBT counterparts. They point out the lack of integration between permanency efforts in the child welfare field and the development of services for LGBT youth in care. Support for this assertion has been provided by Courtney et al.'s (2011) Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, one of the few studies that pose the question about sexual orientation. In their latest iteration of post-foster care surveys, the researchers found that 27.5% of female respondents and 7.2% of male respondents reported a sexual orientation in a category other than completely heterosexual (Courtney et al., 2011). However, caution must be exercised in generalizing the results of this one study to the entire foster care system and beyond. As Dworsky (2013), one of the principal investigators on the study concludes, "Perhaps the most accurate statement that can be made at this point is that the percentage of youth in foster care who identify as LGB[T] is not known" (p. 1)

The result is that the population of LBGT youth in foster care has remained relatively invisible, and there may be several reasons for this. First, very few government entities and foster care agencies track statistics on youth who identify themselves as LGBT, and often questions about a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity are not asked when they enter or exit the child welfare system. As an example, the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) is a developing repository of data on young people who age out of foster care across the nation

(DHHS, 2012c; Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2011). The creation of this tracking system is mandated by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-169) and will be implemented in every state in the country. Unfortunately, each state has some flexibility in the demographic information it tracks; therefore, the project does not uniformly collect information on sexual orientation or gender identity, continuing the invisibility of LGBT youth in the research about aging out of foster care.

A second factor contributing to the difficulty in obtaining an accurate percentage of LGBT youth in foster care is that often the young people themselves do not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity because they either fear or have experienced social stigma and discrimination as a result of their LGBT status (Estrada & Marksamer, 2006a; Gilliam, 2004; Mallon, 2001b; Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Sullivan, Sommer, & Moff, 2001). Studies have shown that LGBT youth are sensitive to non-supportive environments; therefore, they may not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity even if asked (Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman, & Wong, 2011).

What do LGBT foster youth experience while in care? The consequences of being a hidden minority in the foster care system can be devastating for LGBT youth. Studies suggest not only a lack of acknowledgement of the issues facing LGBT youth in foster care (Council on Social Work Education & Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2009), but in some cases a blatant disregard for the safety and well-being of these vulnerable youth (Child Welfare League of America, 2006; Estrada & Marksamer, 2006b). Research indicates that a significant number of LGBT youth in foster care have faced a range of responses to their confirmed or suspected sexual orientation and gender identity, from ignorance to overt discrimination at the hands of peers, foster families, child welfare workers, or residential staff (Mallon, 1998; Jacobs &

Freundlich, 2006; Wornoff & Mallon, 2006). One project conducted by Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund held national listening sessions with both foster care youth and service providers, and found that youth and practitioners alike felt that social workers were not adequately prepared to work effectively with LGBT youth in out-of-home care (Wornoff, Estrada, & Sommer, 2006). The result is that some LGBT youth can find themselves in a hostile environment within the foster care system and decide to either run away or reject adoption and wait until they age out of care (Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002).

The experiences of LGBT youth in the general population. Although the outcomes for former foster care youth who are also LGBT have not been studied as a separate group to date, the experiences of LGBT youth who face discrimination in the general population can provide some clues as to the future they might face.

Homelessness and associated risks. Many studies demonstrate that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth have an increased risk of homelessness (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzier & Cauce, 2002; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). As a recent article by Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2012) points out, numerous studies support the claim that a large number of homeless youth are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Incidentally, it has been noted that these youth also have a history of being in foster care, often cycling through foster homes, group homes, and the streets. A 2000 study of more than 400 LGBT youth who were homeless in San Diego reported that 65% had previously lived in a foster or group home and 39% reported that they were forced to leave their home because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Berberet, 2006).

Once on the streets, these youth can face the dangers of sexual exploitation and victimization (Salzburg, 2005). Homeless LGBT youth reported being sexually victimized by more people once they became homeless than their heterosexual peers (mean 8.61 perpetrators

vs. 1.24) (Cochran, et al., 2002). Additionally, research based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Homeless and Runaway Youth Survey showed that 46% of gay and bisexual young homeless men and 23% of lesbian and bisexual young homeless women reported exchanging sex for money, drugs, and other needs (Moon, et al., 2000).

Suicide and abuse. One alarming consequence of parental, family, or societal rejection of a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity is the increased risk of suicide (Cochran et al., 2002; Russell, 2003; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Saltzburg, 2005). Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) also found that youth who are aware of their sexual orientation earlier are more likely to attempt suicide during their adolescence, and youth who lost friends as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation were three times more inclined to report suicide attempts. They also reported higher incidences of property damage, verbal insults, and sexual and physical assaults after disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity (Rivers & Carragher, 2003).

One Pennsylvania State University study reported that 75% of young lesbian and bisexual women reported receiving verbal abuse in their lifetime (D'Augelli, 2003). Moreover, 30% reported having been physically threatened, 13% reported physical assault, and 12% reported sexual assault. The same study found that 14% of young lesbians reported verbal abuse and 7% reported physical abuse from their mothers due to disclosing their sexual orientation (D'Augelli).

Transgender youth seem to be at particularly high risk for verbal and/or physical assault. In the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's 2003 national climate study (Kosciw, 2004), 81.3% of transgender-identified high school students report experiences of verbal harassment due to their gender expression, compared to 46.7% of gay and bisexual young men and 35.9% of lesbian and bisexual young women. Moreover, 23.8% of transgender students report physical harassment (vs. 19.5% of gay and bisexual young men and 11.3% of lesbian and

bisexual young women) and 10% report physical assault due to their gender expression (vs. 8.5% of gay and bisexual young men and 2.3% of lesbian and bisexual young women).

Other studies found that LGBT youth are at higher risk of incarceration, criminal behavior, substance abuse (Russell, Driscoll, & Troung, 2002) poor health (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Udry & Chantala, 2002; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006), and increased mental health issues (Mallon, 2001a).

Current trends regarding LGBT foster care youth. As a result of media exposure, anti-bullying campaigns, and public education efforts, issues of discrimination faced by members of the LBGT community have reached public attention. Political and social discourse on topics such as same-sex marriage, gays and lesbians in the military, domestic partner benefits, and gay and lesbian parent adoptions have brought both polarizing rhetoric and an increased desire to understand the experiences of LGBT individuals.

Consequently, progress is being made in educating the child welfare community about the issues facing LGBT youth while in foster care. Over the past few decades, researchers, practitioners, and advocates have applied persistent pressure on state and federal foster care systems to acknowledge the LGBT youth in care. They have conducted studies, developed training curricula, established programs, and published articles about LGBT youth in the foster care system (Barbarett, 2006; Casey Family Programs, 2001; Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006; Mallon, 1998; Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Ragg, Patrick, & Ziefert, 2006; and Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006). As a result, there are new national initiatives underway that have been spearheaded by advocacy organizations such as Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, working in collaboration with the National Association of Social Workers (Elze & McHaelen, 2009), the Council on Social Work Education

(2009), the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2009), and the Child Welfare League of America (Wornoff, Estrada, & Sommer, 2006). These efforts are focused on expanding the skills and building the cultural competence of child welfare professionals in working with young people who are LGBT and in their care. The voices of LGBT youth who have experienced foster care are a vital part of the dialogue, recommendations, and training materials used to accomplish these goals.

Due to these efforts, the plight of many LGBT youth in foster care has now come to the attention of policymakers such as Bryan Samuels, Commissioner of the Administration of Children and Families. He wrote in an Information Memorandum in early 2011, to all state, tribal and territorial agencies responsible for administering foster care services, “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are often overrepresented in the population of youth served by the child welfare system and in the population of youth living on the streets” (DHHS, 2012a, p. 1). Samuels goes on to “urge child welfare agencies to continue to explore the ways in which they may improve daily life and outcomes for young people who are involved in the foster care system and who are LGBTQ” (p. 1).

This call to action is echoed by the current Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, on the Department’s official website (DHHS, 2011). In addition, the Secretary established a Department-wide LGBT Issues Coordinating Council to explore ways to improve the health and well-being of all LGBT individuals in the nation, which would include those in and aging out of foster care. This is a major shift in child welfare policy and an opportunity to ensure LGBT-appropriate services are developed and available for youth while they are in foster care and as some prepare to age out. In order to meet the directive to provide competent and effective programs and services to this population, it is also important to

understand what these young people need in order to succeed as they transition to independent adulthood. To inform these efforts, more research is needed.

The gap in information about LGBT foster care youth who are aging out of care.

There is a growing body of research about the experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care and in the general population, and an even larger number of studies regarding the outcomes of many youth who have aged out of care. Unfortunately, an extensive literature review by the researcher found no published research that addresses the specific experiences of LGBT youth who have aged out of foster care. This finding is supported by a report prepared for the Joint Center Health Policy Institute, which states there is very little information available on the outcomes for young people who are LGBT and aging out of foster care (Leigh, Huff, Jones, & Marshall, 2007).

The result is that LGBT youth continue to exit the foster care system through aging out or running away. It is troubling that the long term consequences of these actions have not been adequately studied, especially in light of the fact that more than 250,000 young people have aged out of the foster care system in the past decade alone, and many of them may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Addressing the gap in information. By conducting a qualitative study, the thoughts, feelings, and insights of these foster care alumni/alumnae can be heard. The goal of this study is to make a contribution to the research literature on youth aging out of foster care, particularly youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The qualitative research process can demonstrate the value of their experiences and empower these young people to tell their stories in order to help others. Hopefully, sharing the stories of LGBT youth who have recently left the foster care system will spark further improvements in the way states, *in loco parentis* (acting as

parent), prepare these young people for successful adulthood. Furthermore, the experiences of individuals in this study may shed light on the experiences of other groups of adolescents served by child welfare services. This information can inform foster parents, service providers, policy makers, and funders in order to improve outcomes for all youth aging out of foster care.

Relevance to Social Work

Social work has been linked to child welfare services since they began and is the primary profession employed by child welfare agencies in the United States (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; National Association of Social Workers, 2013; Social Work Policy Institute, 2010; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). With its code of ethics, emphasis on social justice for vulnerable populations, systems approach, and use of the strengths-based perspective, social work is in a unique position to advance the success of all youth who are aging out of the foster care system (National Association of Social Workers, 2013). In addition, social workers are educated to identify, address, and ameliorate disparities in social service policy and practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). Because of social work's connection to child welfare, understanding the experiences of youth within foster care as well as those who age out of this system is vital in providing competent services. This includes youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. As part of its Commission for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice, the Council on Social Work Education has a Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (CSOGE), which works on including LGBT materials in schools of social work curricula, as well as supporting mentorship of LGBT students and faculty. These efforts communicate the importance of preparing future social workers to be competent in working with LGBT individuals.

In 1983, social worker Trudy Festinger wrote a pioneering book, *No One Ever Asked Us: A Postscript to Foster Care*, and started a dialogue about what happens to young people while in the foster care system and when they leave care. Festinger was not the first person to examine the experiences of this population, but she was among the first to tell the stories of these youth in their own words and to reach a broad public audience. Her work sparked many necessary reforms in the way the foster care system served children and youth. There are no studies currently available that focus specifically on what happens to LGBT youth who age out of foster care. Nearly thirty years after Festinger (1983) started the dialogue, there are still groups of young people in and aging out of foster care who have not been asked to tell their stories. This study is an effort to expand Festinger's discussion to include the voices of foster care youth who are aging out and who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Theoretical Framework

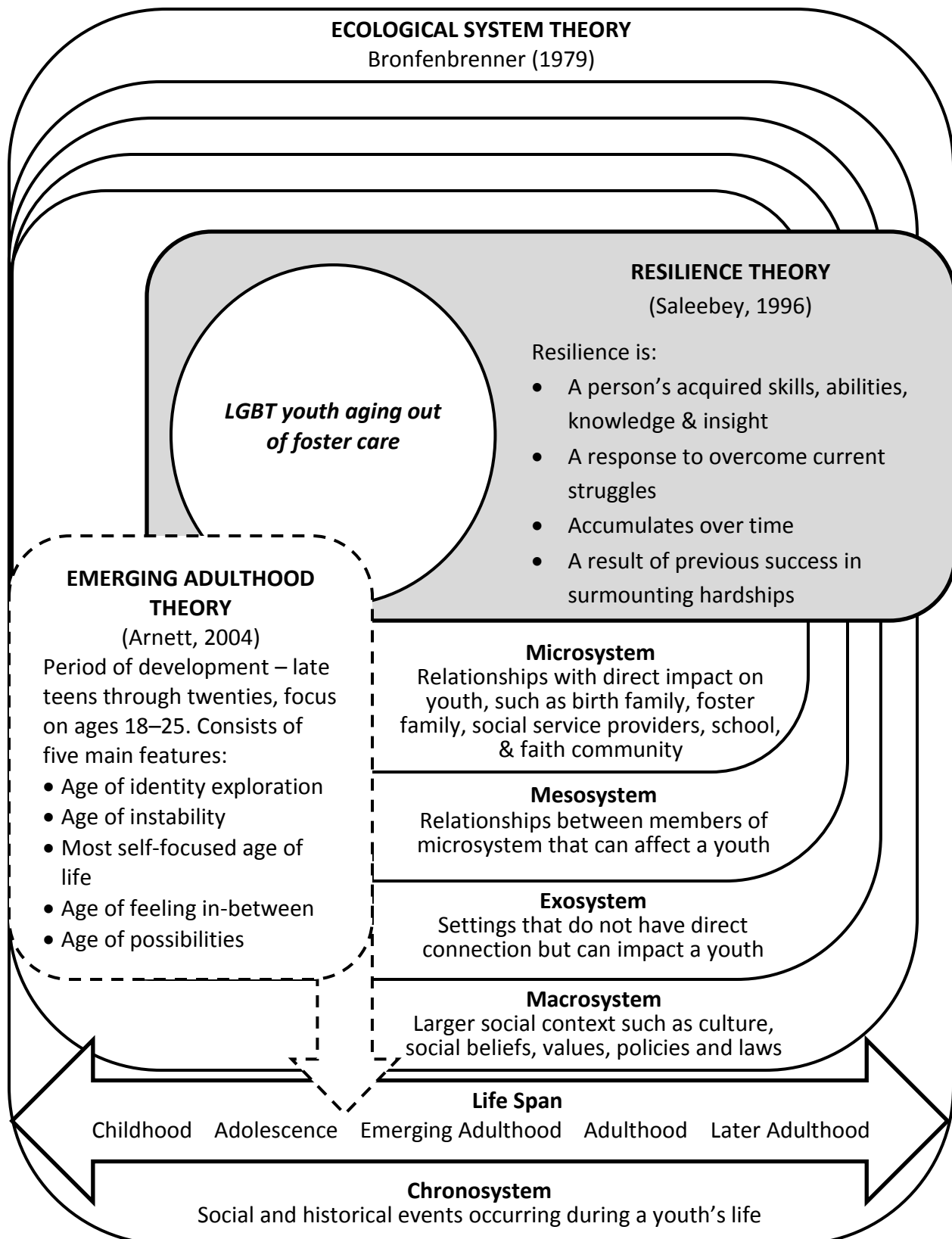
This research study draws upon concepts from three theories and perspectives as they relate to the development of adolescents into adulthood: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karhik, 2009), Saleebey's (1996) construct of the Resilience Theory, and Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory (2004). As previously stated, several researchers who focus on adolescents and foster care have remarked that there is a dearth of theory-based research about youth aging out of care (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Stein, 2006; Van Breda, Marx, & Kader, 2012). In fact, Stein (2006) explicitly states, "There is a substantial body of international research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, on young people aging out of care, but very few of these studies have been informed by theoretical perspectives" (p. 422). This study seeks to address this lack of theory-based

examination by using existing theories as a foundation for developing a deeper understanding of this population of LGBT young adults and their experiences. Although further discussion of each theory is provided in Chapter Two, what follows is a very brief summary of each theory. These theories are also represented in Figure 1: Theoretical Framework below.

Ecological Systems Theory. The overarching theory informing the current study is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, because it conceptualizes the dynamic interconnection between a person and his or her environment. According to Bronfenbrenner, there are five main levels of the social and physical environment that surround an individual. These levels include: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of these levels influences an individual's social, emotional, and physical development in a dynamic exchange of energy and resources. As the young people in this study have been in the foster care "system" and the different levels around them are transitioning, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work on human development and the ecological perspective is germane to understanding the experiences of these young people.

Resilience Theory. Resilience Theory has its roots in the study of children who proved to be very adaptive despite their experience of adversity in childhood. The concept of resilience is a strengths-based perspective that is well suited as a foundation for social work research efforts (Social Work Policy Institute, 2010). Saleebey (1996) describes resilience as "the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing fund of energy and skill that can be used in current struggles" (p. 298). For young people who are aging out of foster care, this resilience is an important survival quality.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



Emerging Adulthood. In 2000, Arnett postulated the concept of “emerging adulthood” as the period between 18 and 25 years of age when adolescents slowly become more independent and begin to explore various life possibilities. Emerging adulthood is a time between late adolescence and full-fledged adulthood when individuals struggle with identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and exploring the possibilities for their future. These five features mark emerging adulthood, and fit well with this study because the young people asked to participate are between the ages of 18 and 25 years old.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study, using a modified Grounded Theory design, was employed to explore the experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of LGBT youth between the ages of 18 and 25 who had recently aged out of foster care. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data about the experiences of study participants and their perceptions of these experiences in aging out of foster care. In addition, participants were asked to create an eco-map as a visual representation of the systems, people, and other key elements in their environment. The researcher also kept field notes of impressions, assumptions, and observations after each interview. Data from these sources were analyzed to expand upon the existing theoretical framework described above and to further develop the Theoretical Map in Figure 1.

The research study sought to answer the following questions:

Research Questions

1. What experiences have LGBT youth who aged out of foster care had in obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment?

2. What services or experiences while in foster care prepared LGBT youth for obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment, and who provided these services or experiences?
3. What services or experiences after foster care prepared LGBT youth for obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment, and who provided these services or experiences?
4. What impact do LGBT youth perceive their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to have on their experience of aging out of foster care?
5. What impact do LGBT youth perceive their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to have on their experience of obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment after foster care?

These questions were the foundation for exploration; however, Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain that the research questions for a qualitative study should provide “the flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth, [because of] the assumption that all the concepts pertaining to a given phenomenon have not been identified, at least not in this population or place” (p. 40). Therefore, as interviews were conducted and data were analyzed, additional or alternative questions arose and were incorporated into the study. Table 2 below demonstrates the connection between the research questions, the interview protocol, and the theoretical framework of this study.

Table 2: Dissertation Theories and Question Comparison

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework
1. What experiences have LGBT youth who aged out of foster care had in obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment?	<p>Interview Question 1: Tell me about where you're living now.</p> <p>Interview Question 2: Tell me about the first place you lived right after foster care.</p> <p>Interview Question 3: Tell me about what happened with school once you left foster care.</p> <p>Interview Question 4: Tell me about the jobs you have had since you left foster care.</p>	<p>Emerging Adulthood</p> <p>Ecological Systems</p>
2. What services or experiences while in foster care prepared them for obtaining these resources?	Interview Question 5: Thinking now just about your time in foster care: Knowing what you know now about life after foster care, were there any experiences or people or services while you were in foster care that helped you get ready for the transition to adulthood?	<p>Emerging Adulthood</p> <p>Ecological Systems</p> <p>Resilience</p>
3. What services or experiences after foster care prepared them for obtaining these resources?	Interview Question 6: Looking back on the first few months after leaving foster care, were there any experiences or people or services that helped to make the transition easier for you?	<p>Emerging Adulthood</p> <p>Ecological Systems</p> <p>Resilience</p>
4. What impact do they perceive their sexual orientation or gender identity to have on their experience of aging out of foster care?	<p>Interview Question 7: I'd like to hear about your experiences now of being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) while you were in foster care.</p> <p>Interview Question 8: Tell me about your experience of being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) while you were in foster care.</p> <p>Interview Question 9: Thinking about your experience of aging out: Do you think/feel/believe being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) affected your experiences of aging out?</p>	<p>Emerging Adulthood</p> <p>Ecological Systems</p> <p>Resilience</p>

Table 2 (cont'd)

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework
5. What impact do they perceive their sexual orientation or gender identity to have on their experience of obtaining these resources after foster care?	Interview Question 10: Thinking about your experiences after foster care: Do you think/feel/believe being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) has affected your ability to find housing, education, and/or employment?	Emerging Adulthood Ecological Systems Resilience

Chapter Summary

In sum, this study was designed to give voice to those young adults who have aged out of the foster care system and who identify as LGBT as well as those who are questioning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The lack of previous work in this area makes this qualitative research exploratory in nature, but has the promise of highlighting the issues faced by this population, particularly in the areas of housing, education, and employment. In addition, these data can help create a path toward future research as well as provide implications for social work practice, research, policy, and education.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section, **What the Literature Reveals**, provides information on the research studies related to youth who are aging out of foster care, as well as on LGBT youth and their experiences while in foster care. The second section, **The Study's Theoretical Framework**, provides a review of three theoretical approaches that act as a backdrop for understanding the experiences of the young adults who participate in this study. These theoretical approaches or perspectives are Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Perspective (1979), Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory (2004), and Resilience Theory (Saleebey, 1996). The third section, **The Policy Environment for Youth Aging Out of Care**, provides a discussion of relevant U.S. federal policies that affect young people who are currently aging out of foster care. And, the final section, **The Policy Environment for LGBT Youth in Foster Care**, offers a discussion of current and proposed legislation related to youth people in foster care who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

What the Literature Reveals

The current study used grounded theory methodology; therefore, it is important to point out at the beginning of this review of the research that some designers of this qualitative research approach do not typically support an *a priori* literature review (Glaser, 1998). Conversely, other grounded theorists (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2004) encourage a thorough review of the history of inquiry and current thinking about the subject in order to create a theoretical framework as well as to design informed research questions. This researcher

consciously chose to conduct a comprehensive literature review in order to gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical and research context of the current study (Wu & Beaunae, 2012).

Over the past few decades, studies have shown that young people who aged out of foster care struggle to meet their needs and keep up with their non-foster care peers in areas of housing, education, employment, and physical and mental health (Anderson, 2003; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Stott, 2013; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). Other research demonstrates that some of the youth in and aging out of foster care each year also identify as lesbian gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) (Courtney et al., 2010; Dworsky, 2013). In fact, several studies indicate that LGBT youth are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, occasionally coming into care as a direct result of the reactions by others to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (Estrada & Marksamer, 2006a; Gilliam, 2004; Mallon, 2001a; Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Sullivan, Sommer, & Moff, 2001).

Further studies show that many of these LGBT youth do not find a safe haven from discrimination, abuse, neglect, or rejection during their time in the foster care system. As referred to in Chapter One, research has identified areas of concern regarding the consequences of overt and covert discrimination on youth who identify as LGBT, whether formerly in foster care or not, particularly increased rates of homelessness, substance abuse, suicide, criminal justice involvement, and mental health issues (Mallon, 2001a; Wornoff & Mallon, 2006). If a state-run child welfare system is to act *in loco parentis* (in place of a parent) for all children and youth in foster care and it assumes responsibility for the safety, well-being, and permanency of each child, this includes the LGBT youth in its care. In the event that permanency for the youth cannot

be secured through reunification with their birth family, adoption, or legal guardianship, then the system has the added responsibility of preparing these children for successful adulthood.

Have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents leaving foster care been readied for the realities of the real world of adulthood by their state parent? The answer to this question is unknown at this time, because researchers have yet to ask it of LGBT youth aging out of care. A comprehensive search of literature using the library search engines at both Michigan State University and Grand Valley State University did not yield a single research study specifically focused on youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and aging out of foster care. The key words and phrases used included “foster care LGBT,” “aging out LGBT,” “lesbian (gay, bisexual, transgender) foster care aging out,” “emancipating foster care LGBT,” and “leaving foster care LGBT,” or variations on these terms. As discussed in Chapter One, a recent issue brief by Dworsky (2013) provided the only discussion of sexual orientation being examined as a variable in outcome studies of youth aging out of foster care. More on this report is provided below. It is possible that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth have participated in previous studies on young people aging out of foster care, but this research did not identify them by their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. In addition, there are no studies, save the Dworsky (2013) report discussed previously, that have compared their experiences or outcomes to their non-LGBT peers.

Literature on youth aging out of foster care. Until recently, the most comprehensive examination of literature on youth who have aged out of foster care appeared to be that of Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth (2005), who reviewed 19 articles, published between 1924 and 2005. These studies showed a wide range of characteristics of the youth who participated in the research, including their history of abuse and or neglect, time in foster care, number of

placements, type of placements, and services received. The studies also looked at outcomes ranging from interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and satisfaction with being in foster care, to educational attainment, criminal history, and use of welfare services. Most of these studies did not use randomized samples and have not been replicated to date, leaving many unanswered questions about the generalizability of the findings (Mallon, 2011). In addition, comparisons between study outcomes have been difficult because the same variables are not examined from one study to the next.

In fact, only a handful of studies that examined the outcomes for young people who aged out of foster care were not directly related to evaluating the results of specific foster care programs or policies. For example, numerous studies were conducted to determine the impact of legislation such as the Independent Living Initiative for Older Foster Children of 1986, on foster care youth who participated in independent living skills training (Blome, 1997; Collins, 2004; Cook, 1994; Courtney & Barth, 1996; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Mallon, 1998), while others looked at the consequences of specific foster care interventions (Pecora et al., 2006). In short, the research to date on young people who age out of care is still only forming a general picture of what happens to some youth, in certain circumstances, and under specific conditions. The following three studies represent the core of this area of research.

Early inquiry. Festinger (1983) was not the first researcher to write about the experiences of former foster care children (Meier, 1965), but her work was one of the most widely read by professionals and lay people, and it had a profound impact on how foster care services were provided. In addition to studying children who were in foster care in the New York Metropolitan City area during the mid-1970s, Festinger examined a sample of 277 young people who had aged out of care in 1975, in order to determine their living situations shortly after emancipation. The

Festinger study was the most rigorous of the projects undertaken at that time; however, it still had significant design flaws. In its favor, Festinger's study used a probability sampling design and investigated only youth who had been terminated from the foster care system because they were no longer age-eligible for services. The drawbacks of the study were that it was conducted in only one community, there was no control group used, and the actual attrition rate of the sample over time was a subject of debate, leaving child welfare professionals cautious about generalizing the findings to other foster care systems. Despite these caveats, Festinger's (1983) investigation identified numerous concerns within New York City's foster care system and revealed that many of the youth who aged out of this system had poor educational, employment, health/mental health, and housing outcomes when compared to youth who had not experienced foster care.

Unfortunately, this study provided only a snapshot look at a small sample of youth once they left care at a specific point in time, and it was difficult to say whether these results would continue into later adulthood. The study brought to light the need for more research into what happens to youth after aging out of foster care. In addition, it played a crucial role in a later court case, *Palmer v. Cuomo* in 1986, which saw a group of former foster care youth bring suit against New York City's child welfare agency for failing to adequately prepare them as they transitioned to independence. The solution to this problem, according to many child welfare professionals, was to develop and support programs that built young people's knowledge and skills as they prepared for life on their own. As a result, in 1986, the Independent Living Initiative for Older Foster Children (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act of 1935; P.L. 99-272: Section 477) was enacted to provide life skills training, mentoring, and other support services to youth when they reached their 16th birthday while in foster care. By 1987, independent living programs were

implemented in all 50 states, and were funded by both federal and state monies. The Festinger (1983) study offers an excellent example of the synergistic interrelationship among research, practice, and policy.

The Barth study. Despite the recognition that further research was needed specifically about young people who aged out of foster care, it was nearly a decade before other studies began to emerge. In the meantime, thousands of young people continued to leave foster care each year without the support of a permanent family or post-care state interventions. One study, conducted by Barth in 1990, interviewed 55 young people who had left the foster care system in the San Francisco Bay Area. These youth had been out of care between one and ten years, were at least 16 years old at the time of emancipation, and were not primarily served by mental health or juvenile justice systems while in the state's care. In addition to an interview schedule that was developed with the input of experienced foster care staff and colleagues, Barth (1990) used a standardized measure, the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), which was created by the National Institute of Mental Health in 1977. Barth noted that previous research had shown increased levels of depression in former foster youth (Mauzerell, 1983, and Anderson & Simonivitch, 1981 as cited in Barth, 1990). The interviews were conducted by trained foster care staff, lasted between one and three hours, and occurred most often in the youth's home.

The findings from Barth's (1990) study confirmed much of what Festinger (1983) had discovered. The majority of young people who aged out of foster care experienced extreme financial hardship (53%); one third (33%) reported engaging in criminal activities such as prostitution, stealing, and selling drugs to obtain money to survive; more than half (55%) left foster care without a high school diploma; some 44% experienced a serious illness or accident

after leaving care; almost one third (31%) had spent time in jail or prison post foster care; and, nearly 1 out of 3 (29%) reported being homeless at some point post-foster care. The study also showed that 100% of the youth who participated had elevated depression scores on the CES-D. Most striking in the wake of the Independent Living Initiative of 1986, was that most of the participants indicated they had not received any training to prepare them for living independently prior to or after leaving foster care.

Although Barth's (1990) study provided a look at outcomes from youth in a different area of the country, it suffered from many of the same drawbacks as Festinger's (1983) work. It examined a relatively small sample (n=55) from one section of the country with no control group. In addition, Barth used a convenience sample, which limited generalizability of any findings. On the other hand, Barth's study provided valuable feedback from the youth themselves to foster care providers and policymakers regarding ways to improve the foster care system's preparation of youth for independence. Greater attention to teaching young people specific skills and helping them find housing were the most common recommendations from study participants. In conclusion, Barth pointed out that mere exposure to independent living skills training in a classroom was not enough to prepare youth for their transition to independence. What youth needed were hands-on experiences and a continuum of transitional services in order to succeed.

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. It was not until a decade late that a multi-state longitudinal study of youth who aged out of care was undertaken by Courtney and colleagues from Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, Illinois (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011). The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth was the largest longitudinal study

of youth who have aged out of foster care and transitioned to adulthood in the country (Courtney et al., 2011). It began with baseline interviews of 732 foster youth (474 from Illinois, 195 from Wisconsin, and 63 from Iowa) who were either 17 or 18 years old and had been in care for at least one year prior to their 17th birthday. Participants were selected by convenience sampling, and subsequently interviewed after they aged out of foster care, at 19 years old, 21 years old, 23 or 24 years old, and 26 years old. Researchers conducted structured in-person or telephone interviews using standardized and project-specific instruments. Although there was some drop out, 82% of the baseline sample (n=602) were still participating in the study when they reached 23 or 24 years old between 2008 and 2009. This research was fashioned after a previous longitudinal study with a small sample size (N=149) conducted by Courtney and colleagues (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001) on youth aging out of care in Wisconsin between 1995 and 1998. Courtney hoped to duplicate many of his initial findings with this larger, multi-state sample.

The study used outcome measures in a wide range of domains, including employment, education, housing, criminal justice involvement, and public assistance. The results from these participants were compared to a nationally representative sample of 23- and 24-year olds who had never experienced foster care as reported in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The findings were disturbing. Fewer than half of the former foster youth were employed at the time of the last survey, more than 25% had no income from work in the past year, and those who were employed were not earning a living wage. The median annual income for those employed was \$8,000. While the majority had a high school diploma or GED by this time, and 30% had completed at least one year of higher education, only 6% had a degree from either a 2- or 4-year school. Nearly 40% experienced homelessness or “couch surfing” since leaving foster

care. Most said they were helped by foster parents and their social workers; nevertheless, only 25% felt ready to exit foster care when they aged out. Although more than 82% (n=602) of participants remained in the study, the results may be difficult to generalize because the sample was not randomly selected.

Other recent studies continue to show that many young people exiting the foster care system do not adapt well to a new environment of independence and adult responsibilities (Avery, 2010; Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Overall, studies report that youth who have aged out of foster care are more likely to experience extended periods of homelessness, remain unemployed for long stretches of time, and return to institutional life in the form of jail, prison, or a mental health facility; others will become pregnant, contract HIV/AIDS, engage in prostitution, or become the victims of a violent crime (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006a; Pecora et al., 2006b). Only a small percentage of these young people will attend college, and fewer still will graduate with a degree, leaving them unprepared to compete for employment opportunities that could lift them out of poverty (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006b).

Research in the area of youth aging out of foster care continues to struggle with methodological limitations, access to qualified participants, and more predictive conclusions (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007). One of the efforts mandated by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was the creation of the National Youth in Transition Database (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2011; DHHS, 2012c). This database collects information provided by all states on the independent living services and financial assistance that are provided to all youth in state foster care. States conduct surveys of foster care youth when they turn 17 years old in order to establish baseline data, and again on the youth's 19th and 21st

birthdays. Information gathered includes outcomes on six goals: educational attainment, access to health insurance, homelessness, financial self-sufficiency, high-risk behaviors, and positive connections with adults. Other information includes educational attainment and special education services that are provided. States that have a large foster care population will use a random sample of youth to follow.

Demographic information is also being collected on these youth, including age, sex, race, ethnicity, foster care status (DHHS, 2012b). Unfortunately, it took more than a decade after the legislation was passed to finalize the rules and procedures for collecting this information and the database is only now fully implemented in several states (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2011). Important to this current study is that collecting information on the youth's sexual orientation and gender identity is up to the discretion of each state. This is unfortunate, as the database provides an excellent opportunity to track the progress of these youth after they leave care and to examine possible similarities and differences between LGBT youth and their non-LGBT peers. It perpetuates the gap in our knowledge of this population. It also demonstrates a lack of understanding about the importance of self-identity in this area and the impact sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression may have on a youth's experiences. That is why this current study hopes to shed a beginning light on this question.

Summary of findings. Table 3 below provides a summary of the findings from the studies discussed previously, related to the specific variables of housing, education, and employment. A more thorough review of research findings on the outcomes of housing, education, employment, and finances for youth who aged out of care was conducted by Stott (2013) and provided much of the information contained in the table below.

Table 3: Summary of Literature Review on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Study	Study Participants	Housing Outcomes	Education Outcomes	Employment Outcomes
Festinger (1983)	N=277 from New York City. Discharged from care in 1975, were 18 to 21 at discharge and in care at least 5 years. (Participants were up to 5 years post discharge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35% discharged without a HS diploma • 34% had some college credits • 5% had college degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% of males unemployed • 19% of females unemployed (when homemakers considered employed)
Barth (1990)	N=55 from San Francisco Bay Area & Sacramento, CA At least 16 years old when emancipated, discharged from care between 1 and 10 years (mean of 3 years) prior to being interviewed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29% reported a time when they had no home or were moving about every week or more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 55% discharged without a HS diploma • 38% did not have a HS diploma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% unemployed
Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al. 2007)	Phase III N=591 from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin Interviewed at age 21.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17% had been homeless since exiting care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23% did not have a high school diploma or GED • 8% had one or more years of college • 2% had a two year degree • 24% were enrolled in school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 48% unemployed • 77% employed in past year • 85% had worked since last interview

The experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care. Although literature regarding the experiences of LGBT youth who have aged out of care was non-existent before Dworsky's (2013) report, beginning in 1992, Mallon conducted and published research on the experiences of LGBT youth while in foster care settings (Mallon, 1992; Mallon, 1998; Mallon, 2001b; Mallon, Aledort & Ferrara, 2002). Much of Mallon's work contains qualitative interviews with foster youth and staff members, and utilizes small samples in specific large urban centers of the country such as New York City, New York and Los Angeles, California. One of Mallon's major findings was the lack of knowledge about LGBT issues demonstrated by service providers working directly with foster care youth. Almost twenty years later, this concern still exists (Council on Social Work Education & Lambda Legal, 2009). Although Mallon and his colleagues have shed light on the problems of LGBT youth in foster care, they have not taken on the subject of what happens to these particular youth once they age out of foster care.

As Lenz-Rashid (2006) points out, LGBT youth who are aging out of care are often overlooked by child welfare professionals, particularly when these young people do not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. The reasons for this lack of disclosure have been documented in related research. In 1987, Wisniewski & Toomey conducted a study that found 30% of social workers surveyed expressed beliefs that were considered homophobic, according to the researchers' standards. In a 1991 Child Welfare League of America colloquium, the lack of recognition and knowledge of the needs of LGBT youth was identified, as well as an absence of education and training to correct this deficit (Mallon, 1992; Mallon, 1997a; Mallon, 1997b; Wilber, Ryan & Marksamer, 2006). In 1994, Sullivan noted, "None of those challenges is more daunting than the task of overcoming the institutional homophobia that pervades the context of child welfare practice on behalf of these children" (p. 302). A more recent study reported that

nearly half (42%) of LGBT foster care youth were either removed or kicked out of their homes as a result of the reaction by family members to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ryan & Diaz, 2005 as cited in Wilber, Ryan & Marksamer, 2006). Once out of the family home, these LGBT youth faced further mistreatment at the hand of the state system that is mandated to care for them. These youth reported being beaten, raped, physically abused, ignored, coerced, attacked, taunted, evicted from placement, belittled, forced into aversion therapy, and called derogatory names (Mallon, 1998; Mallon, 2001b). Peers, foster parents, and group home staff committed this abuse because the youth's sexual orientation or gender identity was either disclosed or merely perceived.

Courtney et al. (2007) did collect information about the sexual orientation of the young people participating in their longitudinal Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth Study; however, the response options showed a lack of understanding in the way young people identify their sexual orientation and gender identity. Response options included: 100% heterosexual; mostly heterosexual; bisexual; mostly homosexual; 100% homosexual; not sexually attracted to males or females; don't know; and, refused to answer. Of the people who responded, 7.2% of females and 1.8% of males indicated they were bisexual, while 4.1% of females and 2.2% of males stated they were either mostly homosexual or 100% homosexual. There were 2.2% of females and 1.1% of males who responded that they did not know their sexual orientation. This would indicate that 13.5% of females and 5.1% of males participating in the study were homosexual, bisexual, or questioning their sexual orientation. This is 10.2% of the total sample that responded to the question (N = 577), and within range of the estimates previously discussed for the percentage of LGBT youth in the general population (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991). Despite collecting these data from

participants, Courtney et al. (2007) did not use the variable of sexual orientation to examine specific outcomes for former foster youth. The end result is that there is no definitive data on the number of LGBT youth aging out of foster care services in any given year, nor is there a comparison in the outcomes of former foster care youth who are LGBT and those who are not.

Mallon (2000) noted in his studies that LBGT youth often cycle through foster homes, group homes, residential care, and the streets. Reports from urban centers serving homeless and runaway adolescents show that 20-40% who become homeless each year are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Mallon, 2000). In a later study, Lenz-Rashid (2006) found that 34% of 104 homeless former foster youth reported being lesbian or gay. Although the study utilized a non-random sample, the high percentages of LGBT former foster care youth begs the question as to whether these adolescents receive adequate support while in and upon leaving foster care. As Wilber, Ryan and Marksamer (2006) suggest:

The lack of leadership and professional guidance related to these key developmental issues has left a vacuum that is often filled by harmful and discriminatory practices based on personal biases related to adolescent sexuality and gender identity rather than informed, evidence-based policies and guidelines. (p. ix)

Summary of findings. The studies discussed above provide a bleak picture for young people who find themselves in the foster care system and are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. There is a general lack of preparation for child welfare workers and foster parents on how to work effectively with LGBT youth in and aging out of care. Almost twenty years after Mallon (1992) opened the closet door on the abuse and discrimination many of these youth experience during their time in a place that is supposed to provide safety (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a), research shows that there is much work yet to be done to provide

culturally competent care for these young people (Council on Social Work Education & Lambda Legal, 2009).

New literature on lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth aging out of foster care. A recent report by Dworsky (2013) compares the outcomes for LGB youth and non-LGB from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth at age 26 (Courtney et al., 2011). According to Dworsky (2013), the findings indicate no statistically significant difference in current living arrangements between former foster care youth who were LGB and their non-LGB peers. In addition, no statistically significant differences between these groups were found in education outcomes. When results of employment between the groups were compared, however, those who identified as LGB had the same rate of employment but received on average a dollar less per hour in pay. Overall, Dworsky (2013) concludes, “Our analysis also suggests that study participants who were categorized as LGB were not, for the most part, substantially worse off economically than their heterosexual peers” (p. 5). On the other hand, the study goes on to state, “Young people aging out of foster care who identify as LGB may face additional barriers related to their sexual orientation, and they may have unique needs that service providers and other child welfare professionals should be adequately trained to address” (p. 5).

Unfortunately, Dworsky (2013) also identifies a major flaw in findings as not being able to report on the experiences of transgender youth, because data on gender identity and gender expression were not tracked during the longitudinal study. Therefore, it is not possible to draw conclusions on whether young people who are transgender have similar or different experiences than their lesbian, gay, or bisexual peers or their non-LGBT peers once they age out of care. In addition, this report used secondary data from the database of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al., 2011), and was not conducting

primary data collection. It is a start, however, in beginning to recognize the presence of LGBT youth in the population of young people aging out of foster care and facing the transition to adulthood with whatever experiences they have had and preparation they have received during their time in state-sponsored care. In the next section of this chapter, a theoretical framework is described for this study. This framework was developed based on the literature discussed above.

The Study's Theoretical Framework

As stated in Chapter One and depicted in Figure 1 on page 26, this study uses concepts from three theories or perspectives: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Resilience Theory (Saleebey, 1996), and Emerging Adulthood Theory (Arnett, 2004). As this current study is not intended to conduct theory-testing, these perspectives are used only as a backdrop to inform this work. There are common elements, however, in all three of these approaches that help in framing the experiences of LGBT youth who are aging out of foster care, and these elements will be discussed below.

Ecological Systems Theory of Development. The overarching theory informing this current study is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, because it conceptualizes the dynamic interconnection between a person and his or her environment. As the young people in this study have been in and exited the foster care "system," a discussion of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work on human development and the ecological perspective is essential. According to Bronfenbrenner, there are five main levels of the social and physical environment that surrounds an individual, and each one of these levels interacts with the individual in different ways. Like concentric layers, these levels surround the individual, exert influence, and create change, just as the individual exerts influence and creates change within each level's environment. The five

levels are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, and they function as follows:

The Microsystem contains those individuals, groups, and institutions which have direct impact on an individual, such as their family, school, faith community, neighborhood, and friends. For a youth in foster care, this could include their birth family, foster family or residential site, their case worker, a court appointed advocate, their mental health providers, and their teachers and special education staff.

The Mesosystem includes the relationships between microsystem elements, such as the connection between the youth's foster family and their case manager, or between a youth's teacher and foster parents.

The Exosystem links the social setting in which the individual does not have a direct role with the individual's immediate environment. For example, a youth in foster care may be impacted by the termination of funding for a program that employs his or her foster care case worker, resulting in reassignment to another program or a new case worker.

The Macrosystem is the larger cultural context in which people live. This can include ethnicity, socioeconomic status, living in an urban or rural neighborhood, or belonging to a sexual orientation or gender identity that is different from the dominant culture. In other words, a youth, their foster parent, school, and parent's workplace are all part of a larger cultural environment. Members of a cultural group share a common identity, heritage, and values. In addition, social welfare policies that impact a foster care youth are considered a part of the macrosystem that surrounds and influences him or her. The macrosystem evolves over time, because each successive generation can exert influence

over and change the macrosystem, which can lead members of each generation to experience their development in a unique new macrosystem.

The Chronosystem contains the social and historic circumstances in which a person lives. These are environmental events and transitions over the course of an individual's life. As an example, a youth who transitions out of foster care into adulthood in 2013, will have a very different experience than one who transitioned in the 1970s, and hopefully, one who will transition in years to come.

Particular characteristics of these “nested” levels of the system relevant to this research proposal include:

Interdependency. A change in one level of the system affects all levels. In the case of youth who are aging out of foster care and forced to leave their home, school, and social supports behind, this can cause disruption between and among the relationships that surround the youth. People, places, and processes that were familiar to the young person are no longer a part of his or her microsystem, causing a change in his or her social environment, and resultantly, a change in the individual. As this change occurs, homeostasis (or balance) is sought by the individual and other members of the different system levels. This can be very challenging for foster care youth because there is a sense of “loss of control” of their lives as decisions are made for and about them in which they have no voice.

The result of this loss of balance may include the youth acting out, running away, or shutting down, which is similar to the classic fight-or flight-or freeze response (Cannon, 1915). One major change that occurs with foster care youth who are aging out is the loss of the foster care system and their identity and place within this system. This

loss can be accompanied by a loss of identity as a “foster care kid,” which can be perceived as either positive or negative by the youth. Regardless of their reaction to this change, the loss of a major element of the system such as the foster care environment can be unsettling at best.

Reciprocity. As these systems are dynamic, there is a constant internal and external exchange of resources. In order to survive in the larger environment outside of an individual’s personal ecological system, there must be an exchange of resources. Most often this is in the form of food, shelter, money, clothing, and other essential survival items. As the individual provides his or her own resources (e.g., time, work, or attention), he or she receives these survival resources in exchange. In addition, there is an internal exchange of resources, described by some as a form of energy generated by the interactions between the individual and other members of his or her microsystem.

For youth who are aging out of foster care, this external exchange can be compromised by a lack of resources to use in trade, such as poor educational achievement, which leads to unemployment, or improper preparation for necessary life skills, which leads to homelessness and other detrimental outcomes. These youth also suffer from a diminishing internal exchange of resources, as many of the people and institutions in their lives are no longer available once they transition out of state care and to independence. If these resources are not maintained by the youth keeping contact with important people in their lives, or replenished by the youth acquiring new social supports, they run the risk of becoming resource poor. This poverty of internal resources can lead to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual acting out, behavior issues, and suicide –

all of the outcomes documented in current research on the impact of aging out for many foster care youth.

Adaptation. As elements within and outside the system begin to change, the individual tries to adapt to these changing environments. In terms of the ecological perspective and systems theory, adaptation is “a dynamic process between people and their environments as people grow, achieve competence, and make contributions to others” (Greif, 1986, p. 225). If an individual has the opportunity to encounter incremental changes in the environment over the course of time, they have a better chance of successfully adapting to these changes. Unfortunately, many young people aging out of foster care face immense changes in their environments and are expected to adapt to these in a very short period of time. This is often where strengths such as resilience are needed to navigate this life transition to adulthood.

Youth who age out of foster care experience momentous changes in their environment at multiple systems levels. Many of the social, emotional, and physical supports they have adapted to during their time in foster care are abruptly removed and often not replaced. Key elements in their world – housing, education, and employment, among others – may change significantly once these individuals can no longer depend upon the foster care system for support. The Ecological Systems Theory provides a way to conceptualize the impact these changes can have on a young person in this situation and their reactions to these changes.

Resilience Theory. Resilience theory has been slowly evolving over the past seventy or eighty years but has drawn more attention in the last two or three decades (Van Breda, 2001). Although there are many definitions of resilience (Stein, 2005), the one that expresses the concept most closely for the current study is that of Saleebey (1996), who describes resilience as

an accumulated and developing set of skills and knowledge, acquired over time as a result of overcoming hardship and successfully meet life's challenges. Resilience is used to help an individual effectively face new struggles. In examining the outcomes of young people who are LGBT and have aged out of foster care, the intent is to explore what resilience factors helped them cope with the transition and where (or how) they obtained these factors. As social work is also grounded in the strength's perspective (Saleebey, 2008), an examination of what works is as important as identifying what does not work.

Resilience theory fits well with ecological systems theory (Van Breda, 2001) because the factors that create resiliency in individuals can also be identified in the different levels of the environment surrounding the individual. Resilience, therefore, is a dynamic interaction between the individual – in this case, the foster youth – and the many levels of the environment around him or her (Luthar, 2006). Resilience is not static, but is regarded by some as an emerging process as well, which is expressed over time (Van Breda, 2011). Masten et al. (2004) point out that some people exhibit “late blooming resilience,” which can occur during emerging adulthood. According to Smith (2011), “The dynamic interaction between genetic factors, environmental risks (or protections), and the child's prior experiences is constantly evolving and subject to influence by new variables” (p. 33).

In an examination of numerous outcome studies of young people aging out of foster care, Stein (2006) used a resilience framework to categorize these youth into three groups: 1) those who are moving on; 2) those who are survivors; and, 3) those who are victims. The key indicators that determined into which group each youth fell included stable housing, continued education, and employment. One of the findings from this study is that young people aging out of foster care are not members of a homogeneous group, and their resilience is based upon their

own personal traits as well as their interactions with their environments. In addition, resilience is neither a fixed quantity nor subject to a one-time opportunity to acquire. Therefore, understanding the resilience or lack of resilience in LGBT youth who age out of foster care is important to developing and implementing the appropriate provision of services for these young people. Coupled with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the concept of resilience can be understood as the individual's capacity to respond to changes in the various levels of the system in an adaptive way to produce positive results and avoid negative outcomes.

Emerging Adulthood. Concepts of Arnett's (2004) Emerging Adulthood Theory were examined for relevance to youth who have aged out of foster care. Arnett identifies five features of emerging adults: 1) the age of identity exploration, when young people try different jobs, relationships, and higher education; 2) the age of instability, marked by frequent moves because of college, romantic partners, and leaving home; 3) the age of self-focus, when young people examine who they are, what they want to do with their lives, and where they want to go; 4) the age of feeling in between, when emerging adults begin to take responsibility for themselves, but do not feel like adults yet; and, 5) the age of possibilities, as young people are optimistic that they will be successful and their futures will be better than previous generations. Do these five distinct features still apply to young people who must transition quickly into adulthood, such as youth aging out of foster care? The current study examines these features in the research participants.

Legally, the age at which adolescents achieve adulthood, also known as the age of majority, varies by state. In most states, young people become legal adults at 18 years old; while in a few states, youth are not considered adults until they turn 21. Seven states—Arkansas, Nevada, Ohio, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin—have an adjusted adulthood

threshold, which is determined by high school completion as well as age. One question that has arisen as more evidence is uncovered about the fragility of some youth who age out of foster care is: Why must youth end services at 18 years of age? Research shows that many people do not believe an 18-year old has reached the age of maturity, although they may have reached the age of majority. In a national telephone survey of the general public conducted by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2003), the majority of individuals polled knew little about the foster care system in the United States or what happened to youth who exited the system when they reached a certain age. Most people surveyed, however, believed that 18 years old was too young for youth to be completely on their own, regardless of whether they were exiting foster care or not.

If the state is to act as the responsible caretaker of children in foster care, then it must take the place of the parent when it comes to determining when a youth is old enough to live independently (Courtney, 2009). More than half of youth in the United States who are ages 18 to 24 years old live with their parents (Eyster & Oldmixon, 2007) and rely upon their family for emotional and financial support. According to the World Health Organization and the Society for Adolescent Medicine, the period of adolescence lasts into the mid-twenties (Ammerman et al., 2004), and maturity may not occur before 26 years of age (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). This is up to eight years beyond the age that youth are dismissed from foster care services. Contrary to beliefs that adulthood begins at age 18, research demonstrates that youth generally experience a more protracted development period from adolescence to adulthood (Harold, Colarossi, & Mercier, 2007). Arnett (2004) calls this “emerging adulthood” and argues that it is in emerging adulthood, not adolescence, when identity formation actually occurs. In *On Your Own without a Net*, editors Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth (2005) examine the lengthening process from adolescence to

adulthood over the past fifty years in the United States, and the increased dependence of these transitioning adults on their families. One vulnerable population identified by this research is youth who are aging out of foster care.

In recognition of the growing number of research studies that find youth who are “aged out” by their state foster care system at 18 years old are at higher risk for negative outcomes in adulthood, legislative action was taken to shore up these young people. One policy was the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which mandated life skills training to all youth at risk for aging out. The other was the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which allowed states to extend foster care services to age 21 years old. Although this policy does not cover the full period of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett (2004), it does acknowledge the need for continuing state-supplied parenthood to foster care youth beyond the legal age of majority.

Several studies within the last few years have illustrated the use of Emerging Adulthood Theory in relation to youth who are aging out of care. Fowler, Toro and Miles (2011) examined the mental health of 265 young people between the ages of 19 and 23 who had aged out of foster care. These young adults retrospectively reported on their attainment of housing, education, and employment during the first two years after aging out. These three domains – housing security, education achievement, and employment attainment – have been identified by Arnett (2000) as key supports in emerging adulthood and support the focus of these variables in this study.

As mentioned previously, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in the area of child welfare are remarking on the lack of theory-based research (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Stein, 2006; Van Breda, Marx, & Kader, 2012). The current study endeavors to address this gap by using the three theories described above as a way to conceptualize the experiences and

perceptions of young people who are aging out of foster care and who also identify as LGBT. Additionally, in asking youth about their experiences in aging out of foster care and securing housing, education, and employment, it is important to know what policies inform foster care practice. To draw from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, these policies reside in the macrosystem of the young foster care adolescent's social environment; therefore, they affect the youth as well as individuals and groups within the youth's social support system. The section below provides a brief discussion of several of the key pieces of legislation that impact the services and programs available to young people as they transition to adulthood after foster care. Furthermore, a review of current legislation regarding LGBT youth in or aging out of foster care is provided, as this population is the primary focus of the current research study. This policy discussion is also intended only as a backdrop for the current study and not presented to provide policy analysis or policy-testing.

The Policy Environment for Youth Aging Out of Care

Policymaking in foster care functions to establish the rules and regulations that govern agencies and individuals who are entrusted with the safety, permanency, and well-being of children placed in out-of-home care. The foster care system is a complex interactive web of policies and practices that is funded through a combination of federal, state, and local money. Similar to most systems, foster care services are impacted by policies in other arenas, including child abuse and neglect, adoption, juvenile justice, education, housing, employment, and health care/mental health care. In addition, each state has its own rules and regulations regarding eligibility requirements, available services, and implementation of these services.

The primary legislation that determines what services youth who are in or aging out of care will receive include the Independent Living Initiative - Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986 (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act of 1935), the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Anderson, 2003; Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, 2011). These policies are discussed in more detail below.

The Independent Living Initiative - Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986. Title IV-E was enacted by Congress (Public Law 99-272) to assist older youth as they transition from foster care to independence. This act provides life skills training, mentoring, and other support services to youth when they reach their 16th birthday while in foster care. It does not, however, provide funding to cover housing or education services.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. This legislation was enacted to focus flexible funding on supportive services for youth who had or were emancipating, rather than on promoting adoption for this population of foster care youth. Also known as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), this legislation replaced the Independent Living Program of 1986 and offers flexible funding and services to include financial, housing, counseling, and some continued Medicaid coverage. In addition, former foster care youth who are 21 years old or younger can qualify for these services. One mandate of the legislation was to create a national database of services for youth who are transitioning out of foster care to independence in order to track their progress. It is called the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). Although the idea for the database was presented in the 1999 legislation, the states' data collection efforts did not begin until 2010, and the first reports were due by mid-May 2011 (DHHS, 2013).

Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001. This law provides post-adoption support and substance abuse treatment services. It also authorizes educational and vocational training under the Foster Care Independence Program for older youth aging out of care. This is an important service, as many youth who age out face unemployment and the resulting consequences of homelessness, mental health issues, substance abuse, and possible criminal behavior. This policy focuses on providing educational and vocational training that can help these young people secure college degrees and trade skills that could translate into increased income and improved self-sufficiency. As the previous discussion of poor educational outcomes demonstrated in the research shows, the full impact of the policy has not been realized in these youth to date.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351). This legislation provides federal funding for continued services until the age of 21 (Courtney, Hooks, & Lee, 2010). This indicates a shift in thinking at the federal level regarding the age when youth move into adulthood. It is also supported by Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory that postulates adulthood occurring as a slow transition rather than a sudden event at age 18. For a long time, states that felt it was important to continue providing services to youth after they reached their 18th birthday and before they turned 21, were required to fund these services without federal support.

In order to claim Title IV-E reimbursement, the youth must meet strict requirements, including: Enrollment in high school or an equivalency program, college, university, vocational school, or employment promotion program or activity; employment of at least 80 hours per month; or a medical condition which precludes the ability to engage in any of these (Courtney, Hooks, & Lee, 2010). This still leaves a number of high risk youth who are aging out of the

system on their eighteenth birthday without these extended services. In addition to the above stated provisions, the law requires a personalized transition plan be created for each youth within 90 days of their transition out of care (Collins & Clay, 2009). As the funding has only been made available within the last few years, the impact of this legislation cannot be adequately assessed yet. However, as the title of the law makes clear, the focus has shifted away from encouraging youth to be independent and toward making connections in order to be successful in transitioning to adulthood (Courtney, 2009). The provisions of the new Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, reflect a fundamental change in the way the federal government looks at the role of foster care in the lives of older youth who are at risk of aging out. Instead of pushing for a quick and clean break from services in the interest of promoting independence from government support programs, the new legislation concedes the reality that states, as substitute parents for these children, have a responsibility to see that they are prepared for the successful transition to adulthood.

The Policy Environment for LGBT Youth in Foster Care

According to a review of national and state legislation by Estrada and Marksamer (2006a), there are no current policies in place to address LGBT youth in foster care at the federal level. LGBT youth do have the right to safety while in foster care, but the specificity of this right varies by state. For example, California specifically addresses safety regardless of sexual orientation, actual or perceived sex, and gender identity (National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2006). Other states are less supportive of LGBT youth in care. Many times, it is as a result of violating these rights that lawsuits are brought to court and new laws and policies are enacted to further clarify appropriate care and treatment for LGBT foster care youth.

There have been numerous bills and policies proposed to support LGBT parents who want to foster or adopt children. For example, in 2009, a bill was introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), as the “Every Child Deserves a Family Act (ECDFA).” The legislation would prohibit states from denying or delaying foster care or adoption placements on the basis of sexual orientation, marital status, or gender identity of the potential parents. It would withhold funding to states that discriminate against LGBT individuals in foster placements and adoptions. The bill did not make it out of committee. When the bill was reintroduced by Representative Stark (H.R. 1681) in 2011, it again languished in committee and failed to move forward before the end of the Congressional session (The Library of Congress-Thomas, 2011). This bill was reintroduced in the 113th Congress in the House of Representatives by Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) on May 16, 2013 and in the Senate by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) on May 23, 2013. It has been referred to the Senate Finance Committee once again. Regrettably, a review of several federal policy websites uncovered no legislation currently enacted or proposed regarding LGBT youth in or aging out of foster care to date.

Chapter Summary

The review of the research, theory, and policy presented in this chapter demonstrates the lack of knowledge about foster care youth who are aging out and are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. There are significant gaps in the research about the experiences of this specific population of young people. They are virtually invisible in the research, as well as in public policy. Although state and federal policies regarding services to support young people who are leaving foster care and transitioning to adulthood continue to evolve as research provides more

information on their specific needs, there is a deficiency of awareness or acknowledgement of foster care youth who are also LGBT and experiencing this transition. The need for information on these young people is apparent, and this study attempts to fill this chasm with the voices of several of these youth in hopes of informing future research, theory, and policy.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years old who had aged out of foster care and were transitioning from dependent adolescence to independent adulthood. The following chapter discusses the research design used for this study, the reasons for selecting this design, the many recruitment strategies utilized to engage this elusive population, data collection methods and analysis techniques employed, as well as strategies to ensure trustworthiness and research rigor. In addition, a Conceptual Framework is presented here to provide a visual link between the elements of the theoretical framework described in Chapters One and Two and the key variables to be examined during this research, specifically housing, education, and employment attainment by the study participants.

Study Overview

The study used a modified grounded theory (GT) design and consisted of in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interview protocol with young people who fit the criteria for participation. In addition, the researcher attempted to guide the participants in the creation of an eco-map to graphically represent the elements in their social support systems. The interviews were audio-recorded, data from the interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents, these transcripts were manually coded using a three-level coding system designed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and modified by Charmaz (2004), and the coded results were analyzed for themes

and concepts. Additionally, the researcher employed several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of data analysis. These strategies included member checking with several participants to ensure accuracy of the initial coding level, comparing the manual coding scheme with one developed by a fellow researcher through qualitative software, and field notes by the researcher during and after each interview.

Prior to data collection, the researcher sought and obtained approval for the study design from Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board. In addition, because the researcher was employed at Grand Valley State University at the time of the study, she was required to gain approval from the school's Human Research Review Committee.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

A qualitative research method was selected because this type of data collection and analysis is an effective way of examining social issues and situations where specific variables have either not yet been discovered or need further exploration (Creswell, 2007; Fortune & Reid, 1999). Specifically, a modified grounded theory (GT) design was used in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of these young people (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006).

The grounded theory approach was chosen for three reasons. First, it was well suited for this study because grounded theory methodology attempts to describe the experiences of individuals in many contexts, particularly in relation to their social environments (Gilgun, 1997; Oktay, 2012). As the participants in this study were transitioning from one social environment (foster care) to another (independent adulthood), this method allowed the researcher to become grounded in the worldview of these young people as they were experiencing this change. It

provided an opportunity to secure their interpretation of this environmental shift in their own words (Creswell, 2007). Second, through in-depth interviews, the grounded theory approach provided the level of depth and detail of information necessary to increase knowledge about what these young people experienced as they exited foster care and entered adulthood (Creswell).

The third reason for choosing a grounded theory method was its focus on the concept of emergence. The term *emergence* is defined as “The process of becoming visible after being concealed” (The Oxford Online Dictionary, 2012). As mentioned previously, there had been little written about what LGBT youth experienced during the aging out process from foster care; therefore, it was anticipated that the words and descriptions shared by the young people in this study would allow their stories to emerge from previous silence (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Consequently, these stories would contribute to the developing literature about all youth who age out of foster care, and specifically about youth experiencing this transition who are also lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In fact, several participants in the study indicated that they had never been asked about their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in relation to aging out. They had been asked questions about the experience of aging out, but not about its impact on their identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals, nor about how their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression might have impacted the process of aging out of foster care. As the search for knowledge continues about the aging out process and ways to help these young people successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood, all variables must be explored, including sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 below provides a conceptual model for the current study. It combines elements from the Theoretical Framework described in Chapters One and Two with a conception of how LGBT young people transition from aging out of foster care to adulthood. According to Arnett (2004), a youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years old would be in the stage of Emerging Adulthood, represented by **Element 1: Stage of Development** in the diagram. As they are changing and adjusting to their new role as an emancipated adult, their ecological system is also changing with them, according to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, as represented by **Element 2: The Young Person's Changing Ecological System**.

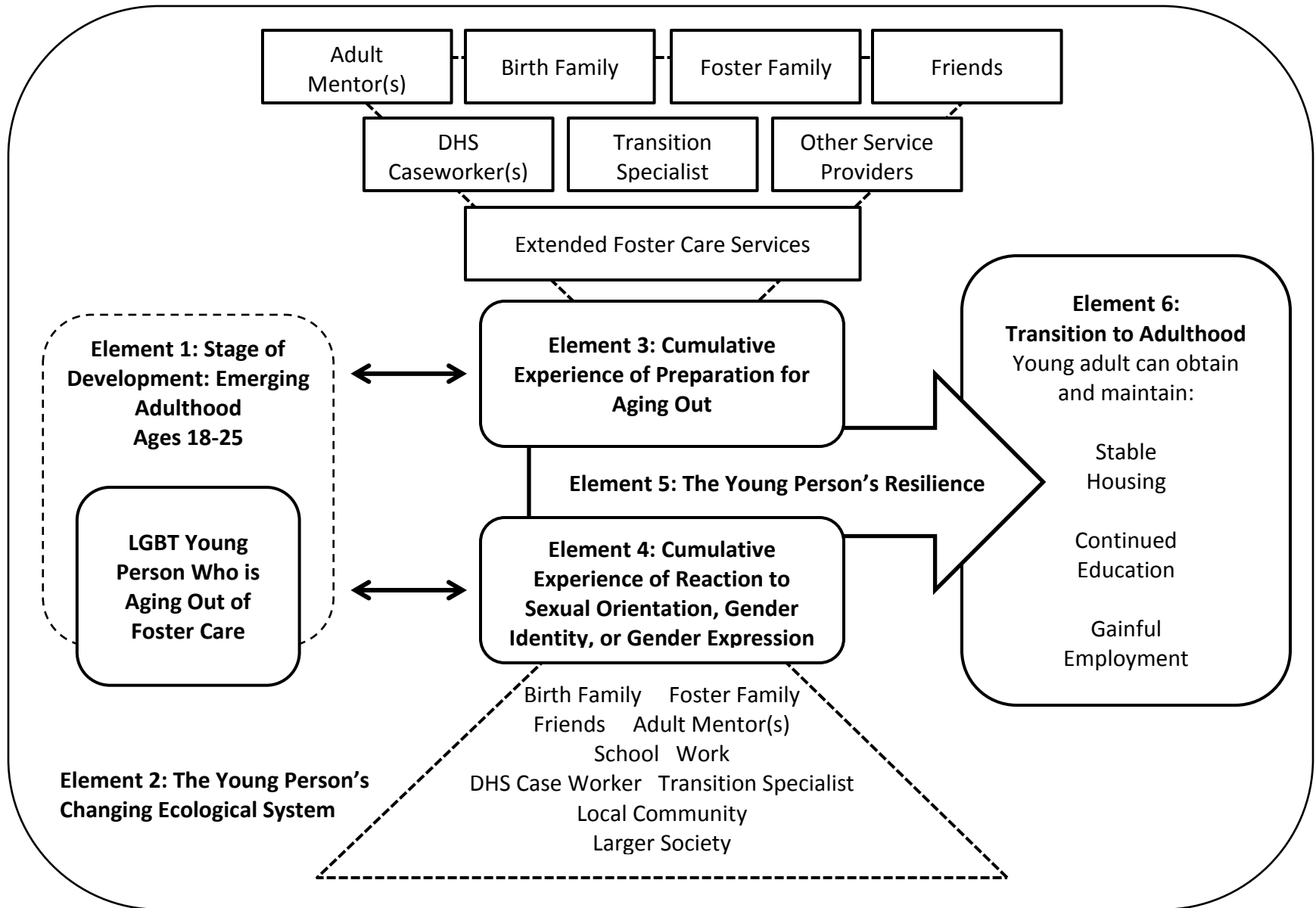
Element 3: Cumulative Experience of Preparation for Aging Out demonstrates of the cumulative experience a young person may have as she or he prepares to age out of foster care. This cumulative experience of preparation can come from many sources, including informal sources such as a youth's adult mentor(s), members of their birth family, members of the foster family, and their friends. They may also receive more formal preparation such as independent living skills training from their DHS case worker, their transition specialist, or other social service providers. In some cases, a young person may also receive extended foster care services after they age out of the regular foster care program. This cumulative experience of preparation can influence the youth's readiness to successfully take on adult responsibilities, such as finding stable housing, continuing their education, and maintaining gainful employment.

In addition, when the youth is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, their experiences may include reactions to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression by individuals at all levels of their social environment. These reactions may come from birth family, foster family, friends, adult mentor(s), individuals or groups at school or work, their case

worker(s), and transition specialist. In addition, they may experience reactions to their LGBT status in their local community as well as the larger society in what they see or read in the local, state, or national media. The cumulative experience of this reaction may be positive, neutral, negative, or a combination of any or all of these responses. **Element 4: Cumulative Experience of Reaction to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, or Gender Expression** represents this phenomenon in the LGBT youth's life.

How the youth responds to the preparation they receive and the reactions to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression can impact their ability to move forward and successfully navigate the adult world. This response is a function of their accumulated resilience, as described by Saleebey (1996) and represented in **Element 5: The Young Person's Resilience**. A youth's resilience can provide a buffer against the lack of preparation that was provided by the official and unofficial support system that surrounded them as they were getting ready to age out of foster care. This resilience can also protect a young person from the impact of negative reactions of others to their disclosure of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The goal of this process is to move out of dependence as an adolescent and toward independent adulthood, as represented by **Element 6: Transition to Adulthood**, where the young adult is able to obtain and maintain stable housing, continued education, and gainful employment. The Conceptual Framework is provided as a graphic representation of the dynamic interaction among all of these elements as the young person faces one of the greatest challenges of their lives, namely becoming an adult.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for LGBT Youth Aging Out of Foster Care and Transitioning to Adulthood



Interview Protocol and the Eco-Map

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). These interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and were designed to explore the experiences of the young people as they aged out of foster care and sought to obtain stable housing, continue their education, and find gainful employment. The interviews also provided an opportunity for the youth to share their perceptions of these experiences and examine whether they thought these experiences either impacted or were impacted by their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The use of in-depth interviews offered the participants a way to express their feelings, thoughts, and insights about their experiences and generated rich descriptive information that could contribute to developing a deeper understanding of what happens when these young people aged out of care (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Furthermore, the interview protocol was structured enough to allow for the exploration of common experiences across all participants such as finding housing and employment, but also flexible enough to allow the researcher to respond by incorporating new questions that emerged from specific situations shared by the participants (Morse & Richards, 2002).

An eco-map (see Appendix B) was used to provide a visual illustration of the social support systems that surrounded these young people as they were leaving the environment of foster care and entering adulthood. These resources included the following: relationships with family, friends, and service providers; extended foster care services; public and private services such as counseling, school, neighborhoods, and faith-based communities; and, work relationships. It was anticipated that this eco-map would be used to triangulate information gathered from the interview questions (Harold, Mercier, & Colarossi, 1997).

Recruitment Strategies

The researcher hoped to engage between 10 and 15 eligible young people to participate in the study. The criteria for inclusion in the study were all of the following: 1) the youth identified themselves or were identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or, in the case of one youth, questioning their sexual orientation; 2) they were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old; 3) they had exited foster care within the past five years as a result of reaching the age when services were terminated or they were participating in extended foster care services; 4) they did not have a permanent placement through official reunification with their birth family or adoption; and, 5) they were willing to be interviewed and audio-recorded.

This population was difficult to locate and contact once they had aged out of foster care. Despite the fact that several research studies indicate a significant percentage of young people who are homeless also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012) and other research demonstrates the presence of LGBT youth in foster care (Mallon, 2001a), it was challenging to connect with these young people. More than a few were skeptical of what the study was all about and what impact their answers would have on continued services. With this in mind, it was important to use a research design that was sensitive to their vulnerability, could be flexible enough to capture the nuances of their individual and collective experiences, yet remain consistent over the course of data collection.

All recruitment activities were conducted within the state of Michigan over the course of six months. Study participants were recruited through non-profit social service agencies that served foster care youth, community-based organizations that specifically served the LGBT population, university LGBT centers, and programs that served both current and former foster care youth, as well as conferences, trainings, and public events where LGBT and foster care

youth or those who worked with this population might be present. Additionally, the researcher provided several continuing education trainings to child welfare workers throughout the state of Michigan about successful strategies for working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth in foster care settings. These trainings were offered by Michigan State University's Continuing Education program as well as through membership organizations representing foster care workers and home-based service employees. As a result, many of these trainings offered opportunities to recruit potential study participants through the child welfare workers who attended.

The researcher also rented an information booth at the Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Allies College Conference (MBLGTACC), an annual event for LGBT students enrolled in universities and colleges across the United States. This event brought the researcher in contact with hundreds of young people who were potential participants, but garnered mixed results. Several individuals who stopped at the information table said they knew of someone who was LGBT and had been in foster care, but they had not aged out. Two youth did identify as being LGBT and having aged out of foster care in other states, and they both provided contact information to the researcher; however, when the researcher attempted to establish connections with them, the information was either inaccurate or the youth did not return contact.

As Table 4 below demonstrates, numerous individuals and organizations were contacted in an effort to recruit the proposed 10 to 15 participants. Contacts included individuals, organizations, agencies, and universities and were provided with recruitment materials. From these recruitment activities, 10 study participants were obtained from the following: Lutheran Social Services of Michigan (three participants), Bethany Christian Services (two participants), and one participant each from the LGBT Center at Grand Valley State University, the

Department of Human Services of Kent County, the Department of Human Services of Gladwin County, Ruth Ellis Center, and the Grand Valley State University School of Social Work.

Table 4: Study Participant Recruitment Locations and Contacts with Results

Organization	Contact Person	Recruitment Results
Lutheran Social Services of Michigan (Detroit location)	Lindsay Harris	3 participants
Bethany Christian Services in Grand Rapids	Erin Sweeney and Justin Beene	2 participants
Department of Health and Human Services – Gladwin County, Michigan	Michael James Smith	1 participant
Department of Human Services in Grand Rapids	Mona Guyton	1 participant
LGBT Center at Grand Valley State University	Dr. Scott Berlin and Colette Seguin Beighley	1 participant
Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit	Jessie Fullenkamp	1 participant
School of Social Work at Grand Valley State University and Michigan State University	faculty and staff	1 participant
Arbor Circle – The Bridge	Susan Sheppard	0 participants
Grand Rapids Community College Stand Out program	Jeffrey Hartman	0 participants
Grand Valley State University’s TRIO program	Amy Thompkins	0 participants
Lesbian and Gay Community Network of West Michigan	Pat Ward	0 participants
LGBT Center at Michigan State University		0 participants
Lutheran Child and Family Services in Grand Rapids	Nancy Teat	0 participants
Lutheran Social Services of Michigan	Kate Wert	0 participants
Michigan State University’s FAME program	Andrea Martineau	0 participants
Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Allies College Conference		0 participants
St. John’s/D.A. Blodgett in Grand Rapids	Rosilynn Bliss and Renee Orr	0 participants
Western Michigan University Seita Scholars	Dr. Yvonne Unrau and Alexander Susienka	0 participants
Wayne State University	Dr. Angelique G. Day	0 participants
Western Michigan University’s LGBT Center	Jennifer C Hsu	0 participants

An informational flyer (see Appendix C) was created to recruit participants on several university campuses and at local LGBT organizations. This flyer was distributed through email or in person to contact people at these organizations, and the researcher ensured that these flyers were widely posted. This flyer was also handed out at several support meetings of LGBT students on Grand Valley State University campus.

Personal contact as an effective recruitment strategy. The researcher had prior relationships with social service agency administration and direct service staff members who could provide access to current and former clients. The researcher also had connections with several non-profit organizations that serve the LGBT community. It was determined that personal contact with these service providers would be more fruitful than an unsolicited email or letter, so the researcher made initial telephone calls to them to ask whether they knew of any young people who fit the criteria for participation in the study. If service providers indicated that they knew of possible study candidates or they had an interest in recruiting participants, an email was sent to them with the following attachments: 1) a letter that provided details about the study (see Appendix D) and 2) a recruitment flyer that could be emailed or printed and given to the potential participant (see Appendix C). The flyer contained contact information for the researcher, including phone numbers and email addresses. The service provider encouraged the potential participants to contact the researcher or to provide an email address or phone number so the researcher could contact them. In most cases, the youth gave the service provider their contact information and approval to share this with the researcher, who subsequently made the initial contact with the youth.

Use of incentive as an effective recruitment strategy. During the initial email or phone contact with the referred youth, the researcher verified that the young person met all of the

criteria for participation. Once this was established, details about a meeting location and time for the interview were discussed and confirmed. The young people were informed of their potential contributions to the knowledge base about LGBT youth who age out of foster care and told that a \$25 gift card to either I-Tunes, Meijer, Speedway, or Target would be provided to thank them for their interview time. It should be noted that cautions about using incentives for research participants have been raised over the years and the researcher was aware of this discussion (Singer & Couper, 2008). However, according to Grant and Sugarman (2004):

Specifically, incentives become problematic when conjoined with the following factors, singly or in combination with one another: where the subject is in a dependency relationship with the researcher, where the risks are particularly high, where the research is degrading, where the participant will only consent if the incentive is relatively large because the participant's aversion to the study is strong, and where the aversion is a principled one. (p.717)

As none of these situations applied to the current research study, the researcher, or the potential participants, the use of a nominal gift card to thank young people for participating was appropriate and appreciated by the youth.

Attaining the sample size. The grounded theory approach called for enough participants to achieve theoretical saturation, which means continuing data collection until no new data or conceptual insights emerge and the existing categories are well-developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There is some controversy, however, as to the number of participants needed to achieve this saturation (Creswell, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Wu & Beaunae, 2012). A recent literature review by Thomson (2011) of one hundred grounded theory studies using interviews which were conducted between 2002 and 2005, found that “saturation normally occurs between

10 and 30 interviews” (p. 50), with an average sample size of 25 participants. However, Thomson (2011) also suggests theoretical saturation can be impacted by “the scope of the research question, the sensitivity of the phenomena, and the ability of the researcher” (p. 49). In addition, Morse (2000) argues that the more useable the data from each participant, the fewer participants are needed.

It was important to achieve this saturation to avoid the possibility of interpreting findings based on inadequate data (Jones & Noble, 2007). However, study participants were difficult to locate as young adults who have aged out of foster care were often elusive once they have left the confines of state-administered childhood. Adding the element of purposeful invisibility by some individuals who are also LGBT made the challenge even greater. To this researcher, it also made it that much more important to explore and understand their potentially unique experiences. Therefore, purposive sampling methods were used to secure the necessary number of participants (Thomson, 2011). These methods sought to identify individuals who had experienced a particular phenomenon being studied as well as those who will be the most knowledgeable and well-informed participants (Creswell, 2007; Thomson, 2011).

Additionally, because the grounded theory approach was used, the process of data collection and data analysis were conducted simultaneously. This iterative analysis, or going back and forth between the data and the analysis, assisted the researcher in developing more targeted interview questions, and also allowed the researcher to use the process of theoretical sampling to ensure the recruitment of the most informative participants.

The Data Collection Process

Information was collected from the young people using a semi-structured face-to-face interview that lasted between 50 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix A. In addition to initial questions, the researcher used the techniques of elaboration, clarification, and sequencing probes to gain detailed descriptions and specific definitions of concepts from participants. The interview format was flexible and questions were guided by the theory as it emerged (Creswell, 2007). With the consent of the participant, the interview was audio-recorded using a digital recorder. The recorded interview was transcribed by a paid professional transcriptionist into a Microsoft Word document for data analysis. Demographic information collected during the interview was used for descriptive purposes only. In addition, the researcher attempted to work with the youth to develop a graphic representation of their current social support system, called an eco-map. The purpose of using an eco-map in this study was to triangulate information gathered from the interview questions (Harold, Mercier, & Colarossi, 1997).

The researcher reviewed each item of the consent form (see Appendix E) with the participant before beginning the interview and turning on the digital recorder. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification, if necessary. The consent form was signed by each participant and kept by the researcher. The participant was provided with a copy of the consent form for their files.

Another consideration discussed with the participants was the nature of the information they would be sharing during the interview. The researcher pointed out that memories and perceptions of what had happened in their past or what was happening during this transitional period in their lives may bring up a variety of emotions, some pleasant and some troubling. The

researcher made an effort to ensure that participants understood the voluntary nature of their participation and that they were not required to answer any question that felt uncomfortable to them. In addition, the researcher had printed information about resources they could contact, such as LGBT-friendly counselors and therapists or internet websites, should they need it.

It was important that the study participants felt comfortable and safe during the interview. For this reason, interviews were conducted in numerous locations of the participants' choosing, including the researcher's office at Grand Valley State University. In addition, the researcher traveled to many locations across the state of Michigan and set up interview sites at various spots, including an empty student lounge at another university, a private conference room at a non-profit agency, a closed break room in a homeless shelter, and a private office at a county library. Locations were selected to ensure privacy, safety, and comfort.

An unexpected finding: The eco-map completion. To capture the dynamic interaction between the individual and their social environment, a descriptive tool called an eco-map was used (see Appendix B). An eco-map can be drawn on a piece of regular copy paper and consists of a center circle, representing the individual, surrounded by circles of various sizes, which represent the individuals, groups, organizations, agencies, and other environments that are connected to the individual. Of particular interest in this study were the elements previously discussed as indicators of the successful transition to adulthood – those of housing, education, and employment. Other features examined for presence or absence on the participant's eco-map were connections to birth family members, former foster care family members, case workers, foster care peers, and other social contacts. These individuals and groups were identified as either supportive, stressful, or having a neutral effect on the participant. In addition, the eco-map

could include the connection the youth had with other elements of the system, the strength of that connection, and whether conflict in any of these relationships exist.

It was expected that this graphic model would provide an effective way to collect and organize information to visually represent the current life circumstances of LGBT youth who were in the process or had aged out of foster care, as was the case in a study conducted by Harold, Mercier, and Colarossi (1997). Following the main interview, participants in this study were asked to complete an eco-map to illustrate the elements within the social system that surrounded them and the strength of their relationship to these elements. Interestingly, many of the study participants had a hard time capturing the elements in the support system that currently surrounded them. In some cases, they asked numerous questions about what to put in the circles, and the researcher attempted to gently prompt them with suggestions, while trying not to influence what they included in their drawing. In the end, fewer than half of the participants provided usable data on their eco-maps, but this proved to be very valuable information in understanding their perceptions of the transitory nature of their present lives. More discussion on this phenomenon is presented in the findings section of Chapter Four.

The Data Analysis Process

The data from each face-to-face interview was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document by a professional transcriptionist and labeled with a unique title that secured the participant's anonymity. As this study used a modified grounded theory approach, the data were then coded in two major phases. In the first phase, *a priori* categories were used to code the participants' responses based upon the interview questions, with particular attention to the primary indicators discussed in Chapter One, namely housing, education, and employment.

Other categories that were coded included what individuals or services helped prepare the youth before aging out, what support was available during the aging out process, and whether the participants felt that their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression had impacted their aging out process or their ability to secure and maintain housing, education, or employment. This coding phase provided an organized way to address the specific research questions across all of the participants' experiences.

The second phase of coding consisted of a line-by-line procedure as well as an adapted open, axial, and selective coding schema (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In grounded theory methodology, data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously, a process known as constant comparison (Creswell, 2007); therefore, the researcher generated, reviewed, and modified codes in order to compare each new participant's data with previous data. The line-by-line review process was done by the researcher in an attempt to become immersed in the worldview of the study participants. From this process, open coding evolved to examine the data for similarities and differences (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this stage, data were grouped into broad categories or themes as well as subcategories and labeled. The next step was axial coding, which was used to search for connections between the categories and subcategories (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, selective coding was used to identify a central concept or core category that provided the focal point for the development of a theory.

Member checking and peer review. As the data analysis progressed, the researcher met for a second time with two previous study participants (20% of the sample) who agreed to be re-contacted to solicit their response to the categories that were created from their individual interviews. Additionally, these participants were asked to review the emerging theory being

postulated by the researcher as well as to provide any further elaborations or insights they had about the topic. This practice proved to be helpful for both the researcher and the two participants, as new insights about the connections between categories did emerge and the participants expressed satisfaction with being able to assist in the findings.

Another method used to corroborate the accuracy of the coding categories was to solicit the skills of a research colleague who was very familiar with the qualitative computer software program NVivo. This collaborator took the first three interviews that were conducted and ran them through NVivo qualitative analysis. The codes that were generated by the computer program were compared to the ones manually developed by the researcher and the results were discussed and any variations between the computer generated codes and researcher developed codes were analyzed and adjusted, if necessary. As an example, the first three interviews resulted in the generation of codes displayed in Table 5 below. It can be seen that the similarity between the number of codes created by each process was greater than 91.75%, and tended to improve with each subsequent interview that was coded. The full coding scheme will be presented in Chapter Four.

Table 5: Comparison between Computer Generated Codes and Manually Generated Codes

Interview Number	Number of Codes Generated by NVivo	Number of Codes Generated by Manual Coding	Percentage Agreed
Interview 1	182	167	91.75%
Interview 2	185	171	92.43%
Interview 3	270	255	94.44%

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The researcher was aware of the importance of rigor in order to reduce threats to the credibility and trustworthiness of this study; therefore, several strategies were employed to ensure appropriate accuracy and objectivity (Creswell, 2007). Reflexivity strategies consisted of memo writing and field notes as tools to record the researcher's observations, impressions, and assumptions. In addition to memo writing, two additional reflexive activities were utilized to reduce the threat of researcher bias. As noted earlier, a second interview was conducted with two previous participants to check the researcher's progress in theory formation. This was done to minimize the possibility that the researcher misunderstood the participants' responses or excluded information that was important to the participant. The two participants were given their original transcripts from their interviews, along with the open coding document generated by the researcher that contained a line-by-line coding scheme. The participants reviewed the coded transcript and made note if the researcher's codes varied from what they thought it should be. The result of these additional interviews and reviews was that the researcher and the participant agreed on 98% of the codes used. The only discrepancies were more a matter of a few words that needed to be changed because of the transcription rather than the interpretation of their meanings by the researcher. In one case, one of the young participants thought an additional code could have been used for one of the sentences they said, and this code was added to the coding scheme.

The second tactic that was utilized to reduce the threat to trustworthiness was to ensure inter-rater reliability. A research colleague was enlisted to participate in open and axial coding processes. The researcher coded three randomly selected interviews independently and the research colleague conducted data analysis on these same interviews using NVivo qualitative analysis software. After the coding was completed for these interviews, the researcher and

research colleague met and calculated inter-rater reliability. An 80% agreement was sought (Creswell, 2007), which was calculated by dividing the number of agreed upon codes by the total number of codes. Any discrepancies in the coding were discussed and adjustments were made to categories as needed. The remaining interviews were coded by the researcher. Finally, an “audit trail” was used to document each step in the data collection and analysis process so that others could confirm the researcher’s findings.

Confidentiality and Protection of Participants

The researcher applied for and obtained the permission of Michigan State University’s Institutional Review Board and Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee. It was not necessary to obtain any agency’s internal review boards approval, but the Ruth Ellis Center required the researcher to gain consent from Dr. Gregory Mason from the University of Michigan, who was acting as a gatekeeper to limit access to the Center’s youth by outside research projects. To protect the rights of the participants and safeguard against coercion, participants were asked to sign a letter of informed consent that explicitly stated that the study was voluntary and there was no penalty for not participating (See Appendix E). Participants were also told that they did not need to complete the interview in order to receive the \$25 gift card.

Paper copies of data collected for this study were kept in a secure, locked file cabinet within the researcher’s locked office at Grand Valley State University. Any identifying demographic data were kept separate from participant responses to interview questions. Raw electronic data were shared only amongst the researcher, the professional transcriptionist, and the research colleague. This information was kept on a flash drive, locked in the researcher’s office. Audio recordings of interviews were secured in the office, once they had been processed by the

transcriptionist. The professional transcriptionist and the professional qualitative analyst both signed confidentiality agreements that were stored with other study data.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a detailed review of the methodology used to conduct this research study, including the rationale for performing a qualitative study, the recruitment strategies employed to secure the number of participants, the data collection and analysis methods used, and the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, a Conceptual Framework was provided to connect the elements from the theoretical backdrop of the study with the key variables being examined, namely housing, education, and employment. Detailed descriptions of the findings from this study are provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter provides the findings from the semi-structured interviews with study participants, their completed eco-maps, and the researcher's field notes. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, **Description of Participants**, provides descriptive data about the young people who participated in this study. In reporting demographic information and in all of the tables, a pseudonym was used for each of the participants. The description of the participants also includes their current housing, education, and employment status, as these were key areas of interest to this study.

The second section, **Findings from the *A Priori* Coding Data Analysis**, presents the results of analyzing the data, using the following categories from the Research Questions: Experiences with Housing After Foster Care, Experiences with Education After Foster Care, Experiences with Employment After Foster Care, Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood Before Aging Out, Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood After Aging Out, Perceived Impact of LGBT Identity on Aging Out, Perceived Impact of LGBT Identity on Obtaining Housing, Education, and Employment. The third section, **Findings from the Selective Coding Data Analysis**, presents some of the key findings that were not covered in previous section as well as a few unexpected findings as a result of this study's research process. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the key findings from the study.

Description of Participants

Age, gender, and race. Participants in this study included 10 young adults between the ages of 18 and 23 years old, with a mean age of 20.3 years. Five (50%) identified themselves as African American, 3 (30%) as Caucasian, 1 (10%) as Hispanic/Latino, and 1 (10%) as Asian. There were 6 females (60%), 3 males (30%), and 1 transgender person (10%) who participated. All 10 participants had aged out of the foster care system within the past five years. Table 6 below displays these demographics. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used and some of the individual characteristics of the young people's demographics, such as race, were not provided on the table.

Sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Nine (90%) of the 10 participants identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Five (50%) identified as lesbian, 1 (10%) as gay, 2 as bisexual (20%), 1 as transgender (10%), and 1 (10%) identified himself as questioning his sexual orientation. This youth was referred to the study by a case worker who assumed he was a gay man. As it turned out, the young man was questioning his sexual orientation and had been thought to be gay by many others in his past and present circle of acquaintances, but he did not identify himself as gay at the time of the interview. As he responded to the question about his sexual orientation, "I'm more straight." When the researcher discovered this, she asked the young man whether he wished to continue the interview, because the focus was primarily on youth who were LGBT. This young man agreed and was included in the study because he wanted to share his experiences of being labeled as a gay man while in foster care and after aging out, and because he is currently questioning his sexual orientation. Table 6 below shows these demographics.

Table 6: Demographics and Experience in Foster Care of Study Participants

Pseudonym*	Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity	Current Age	Age Entered Foster Care	Years in Foster Care (Including Extended Care)	Receiving Extended Foster Care Services
Adam	Questioning	19	12	7	Yes
Ben	Gay	23	6, adopted, removed, returned to foster care at 16	2+	No – aged out of extended care services
Carrie	Bisexual	20	17	1	No – never received extended care services
Don	Bisexual	18	15	3	Yes
Erin	Lesbian	21	15	6	No – never received extended care services
Frankie	Transgender	22	6	15	No – aged out of extended care services
Gail	Lesbian	19	12	7	Yes
Harriet	Lesbian	20	11, adopted, removed, returned to foster care at 15	5+	Yes
Irene	Lesbian	19	10, adopted, removed, returned to foster care at 14	5+	Yes
Juliet	Lesbian	22	<1 Did not discuss specifics of history in foster care	?	No – Just aged out of extended care services

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

Experience in foster care. Although a demographic survey was not conducted with participants, the researcher was able to glean facts from the interview content about when they entered foster care. The range in age when these young people initially entered foster care was younger than 1 to 17 years old, with a median of 11.5 years old. As three (30%) of the participants experienced several entry points into the foster care system, the mean time in care was not calculated. These three individuals were in foster care for a time (the exact amount of time was not discussed) and they were subsequently adopted; when the adoptions were broken because of abuse or neglect, the youth re-entered the foster care system. At the time of the interview, five participants (50%) were receiving some form of extended foster care, while two (20%) had just completed their extended services and were ready to live on their own. Table 6 above shows these demographics.

Current housing location and duration. All of the participants in this study were living in various cities and towns throughout Michigan. At the time of the interview, 6 (60%) participants lived in urban areas, 3 (30%) lived in suburban neighborhoods, and 1 (10%) participant lived in a small town in a predominantly rural area. Housing situations were as follows: 3 (30%) lived alone, 2 (20%) lived with roommates, 2 (20%) lived with family members such as a grandparent and a step-sister, 1 (10%) lived in a group transitional housing setting, 1 (10%) lived with a foster family, and 1 (10%) was homeless. In addition, 9 (90%) of the 10 participants had been in their current housing situation for less than 1 year, while 1 (10%) had been living with the same foster family for more than 4 years. Table 7 below shows these data.

Current education activities. In relation to participants' current educational endeavors, 5 (50%) were enrolled in post-secondary institutions, 2 (20%) were enrolled in high school, and 3 (30%) were not enrolled in any school. All three participants who were not currently enrolled

in school expressed an interest in continuing their education, and 2 out of the 3 had begun the application process for admission into college. Table 7 below shows these data.

Current employment and duration. At the time of the interview, 1 (10%) participant was working full-time, 2 (20%) had part-time employment, and 1 (10%) had employment through odd jobs. Six (60%) did not have any employment at the time; of these 6, there were 2 (33.3%) who had recently lost their jobs. All participants who were unemployed were actively looking for work. The type of work that participants engaged in included working in a factory, working at a recreation center, working as a research assistant, tutoring, and babysitting. All of the participants who were working full or part-time had been working less than 6 months at their place of employment. Table 7 above shows these data.

Table 7: Current Housing, Education, and Employment Status of Study Participants

Pseudonym*	Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity	Age	Current Housing	Current Education	Current Employment
Adam	Questioning	19	Living with relative Less than 1 year	Enrolled in post-secondary	Currently employed part-time Less than 6 months
Ben	Gay	23	Living with roommate Less than 1 year	Enrolled in post-secondary	Currently employed part-time Less than 6 months
Carrie	Bisexual	20	Living with roommates Less than 1 year	Enrolled in post-secondary	Picks up odd jobs No permanent employment
Don	Bisexual	18	Living alone Less than 1 year	Enrolled in high school	Currently unemployed
Erin	Lesbian	21	Living alone Less than 1 year	Finished GED. Not enrolled in school	Currently unemployed

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

Table 7 (cont'd)

Pseudonym*	Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity	Age	Current Housing	Current Education	Current Employment
Frankie	Transgender	22	Homeless – living with partner at friend's home Less than 3 months	Started college, dropped out. Not enrolled in school	Currently unemployed
Gail	Lesbian	19	Living with foster family in extended care More than 4 years	Enrolled in post-secondary	Currently unemployed
Harriet	Lesbian	20	Living in transitional housing Less than 1 year	Enrolled in post-secondary	Currently unemployed
Irene	Lesbian	19	Living with older sibling Less than 1 year	Enrolled in high school	Currently unemployed
Juliet	Lesbian	22	Living alone Less than 1 year	Finished high school. Not enrolled in school	Currently employed full time Less than 6 months

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

Findings from the *A Priori* Coding Data Analysis

To review the rationale behind using *a priori* categories for coding the data from the study participants' interviews in this phase of data analysis, the researcher's goal was to answer the specific research questions. Therefore, the researcher developed a set of main categories and sub-categories. Table 8 below displays these categories with the Research Question they each address. A full description of the findings for each of these main categories follows the table.

Table 8: *A Priori* Categories for Phase 1 Data Analysis

<i>A Priori</i> Main Categories	<i>A Priori</i> Sub-categories	Research Question Addressed
Experiences with Housing After Aging Out of Foster Care	Current housing location and duration History of housing after aging out <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent moves and short-term living arrangements • How did they find this housing? • Barriers to finding housing • Living alone or living with others 	Research Question 1
Experiences with Education After Aging Out of Foster Care	Current education activities Education after aging out of care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance in preparing for school after foster care • Barriers to education 	Research Question 1
Experiences with Employment After Aging Out of Foster Care	Current employment and duration History of employment after aging out of care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did they find employment? • Barriers to employment 	Research Question 1
Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood <u>Before</u> Aging Out	Services youth received while in foster care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of services received • Who provided these services? • Gaps in service 	Research Question 2
Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood <u>After</u> Aging Out	Services youth received after aging out <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of services received • Who provided these services? • Gaps in services 	Research Question 3
Perceived Impact of LGBT Identity on Aging Out	Impact on aging out experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coming out experience while in foster care • Experience of discrimination while in foster care 	Research Question 4
Perceived Impact of LGBT Identity on Obtaining Housing, Education, and Employment	Aging out experience Impact on obtaining housing, education, or employment	Research Question 5

Experiences with housing after aging out of foster care. Of the 10 participants in this study, 5 (50%) aged out of a foster family home, 3 (30%) aged out while they were homeless, and 2 (20%) aged out of a residential setting. Of the three youth who aged out while they were homeless, 2 (66.7%) were in a residential program within a homeless shelter, while 1 (33.3%) was staying with various friends and high school teachers. Table 9 below provides an overview of participants' housing history after aging out of care.

Frequent moves and short-term living arrangements. Most of the young people experienced several moves between aging out of foster care and their current housing location, as Table 9 below indicates. Many of these housing situations were no more than 1 or 2 years in duration. The settings ranged from single rooms in college dormitories or transitional housing, to multi-room apartments, to houses. Only 1 (10%) participant was still living in the same location where they aged out. In several cases, participants were already planning another move for reasons such as some of their roommates already moved out, they were evicted from their housing situation for failure to pay rent, they found other roommates or larger accommodations, and they did not feel safe in their current neighborhood. As one participant explained:

I don't like the environment. The people are not good. Like, I don't know any of the people in my apartment. I got locked out once and I had to call maintenance because I had my apartment key but I didn't have the building key. And I pressed everyone's buzzer like 10 times and no one would let me in. Yup. And that cost me \$25.00. (Don, bisexual, 18¹)

¹ Quotes from interviews with research participants are indented in italics. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 9: Housing History, Current Housing, and Who Helped Find Housing

Pseudonym*	Current Age	History of Housing after Aging Out	Current Housing	Who Helped Find Current Housing
Adam	19	Aged out of residential setting Lived with parent (<6 months) Lived in Supervised Independent Living (9 months) Moved into current house with relative	Living in house with relative Less than 1 year	Moved in with relative
Ben	23	Aged out of foster family home Stayed with foster family after aging out (2 months) Lived on campus (2 years) Lived in apartment with several roommates (1 year) Moved into current apartment with one roommate	Living in apartment with one roommate Less than 1 year	Friend found the apartment
Carrie	21	Left foster family before aging out (age 17) Aged out as homeless (> 1 year) Lived with different friends (< 6 months) Lived with teacher (< 6 months) Lived with roommate found on internet (> 1 year) Lived on campus (2 years) Moved into current apartment with roommates	Living in apartment with roommates Less than 1 year	Friends found the apartment
Don	18	Aged out of residential setting Moved into apartment alone	Living in apartment alone Less than 1 year	Supervised Independent Living Case worker found housing
Erin	21	Removed from foster family home (age 17) Aged out in homeless shelter Lived in apartment alone (2 years) Moved into current apartment alone	Living in apartment alone Less than 1 year	Relative found apartment

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

Table 9 (cont'd)

Pseudonym*	Current Age	History of Housing after Aging Out	Current Housing	Who Helped Find Current Housing
Frankie	22	Aged out of foster family home Stayed with foster family until graduating high school Lived with girlfriend in apartment (1 year) Lived with roommates in apartment (< 1 year) was evicted Now homeless, but living in friend's home with girlfriend temporarily	Homeless – living with partner at friend's home Less than 3 months	Homeless – relative found temporary housing situation
Gail	19	Aged out of foster family home Staying with foster family in extended care More than 4 years	Living in house with foster family in extended care More than 4 years	Case worker found housing
Harriet	20	Aged out of foster family home Moved into a room in transitional group home Less than 1 year	Living in a room in transitional group housing Less than 1 year	Supervised Independent Living Case worker found housing
Irene	19	Aged out of foster family home Moved in with older adoptive sibling in Supervised Independent Living	Living in house with older adoptive sibling Less than 1 year	Supervised Independent Living Case worker found housing
Juliet	22	Aged out in homeless shelter Moved to Transitional Living Program for homeless youth (2 years) Moved to apartment alone	Living in apartment alone Less than 1 year	Homeless shelter staff found housing

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

How did they find this housing? Participants explained that they had several ways of finding a place to live after foster care. The most common way was to rely on their case workers to assist them in locating suitable housing because many of the youth were in extended foster care services. One of these services was Supervised Independent Living (SIL), which provided the youth with the ability to live on their own and be responsible for many of their housing expenses, while still being monitored by a case worker. Because the youth was receiving government funds for housing expenses, these residences needed to be inspected and approved by case workers.

In other cases, the youth found their housing through friends, relatives, co-workers, and on the internet. In two different interviews, youth talked about using internet sites such as Craig's List to locate potential roommates or living situations. When asked by the researcher whether they thought this might be a dangerous practice, the young people said they felt safe and exercised caution in connecting with these potential roommates by meeting them for the first time in public places, with other friends, and using other safety measures. Neither participant said they had experienced any negative consequences from this method of finding a roommate or housing situation so far.

When participants were asked how they found their current housing situation, the responses were split between receiving assistance from a DHS case worker or getting help from friends, family, or previous roommates. Some youth did not want to have a case worker help them find housing, preferring instead to figure it out on their own. As one young woman put it, *"If I understand it once, I try it on my own. And that's when I ask for help. But mostly I love to do things on my own"* (Juliet, lesbian, 22).

Barriers to finding housing. Several of the youth experienced difficulty in locating affordable, safe housing because of issues such as having a Criminal Sexual Conduct (CSC) offense, which limited their options. As one youth explained when a case worker tried to help him find a place to live after aging out:

[S]ince my charges [CSC] and also the fact that I'm gay, we couldn't find a place for me to just rent, like supervised living [SIL] . . . We couldn't find someone who was cool with that, so we just decided to go into my own independent living . . . so I'm kind of living by myself in my own apartment. (Don, bisexual, 18)

Another young woman did not receive much help from the case worker when she had to leave her foster care placement before aging out. According to the participant, the response from her case worker was:

They gave me options. And so they gave me this pamphlet, and said, "These are the places you can go to stay if you're homeless. . ." So they gave me, like, different shelters that I could go to....But they didn't really help me in terms of, "Where can I stay right now when I'm 17?" (Carrie, bisexual, 20)

Yet another participant, who was trying to get out of a bad living situation, had to remain where she was for much longer because she could not find help in locating a long-term housing solution. As she said,

Nobody helped me find a permanent place. I think there were plenty of people willing to say, "Oh, you can stay with us for the short term until you get everything figured out." But I think everyone felt weary about, "If I help her find an independent place or with a roommate, what if the situation goes bad?" And they didn't want to be responsible for that. (Erin, lesbian, 21)

Living alone or living with others. As discussed previously, these young people lived in a variety of situations when they were interviewed. Some lived with a birth family member or adoptive family member; some, with one roommate; others, with several roommates; while others preferred to live alone. This choice of whether to live with other people or not provided some interesting comments by the study participants. In a few cases, the participants expressed a desire to be alone. One participant captures this feeling well, “*Yeah. I actually like being alone, surprisingly. Like, I’ve always kinda been antisocial*” (Juliet, lesbian, 22). Others chose to live alone as a sign of their independence. For instance, one youth shared, “*You know, I feel like once I’m staying by myself, it’s more independent and it’s more growing up*” (Harriett, lesbian, 20)

On the other side, there were definitely some youth who did not want to live by themselves. Living with someone else brought a sense of safety, “*I want a roommate, because at night I’d probably be scared by myself*” (Gail, lesbian, 19). In other instances, living with other people felt familiar, as one participant describes his experience:

I’ve lived my entire life with 10+ kids, since I was a little kid. Because my mom had 9 kids, including me, so I...being an only child for 6 months and by myself for almost a year now, it’s...it’s different. (Don, bisexual, 18)

And another participant spoke to the feeling of separation and isolation that comes with living alone:

Sometimes I get lonely, because, you know, I’ve been used to being around, having roommates and dealing with drama and all that. So now it’s like once you aged out of what you used to and try to move onto something new, it’s iffy, but it’s also a lesson learned. . . . Sometimes I do miss being at [name of agency]. Just the company. (Juliet, lesbian, 22)

Summary of findings: Housing experience. The above information provides the findings related to what housing the young people in this study were living in when the interviews were conducted, what their history of housing had been after they aged out of foster care, and who helped them obtain this housing. The key findings from the discussion are:

- Most of the youth in this study were not able to find housing on their own without assistance from DHS case workers or Supportive Independent Living case workers, relatives, friends, and other social supports.
- As many of the young people in this age group, a few youth may be engaging in ways of finding housing, such as searching for roommates on the internet, without the thought of negative consequences.
- Housing instability appears to be a strong theme in the lives of these young people once they aged out of foster care. Some are prone to short-term stays and frequent moves.
- For some youth with issues such as CSC, housing options may be limited.

Experiences with education after aging out of foster care. The pursuit of continuing their formal education after aging out of care appeared to be important to the majority of the young people in this study. As discussed above, half of the participants were enrolled in post-secondary institutions at the time of their interview. Two other young people were pursuing their high school diplomas. While three of the participants were not enrolled in any school at the time of the interviews, all of them planned to continue their education, and 2 out of the 3 had begun the application process.

Although the majority of study participants were in school, attitudes about going to school were mixed. Several of the young people expressed being very goal-focused on their

education. For example, one youth stated, *“I think I’d always known that education was really important. And so, I’d always gone to school and taken the tests and studied with the intent of going to college. I think that’s what got me here”* (Ben, gay, 23). Another participant explained:

I think that comes from a very young age...I don’t think I’ve ever had anybody tell me that I was stupid. And so I don’t think I ever questioned the fact that I would go to college. I may have questioned the fact about how I would pay for college, but I always knew eventually I wanted to go to college. (Carrie, bisexual, 20)

There were other young participants, however, who were not as driven to continue their education. A few participants required some prompting to take education more seriously. One young person shared his experience by saying, *“[F]inally my counselor sat down and was like, ‘Look. If you want to graduate, you need to kick some butt for the...the last month’”* (Adam, questioning, 19).

Still others did not view traditional school as the way to meet their educational needs.

One youth explained:

I want to do something with my hands. I feel like school for me is, why study all these different things if I only want to do this one thing and I’m not going to use any of this that you’re teaching me for this one thing that I want to do. (Frankie, transgender, 22)

Assistance in preparing for school after foster care. In terms of support for continuing their education once they aged out of foster care, the youth in the study had a variety of experiences. Several of the young people were assisted by their case workers in finding appropriate high schools or colleges for them to attend, including help with filling out applications for funding and housing. Many of the youth in the study qualified for educational

assistance because they were in foster care on their 14th birthday. These young people usually had assistance from case workers in understanding these benefits.

Several other youth in the study took on the task of applying to school and for financial assistance on their own, because they did not qualify for some of the extended foster care services. One of these youth stated:

It was just so much research. And I didn't understand the financial aid process. And so getting through that I was, like, so many phone calls. And you always get passed around when you call. But it was almost kinda fun 'cause I always liked doing research and finding out all this information and understanding it. And by the time I got here in my first year of college, I think I came to the realization that I knew a lot more about the process of school and finances and how it worked than a lot of the other students who I was studying with. (Carrie, bisexual, 20)

An unexpected lesson. A few of the young people who were not in school at the time of the interview expressed disappointment in not having continued their education after high school. Because they were also over the age of eligibility for extended foster care services, they were on their own to navigate the system of registration and application for acceptance into college as well as trying to obtain financial support while in school. As one of the young people stated, *"I wish I woulda done it right out of high school, 'cause I mean I probably would have better opportunities now than I do"* (Erin, lesbian, 21).

Barriers to education. Two of the young people discussed the fact that they had a learning disability which caused them to take longer to finish high school. They both were receiving support in school to accommodate their specific educational needs and were determined to complete their education for as long as it took. The issue for these young people

would be whether they could complete their schooling within the state's eligibility requirements for foster care funding. Several other study participants talked about taking longer to complete their high school diploma because of life situations such as homelessness, changes in foster care placements, family crises, and mental health issues. All of these participants were not enrolled in post-secondary education at the time of their interviews.

The location of the school posed another barrier to some of the young people. Although several of the participants were going to different schools in a large urban area, the majority did not like their school. As one of the participants commented, *"It's fine, but it's like people ghetto"* (Gail, lesbian, 19). When asked if this participant liked being in school, she replied with little enthusiasm, *"It's school."* By the time of the interview, it was only a few months into the semester, and this participant had dropped out of two of the four classes she had enrolled in.

Another of the participants was reluctant to go to on to college but felt she had no other choice if she wanted to move ahead in life. As she explained:

[P]eople were like, "You really need to go to school to get an education. Out here you have to have an education to get anything." So I'm like, "Ok, I'll go to school. Even though I hate it, I'm going to try my best to get what I want to get and be where I want to be." So I really wasn't encouraged by anyone except my mother, who tried to push it on me, which I hated. (Harriet, lesbian, 20)

One other issue that was discussed by the participants was trying to balance going to school and working at the same time. Several had put off finding a job so they could concentrate on going to school full time, but were realizing that they were drawing to the end of their eligibility for foster care education funding and needed to look at another source of income. This was stressful to several of them because they did not feel prepared to handle the additional

responsibility of both priorities. This could put them at some risk for not completing their educational goals.

Summary of findings: Education experience. As the findings above demonstrate, the education experiences for the young people in this study were varied:

- The majority of study participants were engaged in educational activities after aging out of foster care.
- Most received help in pursuing their educational goals.
- There were a few who faced special barriers to completing their education, such as a learning disability, lack of motivation, and reaching the end of their eligibility for state-supported education services.
- Several of these youth would soon be facing the challenge of having to continue their education at the same time they were holding down a job. And few had been formally prepared for this challenge.

Experiences with employment after aging out of foster care. In terms of employment, the young people in this program were less successful than they were at continuing their education. Only one of the youth had a full time job, while two had part-time employment, and one was sporadically employed at different short-term jobs. The majority of the young people were unemployed at the time of the interview, with two of these having recently lost their part-time employment. One lost a job because of “money issues,” which the youth did not explain in any detail, and the other quit her most recent employment after only a short time because she did not like the work’s social environment. As the young woman stated:

And there was just a lot of social drama. I was only there for a couple weeks. Like, I didn't think it was that bad until I started working there. Yeah, I learned more about the people there in my first day than I did my job, so... I mean if that tells you anything.

(Erin, lesbian, 21)

Not one of the youth in the study had ever experienced full-time employment except the one participant who currently held a full-time job. In addition, prospects for full-time employment did not look promising for any of the other youth, especially since they were also in school. The one young person who had full-time work was not in school at the time and wondered how she was going to do both once she was accepted at a college.

The type of work that participants engaged in prior to their interview included low-paying and low-skill work in factories, the fast food industry, babysitting, doing hair styling, and cleaning. Several of the participants were employed on the campus of the college they were attending in work such as tutoring, and research assistantships. All of the participants who were working full or part-time had been working less than 6 months at their place of employment.

In terms of length of time in employment, the longest working period by a youth in the study appeared to be 3 years, but this was only summer work. The longest period of continuous work was 2 years. Most of the young people who worked after aging out of foster care did so on a short-term basis with several different jobs. Table 10 below provides this information.

How did they find employment? For those three study participants who had full or part-time employment at the time of their interviews, two found work on their own and one received help from a staff member at the homeless shelter. As Table 10 below demonstrates, these young people have used a variety of methods to look for and find employment in the past. These methods included getting help from case workers, family members, friends, and, most often,

searching for work on their own. In terms of ways to look for employment on their own, the internet seemed to be the favored strategy. As one young person explained, *“I just pretty much went online and looked up temp services and then just went to the temp services and applied”* (Don, bisexual, 18).

Other youth in the study would not look for work through a temporary agency because they have been taken advantage of by these establishments in the past. One youth stated emphatically, *“I try to stay away from temps because I’ve got played by temps, so far, many times and I hate the experience of it.”* This young man went on to describe what had happened in the past through a temp agency:

Like they would call me and say, “Hey, we need you.” And then they will call back and say, “Sorry, we already have the position filled and we didn’t know it.” I’ve paid for taxis to get to the place, which was \$8.00 to \$10.00 bucks. And so I just told them, basically, I’m not coming back to you. I’m not referring anyone to you. Please take my application off the list. And I left. Because I’m not going to pay for something once they’re going to call everybody and not even have a system. (Adam, questioning, 19)

Barriers to employment. A lack of previous experience made it difficult for some of the youth to find jobs, or it relegated them to low-paying service industry or seasonal work. Transportation also posed a barrier to some of the young people in trying to secure and maintain employment. The experience of one young woman illustrates this:

I remember one time I had an interview. And I had to go after school. I was riding the metro bus, and a train was going through at the time. And I was literally 2 minutes late, and they would not interview me because I was 2 minutes late. I was so bummed out. (Erin, lesbian, 21)

In rural communities, a lack of transportation can be an isolating experience for these youth, but transportation issues are not unique to less populated areas. The researcher also experienced the difficulty many of these young people have without reliable transportation during the interview process. One of the young women who was supposed to be interviewed had to cancel at the last minute because the city bus she was on experienced mechanical problems, stranding her across town for hours.

Summary of findings: Employment experience. Table 10 above provides information related to the employment young people in this study had when the interviews were conducted, what their history of employment had been after they aged out of foster care, and who helped them obtain this employment. The key findings from this information are:

- The majority of the youth in this study were unemployed at the time of their interviews.
- Most of the youth found previous employment on their own or with assistance from DHS case workers, relatives, friends, and other social supports.
- Employment instability appears to be a strong theme in the lives of these young people once they aged out of foster care. Some experienced several different jobs and for short period of time.

Table 10: History of Employment, Current Employment, and Who Helped Find Employment

Pseudonym*	Age	Employment History	Current Employment	Who Helped Find Employment?
Adam	19	Internship in high school – receptionist (2 years) Cashier (less than 1 year) Works at recreation center – part-time (1 year)	Currently employed at several part-time jobs	Found internship through school Found employment on own
Ben	23	Worked on college campus (less than 6 months)	Currently employed part-time	Found employment through friends Found employment on own
Carrie	20	Worked at restaurant (2 months) Worked at construction company (summer job) Worked at service club (1 year) Babysitting (off and on) Worked on college campus (less than 6 months)	Picks up odd jobs No permanent employment	Researched on-line Roommate helped find job Found employment on own
Don	18	Temporary jobs (1 year)	Currently unemployed	Case workers helped find employment
Erin	21	Summer employment (3 years) Factory work (2 years) Fast food (less than 6 months)	Currently unemployed	Found employment through family members or friends Researched on-line and found employment on own
Frankie	22	Fast food (2 years) Factory work – temp services (less than 1 year)	Currently unemployed	Found job through friends Researched on-line and found employment on own
Gail	19	Has not been employed	Currently unemployed	Trying to apply on-line
Harriet	20	Temporary jobs (less than 6 months)	Currently unemployed	Case workers helped find employment
Irene	19	Passing out flyers (less than 6 months) Hair styling for friends (off and on)	Currently unemployed	Found employment through friends
Juliet	22	(No discussion of previous employment) Factory work (less than 6 months)	Currently employed full-time	Found employment through staff member at agency

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

Preparing for the transition to adulthood: Services received before aging out. A few of the services mentioned by study participants included help with obtaining a driver's license, and filling out tax forms and applications for housing, education, and employment. As discussed previously in this chapter, some DHS case workers also assisted the youth in locating appropriate housing or employment opportunities. A small number of the study participants talked about the programs they engaged in during foster care that were designed to help them get ready to live independently after aging out. Many of these programs involved regularly scheduled training and educational activities with explicit curricula. One study participant described the trainings:

SIL [Supervised Independent Living] has a class for us. Every 2 weeks we get a check. Well, I used to. But every 2 weeks they still have a class that I come to. They basically teach you cleaning skills, banking skills, checking account. They teach you everything you need to know. As long as you're paying attention, doing what you're supposed to do, then, you know, pretty much, everything that's going on in the world. But you just have to get out there and do it on your own. (Erin, lesbian, 21)

Some youth received training in a classroom setting, while others learned in a more informal group environment. Still, there were a few who received a more one-on-one experience. As one young man explained, his case worker taught him how to pay bills online:

Like he showed me, you know, "Hey, I'm going online to pay my phone bill. I'm going online to pay a light bill. I'm online to pay this bill." And he honestly let me sit down with him and he taught me how to do all that stuff. So it was mostly him who taught me how to become an adult. (Ben, gay, 23)

But the particular training or knowledge shared may not have been as important as how it was shared, through personal contact. One youth in the study summed it up very succinctly and

clearly as to what mattered to him, *“It wasn’t so much the services. It was more the people. You know, it was more the case workers and the residential staff”* (Adam, questioning, 19).

Conversely, several of the youth spoke about having had little preparation for the realities of what aging out of foster care would entail. They did not enjoy the independent living skills trainings because it did not seem relevant to them at the time. Many received this training several years before they were going to age out and, by the time they actually aged out of foster care, they had forgotten most of the things they were taught.

Yet, all the training they received could not prepare them for all situations. One young person was philosophical as she explained, *“I mean ‘cause you never know what life’s going to throw at you, so you gotta take it as it comes and try to remember the few pointers you have and try to make the best decisions out of the pointers you got”* (Harriet, lesbian, 20).

Who provided these services? Although the study participants did not go into depth about who provided many of the trainings they received while in foster care, there were a few youth who mentioned specific case workers who helped them gain the skills and knowledge they needed to prepare for aging out of care. Others who were mentioned as being helpful in teaching skills such as banking or bill paying were family members or other adult friends. One study participant stated that he gained knowledge about what life might be like after aging out of foster care from his same-age friends. He explained it this way:

I had a few friends in school. I mean they didn’t go through foster care, but they lived on their own already. They were still just in school and stuff. And they would tell me how it was. And they gave me an idea, like, I’d go hang out with them at their house. So I had an idea of how things would be. (Ben, gay, 23)

Gaps in preparation services before aging out. Several of the study participants talked about areas where they felt their preparation for the transition into adulthood was lacking. Specific topics of weakness focused primarily on money issues, such as budgeting, balancing a checkbook, and paying bills. A study participant commented:

I wish they would have spent more time on budgeting. I feel like I wasn't prepared. And I told [the case worker], I said, the one thing that you guys did not prepare me for is my money. Yeah. I feel like if they would have given us the check and said, all right, let's sit here and budget out this check, I feel like that would have been better. Because they were going to give us that money anyways. I wish that they would have sat down and said, okay, now let's figure out a way to budget out this amount of money that you have with these bills. (Frankie, transgender, 22)

Summary of findings: Preparation services before aging out. In reviewing the responses from the study participants, the following key findings emerged:

- The amount and focus of preparation for the transition to adulthood study participants received was varied and depended upon the region of the state they were in, the agency they were assigned to, their case worker and transition worker, as well as their age and openness to these services.
- People who helped these young people prepare for adulthood included case workers, friends, and family members.
- Assistance with preparing to age out was provided both formally through scheduled trainings by foster care staff members, as well as informally by some of their family members and friends.

- Several youth in the study identified a lack of training on how to handle their money and a budget.

The experience of aging out of foster care. Before moving forward to discuss the services that many of the young people in this study received after aging out of foster care, a brief review of some of their experiences with the actual process of aging out may help to put the need for these later support services in context.

Some study participants were ready for their independence, as one young woman said:

I would honestly say my biggest thing was getting the heck out of foster care, breezing through everything, just to get that money to be out on my own. I was sick of being in foster care, or in a foster home. (Erin, bisexual, 21)

Other young people faced the time of aging out with anxiety. One young man stated:

It was scary, really, to be honest. I was really worried about it as it was coming up, because...I mean that whole summer before I left, I just graduated, I'm going off to school, and I'm not going to be near anybody. So it was very scary. (Ben, gay, 23)

Adjusting to the suddenness of aging out. Initially, the freedom of being on their own was difficult to adjust to, according to many of the youth in the study. One youth expressed his confusion at the sudden abruptness of aging out, but he has been able to adapt with time. He stated, “*It was too much, too fast, but after getting used to it I'm enjoying it more now since I understand it more*” (Adam, questioning, 19).

Below are several other quotes from different study participants that illustrate the abrupt nature of aging out:

- *Well, I was locked up for 4 years, so I didn't have no one to tell me what I could and couldn't do. So it was like walking on egg shells. And then after a while, once I actually got to hang out with some of my friends, it started getting easier, like going to the mall and truly realizing I had control of my own money again. (Don, bisexual, 18)*
- *It was terrifying. Thank God my girlfriend moved in with me at the time, so it was easier, but it was still hard because we're a young couple, just moving out on our own . . . I didn't have food stamps at the time and my rent was \$495 and the checks were like \$550, \$515. So I'd have to go to my uncle's and be like, hey, can we get some food, because he got food stamps. It was hard, but we made it. (Frankie, transgender, 22)*
- *It went through one thing to another, 'cause on the day of my birthday, that's when everything got cut off completely. So I'm like, "I don't know what I'm doing. I'm scared." But I refuse to let that withhold [sic] me back. I still went. I still did it. I still went to go get my own job. I got it together. Because if I'm not going to do it, nobody's going to do it for me. (Harriet, lesbian, 20)*

Some adults in a youth's life attempted to ease the process of aging out. One such study participant stated, *"I graduated high school. My 18th birthday was in November and I still had all that school year to finish, so my foster parents kept me until my school year was done"* (Ben, gay, 23).

Preparing for the transition to adulthood: Services received after aging out.

Although some of the young people were excited about being emancipated from foster care once they reached age 18, the reality of what they left behind became very real to them and there was

some regret in their decision. As one youth, who decided to go back into extended foster care services, put it:

I mean when I first left my mind wasn't straight. My mind wasn't right. I was just thinking about going home. I was just thinking about getting home to my mom. But then I realized, I'm like, "I left foster care." I left something that paid for my college, paid for my tuition, paid for my books, paid for a car, you know? Paid for everything. And so, I went back into the foster care system, 'cause I lost all those services, you know? And I need those services. I honestly need those services. So I went back in, and so I'm getting a lot of those services . . . There really isn't a down side. (Adam, questioning, 19)

Types of services. Similar to the services youth received before aging out, there were a variety of programs and supports available for the young people once they aged out. Financial support was provided for essentials such as first month's rent, housing and utility security deposits, start-up household items, furniture, and limited money for buying a car. As the discussion above indicates, some of the youth also received assistance with finding appropriate housing and employment, as well as support for their education endeavors. Many of these services were provided through state-sponsored extended foster care programs.

Post-foster care services also included more skills training, but specifically focused on immediate needs. A few of the young people who participated in these sessions seemed to appreciate the importance of the information they were learning, after having experienced the aging out process. One study participant described the program, saying:

We have classes here, actually. Like housing, how to find a good apartment, what questions to ask. How to find a good car, what questions to ask. How to do this, how to

do that. Basically, we have meetings and the meetings help us basically learn how to grow up and be responsible. (Irene, lesbian, 19)

Who provided these services? Once again, training and support services were offered by a variety of agencies and individuals, from DHS caseworkers to family members. One young woman described her first few experiences of trying to do her own bills after aging out of care:

I'd freak out. My cousin would help me. She's always been willing to help me. I'm trying to slowly learn how to do that all on my own. And she's just used to just doing it for me. And it's like, you know, I gotta be able to do some of this on my own. Like, what's going to happen when she's not around? (Erin, lesbian, 21)

In some cases, the study participant was not eligible to return for extended foster care services, or chose not to participate in that program. In these instances, they found assistance with their aging out dilemmas through other supportive adults in their lives. One young woman describes the close relationship she had built with a staff member at a homeless shelter:

Um, one of the workers from the homeless shelter. She's kinda like a mom to me. She's always been there for me, even when I was there [as a resident of the shelter]. Like, we talk on Facebook once in a while when she got on it and stuff. If I ever had anything going on, I would tell her, and she'd give me advice a couple days later. So I mean, even though she was far away, she was still helping me out. (Erin, lesbian, 21)

Instead of helping the youth, however, there were other systems and processes in place that tended to add to the difficulty. One of these situations is the delay some young people experience if they age out of foster care at age 18, and then try to get back into the extended foster care services through age 21. As one young woman indicated:

I would say the process of aging out is...it's crazy. Aging out, going back into the voluntary [foster care services], like, it's... The process could change, 'cause it takes longer than it should. If everybody was on their job, then things would get done faster in a more productive way. But you have people who are out here slacking, people who are not doing their jobs, who don't care; they just want the money. So it's like if the process is better, then it would be better. (Harriet, lesbian, 20)

Another youth faced a similar wait to have services continued and, as he explained it, “*So I went back into the foster care system. It was my choice. And it's still a work in progress. Ugh. It's been a work in progress for, like, 3 months already*” (Don, bisexual, 18).

Three months may not appear to be a long wait, but those few months can be crucial to a young person's ability to survive as they transition into adulthood.

Summary of findings: Preparation services after aging out. In reviewing the responses from the study participants, the following key findings emerged:

- Some study participants received extended foster care services, while others did not opt or were not eligible for this support.
- People who helped these young people after they aged out included case workers, friends and family members.
- Both formal and informal support activities were available to many of the youth in this study, and some of the youth appeared to seek out these services on their own.
- For youth who were not eligible for extended care services, they needed to find their own social support system to help them with the transition out of foster care and into adulthood.

- For youth who aged out of foster care at age 18 and later wished to return to extended foster care services, there was often a waiting period to get supports reestablished.

The impact of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and aging out of foster care. The main goal of this study was to explore the experiences of youth who were aging out of foster care and also identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The previous sections of this chapter have focused on the overall aging out experiences of the youth in the study. As these young people are also LGBT, the following findings document their specific experience through the lens of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Coming out experiences while in foster care. While in foster care, the youth in this study had varied experiences with coming out to themselves and disclosing to others about their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. In order to understand how their coming out process may have influenced their aging out experience and, subsequently their ability to secure housing, education, and employment, it is important to examine some of the details of their coming out stories. These stories differed in the age at which they first came out, who the young person decided to disclose their identity to first, whether they disclosed being LGBT in their foster care setting or to their birth family members, and the responses they received about this disclosure. Table 11 below displays the data on these specific features for each of the youth in the study.

The pre-disclosure hinting. Several of the young people talked about making suggestive comments about their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to others prior to actually disclosing their LGBT status to others. One young man described his experience:

I hinted at it a lot when I was a child. I recognized I was different. Didn't know I was gay, but I recognized I was different at the age of 5. I knew I was different from the other guys in the classroom. (Don, bisexual, 18)

Another study participant had a similar experience and described it in this way:

I always hinted at it, and I always wanted to come out, but I was so scared of people, like, what they would say. Kind of like the normal reasons people would stay in their closets. And I really didn't necessarily come out of the closet until I was in 9th grade. (Ben, gay, 23)

The trial-run strategy. A few of the young people sent up test balloons with friends before they disclosed to family members to see how the experience might go. One young woman received an unexpected response. As she explains:

I came out to a couple people prior to really coming out, like, a couple of close friends knew. But they weren't going to say anything to anyone. And, of course, my first friend that I ever told, she also told me too that she was gay. (Irene, lesbian, 19)

And another youth told the story of coming out to a roommate first, and the roommate who encouraged her to tell her birth mother immediately. She shared the story below. Note that many of the speech idiosyncrasies of this youth, such as “like” and “you know” were left in the text to provide the tone of the telling:

I was with my roommate in my room. And I told her, and she's like, “Well, you gotta tell your mom. That's the first person you should tell.” I was like, “I don't know. I can't do it in person.” And she's like, “You gotta call her and tell her.” So, she's like, “You gotta put it on speakerphone so I can hear this.” ‘Cause she's like, “I wanna hear this.” So, you know, I call my mom up. She's on speakerphone. I'm like, “I gotta tell you

something, Mom.” She’s like, “Oh, no. What’d you do?” I was like, “I didn’t do anything. I just gotta confess something.” And she’s like, “What?” And I’m like, “I like girls. Like, I’m a lesbian.” And she’s like, “I already knew that.” Ok. I’m like, “What?” And she’s like, “I’ve known since you were 6 years old.” I’m like, “Oh. Well, you gotta help me tell the rest of the family,” or whatever. And we were talking about it. She’s like, “Sweetie, they’ve already known too. We were just waiting for you to tell us.” And it’s like they knew I was gay before I even knew. And it was just crazy. (Erin, lesbian, 21)

Who did youth in the study disclose to first and what was their reaction? Beyond the hinting and trial runs, the young people in this study chose a variety of individuals or groups to disclose to for the first time. These individuals included predominantly family members and close friends. In this study, the majority of participants selected their favorite family members, including grandmothers, siblings, and an aunt. Interestingly, in all of these cases, the family member also represented a parental figure at one time in their lives. Reactions to this disclosure were mixed, according to the youth. A few of their experiences are described below:

I actually told my biological grandma first. And then my grandma was really excited because her brother was gay too. And then so was my sister. She said, “Wow, you are?” Like she was not expecting it. But she acted like it was the best thing ever. So it was really cool. (Ben, gay, 23)

As another youth shared:

I came out to my sister. I was terrified. I’ve never been more scared in my life. I was like, “Ok, I have to tell her.” And she was just, “Oh, ok. I knew it. I knew it.” She was like, “I knew it. You can just tell.” I’m like, “What do you mean?” She goes, “You’re so different. You’re just not normal.” (Harriet, lesbian, 20)

Disclosing to foster family members and their reactions. A few of the study participants shared their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression with their foster families.

This disclosure met with a range of reactions. Several of them are shared here:

- *It was really weird. Before anyone else, I told my foster family first. Right when I moved in. The last one, yep. And I told them just 'cause...I don't know. I wanted to be open about it. (Ben, gay, 23)*
- *And then she told her parents. And then they sat me down and said, "We have a trust issue." And they asked me for all the passwords to my computer and things like that. And our relationship kind of deteriorated from there because I think it was just, they didn't trust me . . . it wasn't just about the [sexual] orientation thing anymore. (Carrie, bisexual, 20)*
- *When I first came out, it wasn't right. Everybody wanted to change me, "You're going to hell. You're doing this and that." Then I'm at home, "It's not right. You need to get changed. You're going to hell. Such and such." (Gail, lesbian, 19)*
- *[A] couple of people kinda knew. Like, my foster parents, I think they had an idea that I was. And my foster brother knew and he would pick on me about it. (Erin, lesbian, 21)*

Table 11 below displays the data on some of these experiences for each of the youth in the study.

Table 11: Coming Out and Disclosure Experiences of Youth

Pseudonym*	Age at coming out	Disclosed to first <i>Response to Disclosure</i>	Disclosed to foster parent(s)/ family or in residential? <i>Response to Disclosure</i>	Disclosed to birth parent(s)/ family? <i>Response to Disclosure</i>	Disclosed to case worker? <i>Response to Disclosure</i>
Adam	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ben	16	Told grandmother first. <i>She was excited because her brother was gay</i>	Yes - Disclosed to last foster family from the beginning. <i>Foster family was accepting</i>	<i>Sister was excited and supportive</i> <i>Older brother was not supportive</i>	Yes – Case worker <i>Supportive</i> Yes – Transition worker <i>Not supportive</i>
Carrie	16	Best friend at school	No – Was “outed” by foster family’s daughter <i>Not supportive</i>	Yes <i>Not supportive</i>	No
Don	14	“Selective people” <i>Mixed responses</i>	Yes – Came out in residential setting <i>Mixed responses</i>	Yes to some family Father was gay <i>Most of family is supportive, except grandfather</i>	Yes – different rules apply to LGBT youth in residential placement <i>Not supportive - Asked not to talk about it</i>
Erin	17	Friends at school <i>Supportive</i>	No	Yes – said they already knew <i>Most supportive</i>	Yes <i>Supportive</i>
Frankie	17	Grandmother <i>Supportive</i>	Yes <i>Foster father was not supportive</i>	Yes to most family members <i>Supportive</i>	Yes <i>Supportive</i>
Gail	14	Friends <i>Mixed responses</i>	Yes <i>Not supportive</i>	Yes <i>Not supportive</i>	Yes <i>Supportive</i>

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

Table 11 (cont'd)

Pseudonym*	Age at coming out	Disclosed to first <i>Response to Disclosure</i>	Disclosed to foster parent(s)/ family or in residential? <i>Response to Disclosure</i>	Disclosed to birth parent(s)/ family? <i>Response to Disclosure</i>	Disclosed to case worker? <i>Response to Disclosure</i>
Harriet	14	Came out to sister <i>Supportive</i>		Yes <i>Mixed responses</i>	Yes <i>Supportive</i>
Irene	15	Came out to adoptive sister <i>Supportive</i>		Yes <i>Mixed responses</i>	Yes <i>Supportive</i>
Juliet	16	Came out to her aunt <i>Not supportive</i>	Yes – In homeless shelter for LGBT youth	Yes – Some family <i>Mixed responses</i>	Yes <i>Supportive</i>

* To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used

The experience of discrimination while in foster care. Several of the participants in this study described either experiencing or witnessing acts of discrimination based on a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. This discrimination occurred in multiple foster care settings, including foster homes, residential settings, and group homes. A few of their stories have been captured here.

- *Like I said I don't judge people for a fact 'cause growing up I was called gay. I was called a fag, you know. I was beat up, because, you know, people thought I was gay. I was jumped because, you know, people were like, "Oh, you know, you're gay," because you know, the way I walked, the way I talked, you know? I hung around nothing but girls, you know, my laugh, he-he, is considered girlish, I guess. (Adam, questioning, 19)*
- *When I would talk to my case worker about that [being gay], he would bring books on how to change it and all this stuff. Yeah. So he was the one giving me the resources, but not necessarily the right ones, I guess. Yeah. So he just did not agree with anything like that. Just thought that I needed to be changed. (Ben, gay, 23)*
- *If you're gay in [name of agency], there's different things you have to follow. Different like, they'll say, "Can I ask you not to talk about it so much?" (Don, bisexual, 18)*
- *And he [foster father] just shut down to me. And it hurt a lot because I looked up to him. I respected him. And you know, he would tell us stories about how he used to be an ex-alcoholic and an ex-poththead, but now he's a deacon in the church. So he can't accept that. (Frankie, transgender, 22)*
- *Well, this only happened in foster homes. It was the foster kids. I always got mocked for it. Always. I'm pretty sure I was gay from the time I was born. I'm pretty sure. But I always got mocked. Like, you're gay. You homo. Well, then I would get mad, because*

then I wanted to keep it a secret. I didn't want anybody to know because even when I was 13, it still wasn't okay. Back then it wasn't as known as it is now even. (Don, bisexual, 18)

Summary of findings: The impact of being LGBT on aging out of foster care. In reviewing the responses from the study participants, the following key findings emerged:

- The study participants had a range of experiences with coming out and disclosing their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to others; however, most of their case workers appeared to be supportive (see Table 11 above).
- Although many of the youth in this study had a few key people they would come out to first, namely family members and close friends, this was not the case for all of these young LGBT people.
- It appeared to be difficult to predict how people would respond to the disclosure of the youth's LGBT status, because often times participants were surprised by the reactions they received, both positive and negative.
- The incidents of discrimination against LGBT youth within foster care setting continues to occur, and to be perpetrated, condoned, or ignored by foster care service providers.

The impact of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender on obtaining housing, education, and employment. Many of the young people were living in situations where they had disclosed their LGBT status to family, roommates, and landlords. Only one youth reported any experience of discrimination in finding housing based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. This youth also had a Criminal Sexual Conduct (CSC) conviction, so it is difficult to determine whether his difficulty in finding housing was based upon his being

gay or his previous criminal charge. In another case, the landlord of one of the young women had a gay son, and he specifically wanted a lesbian to move into his apartment complex. Because many of the youth in this study had made frequent moves in short-term housing situations, it may be difficult to determine whether any of these relocations were the result of any overt or covert discrimination on the part of landlords, roommates, or other housing arrangements.

The impact on education. A few of the study participants had experiences in high school with some physical and verbal bullying or teasing. One youth, as referred to above, reported being beaten up and verbally harassed numerous times because other students thought he was gay. The outcome of this physical and verbal abuse was not provided by the youth, but he appeared to have taken it in stride, at least in the retelling. Several of the young women experienced having fellow male students tease them and make suggestive sexual overtures, but they generally dismissed these as bravado. Conversely, one young woman explained that being gay or lesbian in school was actually very popular. As she described it, *“I don’t know. It’s crazy because in school everybody, like, flocks towards it”* (Harriet, lesbian, 20).

The impact on employment. In relation to employment and the impact of the study participants’ sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, experiences varied. Some of the young people were out at their work from the beginning, while most preferred to remain closeted until they were familiar with the work environment and their co-workers. Of course, at the time of the interviews, only three of the participants were employed, and although some were out to a few co-workers, none of them were out to their employers. None of the study participants described any experience with overt discrimination based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in their previous work. But, as discussed in previous

sections of this chapter, many of the youth in this study did not have a lot of experience in gaining employment at the time of the interview.

Summary of findings: The impact of being LGBT on obtaining housing, education, and employment. In reviewing responses from the study participants, the following key findings emerged:

- The study participants had a range of experiences in trying to secure housing, education, and employment, but few had faced any overt discrimination.
- Because of the transient nature of their experiences, specifically around housing and employment, it may be difficult to identify any influence of the youth's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression on gaining housing, education, or employment. Additionally, it may be difficult to recognize how being LGBT may influence their aging out experience. In other words, they may not have been in a housing situation or job long enough to recognize discrimination if it happened to them. They may be able to identify obvious bias against them, but their perception of more subtle forms of discrimination may be undeveloped as yet.

Findings from the Selective Coding Data Analysis

In the previous section, the main focus was on the three key indicators of successful transition to adulthood that were discussed in the previous chapters. These indicators are housing, education, and employment. This section will discuss a few of the key findings from the selective coding process that were not covered in the previous section.

First impression and long-lasting experiences from foster care. There were some very profound stories that the young people told during the interviews that evoked a lot of emotion in

them as they shared these events. Some of the stories echo findings from several other research projects, and appear to be common themes across time, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Here are a few that seemed to stay with the youth:

- *I guess the down side would be maybe having to leave a family member and going to live with a stranger. I think that's most why I didn't like the foster care system. I hated living in foster homes. The residential places I did not mind. But the foster care systems, like, the foster homes, I hated because...It wasn't the parents. It was just you don't feel right going into a stranger's home. You don't know nothing about that person. (Don, bisexual, 18)*
- *The only thing that you had sometimes was a bag of clothes. I know when I went in foster care that's all I had was the clothes on my back and a bag of clothes. I had no toothbrush with me. I had no hygiene products, nothing. I think I had a dollar fifty on me and then the bag of clothes. In a trash bag. And that made me feel like I was worth nothing. I was just a bag of trash. That's what that made me feel like. (Adam, questioning, 19)*
- *All you know is that you're going to live in some stranger's house. That's what I see every foster care kid doing when they enter a foster home. You're being moved into a stranger's house. You have no family around you. None of your friends. (Ben, gay, 23)*

What helped these young people succeed? In the face of uncertainty, constant change, and the unknown, so many of the young people in this study continued to move ahead with their lives. When asked what it was that helped them make it through the difficult times, such as aging out of foster care, the youth had the following explanations:

- *I just kept on moving forward. You know, yeah, I would take 20 steps forwards and get knocked down 10 steps back, but when I felt like I got knocked down, I didn't stay down. I*

got back up. And I'm like, "You know what? I'm going to do this." I didn't put my life on hold just because I was in a foster care. That is just a short period of time where your life has come to a stop. (Don, bisexual, 18)

- *I had people saying, "Never give up," but I knew that. Then I told them, "You know what? If I give up, I'm going to be nobody. I'm going to become nothing but a kid and a trash bag, that's all I'm gonna become. And I don't wanna have that label. Not me." (Adam, questioning, 19)*
- *I think, like, there's a reason I go through the stuff I go through. And, uh, I think, like, I just have to keep moving forward. There's a reason I have to go through it. And it's to move forward and hopefully there's something better at the end of the road, you know? And I'm just waiting to get to the end of the road. (Carrie, bisexual, 20)*
- *Um, just, truth be told, it was the Lord above. He the one that, you know, the more I pray to Him and the more I worship, the more stronger I get, because I felt like I could have been a victim. I could have been one of the ones on the news saying, "This young lady has killed herself," all this and this and that. But because I have strength from the Lord above helping me to maintain and... He giving me the positive people in my life, that's what made me more strong. (Juliet, lesbian, 22)*
- *My will and my strength. If I didn't have the will... I believe my soul is so willing that it does not make any sense. I have tried. I've tried, and I've tried, and I've tried. No matter how bad the situation, it is always something inside of me that says, "Push on. Continue. You can do this." It's like I can never give up. (Harriet, lesbian, 20)*

Recommendations from youth to service providers. During the interviews, participants were asked to offer some suggestions to case workers, transition workers, and other social

service providers for working with foster care youth, particularly those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The following are their ideas:

- *Be informed. Well, I mean as far as the whole educating social workers about dealing with LGBT, I would like to see...And it probably won't happen any time soon, but I think that social workers, especially in Christian-based settings, need to be more supportive. They're not supportive enough. They don't want to hear it. But they need to be educated in how to deal with people like that. (Ben, gay, 23)*
- *Be open. Yeah, 'cause I went to a doctor's office downtown just the other day. And the nurse came in, and she had a little HRC [Human Rights Campaign] pin. And I was like, "Oh, that's so awesome." (Carrie, bisexual, 20)*
- *Be available. Having people there to give you pointers and helping you out. Like, if you had a question, they could help you find an answer or they have the answer. Just finding a good support system or maybe some adults that you can confide in and trust to ask those kinds of questions. (Erin, lesbian, 21)*
- *Be accepting. Well, one, if the foster care worker is there to support and to help the client of theirs, then they supposed to support them regardless of their sexuality, their race, their age, any of that, because at the end of the day, their job is supposed to be like a family to them, not, you know, be doing hatred of them or judge them because of their sexuality. (Gail, lesbian, 19)*
- *Be a listener. So I feel like people need to start listening, having open ears and listen to what people or LGBTQ people went through, than to say, "Oh, well. Ugh, that's nasty." That's not going to help us. That's not going to bring us all together. That's going to*

break us down into pieces. So I feel like people need to open up and just listen. (Harriet, lesbian, 20)

Recommendations from youth to other foster care youth. In addition to providing suggestions for social service providers, the youth in the study were asked to share any advice they had with other youth in foster care, especially those who were LGBT. Key themes in their suggestions are being yourself, staying strong, and facing the reality of your situation. The following is their guidance to other foster care youth:

- *So that's what a lot of foster care kids have to do to actually keep on moving forward with their life, to become a better person in their life, to show people I'm accepting the fact that I'm in foster care. I'm accepting the fact I am where I am. But you know what? By accepting that fact, you will become a better person. You will move on with your life. By yourself or with other people on your side. Either way. As long as you accept that fact that...that you are who you are and you are where you are, then you'll be ok. (Adam, questioning, 19)*
- *I think no matter what anyone goes through, you can't forget to be yourself. Like, that's the most important thing. No matter what you're going through, what life throws at you, being yourself, that's what's going to get you through anything in life. (Erin, lesbian, 21)*
- *Yeah. And I would say, don't rush anything because it is a hard world out there. I've been out on my own for a year and a half now and it's hard. (Frankie, transgender, 22)*
- *Basically just be yourself. You don't have to hide who you are to impress no one. Like, if you... It's hard to basically put on an act for somebody to impress so they can like you rather than be yourself. And it's like you're acting. You're really someone you're really*

not. Like, it's either they accept me for who I am or this is not the person I need in my life or to support me. (Gail, lesbian, 19)

Unexpected Findings

In addition to the anticipated findings based on participant interviews, there were two interesting discoveries that arose during the process of data collection. These findings are shared here to provide information for future research projects with this population.

Snowball sampling ineffective as a recruitment strategy. Every participant in this study was recruited through someone who also knew the researcher, directly or through another contact. There were no participants recruited through flyers that were posted in public sites or in LGBT organizations. For the young people in this study, the introduction of the researcher by someone they knew and trusted appeared to be the most effective way to gain their interest and participation.

Conversely, the researcher had proposed using a chain referral sampling, otherwise known as a “snowball” sampling, technique to obtain more participants in the study (Biernacki & Woldorf, 1981). This sampling technique has been shown to be particularly effective in recruiting hard-to-reach populations or addressing sensitive subjects, such as LGBT former foster care youth, because it utilizes the organic social networks of current study participants to spread the invitation to participate (Noy, 2008). Noy proposed this sampling technique as generating a unique type of social knowledge, one that is “emergent, political, and interactional” (2008, p. 327), and one that addresses issues of power and social capital. Nonetheless, this strategy did not work at all for the current study. The young people who participated did not provide a conduit to others like themselves. In fact, they did not know of any other youth with

the same characteristics, namely who identified as LGBT and had aged out of foster care. They knew of youth who had aged out of foster care as they did, and they knew of youth who were LGBT as they were; but, they did not know of another person in their circle of contacts who was LGBT and had aged out of care.

The Eco-map: One data collection tool provided more information than expected.

The researcher attempted to use an eco-map to capture the dynamic interaction between the study participants and the social environment around them, including supports and stressors. However, when participants were asked to create a drawing of the people, services, and organizations that they interacted with on a regular basis, they had a difficult time accomplishing this task. Several of them had participated in creating an eco-map in the past with a case worker, but at the time of the interview, they appeared to be confused on what to include and what not to include on their drawing. When the researcher asked a few of the young people why they were having a difficult time, one participant explained that they were not sure if they should include some of the people and places on their paper, because they did not know if they would still have contact with them in the future.

Because we were attempting to create the eco-map in the middle of a major transition in many of these young lives, they may have been reluctant to quantify the number of people and other elements in their social system on paper. The researcher can only speculate, but perhaps the realization that things were changing dramatically and so many things were tentative in their lives might have been too difficult to capture on paper at the time of the interview.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided findings from the in-depth face-to-face interviews with study participants, particularly addressing the research questions on their experiences in obtaining housing, education, and employment as they aged out of foster care. In addition, the findings provide information on who assisted these young people in their transition to adulthood, and what impact, if any, their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression had on their success in moving forward. In the next chapter, these findings will be compared to the results from previous research studies on this population, conclusions will be discussed, and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research will be presented.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study was conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and have aged out of the foster care system. The overarching question for this research was how these youth manage the transition from foster care to a life beyond care. Of particular interest were the participants' experiences in attempting to obtain independent housing, continue their education, and secure gainful employment once they were terminated from foster care services, and whether they perceived their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to have an impact on their aging out experience or their attempts to find these resources. To gather this information, in-depth interviews were conducted, the responses from these interviews was transcribed, coded, and analyzed, and the findings reported in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

This chapter will review the key findings from the interviews based on the research questions posed by the study and compare the findings to results from previous research studies on young people who have aged out of foster care that were discussed in Chapter Two. It will conclude with implications for social work practice, education, policy, and research.

Review of Research Questions with Key Findings

Five research questions were posed by this study. First, key findings from the study addressing each one of these questions will be discussed, followed by a comparison of the findings to results from previous research on this topic.

Research Question 1:

What experiences have LGBT youth who aged out of foster care had in obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment?

Housing. In relation to housing, interviews with participants indicated that 9 out of the 10 (90%) young people had been in their current housing for less than one year. Half of the youth had moved several times since aging out of foster care, and 3 (30%) had been homeless during that time. Three (30%) of the participants were living alone at the time of the interviews, 2 (20%) were living with relatives, the other 5 (50%) were living with a variety of other people such as roommates, partners, or foster family members.

Not one of the young people found their current housing situation on their own. Some had help from case workers or a supervised independent living worker, others had relatives, roommates or friends assist them in locating a place to live, and still others moved in with relatives. Prior to finding their current housing, a few of the participants explained that they had used the internet to locate potential roommates or living situations. None of these young people thought this was a dangerous practice because their efforts had been successful. The majority of the participants seemed to need some help in obtaining a place to live after leaving foster care, and many had made frequent moves over a short period of time. Perhaps this is a remnant of their days in foster care when adults were making decisions for them about where they would live and many youth experienced multiple placements before their time in state-sponsored care was over. This could be a difficult pattern to change for some or it could be a way for them to take control of their lives. It may also be a function of the financial situation they find themselves in without steady employment or other income.

When the results of this study were compared to previous research on housing situations for foster care youth who had aged out, they showed similar patterns. In Courtney et al.'s (2010) longitudinal study, by the time the young people had reached age 24, some 37% had been homeless or "couch surfed" at least once after leaving foster care. Another study by Reilly (2003) that examined outcomes for youth up to three years after they had aged out of care showed that 36% had experienced a time when they had no place to live. The 30% of youth in the current study who have experienced homelessness is certainly within this range, considering the oldest person in the study was 23 years old. Additionally, Reilly (2003) reported that 35% of the young people in his study had experienced five or more moves since leaving foster care. As the data on the history of housing for the current study participants shows in Table 9, several of the youth are approaching that frequency of relocation. Perhaps the most disturbing finding from Courtney et al.'s (2010) study was that half of the young people who were homeless had experienced this more than once, and those who had couch surfed once were three times more likely to do it again in the years after aging out of care. Several of the youth from the current study had experienced recurrent homelessness since aging out, supporting the previous findings.

Education. In examining the education activities of the current study participants, 8 out of 10 (80%) had completed high school or their GED, and the 2 (20%) remaining participants were enrolled in high school at the time of their interviews. Five out of 10 (50%) were enrolled in post-secondary education. The 3 (30%) who were not currently enrolled had plans to go back to school in the very near future. These results appear to differ from previous research findings on the educational achievements of foster care youth who aged out. Reilly (2003) showed that 31% of participants did not have a high school diploma three years after aging out of foster care, while only 20% of youth in the current study did not have their diploma yet. However, in the

study by Courtney et al. (2010), 25% of the sample had not obtained a high school diploma by the time they were 24 years old. The reason for the inconsistency in the findings from the current study around educational attainment with previous research is not known at this time. It might be related to the self-selection of the particular young who chose to participate in this study; it could be a function of a more successful initiative in the state to encourage youth to complete their education; or, it could be that the current state economy offers a better path to education than to employment at this time. This is an area for more investigation.

In light of the results from the current study that indicate that a half of the young people faced special barriers to completing their education, such as a learning disability, a lack of motivation, and that they were soon at the end of their eligibility for state-supported education services, their continued success in education may be in jeopardy. Another potential barrier for some of these young people may be the fact that they will be required to hold down a job at the same time they are going to school, a challenge that some may not be equipped to handle. As if their previous histories of frequent moves and changing employment situations are any indication of the tenuous nature of their lives, continuing their education may be a struggle for several of the young people in this study.

Employment. At the time of the interview only 3 (30%) of the study participants had regular employment, and of those only 1 (10%) was employed full-time. The employment histories for the young people in this study are displayed in Table 10 and indicate instability in their work life, with many having worked numerous different short-term jobs in the past, and a few having little work history at all. Although some were able to find employment on their own, others needed help from DHS case workers, relatives, friends, and other social supports to locate appropriate work. In terms of employment outcomes from previous research, one study indicated

that greater than 67% of youth who have aged out of foster care cannot maintain steady employment in the first few years of leaving foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2003). The data on employment from this current study seem to be in line with that of previous research. A study by Courtney and Dworsky (2006) of 19-year olds who had aged out of foster care discussed the financial troubles many of them faced and indicated that these youth were twice as likely as a nationally-representative comparison group to report economic hardships, such as not being able to pay rent or utilities.

Summary of findings for Research Question 1. The findings from the current study appear consistent with those of previous research on young people aging out of foster care and their experiences with obtaining housing and employment. The findings vary from previous research on education attainment. These young people show instability in their housing and employment pursuits, but stronger outcomes in their current educational journeys than previous studies have shown. Perhaps this is a result of the small sample size of the current study, or a function of recruitment strategies that targeted several colleges and universities. Another explanation might be that some of the youth in this study were in extended care services that might have allowed them to pursue education over employment opportunities. In addition, the study participants had a varying range of time post-aging out. Previous research cited here examined the experiences of young adults who had been out of foster care for at least three years and did not have extended services. It is difficult to know for certain, but something to be noted.

Research Question 2:

What services or experiences while in foster care prepared LGBT youth for obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment, and who provided these services or experiences?

Participants in this study appeared to have a variety of preparation activities for aging out of foster care and securing housing, education, and employment. Some of the preparation came from formal and regular training conducted by foster care personnel, including independent living skills, group support sessions, and one-on-one instruction. Other preparation activities were less formal and were provided by family members, mentors, and friends. Regardless of who provided the information, it was not consistently delivered to all of the participants. In addition, a few of the study participants commented that some of the training was given too early and they did not remember it once they eventually aged out of care. Others attended the trainings because they were mandatory in order to receive their financial assistance, but the youth did not see the need for much of the content and did not absorb the material presented at the time. It was not until many of the youth were faced with the reality of leaving foster care services that they recognized the value of the training they had received.

Loman and Seigel (2000) point out that the natural system of preparing youth for adulthood usually provided by birth families over a longer course of time is not present for many of these youth. Therefore, they must rely on training offered by foster care services or piecemeal informal education gleaned from family, friends, and other caring adults in their lives. In the current study, none of the participants mentioned having received any assistance from the foster care families they were living with at the time of their emancipation. This seems to be a telling finding as a commonsense place to hold many of the trainings related to household chores and budgeting would be in the very place they are living.

Several of the young people in the study did receive assistance in finding housing or employment or applying for college through their case worker or transition worker, but many wanted to find these resources on their own. Perhaps, as a few pointed out, they wanted to finally

be independent and do things on their own, or maybe they were reluctant to depend on others for support or did not trust the system to help them; regardless of their motivation, many of the youth were determined to make their own way alone. There were others, however, who saw a benefit to continuing to receive services from the state while they were making the transition from foster care to independence. They were still dependent upon the foster care system to help them secure housing, education, and employment. Some of these youth appeared to receive mixed messages from the support systems around them, including their case workers and foster families or transitional living arrangements. On the one hand they were encouraged to become more independent because their time in care was coming to an end; on the other hand, they were told they must accept pre-emancipation services in order to receive a stipend. This contradictory communication from the system – also perceived as the authority figure – could leave these young people confused and immobilize their moving forward into adulthood.

Research Question 3:

What services or experiences after foster care prepared LGBT youth for obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment, and who provided these services or experiences?

In the current study, 5 (50%) of the participants were receiving extended foster care services, while the other 5 (50%) either were not eligible for these services or opted not to receive them. In the area of housing, these extended services provided assistance with locating appropriate living arrangements, as well as paying first month's rent and security deposits for rent and utilities. In the area of education, extended foster care services helped with filling out applications and registration for classes. Also, they helped with finding transportation to and from the school, if necessary. Employment assistance under extended foster care services

included help with creating a resume, filling out an application, practicing interview skills, securing appropriate clothing for an interview, as well as transportation to and from work.

In reviewing the findings from this study, 4 out of 5 (80%) of the youth in extended foster care had help from case workers or transition workers in finding their current housing. The other youth in extended care returned to a relative's home. All of the youth in extended care received help in applying for school and in securing transportation to get back and forth to classes. In addition, most of the young people received school supplies through the extended care services. As far as assistance with obtaining employment for those in the extended care program, only 1 (20%) of the 5 was employed at the time of the interview; this was part-time work, and he found the employment himself.

Four out of 5 (80%) of the young people in the study who were receiving extended foster care services had recently returned to the foster care system. They were all either 18 or 19 years old. Recognizing their precarious situation, they chose to apply for extended foster care services; however, several of them found an unexpected delay in reinstating their benefits, including their financial support. Undoubtedly, this delay made for some stressful times for both the youth and their transition workers, who had to apply their maximum problem solving skills in obtaining temporary resources for the youth until their stipends kicked in. Ironically, these young people did not have six months of financial reserves to fall back on during the waiting period. One of the young women in the study related her experience with applying for extended foster care services this way:

I would say the process. Oh, the process of aging out is...it's crazy. Aging out, going back into the voluntary program, like, it's... The process could change, 'cause it takes longer than it should. If everybody was on their job, then things would get done faster in a more

productive way. But you have people who are out here slacking, people who are not doing their jobs, who don't care; they just want the money. So it's like if the process is better, then it would be better.

This situation highlights one of the dilemmas for the foster care system: how to simultaneously prepare a youth for independence and the end of regular foster care services, at the same time ensuring that the youth has the necessary services to be able to achieve that independence and wean themselves from dependence on the state. The balance between gentle prodding to encourage the new adult to leave the nest and the urge to protect the novice from harm is a delicate one. As birth parents have known for a long time, this is easier said than done (Harold, Colarossi, & Mercier, 2007). Arnett's (2004) theory of Emerging Adulthood has demonstrated that most young people are not prepared for the challenges of adulthood at age 18 and need continued nurturing into their late 20s. Why would the foster care system, acting *in loco parentis* (in the place of the parent) expect that foster care youth would be any different from non-foster care youth in their need for support that extends beyond their 18th birthday? And knowing this fact, why would it not put in place a smoother transition from regular foster care services to extended services? Unfortunately, this is one of the realities of an adult system that many of the youth trying to age out of care must face.

The other 5 (50%) young people in the study who were not receiving extended foster care services all found their current housing through friends or family members. A troubling finding from the study was that 3 out of the 5 (60%) youth were not enrolled in school and 3 (60%) were not regularly employed at the time of the interview. Considering they had no safety net of foster care services to fall back upon, and 2 (40%) had no connections with family members, they were truly out on their own.

Research Question 4:

What impact do LGBT youth perceive their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to have on their experience of aging out of foster care?

This research question and the next are the heart of the current study. The previous information allowed a comparison between the participants in the present research project and the general population of their peers who were also aging out of foster care that have been studied in the past. As the findings suggest, the LGBT youth in this study appeared to have similar experiences to those reported by preceding research in their attempts to locate a place to live, to continue their education, and to find and keep a job. The following discussion, however, examines the specific experiences of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and have aged out of foster care.

During their interviews, several of the study participants described the reactions they had received to the disclosure of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to family members, friends, and professional foster care staff members. These responses appeared to be mixed across all of the youth's different support systems. There was no one youth from this study who experienced consistently negative reactions to their disclosure; most found some support and acceptance as well as some condemnation and non-acceptance, depending on whom they told. Several found people who already "knew" they were LGBT before they came out to themselves or disclosed their status to others. In addition, it seems that the youth who experienced negative responses to their disclosure chose to ignore this non-accepting feedback and, when possible, avoid the person with that reaction. There were several cases of physical response to a youth's disclosure, but even this did not appear to stop the youth from moving beyond this adverse response and seeking out those who were more accepting and supportive.

Two key findings must be highlighted here. First, many of the young people in the study talked about not knowing what type of response they would receive after disclosing their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to various people in their social environment, regardless of how well they knew these people or how close their relationship was. More than once they were surprised by the reaction they received after their disclosure. The consequence of this “not knowing” was that every time they had to disclose to another person, there was that fear of what reaction they would receive. This caused some anxiety in a few of the study participants. In fact, one young woman commented that she was tired of having to come out over and over again. It did not appear from the comments made by the study participants that this process became any easier over time.

The second finding that is troubling in 2013 – when there is such a growing awareness of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and cultural competence in working with the LGBT population is a mandate – is the continued presence of discrimination, overt and covert, against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the foster care system. This discrimination is not limited to the children and adolescents being served by the system; it includes those who are providers as well. Those who perpetuate this discrimination, whether through ignorance or will, are doing harm to all those impacted by the foster care system – the children, the foster families, the service providers, and the greater community that interacts with all of these individuals. Regardless of the fact that the youth in this study tended to show great resilience in overcoming the discrimination they experienced during their time in foster care and in extended care, the state *in loco parentis* is responsible for ensuring their safety – both emotional and physical – and has a duty to protect them from this discrimination like a mother

hen with her chicks. The youth should not have to be responsible for dealing with the discrimination; the state should assure that discrimination of this kind does not exist in any way.

Research Question 5:

What impact do LGBT youth perceive their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression to have on their experience of obtaining resources such as housing, education, and employment after foster care?

Although few of the study participants talked about having experienced overt discrimination in trying to secure housing, education, and employment, it is difficult to determine whether they actually faced this bias or not. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, the temporary nature of many of the situations these youth experience, specifically around housing and employment, make it hard to identify any trend in discrimination based on the youth's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. In addition, many of the young people in the study were of minority ethnicities, and most were from low income backgrounds. Perhaps they attributed not getting a job or not being rented an apartment to their youth, their ethnicity, their socioeconomic status, their inexperience – even their foster care background – rather than their being LGBT.

They may have been able to identify overt discrimination against them based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression; nevertheless, they may not have developed a more astute awareness of the subtle forms of discrimination in their world yet. Furthermore, many of the youth were 18, 19, or 20, at the time of their interview and had not interacted significantly with the business or housing sphere, except through their case worker or transition worker. Perhaps these professionals acted as a buffer to the harsher realities of life outside the foster care system. Still, some of the young people in the study mentioned that they faced more

negative reactions within the foster care system than they did once they had aged out of care. As one young man explained, he was surprised, *“Because I rarely received any bullying through high school.”* But when asked about where he faced discrimination, he stated, *“If you’re gay in [name of agency], there’s different things you have to follow. Different like, they’ll say, ‘Can I ask you not to talk about it so much?’”* Another young man relayed a more threatening experience in a foster care residential setting, and shared the following:

[G]rowing up I was called gay. I was called a fag, you know. I was beat up, because people thought I was gay. I was jumped because people were like, “Oh, you know, you’re gay,” because you know, the way I walked, the way I talked, you know? I hung around nothing but girls, my laugh, he-he, I guess is considered girlish.

This difference in awareness could be because they were more attuned to threats to their more immediate environment than they were to possible dangers outside of their support system. All of this is speculation, of course, without further research into the experiences of LGBT youth who have aged out of foster care.

Summary of research question findings. One fact for certain is that many of the youth in this study are faced with multiple risk factors because of their physical environment, ethnicity, family history, socioeconomic status, and foster care background. The additional challenge of adjusting to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression at the same time they are transitioning to a new social environment of adulthood could put these young people at greater risk for negative outcomes. Although the findings of this study indicate that the youth who participated in the interviews had similar experiences to other young people who have aged out of foster care, specifically in regards to their housing, education, and employment insecurity, they demonstrated some differences as well. This particular group of ten young people may have

had higher rates of completing high school than findings from previous research indicate, but this success is tenuous at best. One missed bus, one lost job, one late financial stipend check, one more short-term housing situation, one uncaring case worker, and they could be forced to forgo school for a low-paying job to make ends meet.

In addition, these youth are riding the crest of a growing awareness of issues faced by those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, as well as recent national legislative victories regarding equal rights for sexual minorities. In order to protect these young adults and allow them every opportunity to reach their potential in life, as any parent deemed acceptable by the state child welfare system would do, there are changes that need to be made to the current foster care system. The findings from this study can offer some insight and recommendations for these changes. The following sections will discuss implications for practice, education, policy, and research.

Implications for Practice

Preparing child welfare agency staff and volunteers. Almost twenty years ago, Mallon (1998) reported that LGBT youth experienced overt and covert discrimination while in the child welfare system and some of this behavior came from child welfare workers. More current research (Ragg, Patrick, & Ziefert, 2006) finds this discrimination continues today and points to the need for more training for child welfare workers and volunteers in this area. Several training curricula have already been developed to prepare social workers, other staff members, and mentors who work with LGBT youth and families in foster care. In particular, the following trainings are beginning to experience wider acceptance and implementation across the country. This list is meant to show the growing cache of training resources available to child welfare

agencies that does not require them to reinvent the wheel in order to prepare their staff for competent service to LGBT youth.

- *All Children – All Families Initiative* (Human Rights Campaign, 2012)
- *Child Welfare League of America Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBT Youth in Out-of-Home Care* (Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006)
- *Getting Down to Basics: Tools to Support LGBTQ Youth in Care* (Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund, 2006)
- *Helping Families Support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children*. National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, Washington, DC (Ryan, 2009a)
- *Moving the Margins: Curriculum for Child Welfare Services with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth in Out-of-Home Care* (National Association of Social Workers & Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2009)
- *Promising Practices in Adoption and Foster Care: A Comprehensive Guide to Policies and Practices that Welcome, Affirm and Support Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Foster and Adoptive Parents* (Human Rights Campaign, 2009)
- *Social Work Practice with Transgender and Gender Variant Youth* (Mallon, 2009)
- *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children*. Family Acceptance Project™, Marian Wright Edelman Institute, San Francisco State University (Ryan, 2009b).

Preparing foster families. There are many foster families who would welcome a foster youth who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. This is apparent from the experiences of some of the youth in this study who were embraced by their foster families. There

is a movement in many states to push for licensure of lesbian and gay couples and single individuals who could take in LGBT foster youth (Siegel et al. 2013). Some child welfare professionals believe that LGBT youth should only be placed with LGBT foster parents, while others believe a foster parent's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression should not play a part in placement decisions. Regardless of the outcome of this current debate, all foster parents need to be trained in working with LGBT youth, especially in the areas of coming out, identity formation, coping tools and strategies for facing discrimination. As Freundlich and Avery (2005) point out, foster parents face a number of issues in trying to be culturally sensitive to LGBT foster youth and should be supported in their efforts to make welcoming homes for these young people.

Preparing other foster care youth for living with LGBT youth. Sensitivity training can benefit all foster care youth in dealing with diversity of many kinds, including sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Perhaps training foster care youth about the truths versus the myths about these issues can alleviate their fears and apprehensions, thus preventing bullying and harassment. The train the trainer curriculum mentioned before, created by NASW and Lambda Legal (2009) has modules that can be adapted to use with a younger audience. In addition, the Out of Home Youth Advocacy Council in California (2007) designed the *Creating Inclusive Services for LGBT Youth in Out of Home Care: Training Resources* in order “to promote and facilitate the implementation of AB 458, the Foster Care Nondiscrimination Act” (p. 2). This is a state law in California created to protect LGBT youth in foster care.

Preparing current social workers. Just as periodic training in ethics and pain management is required for licensure renewal in many states (see for example Michigan's

Licensing and Regulatory Affairs website, 2013), specific training to prepare practitioners to work with particularly vulnerable populations, such as LGBT youth, should also be mandatory for all social workers. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are foundational to competence in the social work profession. As mentioned above, numerous training and informational resources are available to assist social workers in providing effective and culturally appropriate services to young LGBT individuals (Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006).

Additional issues to consider. As practitioners, we must ask ourselves how we can create a place for LGBT foster care youth to feel safe and supported in their growth and development as individuals and community citizens. In addition to regular cultural competency training and support regarding LGBT issues for all individuals associated with the child welfare system, consideration should be made for establishing and supporting agencies and programs whose primary focus is serving LGBT foster care youth. If estimates are correct about the percentage of youth who are in foster care and identify as LGBT, there may be a need to establish separate support services for these youth in order to effectively meet their needs. At a minimum, all agencies and programs that serve foster care children and adolescents should assess their policies and procedures to ensure an open and accepting environment for these young people. Recent suggestions from the LGBT Foster Care Project developed by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center (2013) in New York City include the following:

Identify a staff person to serve as the LGBT resource contact person within the agency, who stays up-to-date on LGBT community resources, and is accessible to youth, parents and staff for information and/or supervision. Create an inclusive and safe physical

environment for LGBT youth and families by displaying supportive images such as inclusive posters, pink triangles, rainbows or hate-free zones stickers. (p. 1)

These simple and low cost measures can make sent a clear message to LGBT youth who are watching and waiting to see whether they will be safe in their new social environment. As one of the participants in the current study relayed during her interview:

Yeah, 'cause I went to a doctor's office downtown just the other day. And the nurse came in, and she had a little HRC [Human Rights Campaign] pin. And I was like, "Oh, that's so awesome." (Carrie, bisexual, 20)

Recommendation 4: Implement the curricula and practice recommendations that are readily available and evaluate the results on foster care youth, foster care workers, and foster care families. There is funding available through the Department of Health and Human Services to study the effects of implementing this training on the permanency outcomes of LGBT youth. Obviously because of the ever-changing political climate, this funding has a short shelf life.

Implications for Education

Preparing future social workers. In 2009, the Council on Social Work Education collaborated with Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund to conduct a national survey of social work programs to determine the level of preparation for social work students to serve LGBTQ individuals, with a particular focus on adolescents and young adults. A random sample of social work program directors and faculty members (N=299) participated in an online survey. According to the findings report:

Results indicated that most programs do not formally assess student competence in serving LGBT individuals; do not contain content on LGBT youth; do not provide field

placements in LGBT-specific, youth-oriented settings; and do not have faculty members with sufficient awareness of LGBT issues. (CSWE & LLDEF, 2009, p. 3)

Recommendations from the report included infusing content about working with LGBT clients of all ages into all practice courses taught to both bachelor and master's level students. Take the subject out of special topics and elective categories and ensure that all social work students are exposed to teaching around culturally competent behavior with LGBT clients, best-practices for working with specific sub-populations within the LGBT community, such as young people, aging LGBT adults, coming out issues, and LGBT and spirituality issues. The National Association of Social Workers and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (2009) have created a train the trainer curriculum for child welfare staff members that can be adapted to address this gap in the education of future professionals. This resource is ready to use; the schools of social work need only integrate it into their courses and their school's culture.

Implications for Further Policy Development

In reviewing current foster care policies in the United States and in light of the findings from this study, three main issues stand out as areas for further policy development: 1) the criteria used to terminate foster care services for youth aging out of care; 2) the need for a continuum of care for more vulnerable youth exiting foster care; and, 3) the lack of cultural competency of staff members working with LGBT youth in and aging out of care.

When should youth be terminated from foster care services? The first issue is the determination of when a youth is ready to leave foster care and achieve self-sufficiency. Loman and Siegel (2000) conducted a literature review of Independent Living Skills programs and found that there is no standardized assessment tool used to determine whether youth have

acquired the necessary life skills to successfully transition out of foster care services. The criterion currently being used to terminate foster care services for youth who are said to “age out” is chronological age. As each of the 50 states has its own eligibility requirements, a youth could live in one state and receive services, cross the state line, and be too old for services in another state. If we can learn anything from history, it is that socially constructed ages are not good indicators of maturity and readiness for adulthood (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Settersten, Furstenberg, Rumbaut, 2005). The findings from this study demonstrate that a youth’s age is not a good indicator of their preparedness for independent living. Many of the study participants continued to have housing instability and uneven employment histories. Several have experienced homelessness after leaving foster care, and the prospects for others to face homelessness in the future seem strong.

It is interesting that no distinction is made in the statistics currently kept between a youth who seeks legal emancipation and one who has aged out of the foster care system; however, the circumstances before and after separation from state care for these youth could not be more different in most cases. Young people who are granted legal emancipation from parental control by the courts must meet strict requirements. These conditions may vary by state; however, most have minimum age stipulations and require consent from parents when possible. In addition, a youth must demonstrate the ability to handle finances, maintain employment and housing, and successfully perform self-care (for example, Michigan Compiled Law, Act 293, 1968). Many states also require youth to be free from a dependence upon state and federal welfare services. On the other hand, youth who age out of the foster care system do not need to demonstrate these abilities in order to have their cases closed and services terminated when they reach age 18.

Is age the best criterion for ending service for these foster care youth, or should they achieve a measurable level of self-sufficiency and maturity before exiting the system? In the past, youth did not age out of previous forms of foster care because they naturally transitioned into adulthood when they were perceived to be capable enough to care for themselves. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 shows evidence that policymakers are recognizing the issue of youth aging out too soon, and have extended the age of services from 18 to 21 years, for states who wish to exercise this option.

Recommendation 1: One recommendation would be to have states examine their current policies regarding the age at which youth are no longer eligible for services. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services could fund demonstration projects that develop the tools and measures necessary to determine the optimal age or skill level at which youth should age out of care. Information from the National Youth in Transition database, which is mandated by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, could assist with outcome comparisons between states with different age requirements.

What services should be offered for extended foster care? The second issue requiring attention in current foster care policy is the need for comprehensive services for more vulnerable youth preparing to transition out of foster care and into adulthood. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 extends the age of services for youth, as long as they meet stringent requirements. This is essential to ensuring stability for youth who are employed or enrolled in school so that they are not at risk for losing these supports. However, it still leaves many of the more vulnerable youth without support. These youth include those who have dropped out of school and those who are unemployed. Since research has shown the distressing long-term economic and social effects of not acquiring a high school degree,

providing a bridge of programs to support this population in achieving their continued education and consequently better employability is vital.

In a review of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Programs in several mid-Western states including Michigan, Anderson (2003) recommended “a comprehensive continuum of services for foster care youth that begins while they are in high school and continues past their discharge date from foster care” (p. 5). This recommendation seems prudent in light of the findings from this study that indicate many of the youth were not in stable housing or employment at the time of their interviews, and several had discontinued their education to pursue low paying jobs. The young adults who wanted to return to school were at an age when they would need to navigate the registration and financial support process on their own, thus increasing the possibility of not continuing their academic pursuits. In addition, the majority of study participants had either a physical, mental health, or learning disability and, without a continuum of care, it could leave them to find their own way through an adult social support system that is not designed for easy access to services that can meet their needs.

Recommendation 2: Instead of providing a piecemeal social support system to youth who age out of foster care, the young person should be assessed when they enter high school for their health, mental health, and academic support needs. This assessment can lead to a comprehensive plan of services that extends either to a permanency outcome such as reunification, adoption, and guardianship, or through their aging out process. Once they have aged out of care, they would be reassessed to determine the need for continued services. If further services are necessary, a transition plan to enroll them in available adult services would be developed and implemented by their transition case worker. This worker would perform

follow-up services and check-ins with the young adult until they are 26 years old or demonstrate successful independent skills, as determined by a standardized assessment form.

What protections should be provided for LGBT youth in and aging out of foster care? The third issue is the need for a national policy to protect youth who are LGBT and in or aging out of foster care from discrimination. Recent studies suggest not only a lack of acknowledgement of the issues facing LGBT youth in foster care (Council on Social Work Education and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2009), but in some cases a blatant disregard for the safety and well-being of these vulnerable youth (Child Welfare League of America, 2006; Estrada & Marksamer, 2006a). Several states have specific anti-discrimination laws regarding LGBT youth in out-of-home care, but a universal endorsement of fair and equal treatment for these youth needs to come from the federal government. In addition, the cultural competence of workers throughout the system regarding LGBT foster care youth should be mandatory and assessed for compliance.

Recommendation 3: History has shown that success in policymaking often depends upon such factors as the current political and economic climates, persistence, and the ability to seize opportunity. Since the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, has already stated the importance of ensuring the permanency and well-being of LGBT youth in foster care, it seems that the safety of these youth should be just as important to ensure through anti-discrimination policies. At the same time, Commissioner Brian Samuels of the HHS Administration of Children, Youth and Families recently called for states to take advantage of federal funding in order to train foster care and adoption workers for their work with LGBT youth in out-of-home care. A federal policy would make this a mandate, not an option for all foster care worker, foster parents, and youth in foster care. Training about

understanding and embracing differences in themselves and others should be a part of every foster care child's orientation to state-sponsored care.

Implications for Further Research

At present there is an increasing compilation of research studies on foster care. These include examinations of the long-term effects of foster care on individuals, the impact of aging out of care on young people, and LGBT youth in foster care. Unfortunately, there is only one published study (Dworsky, 2013) that explores the consequences of LGBT youth aging out of care. Much of the information gleaned so far on the subject has been anecdotal. The challenges of studying the long term effects on youth who happen to be LGBT and have emancipated from foster care is difficult at best. First, the community is only a small percentage of the larger population and often a hidden minority. Second, many young people who exit foster care are not tracked by any mechanism thus far, even though the National Youth in Transition Database (DHHS, 2012c). Third, young people who are LGBT are in various stages of being open about their sexual orientation and gender identity to the broader world, and therefore more difficult to contact and engage. Fourth, many of these youth have been assessed, analyzed, surveyed, treated, evaluated, diagnosed, and categorized much of their lives and see little benefit for their time and troubles. Once emancipated from foster care, they are also freed from the requirements of answering any questions they do not want to answer.

Given the constraints of gathering a significant number of research participants, it is little wonder many of the studies on LGBT foster youth tend to have small samples and focus on qualitative rather than quantitative data. This is not a criticism of the research already conducted. On the contrary, the in-depth interviews and focus groups held with LGBT youth who are exiting

or have exited foster care have provided a greater insight and understanding of the issues facing these young people than quantitative studies may have been able to capture (Creswell, 2007). However, in the current academic and clinical climate of evidence-based practice (Gambrill, 2006; Proctor & Rosen, 2008), these studies must be able to move past the exploratory phase in order to inform future policy and practice.

In addition, the LGBT population tends to be lumped together as if it were one homogeneous group of people, and nothing could be farther from the truth. Lesbian youth have different issues than gay or bisexual young people, and more specific investigation is needed in these areas. Just as one program does not meet the needs of all youth in foster care, individual distinctions must be addressed within the LGBT population as well. As an example, although research has not specifically addressed the experiences of transgender youth as they age out of foster care, professionals in the field report that transgender youth are at even higher risk of poor permanency outcomes than gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006).

Recommendation 4. Having said this, there is also a need to bring all of the research efforts conducted to day together as a collaborative. It appears that there are significant research activities being conducted on the east and west coasts of the country and in the Midwest, but these occur mainly in large metropolitan areas such as New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago. Of course, these places are also where a concentration of LGBT individuals can be found, making larger samples sizes possible; however, there should to be fair representation of those individuals who live in suburban and more rural areas in the research findings as well. Their experiences are as important to an understanding of the LGBT population who are aging out of foster care as their big city cousins.

It also appears that some of this precious and rare research is done in silos where the proverbial right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. This can lead to a duplication of effort and an ineffective use of time and energy. It can also lead to territorialism, unnecessary competition for research dollars, and a host of other reactions that do nothing to enlighten us about how to best serve the youth in need. Bringing some of the powerful researchers on the subject of LGBT youth in foster care to bear on the issue of their aging out of care in a combined effort could be a remarkable model for others to follow. With the current receptive climate from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, new funding is becoming available to address some of the gaps in research and this is an opportune time to work together (DHHS, 2011).

Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study

The study has provided an opportunity for the participants to tell their stories in an attempt to inform us about their experiences and perceptions as they age out of foster care and face the reality of a new chapter in their lives. Hopefully, this is only the beginning of more efforts to come in understanding their worldview and in working to address the needs of this population, using their suggestions and insights as a guide. As discussed in Chapter Three, there are several limitations to this study which should be mentioned. These include the small non-random sample utilized by the researcher, the restricted geographic area from which participants were drawn, and the nature of the data being collected. In addition, there were 6 (60%) women, 3 (30%) men, and 1 (10%) transgender person who participated in the study and this gender imbalance may have influenced the findings. As all of the locations for recruiting potential participants were in Michigan, the findings from this study cannot be generalizable to other parts

of the country. Moreover, some of the data collected were based upon the recollections of past experiences of the participants and may not reflect a clear picture of actual events.

Another limitation to consider is the restrictions inherent in a qualitative methodology design. The thinking/iterative process undertaken by the researcher can create an increased occurrence of bias in both the research process and the subsequent analysis, which must be recognized and guarded against by the researcher. Employing strategies such as member checking and having a qualitative research peer compare the coding scheme for a sample of the interviews with one generated by a qualitative software program can help alleviate some of the incidents of potential bias. As is obvious from its narrow focus, the findings of this study are limited to the input from these 10 participants and cannot be generalized beyond that point. This study was exploratory in nature and intended to develop a baseline from which more rigorous research can be conducted in the future on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are aging out of foster care.

Lessons Learned

If I were to have the opportunity to conduct this research a second time, there are several revisions I would make in the design and implementation of a new project. The first area to revise would be in the way I conducted the interviews. During this project, I tended to go into the interview with some basic questions on the interview protocol that I wanted to have answered, but the order of the questions and prompts used may have varied from interview to interview. In an attempt to be responsive to the young people being interviewed, I often followed their lead with a topic, hoping that they would eventually answer the questions I had in mind. Most of the time, this technique worked and garnered additional information that I was not expecting. For

instance, letting one of the youth talk about his experience in moving multiple times from foster care placement to foster care placement, he mentioned having to move his belongings in plastic bags, having no luggage. Apparently, living out of plastic bags is a common practice for many of the foster care children and youth, and proved to be a highly visual reminder of their impermanence and susceptibility to the decisions of others.

Another design adjustment would be to have a secondary coder to process all of the interviews. Although I employed the strategy of member-checking for two of the early interviews and peer checking for three other interviews, having a secondary coder for all of the interviews could have boosted reliability of the data and analysis.

One important lesson learned from this project is never to underestimate the amount of time each element of the research process takes in order to produce a quality product. From the initial fog of the research questions, past the wait for IRB approval, beyond the safari-like hunt for interviewees, through the mind-numbing data coding and analysis, under the piles of papers with tables and chicken-scratched drawings, and ultimately to the writing, this research stuff takes a long time.

Through all of this, I heard the voices and saw the faces of the young people who allowed me to get a glimpse into a very vulnerable period of their lives. For them, the time is definitely worth it as they make their way into adulthood. I hope to do them justice in my telling of their stories and sharing their insights and recommendations to make the future better for the next generation of LGBT youth aging out of foster care.

Researcher Reflections

It is important to note, for the sake of openness, that I am the daughter of a foster care alumna who essentially aged out of an orphanage in upstate New York many years before the term “aging out” was in common usage. As a lesbian, I have a profound interest in the experiences of members of the LBGT population; and, as a social worker, I am passionate about creating accessible and appropriate services for this population. With many years of working in the child welfare system in my past, from child abuse and neglect prevention to program evaluation, I have a good working knowledge of the foster care system. However, as a Caucasian woman in her (very) late fifties, who was the eldest of four children and raised in an upper middle class heterosexual family, any exposure to the experiences of being in or aging out of foster care is limited to my having read massive amounts of literature in preparation for this study, as well as having consumed the occasional movie or novel about the topic. The first, provides a less than optimistic picture of the outcomes for many former foster care youth; the latter, usually conceals the bad parts of the story with “Lifetime Movie” happy endings. With the guidance of the courageous young men and women in this study, it was my hope to strip away the years of silence and to let their true voices emerge.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

NOTE: In regards to terminology about aging out of foster care, the researcher will take the lead from the person being interviewed. Terms such as “leaving care,” “aging out,” “exiting,” “emancipating,” or whatever word or words they prefer to use will be mirrored in the following questions. In addition, the researcher will ask permission to follow the lead of the participant in the terms they use to describe their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Eco-Map: At the beginning of the interview, the researcher will introduce the idea of completing an eco-map as the questions go along. An explanation will be given to the participant of the purpose and disposition of an eco-map for this research study.

1. Tell me about where you’re living now.
 - How did you find the place? Did someone help you find it?
 - How long have you been there?
 - How do you like the amount of independence (freedom) you have/don’t have?
2. Tell me about the first place you lived right after foster care (if different from current location).
 - (If they moved out of a foster care setting)
 - Did someone help you find that place? If so, who?
 - What was it like to leave the place you had been living in while in foster care?
 - Did someone help you move? If so, who?
 - Where did you get all of the household items, furniture, etc.?
 - (If they did not moved out of a foster care setting right away)
 - What was it like to stay in that place even though you weren’t in foster care anymore?
 - How did you know it was time to move out?
 - Did someone help you find another place to live? If so, who?
 - Have there been times when you didn’t have a place of your own to live? If so, can you talk about that experience?
3. Tell me about what happened with school once you left foster care.
 - Did you finish high school?
(If finished)
 - What was the experience like trying to finish school while in foster care or as you were leaving it?
 - (If not finished,)
 - What were the reasons you didn’t finish? Do you plan to finish some day?
 - Was there a person or people who helped you try to stay in school while you were leaving foster care? If so, who?
 - Have you gone to college or trade/technical school?
 - If no, do you plan to attend some day? If so, what would you like to study?
 - If yes to attending college, what are you studying/did you study?
 - Was there a person or people who helped you apply for college? If so, who?

- Did someone tell you about scholarships or financial aid that was available to you because you had been in foster care? If so, who?
4. Tell me about the jobs you've had since you left foster care.
 - Did you work while you were in foster care? If so, tell me a little about that job.
 - If employed:
 - What was your first job after foster care? Tell me a little about that job.
 - Did someone help you find that job? If so, who?
 - If not, how did you find the job?
 - Have there been times when you didn't have a job for a period of time?
 - If not employed:
 - Have you been trying to find a job?
 - If yes, has someone been helping you to find a job? If so, who?
 - If no, what are some reasons for not looking for a job?
 - What has your experience been like without a job?
 5. Thinking now just about your time in foster care: Knowing what you know now about life after foster care, were there any experiences or people or services while you were in foster care that helped you get ready for the transition to adulthood?
 - Mentoring? Life Skills? Employment training? Education support? Transitional housing?
 - Overall, how do you think your foster care experience prepared you for real life?
 - What services do you think would have been helpful that you didn't have?
 6. Looking back on the first few months after leaving foster care, were there any experiences or people or services that helped to make the transition easier for you?
 - Mentoring? Life Skills? Employment training? Education support? Transitional housing?
 - What services do you think would have been helpful that you didn't have?
 7. I'd like to hear about your experiences now of being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) while you were in foster care. How would you like me to refer to your sexual orientation or gender identity? [Here, the researcher may disclose her own sexual orientation as a lesbian, depending upon the flow of the conversation and/or the researcher's perception of the comfort level of the interview participant.]
 8. Tell me about your experience of being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) while you were in foster care.
 - When did you first know you were (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person)?
 - When did you come out? Before foster care? While in foster care? After leaving foster care?
 - (If participant came out before foster care)
 - Did you tell people you were (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) once you got into foster care? If so, what was the experience like? If not, why didn't you tell anyone about being LGBT?
 - While in foster care, what kind of messages/signs/clues did you receive that

told you it was safe/not safe to come out?

- Did you receive any kind of help or support once you came out? If so, who helped?

(If participant came out during foster care)

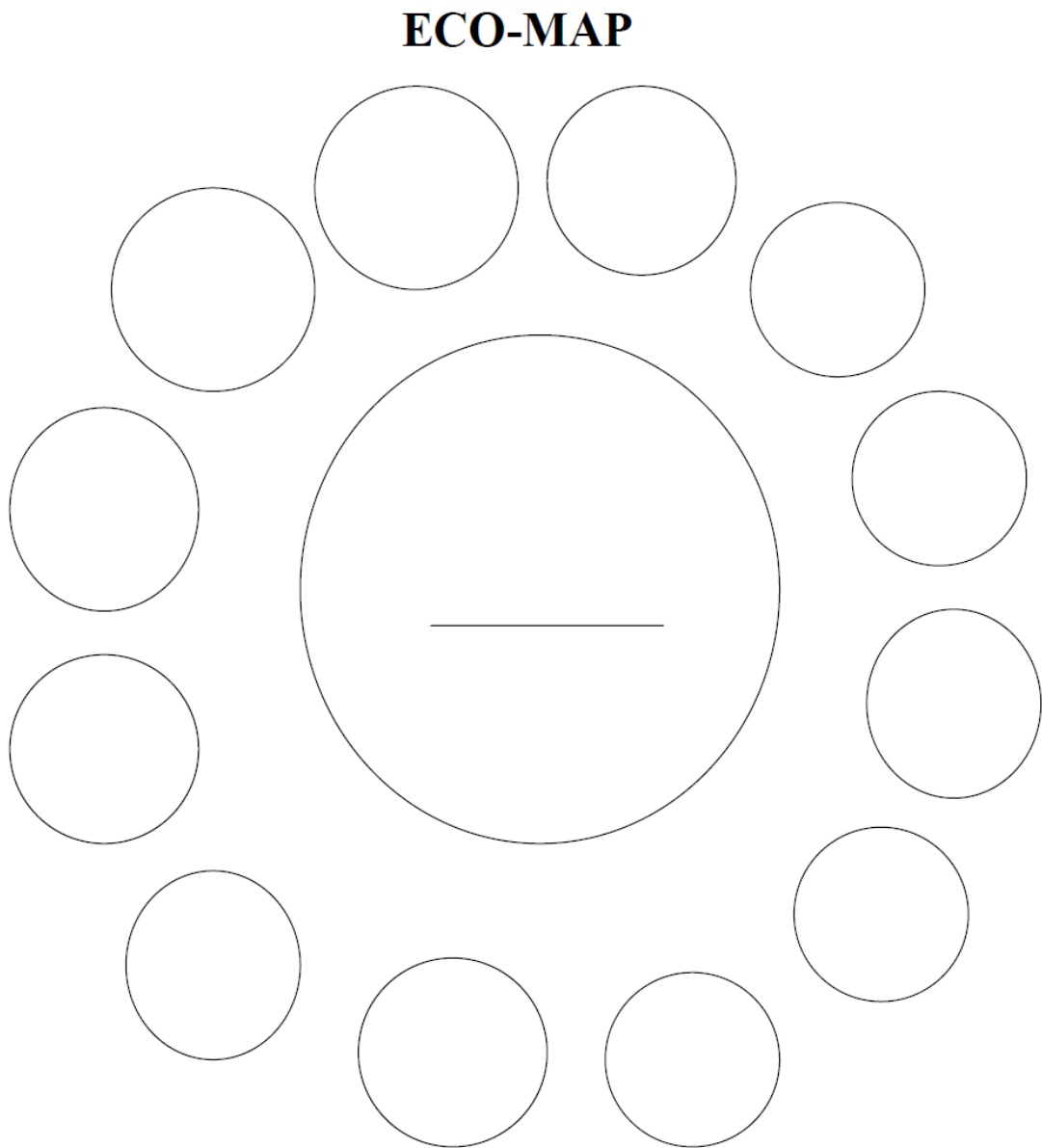
- Did you come out while in foster care? If so, what was the experience like? If not, why didn't you tell anyone about being LGBT?
- While in foster care, what kind of messages/signs/clues did you receive that told you it was safe/not safe to come out?
- Did you receive any kind of help or support once you came out? If so, who helped?

(If participant knew they were LGBT, but came out after foster care)

- Did you suspect or know you were LGBT while you were in foster care?
- Do you think anyone else ever suspected that you were LGBT? If so, how do you know this?
- While in foster care, what kind of messages/signs/clues did you receive that told you it was okay/not okay to be LGBT?

9. Thinking about your experience of aging out: Do you think/feel/believe being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) affected your experiences of aging out?
 - Do you think/feel/believe people treated you differently because of your sexual orientation or gender identity? If so, can you give me some examples of this treatment?
 - Do you think/feel/believe your sexual orientation or gender identity affected finding a foster care placement for you? If so, can you talk about this?
 - Do you think/feel/believe your sexual orientation or gender identity affected finding a permanent placement for you? If so, can you talk about this?
10. Thinking about your experiences after foster care: Do you think/feel/believe being (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a transgender person) has affected your ability to find housing, education, and/or employment?
 - Do you think/feel/believe people treated you differently because of your sexual orientation or gender identity? If so, can you give me some examples of this treatment?
 - Related to housing? If so, can you talk about this?
 - Related to education? If so, can you talk about this?
 - Related to employment? If so, can you talk about this?
11. Complete the Eco-Map
12. Do you have anything else you would like to share about your experiences in aging out of foster care?

Figure 3: Eco-Map Diagram



APPENDIX C
RECRUITMENT FLYER

**Did you age out of foster care?
Are you LGBT?**

**SEEKING PARTICIPANTS TO TALK
about Being LGBTQ and Aging Out of Foster Care**

If you or someone you know:

- ✓ **Is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender**
- ✓ **Has aged out of foster care in the past 5 yrs**
- ✓ **Is between the ages of 18 and 25**
- ✓ **Is willing to be interviewed and recorded**

I am doing research for my doctoral program at Michigan State University, and I'm also a faculty member at Grand Valley State University. The goal of this research is to hear from you about ways that foster parents, child welfare workers, and policymakers can better serve the LGBT community. Questions? Feel free to contact me.

Mary Banghart, LMSW, PhD Candidate
Michigan State University
Direct phone: (616) 331-6564
Email: bangha11@msu.edu or banghama@gvsu.edu

APPENDIX D
INTRODUCTORY LETTER/E-MAIL TO SOLICIT VOLUNTEERS

Dear _____:

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting to explore the experiences of individuals who have aged out of the foster care system within the past few years and also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

You are being invited to participate because of your personal knowledge about this subject. I am interested in your experience and would like to ask you several questions in a face-to-face interview that will take approximately 1 to 2 hours. In order to capture your answers in their entirety, the interview will be audio-recorded.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in the study without penalty or coercion. You may choose not to participate at all, or you may choose not to answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without any negative consequences. If you are in any way affiliated with Grand Valley State University (GVSU), it is important that you know my association with GVSU as a faculty member is not related to this research study. Your decision to participate or not to participate in this study is completely voluntarily and will not impact any relationship you may have with GVSU. I am conducting this study as part of the requirements for my doctoral program at Michigan State University.

You have a right to confidentiality. All audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed and typed into a Word document. The only identifying information that will be connected to your answers will be your age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. It is highly unlikely that someone could link any responses to a particular participant given these demographics, however, I can and will protect your confidentiality to the maximum extent of the law. You have the right to ask to review the responses you gave during the interview(s) before giving your permission for them to be used in the study.

You have the right to privacy. All audio-recorded interviews from this study will be transcribed and typed into a Word document. All data will be stored in a locked file cabinet at GVSU and all Word documents will be protected with a password.

Benefits of participating in this study. You may not experience direct benefits from participation in this study; however, the information gained through sharing your story may be useful to researchers, social workers, other child welfare staff and volunteers, therapists, and policy makers. Hopefully, it will inform the policies, programs and services provided to foster care youth, especially those who identify themselves as LGBT. In addition, you will receive a \$25 gift card to one of several locations to thank you for your time and participation.

Please respond to this letter or email if you are willing to participate in the study and would allow me to contact you to set up an interview. Also include the best day and time for the interview to occur. The interview can be held at my office on the downtown Grand Rapids campus of Grand Valley State University, or at a location that is convenient for you. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Banghart, LMSW
Michigan State University
PhD Candidate
Direct phone: (616) 331-6564
Email: banghama@gvsu.edu or
banghal1@msu.edu

APPENDIX E

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Study Title: Exploring the Transition to Adulthood by Youth Who Have Aged Out Of Foster Care and Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender

Researcher and Title: Mary Banghart, a doctoral student at Michigan State University and a faculty member at Grand Valley State University

Department and Institution: School of Social Work, Michigan State University

Address and Contact Information: Grand Valley State University, 401 West Fulton St., Grand Rapids, MI 49504, Office phone: 616-331-6564, Email: banghama@gvsu.edu

Sponsor: Rena Harold, Ph.D., Michigan State University, Baker Hall, East Lansing, MI 48823, 517-432-3733

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

You have been asked to participate in a research study that involves individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and have emancipated (aged out) of the foster care system. You have been selected for this study because you are between the ages of 18 and 25, you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and you have aged out of the foster care system within the past five years.

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the experiences of individuals who have aged out of foster care and who identify as LGBT. It is hoped that this study will give a voice to this population and provide society with a better understanding of their experiences as they leave and after leaving foster care. Ultimately, it is hoped the information obtained through this study will inform service providers, policy makers, foster care parents, and all those involved in the foster care system about what assistance and programs are needed to help LGBT foster care alumnae or alumni succeed in transitioning to adulthood.

Your participation in the study will take about 1 to 2 hours of your time for an in-depth face-to-face interview.

This information is a part of Mary Banghart's doctoral dissertation, and she is working under the supervision of her dissertation committee chair, Rena Harold, PhD, and other members of this committee.

2. WHAT YOU WILL DO

As a participant of this study, you will be voluntarily sharing information that will be

recorded and analyzed by the researcher. You will participate in a 1 to 2 hour interview that will consist of two parts: 1) answering several questions about the experiences you have had in aging out of the foster care system and 2) completing a graphic representation of the people, places, and important things currently in your life (this is called an eco-map). The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure the accurate collection of information. Your willingness to be audio-recorded is a requirement for participation in the study. The results of this study will be published in the researcher's dissertation, and possibly in professional journals as well as at professional local, state, or national conferences. If you would like a copy of the findings from this research project once they are completed, they will be sent to you if you fill out a self-addressed envelope provided after the interview.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

You may not experience direct benefits from participation in this study; however, the information gained through sharing your story may be useful to researchers, social workers, other child welfare staff and volunteers, therapists, and policy makers. Hopefully, it will inform the policies, programs and services provided to current and future foster care youth, especially those who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks that may occur as a result of your participation in this research, except possible psychological discomfort as the interview questions may bring up some upsetting memories. The researcher will provide a list of qualified therapists if you feel you would like to explore some of these potential issues further. Agreeing to participate simply means that you will allow the researcher to use information from your interview for the purposes of this study.

This information will be disguised to protect your identity as a pseudonym will be utilized and all materials will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office in the School of Social Work at Grand Valley State University.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this research study. No information that could identify you such as your name, date of birth, and other potentially revealing information will be linked with your interview responses. The audio-recording of your interview will be shared with a contracted professional who will transcribe your answers, but the audio file will not contain any information that could identify you as a study participant. This contracted professional will sign a confidentiality agreement.

The information provided by and about you will be kept strictly confidential to the maximum extent allowable by law. The Institutional Review Board of Michigan State University retains access to all signed informed consent forms, but this information is kept in the strictest security.

The audio-recording of your interview and all other research materials that the researcher uses will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office at Grand Valley State University where the researcher is employed. It will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. The results of this research will be published in the researcher's dissertation and possibly in professional articles or books; however, no personally identifying data about you will be included in the published reports.

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

Participation is voluntary. It is entirely your choice as to whether or not you participate in this study. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after the interview without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You also have the right to decline any questions asked during the interview while also reserving the right to refuse to complete the eco-map. Your consent to be interviewed includes your agreement to be audio-recorded.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

For the gift of your time and participation, you will receive a \$25.00 gift card to your choice of Target, Meijer, iTunes, or Speedway. This gift card will be given to you once you begin the interview and eco-map, regardless of whether or not you complete either or both of these.

8. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury (i.e. physical, psychological, social, financial, or otherwise), please contact the researcher (Mary Banghart, Grand Valley State University, 401 West Fulton St., Grand Rapids, MI 49504, Office phone: 616-331-6564, Email: banghama@gvsu.edu).

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at Olds Hall, 408 West Circle Drive #207, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

9. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature

Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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