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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW PRE-ADOLESCENT FOSTER CHILDREN STORY THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES

By

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW PRE-ADOLESCENT FOSTER CHILDREN STORY THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES

By

Jason B. Whiting

This is an exploratory project of gathering and analyzing the stories through which latency-age foster children make sense of their lives. Personal narratives are a useful tool for understanding how children in care perceive and process their world. The stories can be used to help case workers, therapists, foster parents, and policy makers better understand these children and attend to their needs. Foster children desire to have a greater part in the decisions that affect their lives, and hearing from them is important in honoring the unique and powerful story each child brings forth. In this study an ecological framework is used in conjunction with the postmodern story metaphor as a guiding theoretical orientation. A qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was used with a sample of 23 foster children drawn from two agency settings. Ethnographic semi-structured interviews were employed using a story-board format. Themes uncovered are discussed as well as implications for treatment and research.

This is dedicated to my wife April, who exceeds me in every worthwhile quality.

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Many people have contributed to this project, in many different ways. A special thanks to my committee, Dr. Lee, Dr. Carolan, Dr. Harold, and Dr. Phenice for numerous suggestions, mentoring, and demonstrated interest in me as a student. Their hours of assistance and accommodation have been deeply appreciated.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background Information

> *I did not really know what a foster home was, and no one took the time or cared enough to explain. I just knew that I did not want to go to one. The only thing that "the workers" made clear was that I would never live with my mother again. This was so horrifying I became sick and vomited. The thought of not seeing my mom again devastated me. I was empty inside, dazed and in a fog. (Youth in care - Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996).*

Children's lack of power in society and family leaves them prone to victimization. Their voices are not heard and they generally have little say in what happens to them (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994). Children who fall into "at-risk" categories are particularly vulnerable and are often at the mercy of many external forces (Combrinck-Graham, 1995; Lewit, 1993). This population of victimized youth includes foster children, who experience the confusion and loss of being pulled out of their biological family. It is ironic that the efforts to protect these children from abuse and neglect often result in further harm through this "rescue". Foster children undergo a complex and difficult transition and are usually left without say in what happens to them. We know little about how these children make sense out of their experience in care. Their voices need to be heard, and their stories can be a rich resource of useful information (Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1994).

Children commonly explain their world and express themselves through stories (Riley, 1993). The term "story" connotes an extensive structure composed of diverse themes, plots, characters, and events. Moreover, a story has the ". . . capacity as

metaphor to conjure up and illuminate less accessible aspects of experience" (Schnitzer, 1993, p. 443). It is precisely these aspects of foster children's experience that their stories can help us discover and appreciate. Foster children undergo many unusual and often difficult situations. Their stories function as a window to their world, and help us understand how these children make sense out of contradicting and confusing circumstances. Eliciting and exploring their stories would help us better understand them and assist in their lives. Foster children's stories could be used to shape treatment plans and clinical interventions and lead to a better understanding of foster children in general.

Purpose of the Study

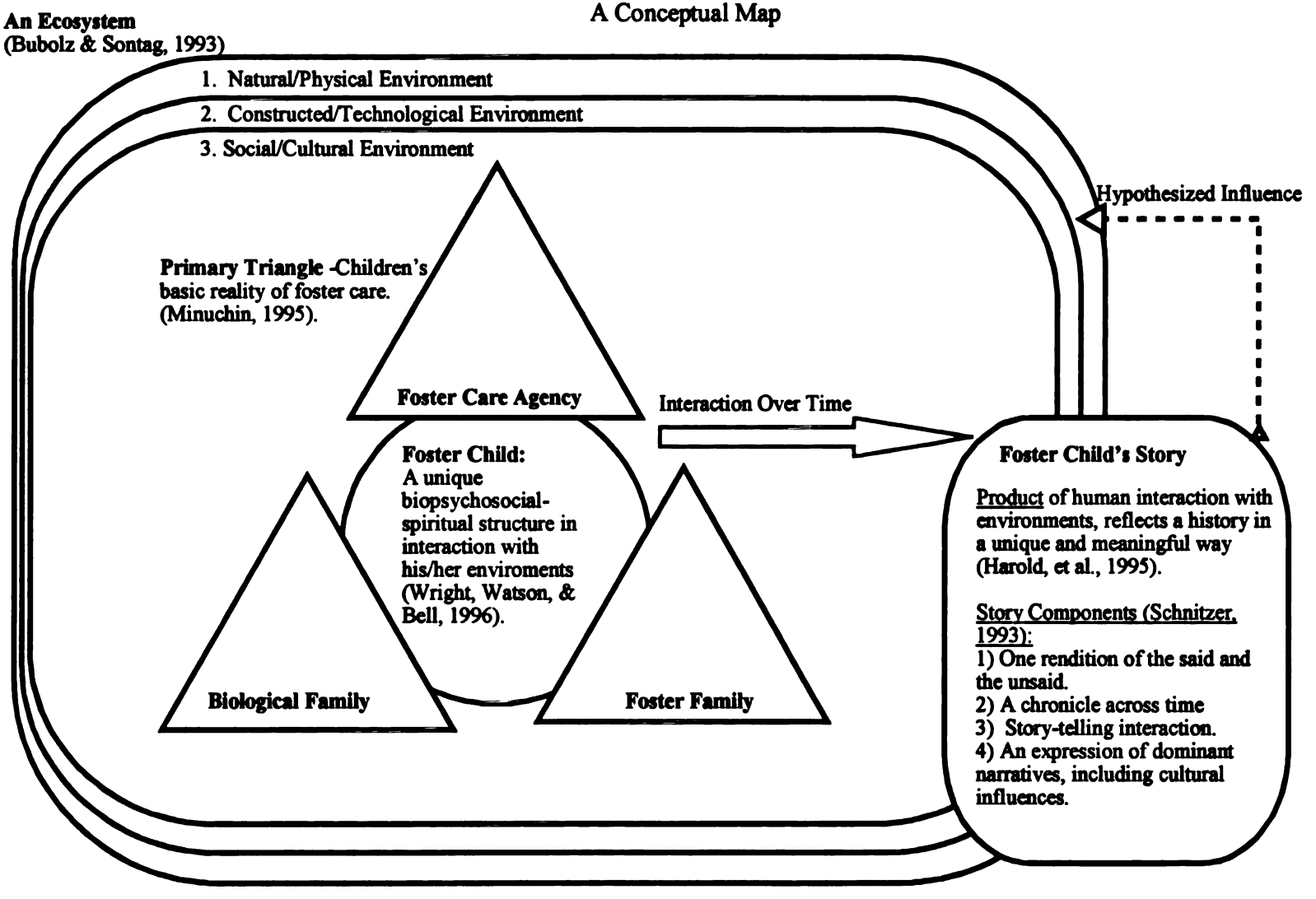
This is a qualitative study of how pre-adolescent foster children describe their life histories and make sense out of the unique and often confusing circumstances which they experience. This is expected to be beneficial both to those concerned about the foster care system and to the children participating in this study. Qualitative analysis of their stories will contribute to a body of research that is both scarce and inconsistent. This study is exploratory in that it has attempted to analyze the stories of foster children in a way which has not been done. The insights obtained into their experiences of foster care may help improve the foster care process at the level of therapeutic treatment, case management, and policy. Moreover, by being asked to tell their stories, these often unheard and helpless children are empowered by being given a voice which is valued.

This project focused on the group of pre-adolescent foster children, from ages 7 to 12. This age group was chosen for several reasons. First, most insider's accounts of foster care are retrospective, with the majority or studies hearing from former foster children rather than those who are currently in care. In addition to the accounts of adult's

recollections (e.g. Festinger, 1983; Seita, et al., 1996), there are forums for adolescent foster children, which allow them to share experiences and be heard (Desetta, 1996). It appears that the younger the foster child is, the less likely he or she will be heard. This is relevant because more children are entering care at younger ages, including a significant growth of infants and toddlers into foster care (www.kidscampaign.org). Learning more about the latency-aged child is a logical step in learning more about the younger populations of children in foster care. Also, this age group has been found to respond to loss with more social and health problems than children of other stages (Wordon, 1996). Loss is unavoidable for the foster child, and better understanding of this process could help in aiding the adjustment for this age group. Finally, although this group is young, they are old enough to verbalize and process their life experience in a story format (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Children of this age are becoming more interested in their own development, particularly of their history, and have been found to enjoy reviewing younger escapades and baby books (Fahlberg, 1991).

Chapter One covers the conceptual and theoretical orientation of the study, and offers maps to summarize and display this information. The two principle theories, human ecosystems and postmodern/narrative, are discussed relative to their guidance of this project. Chapter Two reviews pertinent literature related to foster care, foster children's perceptions, and why hearing foster children's stories is important. Chapter Three outlines the qualitative methodology used, and identifies important research issues which affected the course of the study. Chapter Four covers the findings of the study, being the children's voices, and Chapter Five suggests some implications for those findings.

Figure 1.1
The Creation of Foster Children's Stories and Their Influence
A Conceptual Map



Included is a conceptual map, previously published by the author, (Whiting, 2000) which shows the hypothesized relationships between the environments of foster children and their stories. The map shows the process of story creation and the influence those stories could then have on the foster care environment. The foster child is at the center of the model and is the "filter" through which outside influences pass. The child is a unique individual with a "biopsychosocial-spiritual structure" who brings forth an individual version of his or her reality (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996, p. 113). This rendition is influenced by the child's biology, gender, developmental level and health. Intra-psychic characteristics, such as psychological development, beliefs and attachment style also affect the story content (Stovall & Dozier, 1998). Additional influences include social traits, such as cultural or language influences, and spiritual tendencies, such as beliefs related to meaning or resiliency.

The child brings forth an individual reality through interaction with the environment in which he or she resides. The child not only processes his or her environment, but also absorbs and changes in response to it (Maturana & Varela, 1992). The model indicates that the systems which are most immediately relevant to foster children are usually the biological family, the foster family, and the foster care agency (Minuchin, 1995). Although other ecosystemic factors will affect foster children, often they will be through these three primary systems. Systems surrounding foster children fit into one of three environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). First is the natural/physical environment, which includes unaltered natural surroundings such as water or biological organisms such as health-influencing pathogens. The constructed/technological environment includes anything altered by man, such as structures (such as foster care

agency), or other urban buildings. Thirdly, the social/cultural environment includes cultural norms regarding child welfare, national laws or policies related to foster institutions, government, moral rules, and language. The story is a product of these transacting influences and the meaning which the child makes of them.

The child's story could be gathered and heard by those who are in the foster care system which would influence the environment where the child resides. Including the children in the foster care process in such a manner could improve foster care and help the work to be more collaborative (Combrinck-Graham, 1995). In the present study, these stories were gathered and appreciated by an individual who is outside of the foster care system, and who is responsible for the meanings gathered and interpreted.

Theoretical Model

The background theory for this project is human ecology, (e.g. Bubolz & Sontag, 1993) which serves as a generative framework for story construction and the interaction of a person within multiple environments. This project gives particular focus to stories, and as such, uses a narrative/postmodern theoretical framework as its primary theory. Postmodernism espouses a diverse view of humanity and the world, implying that there are many ways of understanding and experiencing (Moules, 2000). Within postmodernism is social constructionism, which presents the belief that reality is constructed within relationships, and that lives and relationships are constituted within language and organized into narratives (White & Epston, 1990). Accordingly, the interaction of a foster child in his or her multiple environments will produce a rendition, or story, of his or her life experience.

An Ecosystemic Perspective

A foster child is in the center of interacting systems which include the nuclear family, extended family, foster family, foster agency, legal, and political systems (Milner, 1987). These interacting pieces form an ecosystem which will affect the foster children within it. A foster child's story is a product of these different influences in the child's life, and is an indication of how the child interprets his or her experience with each system. Too often these differing members of the ecosystem may work in ignorance of, or at odds with, the other members, which results in less effective involvement with the children (Imber-Black, 1988). Better understanding of the child's experience within this ecosystem can uncover gaps in care where the needs of the children are not being met (Goerge, Wulczyn, & Fanshel, 1994). Unfortunately, these children are generally at the mercy of the systems around them and are left without a voice. If the children's perspectives were heard, true collaboration and understanding might be more likely, as all members of the ecosystem could be valued (Combrinck-Graham, 1995).

Each unique story has meaning and substance which can then ripple out through the system and positively inform the actions of the greater parts (Lyman & Bird, 1996). In most foster care institutions, there is no method for providing input from the child into the system, and usually no structured means of hearing the children at all (Gil & Bogart, 1982). Jones and Moses (1984) argue that letting foster children express themselves and share with one another would help monitor and improve the foster care system. Hearing from foster children in a more systematic, involved way, could change the experience that the child has in care. The stories of foster children could inform the systems in the environment wherein they reside.

The Usefulness of the Story Metaphor

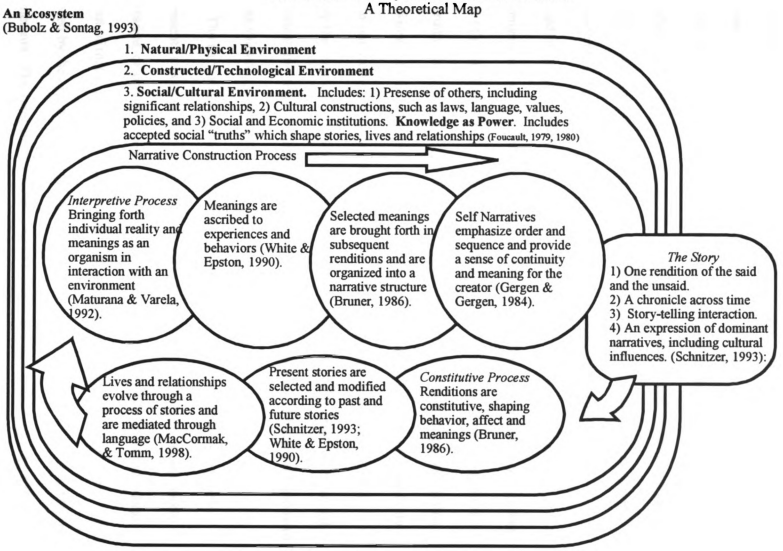
In this age of postmodern approaches to scholarship, many are skeptical of the "truths" traditional scientific metaphors have applied to human behavior (Mills & Sprenkle, 1995). Family members and relationships are complex and do not easily lend themselves to positivistic linear principles. As family research trends focus less on causes of behavior and more on patterns of action connected to meanings, story has come to be used as a metaphor for human existence. From a social constructionist perspective, we each situate our life events into a flowing narrative which reflects our individual perceptions (Moules, 2000). Individual life stories reveal what is relevant in that person's reality, which in turn affects their behavior (MacCormack & Tomm, 1998; Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). In other words, the meanings we attach to our past events shape our present and future (Schnitzer, 1993). Individuals' life stories are renditions of many facets of their experience which researchers and clinicians can access and explore (Harold, Palmiter, Lynch, & Freedman-Doan, 1995; White & Epston, 1990).

A child's reactions to the upheaval and losses inherent in entering foster care are likely to be expressed in the stories they share. Schnitzer (1993) describes how stories have four characteristics that are relevant to the research process: "story as one rendition of the said and the unsaid; story as a chronicle over time; story as a part of a story-telling interaction within families; and finally, story as an expression of dominant narratives, exerting cultural influences" (p. 444). A foster child's story will reflect what life events the child experienced as most meaningful. It will also contain developmental content, and relationship themes of biological and foster family. A story is brought forth in interaction and reflects the setting in which it is shared. In other words, the narrative will be

influenced not only by the teller, but by the listener, and both will be influenced by common cultural assumptions. The story is a personal and unique account of one child's life which reflects the past and influences the future (Eron & Lund, 1998). Instead of force-fitting responses into preconceived categories, as may be done on a questionnaire, "through the use of 'story telling,' clients can provide a bio/psycho/social history of the development of their [situation] in a way that is most congruent and meaningful to them" (Harold, et al., 1995, p. 39).

Hearing a child's story is more useful than only hearing specific answers to questions or observing emotional states. For example, a foster child who expresses themes of victimization and frustration with "the system" is having a qualitatively different experience than one who feels frustrated and angry with his biological family, though clinically, they may both be expressing the same feeling. While foster children's feelings are sometimes heard in their intake to care, and are often heard and reflected in treatment, more could be done. If the gathering of stories were done in a more systematic fashion, they could be utilized as rich research data, or for better case management or treatment.

Figure 1.2
The Process of Story Construction and Influence
A Theoretical Map



The background theory in the theoretical framework is an ecological approach, which is depicted in the outer rings of the theoretical map. These shapes represent the interacting environments in which human beings reside: the natural/physical/biological, the social/cultural, and the human-built environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). These environments comprise the setting in which we exist and interact, and create our reality. Within the social/cultural environment is included the concept of knowledge as power. The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) has discussed how our lives are influenced by the power of knowledge, or "truths" which often go unnoticed and unchallenged in society. These influences are not being wielded by persons in power, but are part of societal patterns, or messages. These permeating messages are constitutive, and recruit us into believing or behaving in certain ways, which in turn shape our stories and self-image (White & Epston, 1990). For example, the messages about female body image in our western culture subtly and strongly encourage people to scrutinize and objectify the female body. We all become caught in these webs of "truths" in the social environment and tend to classify, evaluate, and objectify ourselves and others according to the ideas valued in society.

The narrative-construction process takes place as an interaction between these environments and a person. This is shown on the map by the overlapping circles within the narrative, or primary theory, frame. It begins as a person has experience and makes sense out of that experience. This process of bringing forth an individual reality is influenced by the organism's unique biological structure, which has been influenced by its environments. The same environments will be experienced in different ways by different people, because we have different realities and different structures (Maturana & Varela,

1992). The same electricity will flow into a toaster and a washing machine, but each will respond according to its individual structure. Two foster children may experience the same removal from a biological parent, but each will respond according to his or her individual structure.

The process of reality-construction continues as we ascribe meanings to our life events and behaviors (Schnitzer, 1993). We are participants in what we are observing, and this shapes the reflections which we have about reality (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). The meanings we adopt from our experiences will then shape subsequent ideas about people, values or ourselves. These meanings are drawn forth in our interactions and become the building blocks of our stories (White & Epston, 1990). As the map shows in the progressing circles, stories continue to be formed and refined as they are organized and structured into sequences. Selected experiences from the past, present, and those which are expected to occur in the future are connected in a lineal sequence and create a story or self narrative (Gergen, 1985). The map shows the product of this process, which is the story itself. This piece is identified on each map by the same rounded rectangular shape, as it is central to the goals of the project. The outcome of this project is the obtaining of the foster children's stories, which are assumed to be created by the process just described. The story itself is made up of the four components mentioned earlier: story as a rendition of the said and unsaid, story as a chronicle, story as a story-telling interaction, and story as a reflection of dominant narratives (Schnitzer, 1993). Not only do we create these stories, but our stories create us, and shape our lives, as the next part of the map illustrates.

We operate within the self-narratives we create. If I have come to experience

myself as a competent person, I will act more confidently. If a foster child has come to see him or herself as unlovable, s/he will act according to that script she believes. As Michael White (1990) says, "stories are full of gaps which persons must fill in order for the story to be performed" (p. 13). Each time we act, we "re-author" our lives, and our lives evolve according to our stories. On the map the ovals show this process of story-performance. While we are not determined by our stories in the traditional scientific sense, our stories invite us to engage in performances which are guided and shaped by our individual renditions of both past and future (Bruner, 1986; White, 1993). For example, if a foster child is told he is bad and will "end up just like your no-good father," this future prediction may have influence in the child's self-story and present behaviors (Schnitzer, 1993).

As our lives progress, we continue to modify and re-author our stories in accord with our interaction with others and our environments. Problems occur when people's stories become bogged down with constraining or negative themes (Eron & Lund, 1998). Solutions are found as lives are re-storied, new options are seen and people come to see themselves in new, more positive ways (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). In other words, progress occurs as a person's story more accurately represents his or her lived experience (MacCormack & Tomm, 1998). This can occur as new experiences are had in relationships, such as when a foster child comes to see herself as lovable because of experiencing a loving foster parent. Stories can also change as we have the chance to express them and examine them, as may be done in a therapeutic setting (White, 1988/1989). As living systems we constantly adapt, modify and "structurally couple" with the systems with which we interact (Maturana & Varela, 1992), and our stories can

change for the better if we have a positive interaction with our environments. The process of interaction between persons is usually mediated through language, and is the basis for sharing influence and new experiences (White & Epston, 1990). This process of story-creation is shown on the map as continuing in a circular fashion as it evolves throughout our lives.

Assumptions

The process of research, whether quantitative or qualitative, incorporates values and assumptions, which may or may not be obvious (Allen, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research, which has gained acceptance and relevance in family studies, becomes stronger and more valid when the assumptions underlying each project are explicit (Fetterman, 1989). A theoretical *assumption* is a statement taken as given and not usually subject to verification or empirical testing, while a *proposition* is a statement which asserts relationships between concepts (Reynolds, 1971). The relationships between concepts are the building blocks of theories, and theory is the framework in which this project is grounded. Although this section repeats some elements addressed in other areas, and in some cases overlap with each other, it is important to make explicit some of the main assumptions and propositions of this project.

Assumption One: There is a need to better understand the experience which foster children go through.

Several studies in the foster care literature have argued that our understanding of how foster children perceive their experience is limited (e.g., Gil & Bogart, 1983; Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1994; Rice & McFadden, 1988). Improving knowledge could improve programs, treatment, and research (George, Wulczyn, & Fanshel,1994).

Assumption Two: Foster children experience life events which are not typical for children of the same developmental level.

A foster child by definition has usually been taken from his or her family for reasons of abuse or neglect. Adding on to the biological family difficulties, foster children experience substantial losses, of family, friends, school, and possessions (Lewit, 1993). In addition to the losses experienced, foster children gain new authorities, residences, loyalty conflicts, and experiences.

Assumption Three: We should value and hear the voices of children who are going through stressful and difficult circumstances.

All members of our society have a right to be respected and heard. It is particularly important for those members who are powerless or in a position of exploitation to have an opportunity to share what they are going through (Finkelhor, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994). Research in ecological frameworks tries to identify and liberate those persons who, by virtue of the environments in which they live, are subjected to oppressive or limiting circumstances (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Assumption Four: We bring forth individual reality in an interactive creation process between individual and environment.

The same experiences, if shared by different children, will have different meaning for each, because each person has their own unique structure and history (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). It is impossible to "know" something independent, or free from influence of ourselves (Maturana & Varela, 1992). The act of knowing is always an act of interpretation (White & Epston, 1990).

Assumption Five: The text/story metaphor is a useful one to use when looking at foster

children's perceptions of their experience.

Children naturally incorporate story into their play and express themselves through stories (McNamee, & DeChiara, 1996). The story metaphor is particularly suited for qualitative research as it focuses on meanings, themes, and understandings (Harold, et al., 1995).

Assumption Six: An ecosystemic framework is a useful one for understanding the story-creation process of a foster child.

Because the story creation process is seen as an interaction between organism and environment, human ecology is useful because it also focuses on these two components in interaction (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Assumption Seven: We tell stories according to the meaning we ascribe to life-events, not according to the events themselves.

The events we experience are processed through our own unique and individual structures. The stories we tell about our lives reflect the areas which are most meaningful to us and fit with our reality (Schnitzer, 1993).

Assumption Eight: Because life experience is richer than discourse, a narrative can never encompass the full spectrum of our lived experience.

A story, by its nature, is one rendition among many which selects themes, plots, characters, and meanings from the whole range of human experience (Bruner, 1986; Schnitzer, 1993).

Assumption Nine: Our lives and relationships evolve through the performance of our narratives and are mediated through language.

Our relationships develop and evolve through language (White & Epston, 1990).

The language we use in our stories will serve as a guide for our future stories, including our behaviors, emotions, and meanings.

Assumption Ten: Better understanding of foster children's stories could lead to more effective treatment and intervention with foster children.

If those who worked with foster children had a richer, more full understanding of the foster experience, they would be more empathic and better know how to tailor treatments and programs to fit the children (Gil & Bogart, 1983).

Propositions

Proposition One: The three environments in which foster children reside are interdependent and influence one another.

The natural/physical environment, social cultural environment, and the human-built environment all interact and affect each other and are reversible (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Where there is a change in one, for example a foster care policy implemented in a state, there will be a change in others, such as a building being built, which then affects the physical environment. Even though they don't cause or determine each other, they influence and alter in response to changes in the other environments.

Proposition Two: The environment is shaped and selected in the narrative process in which humans engage.

The relationship between the environment and the narrative process occurs as we tell stories according to the meaning we ascribe to life-events, not according to the events themselves. The text analogy is useful in examining the influence of ecosystemic components and story components in lives because the meaning which we ascribe to behaviors and events survives across time. Every new telling or conjuring of a life

experience is a new interpretation of it and thus a new writing of it (White & Epston, 1990). The environments which foster children experience are related to the way in which they make sense out of them by means of the narrative process. The meanings which foster children bring forth are an interaction between their own selves and their ecosystem.

Proposition Three: The unique bio/psycho/social-structure of each individual interacts with his or her environment and brings forth a unique reality, or story.

The relationship of the individual with his or her environment is an interactive one which is constantly evolving and shaping. The environment responds to our actions, and we respond to our surroundings. It is through this process that we come to bring forth individual renditions of reality (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996) which are organized into stories (White & Epston, 1990). Reality creation is an ongoing process (Maturana & Varela, 1992) and is independent of "truths" or other "objective" reality.

Proposition Four: The stories foster children create will affect the way they feel, believe and behave individually and in relationships.

Our lives and relationships evolve through the performance of our narratives. If we accept that foster children give meaning to their experience through the storying of experience and that these stories express selected aspects of their experience, than it follows that the stories guide and shape their lives.

Proposition Five: Foster children's stories can influence those who hear them, including foster and biological parents, caseworkers and policymakers.

Bringing forth stories is a process which is done in interaction, and the hearing of a child's story affects both the listener and the sender (Schnitzer, 1993). When stories are

heard by those who work with the children, they have power to influence behavior. Treatment might be guided by the content shared in a story, or policies could be shaped if informed by well-researched themes gathered from foster children's stories. The influence of the story would be circular, feeding back into the environment which shaped the story.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Foster Children

Foster care is growing rapidly, and affects more people each year. Admissions rose 44% between 1986 and 1995 (Downs, Costin, & McFadden, 1996), and in New York City alone, the foster care population almost tripled from 16,230 at the end of 1984, to 48,068 in 1993 (Desetta, 1996). As of 1999 there are over a half million children in foster care in the U.S. and the average length of stay is nearly three years (www.acf.dhhs.gov). The number of children needing protection overwhelms the system, and foster parents, workers and staff have a high turnover rate due to the difficulties involved (Downs, et al., 1996). Recent surveys have shown that society is concerned about family breakdown, abuse, and neglect (www.kidscampaign.org), and apprehensions have been expressed in recent popular literature about children in foster care (e.g., Chazin, 1998; Sieg, 1998). Information about children who are taken from their families provides a rough indication of the risks and challenges which some of our youngest society members face. Additionally, foster care reminds society of the vulnerability of our families and the responsibility we have to support one another (Lewit, 1993).

Despite the societal attention given to family breakdown, the system of foster care, which is critical in assisting with these complex problems, is struggling with clear and consistent policy directives and is often overwhelmed when demands outstrip resources

(e.g., Wells & Freer, 1994). There is currently a dearth of reliable, consistent data regarding foster care institutions (Goerge, Wulczyn, & Fanshel, 1994), and many myths surround the foster care system and those involved (Festinger, 1983). The outcome research is mixed in its conclusions about the effects of foster care. Some research shows higher behavioral, medical, psychosocial and school problems among foster care youth, (Fahlberg, 1991; McIntyre & Keesler, 1986) and other studies suggest that foster care placement is not detrimental and may rescue these children from even worse effects (e.g., Lyman & Bird, 1996; Timberlake, Pasztor, Sheagrin, & Lammert, 1987).

Even though the research shows mixed findings regarding the long-term repercussions of foster care, it is evident that when families are pulled apart, the impact on a child is significant (Bicknell-Hentges, 1995). In a longitudinal study which found that former foster children do relatively well in society as adults, Fanshel and Shinn (1978) warned that foster children felt damaged in areas which are hard to measure, such as feeling stigmatized or inferior. Currently the family service field is struggling for direction and we need more quality information about the needs of clients who utilize family service programs. We lack detail in many areas, one of which is how the children experience being in foster care (Downs, et. al., 1996; Wells & Freer, 1994). Obtaining these stories is one way of illuminating a complex and interacting system from the innermost level.

Foster Children's Perceptions

Rice and McFadden (1988) argue that one of the reasons that the foster care research is confusing and insufficient is because it glosses over the children's perceptions. Much of the existing research on foster children's experience is based on adults' retrospective accounts, which are filtered by further years and memories (Johnson, et al.,

1994). Some of the studies which have focused on the foster child's perspective have had a specific focus, such as hearing children's perceptions about "family"(Gardner, 1996; Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1994), self-esteem (Lyman, & Bird, 1996), or reactions to their care (Gil & Bogart, 1982). Although these are useful, another approach would be to let the child's experience drive the story, rather than the adult's agenda. Even the most open-ended approaches have an influence on the direction of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994), but a general focus on the child could yield information which is broader than would research guided by a specific topic.

Hearing foster children tell what they experience, while they experience it, is important for several reasons. First, we don't have a good understanding of how foster children experience care, and illumination in this area could improve societal awareness and foster care policy. Additionally, most foster children want to talk about what is happening to them, and this expression of stories is therapeutic and can inform clinical treatment. Finally, listening to foster children shows respect for them and acknowledges their individuality.

Increasing Awareness & Informing Policy

From the abusive or neglectful homes, to the shock of being taken from their families, foster children experience many stressors which are outside of the normal range of children's development (Downs, et al., 1996). Obtaining stories will increase our limited awareness of the many unique dynamics in the foster care system (Harold, et al., 1995), and will shed light on how families and children experience family service programs (Wells & Freer, 1994). In a study laying out a foster care research agenda for the 90s, Goerge, Wulczyn, and Fanshel (1994) state "for the purposes of serving these children . . .

it is important to understand the conditions foster children experience before, during, and after out-of-home care so that targeting for prevention, treatment concurrent to out-of-home care, and after care can be improved" (p. 532).

Given that our culture affords less respect to those who have less power, there are significant challenges to changing policy to better serve our foster children (Downs, et, al., 1996). Organizations exist who are seeking to give children a voice and influence policy in behalf of those who are powerless (e.g., see www.cwla.org; www.unicef.org). Gaining a more solid understanding of how foster children experience their lives in and out of care would add fuel to the cause of those involved in national and local advocacy. If policy advocates had a better understanding of what the children found helpful during their foster care, they could try to emphasize or strengthen those areas. Areas of care which children experience as damaging could be re-examined and challenged.

Now is a crucial time in the field of family services. Not only is the system struggling for direction, but popular sentiment is for the rights and support of children (www.cwla.org). Story gathering research can help in representing foster children's voices, giving representation in two senses of the word: description as well as advocacy (Alldred, 1998).

Expression is Therapeutic

Vehicles for children's expression, particularly stories, have been found to be therapeutic with children who are overwhelmed (McNamee & DeChiara, 1996). This seems particularly pertinent for foster children, who generally have few means of expressing themselves in reaction to their highly stressful and often confusing circumstances. When these children are allowed to verbalize their feelings, it helps them

better understand the sequence of events which led to such an arrangement (Rest & Watson, 1984). Additionally, children who don't express inner conflictual issues may behave in maladaptive ways, such as acting out or truancy, which then contribute to foster home breakdown and further difficulties (Rice & McFadden, 1988). Foster children who are allowed to share their own story feel empowered (McAuly, 1996), which is significant because those who come into foster care feel powerless and out of control (Bauer, 1993). Sharing histories has also been suggested as a way of strengthening attachments between foster children and care takers (Fahlberg, 1991).

Our understanding of clinical treatments for foster children is limited (Goerge, et al., 1994). A child's story would provide a rich narrative for caseworkers to hear, which would help them better understand and empathize with the foster children (Holody & Maher, 1996; Rice & McFadden, 1988). The stories of children in care could be used not only to better understand treatment processes and outcomes, but as a part of the treatment. One teenager in care shared examples of how his therapist had helped him overcome some of his grief and challenges in an essay entitled "How therapy changed my life" (Desetta, 1996).

When clinicians spend time learning the stories of children in service programs, it helps to build congruence between the clinician's and child's reality and the meanings shared in that therapeutic conversation. Story gathering gains information, builds trust and helps explore difficult issues (Holody & Maher, 1996). Listening to children's individual stories may not allow for the changing of all circumstances, but hearing perspectives from the child can allow the clinician and child to examine meanings and beliefs in stories, which can help children see things differently, "re-story" parts of their

lives, and then feel and behave in different ways (O'Connor & Hoorwitz, 1984; Schnitzer, 1993). For instance, a five-year-old girl came to foster care after being abandoned by her mother. This abandonment and subsequent placement in care happened not long after a shouting session between the mother and daughter. The girl was terrified of making her foster parents angry because she felt that her acting out had caused her mother to leave. Opening space for hearing that story and exploring alternate versions allowed this child to rid herself of the burden of self-storied blame (Fahlberg, 1991).

Another treatment use for stories is a group format, where foster youth can share their stories as a way to normalize and deal with the unique challenges of foster care. This method was used by Rice and McFadden (1988) who shared stories told in groups with caseworkers and foster parents. These adults were moved by the stories and became more involved in the children's lives.

Respecting Foster Children

Each child in care, like any child, has a unique persona with a history and personality that cannot be adequately described by statistics. The stories of foster children reflect the wide range of experience, beliefs and situations in which they live. To gloss over differences or to lump foster children together into categories may not be as helpful as hearing individual stories (Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1994). Foster children are valuable members of our society who need to be heard, not just to obtain the content of their story, but to respect them as individuals (Pugh & Selleck, 1996). When they are left unheard in the face of stress, they are confused, frightened and dehumanized (Johnson, et al., 1994). Offering children a voice may help them make sense out of their upheaval and losses, and may help in the coping and healing process.

Findings From Previous Research

Several studies of foster care have argued for the need of hearing from foster children, both to understand what they are going through and just to give them a vehicle to speak out (e.g., Desetta, 1996; Downs, et al., 1996; Rice & McFadden, 1988; Festinger, 1983). The few studies which have attempted to gain the perspective of the child while in care are often inconsistent in goals and methods. Quantitative or questionnaire methods are more common than those leaning toward qualitative, and there is less research on the younger children in care.

Festinger's (1983) large-scale work is often cited in the literature regarding foster children's perceptions. The work's main purpose, however, was to study foster children after they have left the system. The focus was to offer former foster children a chance to speak. These participants had suggestions on improving foster parents (screen them better and make sure they love and accept everyone), biological parents (want more knowledge of their heritage, and what happened to bring them to care) and the agency (want more privacy, less supervision and intrusion).

To offer foster children a voice was the purpose of a collection of stories by teenage foster children by Desetta (1996). These stories were sponsored by a bimonthly magazine, Foster Care Youth United. This was created in 1993 to give teenagers in care a chance to share their experiences and be heard. This collection of stories is compelling and includes powerful insiders' accounts of coming to foster care, abuses in the system, feeling different among peers, and striving to overcome. These teens wrote interesting stories for this collection, but it is not a research study and does not contain any analysis.

Other projects have included a longitudinal study by McAuly (1996) which

focused on middle childhood-aged foster children's perceptions of their social and emotional development, as well as an earlier study by Gil and Bogart (1983) which was undertaken simply for the value of hearing the children. The latter study gathered many suggestions from the children regarding improving care, as well as comparisons of children in group homes versus foster families.

Further studies beginning in the nineties examined the perceptions of foster kids relative to some of the myths and beliefs in foster care. For instance, one study challenged the belief that foster children tended to idealize their biological family. They found that most of these children understood that their parents had problems and needed help (Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1994). Other studies found that most foster children liked and appreciated their foster families and saw them in "family" roles (Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1994; Gardner, 1996). These studies also suggested that foster children want to be better informed about what is happening and that children should have more of a voice in their care.

Although many of these studies offered foster children a chance to speak, much of what was gathered had a specific research focus, such as looking for self-image and self esteem perceptions (Lyman, & Bird, 1996) or wondering what kids on the street thought about foster care (Holdoway, & Ray, 1992). An different format for hearing from foster children was employed by Rice and McFadden (1988) as they set up groups for foster children to share with each other. They explored the usefulness of expression of children with each other, as well as how accounts differed according to age.

Interestingly, one of the consistent themes appearing in listening to foster children is that they want to be listened to. Several studies commented that children enjoyed the

process of sharing their perspective, particularly when it involved feedback about what they liked and disliked in care (e.g., Rice & McFadden, 1988; Festinger, 1983, Gil & Bogart, 1982).

Developmental Issues of Pre-Adolescent Children

Foster children come from homes where there has been relational neglect or possibly abuse. These circumstances are likely to influence the child's normal course of development, both socially and cognitively (Fahlberg, 1991). Child development is mastered only in the context of relationships and ecosystems, which provide the interactive settings that children need to learn and progress (Berger, 1994). Recognizing that the conceptualization of child development is a social construction reminds us that the constructs which we fit into "normal" development, serve merely as comparative guideposts. Speaking within the language of child development is a way of sharing common understanding between relationships, but needs to be seen for what it is- an organizing construction-rather than truths which apply to all children (Alldred, 1998). Foster children often show developmental differences compared to the general population of children. For instance, studies have shown that children who are mistreated or neglected are at risk for delays in socioemotional and scholastic functioning (Barnett, Vondra, & Shonk, 1996).

As has been mentioned, much of the foster care literature related to the participant's perspective has come from the adult's perspective, or occasionally, the teen (Desetta, 1996). As foster care is growing demographically in the pre-adolescent and younger populations, this study will focus on foster children between the ages of 7 and 12 years. Research with children who have been victimized needs to be more developmental

in style (Finkelhor, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994). Developmental characteristics of the pre-teen population which may be relevant for this study include: the child's cognitive abilities, special vulnerabilities of this age, and communication styles.

Cognitive Understandings

According to most child development research, the age of a child will affect the way he or she organizes and understands their environment (Brooks, 1994). Jean Piaget (1976) conceptualized the pre-teen years as the concrete operational stage, in which children were able to integrate and organize the world surrounding them. The concrete operational child, who is between 7 and 12 years old, is able to better see multiple viewpoints, and verbalize the details of their experience. It is during this time that children become more interested in the processes of life, become better at reasoning, and become more interested in their own development. Typical pre-adolescents become quite peer-conscious, and are aware of the values that others hold (Craig & Kermis, 1995). This period is a time of disequilibrium for many pre-teens, as they may become moody, critical of parents or adults, and begin to move toward adolescence (Fahlberg, 1994).

At the time when these children are becoming more aware of other's viewpoints, they become more able to distinguish between real and ideal self-perceptions (Berger, 1994). These perceptions of self are of interest in the story which children tell, as maltreated children are more likely to inflate their own self-perceptions, perhaps as protection in the face of negative or rejecting relationships (Barnett, Vondra, & Shonk, 1996).

Issues in Interviewing Pre-Adolescents

Better understanding of children in the 7-12 age range can help in the process of

communicating with these children. Children who have suffered loss, which includes foster children, benefit from having someone carefully listen to them (Worden, 1996). Doing this with a pre-adolescent can be facilitated by spending time entering an alliance with the child, sharing information about yourself, and conveying a message of support and interest (Fahlberg, 1991). Care must be taken to not assume that because a child fits into a specific stage they will respond in the normal way. This age group consists of a range of development in children, where some would respond to more adult-style conversation and others would better share using toys or puppets (Fahlberg, 1991). The nature of stories of this age group is also likely to vary, from the more adult-like structured, developing story, to the childlike story, which is more inchoate and fluid (Andreozzi, 1996).

Victimization of Children

The normal development of a child is affected when he or she experiences abusive or neglectful circumstances, which have occurred to many foster children (Barnett, et al., 1996). Children, by their nature, are prone to victimization as they are physically small, and are dependent. Additionally, society has high tolerance for many forms of child victimization, which include violence, neglect, and even family abduction (Finkelhor, et al., 1994). Children suffer more victimizations than adults, and Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1994) have argued that we need new conceptualizing in this area, including more comprehensive theory and research, as well as a more developmental perspective on child victimization. Incorporating an ecological approach here is useful, as one of the goals of human ecology is to enrich vulnerable or at-risk parent-child links and family environments (Andreozzi, 1996; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Effects of Trauma

Children are sensitive to family problems and often serve as a barometer for distress, acting out or responding symbolically to the system dysfunction (Andreozzi, 1996). As such, children who undergo trauma, including family abuse, neglect, or separation are at high risk for later mental health problems, including becoming perpetrators of abuse (Finkelhor, et al., 1994). Children in foster care likely have poor attachment to a caregiving figure, which has been associated with many behavioral, psychological, and developmental problems, including loss of impulse control, poor conscience development, low self-esteem, and emotional distress (e.g. Barnett, et al., 1996; Craig & Kermis, 1995). Sharing histories has been suggested as a way of strengthening attachments between foster children and their caregivers (Fahlberg, 1991).

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Methodology

Although many approaches to researching foster children's perceptions may be useful, a qualitative approach is particularly suited to examining stories. Stories reflect a social contextualization of ideas and contain rich renditions which do not lend themselves well to traditional quantitative approaches. Wells and Freer (1994) argue that traditional hypothesis-testing methods of research in family service programs have fallen short and that qualitative research in this area will likely increase. They claim that qualitative methods fit well with family service fields because both qualitative approaches and family services are respectful, value multiple perspectives, and emphasize a broad view of the context of family, culture, and community.

Although qualitative research is often still regarded as less legitimate than the experimental types preferred by some grant agencies, it has become more valued and more common in the family sciences (Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993; Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). Because the story metaphor is concerned with meaning and themes rather than causality and explanation, it is a good fit with qualitative research. For instance, when examining foster children's stories, the purpose is not to find quantifiable "truths" or facts, but to hear individual renditions (Schnitzer, 1993).

Qualitative research is attuned to the idea that each child's perception is

worthwhile and that reality is constructed on an individual level. It is these personal views of reality, rather than an "objective" reality to which children respond (Wright, et al., 1996). Qualitative research uses the voices of women, men, and children as the text for research (Walker, 1996) and this project is about hearing the voices of foster children. Qualitative research has been described as a clinical science of the humanities, because it helps us better understand the human condition similar to poetry, art, and stories (Newfield, Sells, Smith, Newfield, & Newfield, 1996).

Contrasts with Positivism

Significant challenges to traditional, positivistic research have occurred in the last few decades in family and family therapy research. Many recognized that the attempts to break down family experience into its component parts in order to dissect and study them was akin to "kill[ing] the beast in order to understand it" (Tomm, 1983, p. 39). Social constructivist critiques argued that human experience and circular processes within families are not best understood using reductionistic and operational approaches (White & Epston, 1990; Wright, et al., 1996). Whereas a positivist approach to research looks for objective information about a subject, independent of context and researcher, one coming from a more phenomenological approach seeks understanding of meanings and human experience (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). "Immaculate perception", or the idea that one can be completely removed from what one observes, is rejected in favor of a value-informed researcher-influenced process (Gale, 1996; Newfield, et. al., 1996). Qualitative research works from a more phenomenological base, which assumes the importance of context. Phenomenology also assumes that knowledge is socially constructed, and that the researcher is part of the phenomena he or she studies (Walker, 1996). A qualitative

researcher assumes that language is a vehicle for interpreting and understanding the meanings which guide lives (Newfield, et al., 1996).

Although qualitative research is generally post-positivist in its assumptions, care must be taken when using qualitative approaches, as the dominant cultural assumptions regarding research can easily influence the research process (Alldred, 1998). For instance, in a qualitative interview with children, objectivist assumptions might seep into the project if the researcher assumes that he or she can enter this child's world, examine, hear, and report what is merely observed. Seeing language in this way, as representational of the child's world, is different from assuming that language is constitutive, and that each interview, or conversation, is an orchestrated event occurring between two or more persons (Gale, 1996). In other words, the content of the child's interview is not just a snapshot of an objective history, but a rendition, brought forth in interaction which influences its creation. Understanding of one's assumptions and contextual influences, such as those drawn from positivist approaches, helps ensure trustworthiness and validity in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In clarifying the position of qualitative research, the intent is not to dismiss the value of traditional quantitative approaches. Qualitative and quantitative approaches essentially reflect different ways of thinking about the nature of what humans do, and how we know what we know (Walker, 1996). Instead of arguing which approach is "better," researchers would do well to move toward what Sprenkle and Moon (1996) call pluralism in family research, incorporating the strengths from each.

Working with Children

Traditionally parents or adults have been the informants in child-focused research

(Gil & Bogart, 1982). There is a need for better research with children, but there are few guidelines for interviewing children (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Qualitative approaches are well-suited to children, as interviewing them gives this "socially silenced group. . .[whose] opinions are not heard in the public sphere" an opportunity to have a voice (Alldred, 1998, p. 148). In more traditional theories of child development and research, the focus on children was generally on what happened to them, or what they undergo, rather than what they have to say (Brooks, 1994). This emphasis on children as how they compare to adults treats them more like "human becomings" rather than human beings (Qvortrup, 1987). The concept of childhood is a social construction, which can obscure the imbalance of power when working with children, even in interviews (Alldred, 1998). Being reflexive and seeking to not judge child responses by adult constructs was one of the challenges particular to this project.

Interviewing children for qualitative research should be done with an awareness of some of issues particular to younger populations. Docherty and Sandelowski (1999) state that children's interview data are not less well developed than, but different from qualitative data obtained from adults. Children organize their experiences into scripts, which differ slightly from the structure of adult's accounts, and anticipate and re-create their lived experiences according to these self-narratives. For example, a child's response to a question will often reflect what usually happens, rather than what happened in a specific instance. Children may need more interviewer direction, because interview directions which are usually obvious to adults may not be to children (Alldred, 1998). Additional suggestions for qualitative child interviews include: not reacting in negative (shocked or horrified) ways to disturbing story content, assuring confidentiality, anchoring

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Research Questions

Marshall and Rossman (1995) state that the purposes of exploratory research include investigating little understood phenomena, identifying important variables, and generating hypotheses for further research. This is an exploratory, qualitative study, and as such, it has fairly broad research questions.

Research questions are guided by the conceptual map described in Chapter 1, which reflects the theoretical nature of the questioning. Selecting research questions in qualitative approaches is a delicate process. The challenge is to create questions which are sufficiently clear as to reflect the study's focus and practicality, while at the same time remaining flexible enough to adapt to new avenues which may open up (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This project began with seven research questions, but these were modified during the course of data analysis. It was discovered that questions 1 and 7 were asking similar things about ecology and environments, so these were collapsed into one question. Additionally, question 4 was too broad, and was redundant in covering material addressed in several of the other questions. After eliminating question four, the five remaining questions were:

1. <u>How is the child's story reflective of cultural and ecological influences?</u>
    a. It is anticipated that in the child's rendition there will be beliefs which have been influenced by the privileged "truths" which society perpetuates. These might consist of meanings or ideas about ethnicity, social class, gender, or family. Care must be taken as the researcher to not be blinded

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to ideas which likely influence both researcher and informant.

2. How do the three systems of biological family, foster family, and foster care agency affect the narrative structure and content of each child's story?

   a. As the three primary systems affecting foster children (Minuchin, 1995), it is anticipated that a considerable amount of the story themes will reflect the influence of one or more of these systems.

3. How are the child's characteristics and emotions reflected in the story creation process?

   a. Each of us is a unique structure who brings forth a relationship with the social and physical world which surrounds us (Maturana, 1988). The story brought forth is never independent of the child who relates it, and will thus be influenced by the child (Moules, 2000).

Further questions are guided by the structure of the story itself, as identified by Schnitzer (1993). The four components of a story are shown on all of the maps and reflected in the previous questions as well as these:

4. How does the child chronicle the story, or explain the development of his or her situation?

   a. The story will reflect change over time and how the child perceives lineal sequencing of life events. These themes indicate what the child believes about causality, or who or what is responsible for the current state of the child's situation.

5. How is researcher interaction with the child shaping the story which comes forth?

   a. Each rendition of a story comes forth in interaction, in this case with a

researcher. Stories are influenced by the participants and the setting in which there is reciprocal conversation and sharing of meanings in language. The influence of the researcher in the conversation may be difficult to ascertain in all content areas of the interview. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the reality of researcher values and agenda shaping the story process. Researcher influence will show up where conversation is directed and in more subtle interactive ways. In order to help children better understand the role of the interviewer, an introduction was given at the beginning of the interview explaining the purpose of the meeting.

Sampling Procedures

In qualitative research, the goal is not to have a random sample, but one which is rich in information (Fetterman, 1989). This was a purposive sample, one which matched the necessary criteria for the research question (Newfield, et al., 1996). The criteria for inclusion in this study are:

a. A foster child, one who had been removed from his or her home by order of the protective services and was living with a foster family .

b. A foster child who was between 7-12 years of age.

The goal of this project was to hear the stories of foster children while they were experiencing foster care. Suggestions for obtaining a quality sample include: having some demographic contrast within the sample (such as gender or ethnicity), and choosing those who don't have particular knowledge about the topic being studied, which is in this case foster children's perceptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The sample obtained had both African-American and Caucasian children, as well as males and females (see Chapter 4).

Sample Size

The goal in a qualitative sample is to study lives in a deep, meaningful way, which generally involves a smaller sample size than a quantitative study. Few concrete guidelines are given in terms of numbers needed, but the sample should be sufficient to obtain a "saturation" of identified themes and meanings (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). When themes become repetitive and feel full in data collection and analysis, the sample is likely sufficient (Fetterman, 1989). The sample for this study was 25 children, one of whom declined to be interviewed and another who didn't fit the sample criteria, and was used as a negative case sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This left 23 children whose stories were analyzed. The analysis commenced with the initial interviews of children, and sufficient repetition of themes was found by time the last several stories were analyzed.

Sample Site

In qualitative research, it is helpful to have an "entry" person, who serves as a go-between, or introducer into the culture being studied (Fetterman, 1989). In this project an entry person was Dr. Robert E. Lee, who serves as a consultant at Teen Ranch in Detroit, which provides foster care services. Previous introductions with key personnel had occurred, as well as a pilot interview with a foster child. The second site for interviews was Child and Family Services - Capitol Area, where the primary researcher works part time as a family therapist.

Data Collection

This project used an ethnographic, semistructured interview with foster children. A life history approach guided the interviews and the story-gathering (Fetterman, 1989). Although pure ethnography often involves an immersive, cultural experience, research can

be ethnographic in nature when it utilizes ethnographic assumptions in its interview style and data analysis (Fetterman, 1989). An ethnographic study is usually phenomenological in orientation, meaning it seeks multiple perspectives and realities. These renditions were not sought for their accuracy, but for their meanings (Newfield, et al., 1996). In other words, these interviews did not focus on the accuracy of the child, but the "revisionist nature" of how that child situates his or her life events (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999, p. 181).

A semistructured interview is usually most effective beginning with "grand tour" or broad questions, which allow for general responses and the obtaining of the bigger picture (Fetterman, 1989). These interviews began broadly, and then became more specific, asking questions related to the research questions of the study. While it was useful to use an interview guide (Miles & Huberman, 1994), these types of interviews allow for flexibility in incorporating new directions and modifying questions to tailor the interview to the informant. The interview guide also serves to bring some structure and consistency across interviews, but still allow storytelling on its own terms (Kerwin, et al., 1993).

As part of the interview guide and story telling process, "props" can be used to help facilitate qualitative research (Fetterman, 1989). Props can consist of any physical object which is designed to help spark engagement or reflection. These can be especially useful with children, who by their nature are less verbal than adults. Interviews with children have been helped by the use of objects such as dollhouses, figures, pictures, or other representative objects (e.g. Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1994; Wenger, 1982). The main props used in this study included drawing paper and crayons, allowing the researcher and child to draw if the child wanted. On several occasions the child enjoyed

drawing a picture of his or herself as a way of introduction, and liked it when I would draw pictures with them.

One of the methods used was a modified version of the story-board used by Harold, et al. (1995). This involved a structured series of prompts, which in this case followed the main points of the interview guide. These were placed on successive pages with graphics and text, such as "my early years," "my family," or "How I came into foster care" (see Appendix D). The story-board was shown to the children after initial introductions and "getting-to-know-you" questions had taken place. When it seemed like the children were comfortable, the verbal assent script (see Appendix A) was shared with the child, assuring confidentiality and asking for permission to talk with them. When permission was granted and time had been spent in getting to know each other (drawing pictures, asking questions about school, introducing myself) the interview would proceed roughly according to the guide found in Appendix A. The interviews lasted from 10 minutes to an hour, depending on the child, and each child was interviewed for one session.

Despite the use of structured prompts, the questions asked were open-ended to minimize the directing of the story. Treading lightly was important because the goal in these interviews was not the solving of a question, but a better understanding of the motives and beliefs related to the foster children's lives (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). Ethnographic approaches emphasize gaining an emic, or insider's point of view, rather than emphasizing the researcher's viewpoint (Newfield, et al., 1996). The informant's perspective was more likely to be their own when they were allowed to direct the story.

An important component of any research, but particularly for more in-depth

approaches, is the respect for both the culture studied and the person who is sharing life information (Newfield, et al., 1996). Fetterman (1989) states that the most successful interviews place the interviewee at ease, acknowledge the value of the information, and reinforce continued communication.

In addition to the content of the children's stories, a small amount of demographic information was obtained from the foster care caseworker. This helped in better understanding how these additional factors might be influential in the story. This thickens the data through adding additional sources of data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). These data consist of: age, time in care, ethnicity, gender, and reason for admittance into care (see Chapter Four and Appendix C).

Researcher's Role & Ethics

Acknowledging that there is no such thing as a totally disinterested or objective researcher, a qualitative interviewer becomes the primary research instrument (Boss et al., 1996). As such, it was important to be self-aware in the process of gathering stories. Memos were taken during the data gathering and analysis process and recorded in the analysis software as part of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers participating in exploratory, inductive projects need to remain flexible and reflexive, able to reflect on the content and process of the work (Gale, 1996). Additionally, researchers are susceptible to being influenced by the dominant culture and must remain vigilant about the assumptions brought to the research process (Boss, et al., 1996). This reflexivity helps in maintaining reliability in qualitative research (Miles, et al., 1994).

Another part of being self aware is recognizing issues of power, especially with marginalized or powerless persons. For purposes of trust and respect, it was important to

gain verbal consent from these children for the interview (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). To maintain an ethical research atmosphere, the researcher attempted to avoid psychological pressure with the informants, and assured strict anonymity (Boss, et al., 1996).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in an ethnographic qualitative study actually begins with the first interviews and observations. As the process gets underway, themes emerge and data collection will proceed in a recursive manner, adapting to the findings as the research progresses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In ethnographic analysis, including analyzing interview data, constant comparative methods are used in conjunction with the coding and different types of qualitative analysis (Fetterman, 1989).

The analysis commenced with transcribing the interview data and loading it into qualitative software. The software used in the analysis was the well-known, NUD*IST package, which was helpful in terms of sorting, coding, and displaying large amounts of text (Meloy, 1994). The software assisted in the general process of sorting and winnowing the data, as it allowed for individual sections to be classified according to one or more categories. This process roughly followed several stages. After the initial transcripts were done, they were read and re-read in a process of "soaking," in which the researcher became intensely familiar with the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was followed by an examination of the data for logical relationships and contradictions. The transcripts of the stories were then re-read to confirm or disconfirm emerging relationships, or domains.

A domain is defined as an informant-expressed relationship or category, which is

used in ascertaining how people classify or situate their experiences (Newfield, et. al., 1996). The researcher identified preliminary domains in the initial interview transcripts, and then watched for them as they emerged in subsequent interviews. These domains followed research questions, such as the domain of "race/gender," and likewise emerged independently from the child's definitions, as in the case of "sibling support." These domains were clarified as the researcher asked for further description to confirm or disconfirm emerging patterns. This back and forth interplay between data collection and analysis is part of the constant comparative process (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The taxonomic analysis occurred as the terms within domains were examined in light of their relationships. This helped to establish a hierarchy of levels, with subsets in the original domain (Kerwin, et al., 1993). For example, the emotional expressions common to these children at first emerged independently, but soon became organized into categories, and then hierarchically, such as placing the "loss" category as a subset of "sadness." Componential analysis furthered this process by systematically identifying the meanings associated with a cultural symbol, (Newfield, et al., 1996) such as the meanings surrounding the "system" for foster care children. As the important relationships and themes surfaced, they were coded and organized using NUD*IST, and were organized in hierarchy, and shown on the software as a "tree" (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Coding Procedures

The data in qualitative study are words, which by nature are fatter than numbers, and usually have multiple meanings. Words are also context-related, and can vary in meaning and intensity, depending on where they are situated within a story (Gale, 1996). It is easy to become overloaded in the initial stages of qualitative research with the large

quantity of text which is gathered. To facilitate the sorting of data, codes, or organizational categories, were used to begin the analysis procedures. Miles and Huberman suggest that even before data are gathered it is a good idea to have an initial broad coding scheme, based on conceptual mapping and theorizing (1994). They argue that this makes explicit a process of conscious or unconscious selection of data which is already inherent in data gathering.

Initial codes for this project followed the research questions and are as indicated:

Ecosystemic Themes, (related to the three environments: natural/physical, constructed/technological, and social/cultural)
Biological Family
Foster Agency
Foster Family
Story content related to development, or change over time
Information relative to the story telling process, or co-creation with interviewer.

Codes are "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Codes are usually attached to chunks of varying size, such as single words, sentences, or whole phrases. These can be organized and used to identify the meanings and can be assigned by description, interpretation, or pattern categories (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). As the children's stories were being analyzed and sorted using NUD*IST, coding categories which were previously defined changed and developed. This evolved throughout the research. After the data were thoroughly analyzed, the end product included a list of hierarchical themes from these foster children's stories (Kerwin, et al., 1993).

Validity

The validity of a qualitative study partially depends on the skills of the researcher, and his or her expertise in the area of study. Validity is also strengthened by the

thoroughness of the interview process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Triangulation is a process which involves improving the data by consulting multiple sources or repeating interviews with the same source (Fetterman, 1989). This can occur through observations, consulting others (such as foster workers or foster families), and by returning to interview themes multiple times to allow the child's description of certain areas to thicken (Alldred, 1998). This process of returning to themes during multiple interviews has been found especially useful with children (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). In these interviews when an issue seemed important to the child, we would spend extra time exploring it or would come back to it later. The process of reviewing and pursuing the data until one becomes very familiar with it is another version of soaking and is important in valid qualitative research (Fetterman, 1989).

Other issues which are important in valid qualitative research include obtaining a sample which will provide the kind of information necessary to generalize to theory, and identifying the theoretical assumptions and research biases under which the project is operating (Allen, 2000). Validity is also strengthened by quoting, or letting the words of the informants speak for themselves, rather than summarizing or filtering them (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Overview

This project was an attempt to let foster children tell their stories on their own terms. In qualitative ethnographic interviews there is of necessity a trade off between interviewer control and subject control. The question is, does one keep a tight rein on the direction of the interview and direct the content, or give control to the informant and let them lead the story? This issue of deciding on tight or loose data occurs in all qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and is particularly relevant when working with children, who generally need more direction to keep an interview going (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). In my ethnographic interviews, I played this by ear, allowing for more leeway when the child seemed to have directions he or she wanted to go, or asking follow up questions to responses that seemed pronounced. Often I found the content staying close to the framework I had established in my semi-structured interview, which followed the research questions in an ecological outline. Although these children were young and remained close to the interviewer's direction, they were nevertheless very expressive and brought forth stories which were at times astonishing and always interesting. This chapter introduces the children in terms of their demographic data, then lays out the themes of the interview. These themes follow the research questions which, in turn, correspond to the conceptual map in terms of environments and story creation.

Demographics

This sample of children came from two different foster care agencies. All children's names have been replaced with pseudonyms and other identifying data have been left out. The total number of children listed is 25, but one child declined to be interviewed and another, Mitch, was interviewed as a negative case sample, or one who is deliberately different from the others (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Mitch was 13 and was interviewed due to his different age as a way of comparing and contrasting the interview content (see Chapter 5 for further information related to the negative case sample).

The children's ages ranged from 7 to 12, with the average being 9.6 years old (See Table 1). In this sample, 16/23 were male, (74%) and the majority (19/23 or 82.6%) were African-American and from low-income, urban settings. There was one child identifying as Bi-Racial (African-American/Caucasian) and the remaining 13% were Caucasian. These children had from 0 to 7 siblings, with the average number of siblings being 3.4. There were some children who had only been in 1 placement, while others had up to 8, with the average number of placements being 3.5. Some children were new to care, while others, such as the sisters Jessie and Juanita, had been in for basically their whole lives. The rough average of months in care was 36 months, which is comparable with the 38 month average reported by Lee and Lynch (1998).

Only basic details were given by caseworkers as to the nature of problems leading to the children entering care. These included all forms of abuse, substance and alcohol addiction, homelessness as well as parents being incarcerated. The majority of these cases included neglect as either all or a portion of the reason for removal from homes.

Table 1
Demographic Data of Subjects

Names*	Gen.	Age	Ethn.	Sibs	Plac	EnterCare	Reason+
Brian	M	11	Cauc	2	5	05/19/00	SA, N, A/D
Cage	M	8	Af-Am	7	5	03/17/97	N, A
Chris	M	12	Af-Am	2	1	04/09/97	N, A/D
Cherise	F	9	Af-Am	3	5	08/01/98	N
Chad	M	11	Af-Am	2	1	04/09/97	N, A/D
David	M	12	Caucs	5	3	08/17/99	PA, N
Daniel	M	10	Af-Am	3	4	12/17/96	PA, A/D
Deondre	M	11	Af-Am	3	4	12/17/96	PA, A/D
Devin	M	11	Af-Am	7	5	02/26/97	N
Jessie	F	8	Af-Am	4	8	04/08/93	N, A
Juanita	F	7	Af-Am	4	8	04/08/93	N, A
Junius	M	7	Af-Am	0	1	07/15/00	N
Katelin**	F	8	Cac/His	3	1	06/29/00	A, N
Keith	M	11	Caucs	2	5	09/17/97	PA, EA, N
Krystal	F	11	Af-Am	1	2	08/25/99	N, H,
Melanie	F	7	Af-Am	7	4	03/27/97	N, A
Mitch***	M	13	Cauc	1	2	08/25/99	A/D, Death of Parents
Miles	M	8	Af-Am	1	1	07/07/99	N
Miguel	M	8	Af-Am	1	1	07/07/99	N
Morris	M	11	AfAm/Cauc	0	2	10/24/00	PA, N, I
Patrice	F	11	Af-Am	4	2	01/15/99	N
Paul	M	10	Af-Am	7	5	02/26/97	N
Reggie	M	9	Af-Am	4	2	01/15/99	N
Travis	M	9	Af-Am	2	1	04/09/97	N, A/D
Wilt	M	9	Af-Am	7	6	03/27/97	N, A

* All names have been changed
** Choose not to be interviewed, not included in analysis
*** Negative case sample (over age limit), not included in analysis

+ N=Neglect, PA=Physical Abuse, A/D=Alcohol or Drug problems, SA=Sexual Abuse, EA=Emotional Abuse, A=Abandonment, I=Incarceration of parent, H=Homelessness

Research Question Number One - Human Ecology

As the guiding framework for this project, human ecology focuses on environments and the interaction of organisms and systems within those environments. As illustrated on the conceptual map, the environments most pertinent to the child are those in closest proximity to the interaction of the child. The focus here begins broadly with the natural-physical environment, followed by the constructed-technological, and then moving to those systems which work within the social-cultural realm. The revised research question was: How is the child's story reflective of cultural and ecological influences?

Natural Physical Environment

The natural physical environment is the broad ecosystem consisting of the air, weather, and other physical and biological components as they exist unaltered in nature (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). It is the "outer ring" of the family ecosystem, and is depicted as such on the conceptual map. It was not often that the natural physical environment manifested itself as a major player in the construction of these children's stories, but when it did, it was in negative ways. Most of the children did not cite sickness as a major issue, but Deondre recalled a time when he suffered from leg aches, which would then wake him up, "and sometimes I would get aches in my legs, and then I would get out of my bed and watch TV, then all of a sudden I would see a rat run across." Deondre wasn't the only one mentioning this environmental challenge among the foster children. Cherise remembers being scared at her house because "inside it there was rats and roaches . . . and ants, and the basement was flooded so we couldn't take a bath and we had to wash outside, yeah, and the toilet was filled with rats, and so we had to go outside to use it." Others mentioned rats and roaches, and 9-year old Chad commented: "we had no heat . . .

or no water."

Constructed/Technological Environment

This level of the ecosystem consists of things altered by humans, such as the roads, buildings, or homes. As with the natural/physical level, this ecosystem shows up as less influential in the children's stories, but still important in some cases. Junius, who is 7, responded this way when asked about his home. "I want to say but people tease me . . . because, because, ummmm, because everyone teases me because I live in a dope house." He then described how that affected him socially, as the other children would say "Yeah. Hah, hah, everybody, Junius lives in a dope house, laugh at him." Another home-related memory came from Chad: "There always used to be these kids always coming over to our house busting out windows."

Few other references occurred in the children's stories in relation to constructed aspects of their environments, although there was mention of frequent moves from house to house, living out of a car, and in a trailer.

Social/Cultural Environment

As predicted by the conceptual map and reflected in the stories, this is the environment which had the greatest influence on the child's world. Examples included popular culture references, such as when Cherise sang me her favorite Brittany Spears song, and more complex issues such as race relations. Research question number two also deals with the social/cultural environment, (themes related to biological family, foster family, and foster agency), so the focus here will exclude those systems. More general social/cultural themes did occur in the stories which will be discussed in this section. These include themes related to race, gender and to the legal system.

Race and Gender

Although a biological concept of race and gender may fit better within the natural/physical environment discussion, the themes in these stories are about the cultural construction of these issues and are thus discussed within the social/cultural environment. Stories from teenagers within the foster care system have shown a strong reflection of race and ethnicity (Dessetta, 1996). The issue of race in terms of cross-cultural placement and adoption has also generated considerable discussion recently, including the formation of The National Family Heritage Coalition, which was formed in the interest of promoting racial and cultural competence in child welfare (Freundlich, 2000). The debate is whether "color-blindness" or placing children in homes regardless of racial makeup is detrimental to the child. In the interviews with these children, these issues occasionally surfaced. As eleven-year old Deondre says: "well, like if a black kid was with a white family, then they don't like that family because they're not the same races. Then they might be unhappy, and they might cuss them out." Another girl, Patrice, comments that "I'd rather be with a black foster parent, no offense, but because people like say, 'ha ha, you got a white mom'." Cherise mentioned: "that other girl, she likes white parents, and it's really weird."

Junius reported that other children teased him about being in care and said that it was because he was black that he was in foster care. Chad said : "I think [foster care] is harder for the black kids. . . cause, I don't believe that white people get along with black." Reggie also believed that there was discrimination toward children of color in the system, and he cited an instance of being sent to his room as proof. Cage had an interesting response to the issue of race, likely reacting to the social/cultural environment in which he lives. He said: "It don't matter as long as they in the family . . . and Dr. Martin Luther

King say black people aren't like white people . . .well he went outside to get some air, out to his van, he was going to get the Nobel Peace Prize, and then they snuck up behind him and shot him in the head!" Cage continued: "I'm proud of what color I is . . . no good to make fun of people for what color they is."

In contrast to the social themes which emerged around race, there was almost no discussion of gender issues, except as evidenced by gender-stereotyped plans for the future (see Research Question # 4). The few comments were generally similar to Krystal's observation of foster care: "it's pretty much the same [for boys and girls], . . .both get treated equally." Daniel was hesitant to comment about gender issues, as he put it: "I ain't a girl, so I don't know." Paul remarked about a placement policy: "When you have a girl in a foster home, she sleeps in a different room." It is likely that these children's stories reflect fewer cultural themes than children who are older, such as the adolescents in care. Nevertheless, the thoughts related to race and gender expressed by this group seem derived from the culture in which they live (Schnitzer, 1993).

Legal System

By virtue of their being taken from their biological families, most of these children have had some experience with the legal system, and this was occasionally reflected in their stories. The themes usually emerged in negative terms. One eleven-year-old boy, Keith, felt like the judge had been unfair and didn't acknowledge that his parents had done the things they needed to. He complained, "What I want to know is why doesn't the judge keep his promises. He promised me that he would talk to me in person and never did! . . . I wanted to bust the judge!" Other children reflected on the process of legal intervention when they were taken from their homes. Wilt's memories are typical of many of the

children, "yeah, and they said hurry, hurry up, get out of the tub. So we got our clothes on, and my mamma was crying and we was too, so they just rushed us out of the house. . . it was scary but I was just crying." Other children remember the police involvement in the removal from their homes, and some had an understanding of how the legal system could affect their future reunification with their parents. As Deondre understood, "yeah, and then they went back to the court and they took her [his mother's] rights away. And she couldn't see us, she couldn't do none of that. She couldn't even appeal her case anymore, because she didn't have any rights any more."

Research Question Number Two - Primary Triangle

It is important to clarify that the second research question is still addressing the findings related to the third environment, the social/cultural. The emphasis is given here to the social/cultural systems in a foster child's life which are most likely to have direct bearing on the child in the day-to-day living in foster care. Patricia Minuchin has identified the three systems of biological family, foster family and foster care agency as the "primary triangle" or the child's basic reality of foster care living (1995, p. 255). This was borne out by these interviews which elicited numerous themes related to the child's biological and foster families, as well as themes reflective of the foster care agency. The specific research question is: How do the three systems of biological family, foster family, and foster care agency affect the narrative structure and content of each child's story?

Biological Family

An initial separation in coding categories for the following three systems was to divide the themes into negative and positive feelings related to these three systems. In terms of story the children would tell, we would begin with memories of growing up, and

then move specifically to memories about birth families. The positive feelings recalled by most of these children were typical of most children, remembering a wide range of activities and feelings. These included many happy times, such as those remembered by eight-year-old Cage "we used to go outside every day, ride our bikes in the summer, and we used to talk about stuff in the house, and my little brother, we stayed up all night playing a game." Chad remembers a family activity "One time me and my brothers and my mom she made this ... she took this wood... she made this thing that two people sit on and one person go up and one person goes down." And Patrice remembered feeling special to her mother: "me and my mama used to go places we would like, kind of like a secret to me so like we didn't tell none of my brothers we just went. . . when my mom would pick me up at school and we would go everywhere like before we go home and . . . it was fun." Many of the memories that emerged from the children included extended family, such as grandparents, cousins, and aunts and uncles. Cherise recalled a family tradition, "only on Sundays, we'd go over to my grandma's house after church, let me go to her house, they let me eat steak . . . and it was good too."

Siblings

Another theme which developed unexpectedly from the stories was the children's reliance on siblings. Some of the sibling references were about support, such as Wilt's comment "they help me a lot, they like help me with my work, my sister, she helps my brother, and Cage does all the work, and I do my own work." Many children had tales of undergoing tough times together as siblings, such as Cage's memories, "we used to get whupped and stand in the corner [and we had] like five bedrooms because my mamma got seven kids, and the babies, the babies had to sleep in one room and the boys sleep in one

room, and the babies sleep by theirself." Deondre described the abuse he and his brother used to receive, but kept mentioning that his younger brother had it the worst "uh huh, Daniel got beat the most . . . [mom's boyfriend] would beat us and one day, he beat up Daniel, and he had knocked Daniel down a flight of stairs, and the next day at school, Daniel took off his hat and the teacher saw the marks on his head." Brian remembered his father beating his mother "over the sink with a beer bottle and . . . me and my brothers were crying underneath the table." Themes of suffering together as siblings ran through many of the stories.

As predicted from past literature, many children were dismayed about being separated from their siblings. One eleven-year-old boy, Brian, mentioned this fact four times in his interview, starting with telling me "some of the bad things? I don't get to see my brothers and we're all split up. . . yeah, I don't know what they remember, I wish I like knew where they were and everything." Deondre cited this as a problem with foster care as well, saying "sometimes I just wish I could see my brothers and sisters all day long, like when I was at home." Keith didn't even want to talk about the topic. When I asked about brothers or sisters, he said quietly "Please don't talk about that."

Abuse and Neglect

The negative memories associated with biological families were largely centered around the theme of abuse and neglect. Over half of the children's stories contained some material related to abuse or neglect, ranging from mild to severe. Several accidents were mentioned, such as the report from three brothers, Chris, Chad, and Travis, that their house was set on fire when they were playing with matches. Cherise remembered: "my baby brother, he got smothered in the couch. . . his name was Mitchell, . . . yeah, he was

my twin brother." Cherise also remembered: "I was four years old and I fell off the bed, and broke my arm, I mean my legs." Brian recalled: "I got in a car accident at one point and time, I remember crashing or something because my Dad was drunk and he was driving, he probably didn't even have a license or something, I don't know."

Other story content related to neglect included Chad's memory of an uncle "that used to give us toys because we never had any, and another uncle who used to drive his van and bring us food." Deondre recalled the time he and his brothers would "watch TV, and just run around and stuff at home. We would sleep on mattresses on the floor, we didn't have no bed frames, under the bed with the feet on the ground, and we was cold cause we didn't have no covers . . ." Cherise recounted: "the police let us get ice cream and then we went to this child care, and they washed us up and they gave us new clothes . . . [because] they was dirty!" And Travis explained the reason for his placement was "because they kept fighting. . .or because they left us in the house all day."

More disturbing were the reports of abuse which were evident in several of the children's narratives. Some of the children were witnesses to abusive behavior, such as Morris, who watched his mother's boyfriend as he "used to, um, push her down stairs that he had . . . he liked to just punch her and stuff." and Brian whose father "would beat my mom with a beer bottle." Several of the other children experienced the abuse firsthand. Eight-year-old Jessie said: "My grandma wasn't treating me right [she] whipped me, put me in the closet." and Brian reported that his father "sexually abused me, and my mom had to come back because my Dad threatened to kill me." Cherise shared a story of when "my mommy hit me with an extension cord on my face right here. . . and I went to church like that, my face was all swollen. . . . and they say what happened to you, and I say 'huh uh

huh uh'." She explained that she could not tell people what happened because her grandfather was the minister in that church and her mother had threatened her to keep quiet about it.

The brothers Deondre and Daniel shared some particularly dramatic experiences of abuse, largely from the mother's boyfriend. Deondre explained: "Like, she would be mean in the morning, like all the time, and then she had this man and he used to beat us. . . yeah, you know like a piece of a table, the leg, it had nails in it and he used to beat us with that. Sometimes he would use, see on that chair [points to a flexible one- inch diameter rod] . . . only thicker, it was on our bunk bed, he broke it off and he would beat us with that, he used to call that 'blackie'." This pattern of torment was long lasting, as Deondre further described an incident with the boyfriend: "But he said that when you get back, if you go, then you is going to get beat again. He didn't say 'beat' but he said 'you know what is goin' to happen'. Well, my mama would go to the store, and [the boyfriend] would beat us again. . . yeah, we got beat almost every time he was mad, even when it wasn't our fault. [When we missed the bus, the boyfriend] would drive us to school and he would beat us in the car. . . Yeah. He was heavy-handed! He would slap you, leave marks on your face - but by the time we got out of the car, they was gone." In describing the abuse as directed at younger brother Daniel, Deondre remembered a time when the boyfriend "told me to go run some hot water, cause the hot water had a real high temperature, like REAL high, and he took Daniel and put off all his clothes and he took Daniel in the bathroom and put him in the hot water and got him burnt. . . . and then he told me to lie and say [youngest brother] did it." Under this pressure Deondre lied to the ambulance workers when they came. He also described being hit on the head and back, which sometimes left marks or

"sometimes bumps. He would pick us up all the way to the ceiling in our room, and he would just drop us. . . uh huh, and Daniel got beat the most . . . He used to be able to read, then when [the boyfriend] came around and started dropping Daniel on his head, then Daniel, uh, didn't know as much as before [the boyfriend] came into our life. It seemed like every time [the boyfriend] dropped him on his head, that he would lose some memory or something like that." Deondre also felt his mother was most abusive to Daniel "yeah, she was real mean. She was meaner to Daniel than to anyone . . . she treated him like trash." Younger brother Daniel confirmed the abuse in a separate interview, as he recounted what he remembers about life with mom and her boyfriend. "My mom's step-dad, I mean my mom's boyfriend. He would beat us and stuff.. . . beat us. Tie us up and beat us. Yeah, when I would be in trouble, when [the boyfriend] would beat me, I would cry and cry."

Drug-related behavior was another thing witnessed by some of these children, as Deondre recalled: "and sometimes they would be out for a long time and they would put this white stuff on credit cards, and they would take another credit card and chop it all up and then sometimes they would take us in these old abandoned houses, and they would come out and be sniffin [imitates] like that and they got a cold or something . . .uh huh, and my mom, then they would smoke this stuff called weed." Patrice didn't want to name the specific drug problem, but alluded to it: "my mom did some not so good stuff with a couple of her not so good friends that was with her. Her friends took me and my brother and said that my mom ran away and it was just a lie." And Brian remembered his father giving him alcohol as a joke: "yeah, my dad had some friends, and they would give me some cold beer to drink . . . yeah, I didn't even know what it was, I was just a baby."

Foster Family

Similar to the themes related about biological families, the foster family themes generally emerged into positive and negative categories. The negative experiences with foster families ranged from the normal to the more severe. Cage said that he didn't like his foster family for the simple reason that "it wasn't my mama, my real mama." He also experienced their discipline as severe saying that they were "mean" and that they "tell us to go to bed when it was 3:00." Junius also reported strict discipline: "They tell me to do a lot of work. They tell me to write my name a 102 times. Then I get mad and tear it up." Wilt said: "one of my foster families used to whip us . . . like if we were full, and we take too long to eat, she'd just go whip us. . . we always eat the same thing. Over and over and over. . . it's like oatmeal. . . they whipped me. Now my last foster parents, she was nice to me." Morris reported being grounded and having three weeks in his room for "climbing on the pool table, missing one chore. . . I [also] got under a punishment for a week, for forgetting to do the stairs, not the stairs, but the hallway." Other stories reflected some tension with the other children in the foster home, such as Brian's frustration with a foster brother: "one time . . . they sent me to bed one time and left my toys downstairs, my train track . . . and one of the kids played with it which was not right." Cherise talked of being tormented by foster sisters, reporting that they "pinched" her and "they hit me, those kids, my foster sisters." Obviously it is difficult to sort out the role that the foster child has in these sorts of altercations, but clues come forth in the stories as Cherise continues, "but the five, but we be beatin' on her, because she already tried to fight us at breakfast at school . . . yeah, I only beat up on her sometimes, but the other kids, they beat up on her this much, the whole bit." Brian recalled a bad experience with a foster home: "I was in

respite at first, and then I went to a foster home, I was always getting yelled at, these people would smoke and do drugs and everything . . . She threatened to tie me up with a rope, she threw me outside, [and] it was wintertime, freezing cold. I took my blanket out there. I still got that blanket."

Despite the challenges experienced by some of the children in their foster families, most of them had good experiences as well. Some were thrilled to be in a family that could give them food and things, and several of them used the term "nice" when describing their foster families. Daniel sums it up "Happy, but mad at first, but then I was happy about foster care. . . We had some parents that we could trust [and] . . . they care about me." And Deondre expanded on this: "you don't get beat, um, they teach you the right way to do stuff, they teach you not to lie, stuff like that, they don't try to harm you. Like if you be good, our foster parents , they take you out to the comic book store, they sometimes take us out the whole day, like we never come home. And like one time they took us, um, to [a restaurant], and after that we went to the comic store, then we went to the show, and then we went to the mall. And after that we went out to dinner, and back and then we finally came home. And then we got this older brother, he spends time with us, he plays with us, and my dad, he comes outside and throws a couple passes to us. He tries to teach us how to play football, basketball, and how to have a good attitude if you want to play on a team, and sometimes if we do good for the week or something, we ask if we can go to the store or something, and they say yes. They really never say no."

Patrice appreciated the spiritual dimension that her foster mom brought into her life "it was kind of good and kind of bad. It was bad because I didn't, like, see my mom, like every day, but it was good because I could learn more about God and Jesus [but then]

they said like it was ok for us to have visits and I could see my mom." Patrice thought that all foster parents should teach the foster kids about Jesus, and Reggie agreed that the Christian aspect of care was good for him, as he mentioned that foster care "is fun" and that his "foster parents are Christian and nice." Devin, Jessie, Juanita, Paul, Travis, Cherise, Wilt, Brian, Chris, and Chad all mentioned that the foster family did things with them, such as taking them out to eat, or to play with them. Junius described his foster family thus: "they're fine . . . they are like a family."

Foster Agency

The themes from these children's stories concerning the agency were of a much more mild nature than the reactions about the foster and biological families. As with most of the areas, there was a range of different experiences, but they were smaller in scope, from Brian's complaints that it is "boring" and takes up his time, to several of the other children who said that they agency was "ok," "nice," or "fine." Wilt disliked coming in so frequently, as it made him miss out on fun things with friends, and Paul enjoyed coming in because of the toys, drawing, and movies.

Although the reactions about the foster care agency were somewhat neutral, the reactions about foster care in general were more pronounced, with good and bad feelings shared, as well as suggestions for improving care. Krystal thought foster care was good because it taught her "That I know that it's not my fault that I got here, and that I'm ok." Most of the other positive reactions to foster care related to the foster family, as in ways previously mentioned, such as being taken care of and doing fun things.

Much of the negative reactions to foster care will be expanded on under the next section of the child's emotions. Some children blamed the agency or the legal system, but

more often the negative comments were related to the unfortunate luck of being a foster child. Themes related to loss, especially of parents, being confused, and angry are common and will be dealt with in separate sections.

Research Question Number Three - The Child in the System

An ecological approach focuses on the organism in interaction with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this study the organism of interest is the informant, or foster child. The specific research question addressed is: How are the child's characteristics and emotions reflected in the story creation process? The themes emerging from the children's stories which related to their characteristics and affect can be separated into several categories. The dominant category in this area is related to the child's negative emotional reactions to life events. These are separated out into separate categories including: confusion, loss/sadness, fear, lack of control, anger and shame. Additional themes related to the child are personal characteristics, spirituality, and problem behaviors.

Emotions

The emotions in question here are prominent and relevant as a way of understanding how each child makes sense out of the experiences that happen during the course of his or her life. Understandably, the majority of the emotions emerging related to foster care are of a negative nature.

Confusion

Research has suggested that foster children undergo a significant amount of confusion during the course of being taken from their homes and placed elsewhere (e.g. Fahlberg, 1990; Johnson, et al., 1994). This was quickly confirmed in this study. Nearly

every child was confused about one or more aspect of what was happening and what was going to happen. Other research has shown that pre-teen foster children are particularly vulnerable to confusion (Rice & McFadden, 1989). There were some indications that the children were unclear on who they could regard as family, especially among the younger children. Cherise asked me if I knew her mamma's name, and after she told me, I asked her what her foster mamma's name was and she said, "that's her!" There were numerous responses of "I don't know" when I asked what was going to happen with their family in the future, particularly regarding seeing birth parents again. When I asked Chad what would happen to his birth parents he said, "probably going to die." Juanita was also unsure about ever seeing her parents: "I don't know, I think I'm going to stay at this family because I think I'm getting adopted" and when Junius was asked what he liked about his family he exclaimed, "I got two!" Keith explained the difficulty this way: "It is also tough for a baby, because they grow up with foster parents, thinking they are his real parents, and once he goes back to his real parents, he is like 'what the heck, who are they'?"

The theme of confusion regarding the past and future in a child's life will be further addressed under research question four, which focuses on story as a chronicle, or explanation across time. Suffice it to say that in the course of story-telling, the areas with the most shrugs and not-knowing responses were the discussions of what had happened to get them into care and what was going to happen in the future. There were other areas where children expressed confusion, sometimes directly, as when Patrice said that she felt "confused" because she did not understand why she couldn't see her mother again until she was 18, and when Brian mentioned that he was pretty sure he had other siblings that his dad had never told him about.

Loss/Sadness

This theme began as sadness, but converted into loss/sadness as it became apparent that much of the sadness in the children's stories was related to personal losses. The most pervasive loss reflected was that of family, particularly mother, then father and siblings. Miles, Melanie, Krystal, Chris, Cherise Keith, Jessie, Chad, Juanita, David and Brian all mentioned feeling sad about not seeing their parents, perhaps ever again. Junius put it this way "I don't think I'm never going to see her. They said I was going to be seeing her, but yesterday I just didn't see her. . ." He remarked later at the end of our session that "I was about to cry when we were talking about my mom."

Seven-year-old Cherise had many family losses which she commented on, such as the loss of a cousin who died after being bit by a rat and a brother who was smothered in a couch. She continued relating these losses, mentioning that her dad had died, and that she never knew him. When I commented about all of the deaths in her family she remembered one more: "either my great-great grandma's brother's, sister's aunt's, her brother died. . . and I started crying too. I was screaming out loud." Cherise also mentioned missing her two pet dogs, an aunt "I miss her!" and a good friend, again exclaiming "I miss her!" When I asked her if she would ever see her birth mother again, she said, "never ever . . . that's what the court said."

As Cherise's story illustrates, foster children often lose more than just their families. Friends, pets, surroundings, toys, and school associates are left behind. Reggie mentioned losing more families than one. "There are some things that make me feel sad, when I miss my foster parents." Morris wondered about his "stuff," such as toys and books "I have no clue . . . [where it is at, maybe] over at my uncle's house." Patrice

remembered a traumatic loss at a friend's house "and her mom was crying because her boyfriend's daddy had went to jail and his kids beat him up and stuff and killed him and she was crying and I was crying." Likewise, Devin recalled feeling sad when a "friend's daddy" died after "he got beat up."

General themes of sadness were related to normal experiences such as Daniel being sad "when I get in trouble" or how Chad felt bad "when someone in our family gets hurt." Mike was sad when he fought with his twin brother Miquel and Juanita expressed sadness "when the boys at school talk about [a foster sister]."

Fear

Some of the fears experienced by these children reflect normal childhood fears, such as Wilt's nervousness about school, "like I was scared, like a lot of times I was scared to go to a new school or a new class, I was just scared to go in there and stuff" or his nervousness about the neighborhood dogs. "Yeah, I scared of dogs, we got dogs like on our block." More often the fears expressed were related to the negative experiences incident to being a foster child. Brian's story included this idea of fears related to a frightening father "yeah, and like I would always have these like thoughts that someone was going to shoot through the window, because there was windows across the whole room the whole kitchen and I would get scared like someone was going to shoot in. . . . then sometimes I would get like I would never want to stay away from my mom, and there was like this big window in my room.. . . big, I mean big, and whenever I would look out it when I was sleeping I would get scared so then . . . and I used to sleep with my grandma because I was so scared. . . I think my Dad like shot in the windows or something like he was like scary or something." David also had fears related to bad memories: "I was afraid

someone was going to break in." He described how that had happened when he was young: "I hid in the bedroom and this guy smashed the door in." And both Junius and Jessie remembered scary times of being locked in a closet, as Junius said: "I got locked in the closest and my momma didn't get me out." Miguel reported lots of nightmares and Reggie had a foster brother who teased him by "always coming up to me and scaring me in the dark." Devin reported being disturbed by "watching scary movies" and Krystal worried about how her mom is doing now: "sometimes I feel scared that, like, she's in trouble."

Anger

Similar to confusion, this category is closely tied in to explanations and meanings related to the development of the situation in each child's life. Depending on who the child sees as responsible for negative events, the anger will be directed at different sources. A few children were angry about being in foster care, but even more children described anger directed at other children, or at authority figures.

Brian was angry about not being able to see his brothers while in care, and Chris said that he is "kinda mad" about being adopted because he will not be with his "brothers or mom or dad" anymore. Junius said that he was mad when he came into care because he "didn't want to be here" but Keith was particularly livid about foster care: "Yeah, foster care is just sick! Plain sick! I don't want to hear about it at all. You get taken away from your parents. It ruins your life! Your heart is totally destroyed, and the only thing that is left working in your body is your brain. I want to know [why they took me away from my family]! That is why I want out of this foster care right now!"

Most of the children did not express the intensity of anger that Keith did, but some

had mixed anger with sadness regarding being in foster care. Krystal said that she was angry with the judge, but also: "I get angry when I think she [mom] could have taken care of me better."

The largest single area in which anger was directed was at other children, such as Devin's plight: "there's this girl in my class that is making me mad, and I keep telling her to leave me alone, cause I hate girls, and if she was a boy I would have hit her." Juanita was angry about other kids talking about her and telling on her and as mentioned, Junius was teased about living in a "dope house." He continued: "because they always tease me and make me really angry. So I start beating them up." Chad likewise said that children picked on him because he did not have nice "hair cut and shoes" because of his poor family. Even the seemingly sweet Patrice surprised me with this comment: "this girl in my class, she bugs me and I just want to rip her guts out." Travis became riled "when people hit me," Daniel didn't like it When people is messin' with my stuff" and Devin didn't like "girls messing with me."

Related to the anger directed at other children is the anger directed toward authority figures. Often these feelings seem to be related to behavior or discipline. Miguel reported that his foster mother "yells at [me] the most . . . because I don't follow directions." And Cage got angry when his grandma got on his case for getting "c's on my homework." Wilt reported anger "Like when I do nothing, when people say I do something" and Jessie reported anger: "when I get sent to my room." The issue of problem behaviors was relevant enough to warrant separate discussion later in this section.

Lack of Control

The issue of feeling out of control is one which many other studies have identified

as being difficult for foster children. In this study, lack of control was not a feeling expressed explicitly by most of these children. Themes related to fear or confusion may well often be related to the feeling of having no control, but these children did not seem to be as expressive of this feeling specifically as have other, often older, foster children. In a memo during the data analysis process, I speculated about this: "4:32 pm, Jan 2, 2001. Like the 'feeling different' category, this one may be less pronounced in younger children. Teens are probably much more sensitive [than pre-teens] to feeling controlled or told what they can/can't do, especially when it comes to telling them who their family is."

One telling quote from Brian's story reflects a general feeling of futility "you have to keep moving, and moving, and moving, until finally someone keeps you. That kind of sucks." Cherise drew a picture during her story which seemed to have a strong theme of feeling alone or persecuted. She drew herself in the middle of the paper with other figures surrounding her. She then had me spell out the words for her to write in a cartoon bubble which she is speaking: "I'm saying, "no, don't touch that!!!"

Shame

Like the feeling of lacking control, a sense of shame did not emerge as strongly as may have been expected in these children's stories. In other literature, foster children have felt very stigmatized or different (e.g., Desetta, 1996). This may be again because of the pre-adolescent age of the informants in this study, who likely have less of an exaggerated sense of self-consciousness that a teen would have. The experience that Junius shares was notable because it was unique among these children. He describes being teased for where he lives, his race, and for being in foster care: "They tell me I am too country and too black like the ground. . . They tell me that is why I am in foster care and they tease me."

This type of shame was not prominent in this study, perhaps because it was not explicitly addressed in the interview questions.

Personal Characteristics

Krystal summed up this section up well: "let's see - I'm a normal kid. I'm bad and I'm good." Most of the children's descriptions of themselves seemed quite typical of other children their age. They liked friends, school, sports, drawing, video games, music, holidays, and doing fun things. Most of them described themselves as a good friend, or in positive terms, such as "nice" or "helpful." Other than themes related to affect, the areas related to the self which emerge in these children's stories which are notable are descriptions of problem behaviors and spirituality.

Problem Behaviors

Pre-adolescent foster children have a higher rate of acting out behaviors than do the normal population (Rice et al., 1989). Although I was not asking questions related to problem behaviors, this theme emerged from the stories. Brian described a series of tough times in school: "Well, I like to read, and I am getting better at it . . . I am in special ed because of my behavior. . . I am ADHD . . . Yeah I am really bad in everything." He further describes challenges getting along in foster care placements: "then I went to [a group home] and [a worker] . . . threatened to tie me up with a rope . . . and then I left because the people couldn't deal with me. I kept going into the hospital because of my behavior. If I was bad there they would give me a shot in the butt . . . and I got one too." About half of the children mentioned getting in trouble at home or at school. Cherise told the story: "I hit on people, like I hit that girl Lacey at home, she be mad at Vanessa on the way home. But she was at kindergarten and that's why I teared up her homework, because

she teared up my homework." Morris remembered his kindergarten years: "I be bad. . . [I would] get in trouble, talk about people," and Paul would get trouble at school for "pushing and shoving." Junius remembered "beat[ing] people up at school" for teasing him.

Spirituality

Spirituality is one of the components of a "biopsychosocial-spiritual" structure that humans are (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). This can be a resource in times of stress or may influence the meaning that is found in struggles (Becvar, 1994). Every child in this study reported a belief in God and some experience with prayer and church attendance. Most did not have much to say about it other than general statements. David believed that religion "keeps you doing better things" and Daniel said of God: "He put me on this earth, but I don't know really why." Krystal said that God is "a great God" and Morris reported that his faith in God is helping him "to get home" back with his mother. Patrice had the most developed sense of her beliefs and faith. She frequently mentioned her gratitude for learning about religion from her foster mother: "she was nice, because she was like a gospel person, she loved God and that was good because if she didn't love God we would be nowhere right now . . . I was being bad and stuff because I was so nervous and stuff. But she said it was ok. . . I could learn more about God and Jesus." She discussed her church attendance and prayers and then mentioned "in the bible it says that God died on the cross for our sins and I believe it because like when reservation, resolution . . . resurrection day comes, if I get chose to be God's, like, that's when I really believe that he died for us, and If I don't get choosed I would still believe in him but I would be, like, mad."

Research Question Number Four - The Story Chronicle

The explanations of development are of interest in these stories. Ecological approaches have included time, or the chonosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1978), as an important component in the life of an organism. The way each child explains the development of their situation reveals much about how they make sense out of what has happened to them and what they think is responsible for what is happening. The children in this study had many differing explanations for how they got to be where they are and where they will be in the future. Causal themes occurred throughout the stories, but the focus here will be on the child's explanation of how they came to be into care. The assumption is that the explanation of why they are in care will affect the adjustment to care or how they perceive their current situation. As was mentioned, many of these children expressed degrees of confusion about why they were in care. Some children seemed to have a pretty clear understanding of what had brought them to care, and some seemed to have incorrect understandings of why they were there. The specific research question was: How does the child chronicle the story, or explain the development of his or her situation?

Causality

A possible explanation of the confused or 'not knowing' responses may be related to the children's unwillingness to share, or their mixed feelings about implicating a parent for whom they still feel loyalty. Other possibilities may relate to young age or denial. In any case, several of the responses were similar to Brian's who responded to the question, 'how come you came to foster care?' with an "I don't know . . . I don't understand." He further expressed frustration that nobody told him what the problems were or why his

mother couldn't take care of him. Both Paul and Cage were equally at a loss to explain what got them to care. The only explanation Chris came up as to why he was in foster care was that "[the] neighbor called protective services." Keith was angry because he thought his parents had done what they needed to keep him out of care: "All I can remember is that me and my mom and dad were living in a car and the judge wanted us to get a house, and when we did, all we needed to do was to put some furniture into the house so that we could live there. And on the same day we got the furniture, the judge took me!" Chad also felt left in the dark: "They didn't tell us [why we were taken out].

Most of the children had theories to offer to explain why they ended up in care, although these explanations vary in degrees of certainty. Most of these explanations center on a specific event or events. Cage recalled: "my mamma and daddy was arguing and my mamma set the baby on the porch." After Travis said that he did not know why he was in care, he speculated: "I think because they kept fighting. . .or because they left us in the house all day." Melanie said that she was taken: "because my mamma was fightin . . . she had a gun, my daddy had a gun and the police was there, and the next day I was in foster care. . .I don't know [why]." Wilt remembered that "they used to argue a lot . . . there probably was [other reasons], but I don't remember none of it." Krystal explained: "I ended up in foster care when my mom lost her house . . . and then they (the cousins) put us out and we lived in a shelter and then that's how I got in foster care." Juanita remembered that "my momma, she had to go to jail I don't know," and Jessie thought it was because "My grandma wasn't treating me right [she] whipped me, put me in the closet." Cherise believed this: "we had to get taken away, because my mom kept on leaving us at home" and Miguel speculated: "because my mom didn't take care of me?"

Some of the children were more sure of why they were in care. Deondre explained the day he was taken into care "because [mom's boyfriend] beat us and one day, he beat up Daniel, and he had knocked Daniel down a flight of stairs, and the next day at school, Daniel took off his hat and the teacher saw the marks on his head." Daniel explained the reason he was in care more succinctly: "Uh, we used to get beat!" Devin recalled that "me and my brothers was at the gas station at night . . . we were walking back home, and the police pulled us over and took us home. . . they told my momma that we was gonna have to be in foster care. . . because she let us go out at night." Junius said: "Because . . . I just told you, I got locked in the closest and my momma didn't get me out . . . my momma wasn't ready to keep me yet." Patrice was reluctant to share some of the details of her mother's problems, simply referring to her mother doing "some not so good stuff."

David's story is unique in that he took action to initiate getting into care. He says: "I was sick of getting hit, so I told [a friend whose mom worked at a foster care agency], and he told his mom, and his mom called the people and they came over and asked us to get our shoes on and get off of the bed. They asked us about our mom and dad, and we told them, and they came over, and my mom and dad, they were gone getting the car. So the cops came over and knocked open the door and came over but nobody was answering because we were all watching a movie, so they just like, somehow got the door open, and walked in there and just said 'get your stuff ready to leave.'"

More disturbing are the accounts where the child seems to have a mistaken idea of why he or she is in care, especially when the blame is put on the self. Chad believed he was in foster care because "there was always used to be these kids always coming over our house busting out windows." Miles thought he had to leave his family "because I was

bad . . . we set fires." And Morris told me he was taken away because "they said that I beat up my grandma. I was trying to give her insulin because she's blind, and needing some help, and I been giving her her insulin and stuff, I tried to give her her insulin and she got mad, and then start crying all over and stuff, and they thought I was beating her." It seems unlikely that Morris is the sole cause of his being in care as he believes, as he continued "my mom was in jail at the time." To return to his mother he thought this: "I have to just fix my behavior . . . like [not] running away, and just calm down. . . ."

Future

Equally inchoate were the speculations about the future in these children's stories. The younger children tended to have less sense of what was going to happen to them, and when I asked who they would be with or what would happen next in their lives, several just shrugged or said "I don't know." Some followed that up with speculations, such as Junius who said, "I hope I get to live with my real mom" or Chad who worried that his parents were going to die. Keith was upset about the future and when asked if he knew where he would be next angrily exclaimed "No, I don't!" Some children mentioned that they would see their moms or dads again after they were 18, and several mentioned the possibility of adoption.

The issue of adoption emerged as a separate theme under this research question, and had a range of emotions connected with it. Some of the children were not happy about the prospect, such as Chris who said that he would probably get adopted, which made him "kinda mad, [because] I won't be with my brothers or mom or dad." Most children who speculated about adoption were more positive about the prospect, even Keith, who said "I mean, yeah! If I can't be with my parents, I would want to be

adopted." Krystal had hopes that her extended family would come through for her: "I want to be adopted by my birth family by my cousins . . . I just hope they do." Brian said: "Yeah, I am going for respite in this place, and they might adopt me. . . I think that is great." The brothers Deondre and Daniel were in the process of becoming adopted, and both were pleased about it. Daniel said, "they took us away, and we went to foster care, came back and now I am going to get adopted [and] I'm happy."

Looking toward the long-term future left most of the children with little to say. Some had educational plans, and others had ideas about future professions. These children tended to think of their careers in more gender-stereotyped ways, similar to the plans of young foster children listed in a previous study (Rice & McFadden, 1988). In these stories, the boys mentioned such future professions as firefighter, lawyer, football star, army guy, pediatrician, basketball star and police officer. Devin was the most ambitious: "I'm gonna grow up to be a full-grown basketball player and make millions and billions of dollars, and then I'm gonna get a big, big house, and then I'm gonna run for president." The girls had less to say about professions, but mentioned such things as pop singer, teacher, and "someone who helps kids."

Research Question Number Five - Interviewer and Child Interaction

Each story that is brought forth is done in a specific context (Schnitzer, 1993), which is in this case, a researcher and a child. The context is significant to the creation of the story and must be accounted for, even if it may be impossible to fully determine to what extent the story creation is influenced by the interactive process. Ethnographic research can be a way of giving voice to children, but care needs to be taken to recognize the inherent challenges in assuming that a child's story is an uncluttered rendition of the

child's reality. These stories are modified by the child's perceptions of the setting, the interviewer, and of the expectations of those who have invited these children to participate. These stories are not objective 'snapshots' of the children's lives, but renditions unique to the time and place of their coming forth. Despite this, they offer a voice to the children, and are useful in advocating in the child's behalf (Alldred, 1998).

The research question addressing this issue is: How is researcher interaction with the child shaping the story which comes forth? In this setting, the caseworker had a conversation with the children and their foster parent, and then set up a time to meet with the interviewer. How the child made sense of this likely influenced what they shared. Other issues which may have played a part could have been: perceptions of gender and race, (how they perceived a white male authority figure), and how clear they were on the questions being asked. In some instances, it was evident that the child did not want to share, such as Katelin's choice to not participate in the interview. Patrice didn't want to talk about what got her into care "I don't want to say that" and Reggie had the same reaction shaking his head: "Don't want to say." Several times Keith said that he did not remember in response to questions that it would be unusual for him to not recollect. It seemed to be a way of refusing to share, such as when I asked him about his birth family and he became angry and said, "I can't remember a thing!" Other children remarked that some things were hard to talk about, but several said that they didn't mind sharing. David said: "it's kind of good to let it all out" and Patrice said that "it's good to talk about it, because if I keep all this stress in me I'll start getting gray hairs."

Clues related to the children's perception of me came as several of the children commented on personal issues or had questions for me. Brian wanted to know about my

family, as did Cherise, asking if I was engaged or married. Junius was eager to go play somewhere else during our interview, and wanted to have me return every week. Brian said that I was "not boring" [like his caseworker] but was "cool." Some of the children were interested in the drawings on the story board and some wanted to hear their voices on the tape recorder.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Overview

One of the challenges inherent in qualitative research is the tendency to become overwhelmed with the data, floundering in search of the neat and tidy findings and a stopping point (Meloy, 1994). I struggled with this often, seemingly not seeing the forest for the trees, but persevered for the value of the children's stories and the power of what they had to say. The conceptual map proved its usefulness as a way of organizing and understanding the content of the stories, as the results fit well within that framework. It was interesting to see the areas of emphasis which emerged, such as the emotional reactions the children had, as well as the areas which remained less developed, such as themes of gender. The following chapter deals with some of the key findings in the data, as well as some of the implications of these findings.

Theoretical Foundations and Implications

The goal of ethnography is to generalize findings to a theory, rather than to a population (Newfield, et al., 1996). The findings in this ethnographic-oriented study fit well with the theories used in guiding it, and contribute to the usefulness of these theories. One of the governing values of Human Ecology is justice, including giving voice to those with less power or resources (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). This focus on emancipation is realized here in a small way with these foster children. The natural fit of an ecosystemic framework is realized as the children's stories reflect themes illustrating multiple

environments and interaction within those environments. The importance of understanding these environments in the case of foster children cannot be overstated. Whereas for most children there is a balance of environmental stressors and supports (Bubolz, et al., 1993), for foster children the environmental balance has tipped because of one or more extremely negative environmental experiences. These children's stories reflected stressors at every level of environment, from no heat, to poor housing, to family abuse or neglect, as well as victimization from social systems. The framework can serve as a useful beginning for conceptualizing the child within an ecosystem. Another interest of human ecology is the adaptation of the organism to changing environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). These stories show numerous examples of adaptation, especially in regards to children making sense of new families, siblings, and surroundings.

Using story as a research metaphor is a natural fit for the ethnographer, whose goal it is to be "a storyteller and a scientist" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 13). The intensity and personal nature of stories is what gives them the power to influence our lives (Schnitzer, 1993). It seems likely that the story Keith tells about being misused by the judicial system will affect his future attitudes toward legal interventions in his life. The blame Morris puts on himself for his placement may well affect his future self image and sense of worth. Stories emphasize multiple viewpoints or realities, which was shown here in the great variety of both good and bad experiences of the children. These stories, despite coming from a limited sample, varied widely. They illustrate the perils of generalizing, so often warned against in working with foster children (Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1994).

Key Findings/Themes

Confusion

Keith's "what the heck?" comment seems to sum up a large portion of these children's response to their journey through the foster care system. The uncertainty both about how they got into care and what will happen to them next weighs heavily on many of their minds. Ambiguities may be unavoidable in the foster care process, but children would likely be better served with some information regarding the status of their foster care stay, even when that information is minimal. Without accurate information, foster children are more likely to be confused or make up fantasy stories (Gil & Bogart, 1982). Many of these children in care were aware that their family had problems, and some of them generated fears and unrealistic blame related to these, such as Paul's belief that his parents were probably going to die. Well-meaning professionals are often unable to inform children about the status of his or her placement, either because the workers do not know and can't predict what will happen, or because of a sense of protectiveness toward the child. Wanting to prevent emotional upset in children unfortunately keeps them in a state of limbo where they cannot work through the grief and pain. Ward-Wimmer (1998) argues that children cannot heal from painful experiences without understanding what happened: "Children are often far better than adults at facing even the most gruesome realities. . . unless they are a secret in which case they become very powerful" (p. 3). A state of uncertainty also exacerbates loyalty conflicts and prevents children from beginning to form attachments with new caregivers (Fahlberg, 1990).

Nearly twenty years ago Gil and Bogart (1982) argued that children in foster care need better information regarding why they are in care, more reassurance regarding the

decision making process, and a channel for expression. These children's stories would indicate that these needs may still be going unmet. If efforts are made to prevent placement and those efforts fail, there may be little to be done to avoid pain and difficulty. There are, however, options of minimizing trauma and assisting children in developing a sense of worth. While individual circumstances vary, there could be a more structured way of informing children what is happening either at their entrance into care, or during the process of care. Despite uncertainty in regards to reunification, reassurance could be given as to the process or efforts being made. Children should also be reassured that they are not to blame for their foster care placement so that they can disown some of the guilt that is frequently present in this population (Gonick & Gold, 1991).

Ambivalence

The anger some of these children experienced contrasted with the happiness others felt about being in care. Sometimes these emotions would co-occur regarding the same thing, such as missing parents and being angry with them. Patrice explains about her entrance into care: "It was kind of good and kind of bad" and Krystal agreed that she was both "happy and sad" to be in foster care. Krystal follows up this discussion with her dilemma related to her visits from her mother: "And I was confused, like, 'hey!' and I was sad, but it was ok because I could see my mom." It was evident from the strong and sometimes conflicting emotions described under research question number four that many of these children have a lot to process and integrate.

Issues of Age

Although this study focuses on pre-adolescent children, there is obviously the potential for significant developmental differences when dealing with children from ages 7

to 12. This is compounded by the fact that each child is at a different developmental level based on physical as well as emotional and social factors (Fahlberg, 1990). The question emerges: how do the stories differ between the younger and older children in this sample? Using the NUD*IST software allowed for easier comparison of such issues, as the stories were broken down in codes, and could be easily compared by age or other demographic data (Meloy, 1994). Comparing the younger half of this sample (age 7-9) with the older half (age 8-12) provides one rough estimate of how these stories differ. One initial finding is that the younger children (the 7-9 range) generally divulged less developed stories. Their answers were often more brief, and they had less to say, especially about the difficult issues. There were exceptions, such as Cherese (age 9) who was quite verbal, and Junius (age 7) who also was expressive emotionally, but generally these children stuck to simple explanations or shrugs. Further examination of the age differences shows some emotional differences as well. The younger children were more confused and anxious and often expressed more primary emotions, such as anger, fear, or happiness. The older children were more expressive and understanding of ambivalent feelings, were more willing to express anger toward specific individuals, and generally showed a wider range of emotional expression.

Negative Case Sample

Mitch, the negative case sample, is valuable here in highlighting age differences. Negative case samples are not included in the analysis, but can confirm or disconfirm theoretical hunches by being deliberately different than the primary sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this instance, we have one informant who was interviewed, even though his age puts him outside of the sample parameters. This was useful because it is

expected that an informant outside of the sample would give qualitatively different information than the others. Mitch is 13, and his story indeed differs from the others in several ways. As expected, these differences seem to be a natural extension of his older age, such as the story being more developed and reflective. For example, Mitch's feelings are expressed here as he discusses the loss of his parents, who died: "Yeah, it was pretty sad, I couldn't take it. I couldn't sleep in my bedroom, and when I was about 12 years old, my dad died, he died of a heart-I don't know if it was a heart attack, I don't know what he died of, but I watched it happen." Mitch's story is also the only one where he refers to having a caregiving role for younger siblings, which again may be related to being older. The only other time this was referred to, albeit indirectly, was with Deondre's (age 11) protective inclinations toward his brother Daniel.

The ability of Mitch to express his emotions also seems related to his older age, as the early adolescent is often able to better ascertain how to navigate an interview with an adult and be better able to express a range or thoughts and feelings (Morrison & Anders, 1999). Mitch describes his mother's cancer as "really upsetting," and his placement into care as "confusing, I just really didn't like it, but now I'm getting used to it, [and have since learned] not to be afraid." Mitch also has a more concrete sense of the future than most of the other children: "when I get to high school, 9th grade, I'm getting my own car, and my own job, and when I get through, and get all good grades in high school I'm going to go to college, and going to have my future, and all that stuff. . . I hope to be a lawyer."

Issues of Race and Gender

Another question related to the results of the interview is how the story content may have differed according to the race of the informant. This sample is primarily

African-American, and issues of race were not a major part of most stories. Regardless, the main discussion of race as a challenge came from the African-American children. The issues related to cross-racial placement, as well as instances of prejudice were only mentioned by the African-American children and interestingly, the themes related to race that the Caucasian children expressed included an idealized goal of race relations. Keith said: "If we are black or white shouldn't make a difference, we are all human, we are all connected to God," and David remarked: "I heard that some black kids going into foster care are teased about their color, but I think it shouldn't matter what color you are." If we include Mitch, his comments were similar to these: "Nope, you're still human, it doesn't matter your color or anything, you're still part of this world."

An analysis of gender differences in story reporting failed to show any significant patterns. This would likely change for older children, whose gender role becomes more pronounced in adolescence (Berger, 1994). This may also be due to the limited representation this sample gives to gender, with only a quarter of the children being female.

Clinical Implications

We need better understanding of therapeutic treatments of foster children (Goerge, et al., 1994). In addition to making better informing a part of the process, we could have a forum for foster children to express how they are feeling and what they are uncertain about. Bereavement literature suggests that allowing children the chance to express in a supportive environment helps healing (Worden, 1996). It would likely be helpful for the children to express the loss and confusion which constituted a major portion of their stories. In past research aimed at finding out what foster children perceived, the children

were found to enjoy the process of expression (e.g., Gil & Bogart, 1982; Rice & McFadden, 1988). In this study nearly all of the children expressed enjoyment regarding sharing of their stories.

Clinical Congruence

Story gathering is beneficial for both clinician and child. Therapists would benefit from hearing stories in two ways. First, they would better understand the salient issues found in story research with foster children, such as confusion, fear, and ambivalence. Additionally, they could take time to better understand the individual child's story and it's unique properties. It was clear from these stories that each child has a unique rendition to share. Using stories as a research tool is beneficial because stories have immediacy, and are helpful in bridging the gap between clinician and researcher (Harold, et al., 1995). Understanding what issues are central for the children who experience out-of-home placement will help therapists better understand where to intervene. This study offers a beginning list of themes important to the pre-adolescent child in care. These themes, along with the conceptual framework, could serve as a generative discussion point in assessment and treatment. Better awareness can assist in easier joining, greater empathy, and a better relationship with children and the families who are raising them.

Focus on Abuse and Neglect

The themes of abuse and neglect were prominent in these stories. Therapists and caseworkers may benefit from extra training specific to working with traumatized or abused children. While it is likely that this happens on an informal basis through most educational programs, specific effort should be given to ensure proper preparedness for working with this population. The children interviewed shared emotional effects of the

abuse, such as Brian's persistent fears and behavioral problems, and Keith's anger toward society. Deondre mentioned possible physical effects of the abuse, such as the speculated brain damage experienced by Daniel. Emotional repercussions from physical and sexual abuse, as well as physical effects such fetal alcohol syndrome are more common in this population than in other children (Downs, et al., 1996). Children who have been victimized have unique concerns and potential for further problems (Finkelhor, et al., 1994), and more resources are needed to ensure that those who work with foster children are well prepared to do so.

Gaining a Sense of Control

Many foster children are realistic about what has happened at their biological home about the need for foster care. Nevertheless, like all people, they want to feel listened to and understood. Foster children have strong feelings about what happens to them and have many suggestions for treatment (Festinger, 1983; Gil & Bogart, 1982; Johnson, et al., 1994). They often feel like pawns, and usually have little voice or control in what happens in their lives. Although lack of control is a salient issue for children who have been removed from their biological families, allowing the child to give feedback could help foster children feel more involved with care (Kufeldt, Armstong, & Dorosh, 1994). An agency in Chicago found that encouraging children to verbalize their feelings about foster care often helped the children understand what brought them into care, which helped to lessen anxiety (Rest & Watson, 1984).

Group Therapy and Family Therapy Options

The group therapy program discussed by Rice and McFadden (1989) could be used with young foster children. It was put together according to age levels and

facilitated with discussions regarding placement, case workers, future plans, and what they liked and did not like regarding care. The children generally enjoyed the experience, particularly the young adolescent and older adolescent children. Unexpectedly the groups proved useful to foster parents and caseworkers, who were made aware of issues and emotions of importance in the children's lives. Group work may be a useful way of helping foster children lessen the stigma of feeling alone or different. At Teen Ranch in Detroit groups are being implemented as a way of introducing children into care and to offer the children a way of feeling supported in a non-threatening atmosphere.

Marriage and family therapists who work with family service programs often struggle with the balance of being therapeutic to different pieces of a "family" at one time. For instance, a biological mother may be required to be involved in group therapy or parenting classes as a condition of reunification, and the children would be adjusting to living with loss of family, friends and home. The children are also learning to live with a foster family, and the foster family is likewise adjusting and may need support or education. A forum for sharing stories in this system could offer greater understanding and congruence between system members, as well as allowing the therapist to better understand where the greatest stressors are. If Morris were able to sit down in a therapeutic setting with his foster parents and share his perceptions of what he is being punished for and what he needs to do to return to his mother, those beliefs could be understood and corrected. Cherise and Junius, who were both confused about who their family consisted of, could benefit from intervention designed to clarify roles and responsibilities of foster parents.

Policy and Procedural Implications

The statistics and research on the child's experience of foster care are not very comprehensive or consistent (Goerge, et al., 1994). One of the benefits of hearing from the children is that the system can be guided by their input. Gil and Bogart stated "We urge the development of a mechanism through which children's thoughts, feelings, concerns and suggestions might be channeled into the system that is created to serve them and their families." (1982, p. 9). Sending the message to children that they have a right to express themselves and be heard may be one of the more useful things about creating such a mechanism. As Festinger argued, "Surely a field that stresses the self-determination of clients needs to take steps to avoid drowning out the voices of the children" (1980, p. 297).

Advocating on behalf of those with less say in policy (such as the poor and the young) is one way of raising awareness of the need for positive intervention. Greater awareness could boost financial resources to family service programs, whose needs are generally not being met (Downs, et al., 1996). Greater financial support for foster care programs and for foster families might help in attracting and training better prepared volunteers and professionals (Gardner, 1996). Many children in this study appreciated the value of positive and nurturing foster families. These children averaged 3.5 placements, which would seem to support the need for more and better prepared foster families. Low cost and no-cost quality preventions and early intervention services to families in distress must be made available. These programs are cost-efficient, preventing greater problems down the road (Holdaway & Ray, 1992).

Research Implications

The goal of good qualitative research is to "investigate little understood phenomena, to identify/discover important variables, and to generate hypotheses for future research" (Kerwin, et al., 1993, p. 228). Reviewing the findings of this study reveals several of these important variables, as well as some possible hypotheses and research questions to pursue.

There have been small-scale studies done with other ages of foster children, including ages 11-14 (Johnson, et al., 1994), as well as published stories of teenagers (Desetta, 1996). Expanding story gathering to several different ages would provide developmental comparison of the issues important to the foster children. The ecological framework, with its attending to change over time, could be used in focusing on the differences between age groups in foster care. Additional questions could address differences according to socioeconomic status, time in placements, gender and race.

These children had comments on racial and cultural themes, and it is anticipated that older children would have more to say. Additionally, the issue of cross-cultural adoption and placement could well be served by hearing from the children and families who experience this. Since there are policies and statements currently being formed (Freundlich, 2000), informing these directions by gathering input from those involved would seem to be an important component. There is a disproportionate amount of minority children in care (Downs, et al., 1996), and there could be further investigation of the factors contributing to this phenomenon.

The debate of how best to help children in abusive or neglectful circumstances will continue. This study suggests that children in care generally see the necessity of such

intervention, but are confused as to the details of what happened and what will happen to them next. Their voices could be used to work at improving the foster care system. Better outcome research following the implementation of programs could be undertaken, such as trying to track the effects of a program of story sharing or group therapy. Likewise, outcome research of therapeutic approaches for foster children could be done. Focusing on how children adapt to foster care environments could shed light on how to ease the transitions which occur. Unfortunately, policies and procedures vary widely from agency to agency, making it difficult to determine what programs are working and which are not (Goerge, et al., 1994). Better research and follow up could help in providing better consistency in family services.

It is likely that the Teen Ranch Foster Care Agency influenced the religious component of this sample, as they are a Christian-based agency. Additionally, the majority of African-American children in the sample is likely to have biased the results toward stronger religious participation (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Nevertheless, children from both agency settings and all ethnic backgrounds expressed similar spiritual beliefs in this study. Further research could explore how spirituality might serve as a resource for children in care. The literature on spirituality as a therapeutic resource has expanded greatly in the recent years, and will likely continue (Becvar, 1994; Moules, 2000). Resiliency research could attempt to uncover how these resources are used and how they could be made more available to children who needed them. Agencies such as Teen Ranch in Detroit, who already incorporate an informal spiritual framework, could be compared with secular agencies to determine what effect this has on children in care. Other resources which could be investigated which were identified in this study included siblings, and other

extended family members.

Although qualitative approaches seem particularly suited for the richness of individual stories, the rigor of quantitative methods may be incorporated to help research be valid and reliable (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Many of these research issues could be addressed from both quantitative and qualitative directions. For instance, stories could be gathered more systematically and then quantitatively compared by gender or age differences. Using a method called Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA), Newfield et al. (1996) blend quantitative techniques with more traditional qualitative techniques. Regardless, in deciding what mix of qualitative and quantitative methods would be useful in foster care research, the choice should be governed by the research question (McAuly, 1996).

Limitations

Surely one of the reasons family service research and delivery is struggling is because of the many levels of complex and divergent issues that are involved. An awareness of the many transacting child, parent, family, community, and national factors in the ecosystem wherein the child resides would be a necessary step in navigating the troubled terrain of foster care system (Lee & Lynch, 1998; Lusterman, 1985). The foster parents, therapists, and caseworkers charged with serving children in care face an extraordinary task. All children have many needs, and foster children have needs which have likely not been met. Each effort toward better understanding and helping foster children should be carefully considered. While this study attempts to shed light on the lives of foster children, it has several limitations which must be acknowledged.

All research is influenced by the researcher, and this is particularly true in a

qualitative study (Walker, 1996). Qualitative research is context-specific, and will be heavily influenced, for good or bad, by the skill and character of the interviewer. The interviewer may be seen as an authority figure, which is a concern in research, especially with children. It is possible that these children responded according to what they thought was expected, or modified responses because they found the subject emotionally upsetting. For instance, the reports on abuse or neglect could have easily been softened due to the lack of trust with the interviewer or from feeling loyal to a parent. Also, there may have been social pressure not to state racist viewpoints, or suspicion towards a white male professional. Some of these foster children were more "system-wise," having already had multiple interviews and assessments, while others were newer to care, all of which likely affected their comfort and content of an interview with another professional.

Another limitation of qualitative research is the lack of generalizability due to the specific small sample (Newfield, et al., 1996). This sample is predominantly African-American and male. Additionally, the influence of a Christian-based agency is difficult to determine. While there is no obvious bias emerging from the stories due to these imbalances, a more representative sample would be preferable.

Presuming to learn more about children's perspectives have some inherent challenges, one of which is the difficulty of interviewing children, who are not as accustomed to this sort of interaction as are adults (Docherty, et al., 1999). Additionally, entering the foster care world with the intention to learn more about this specific population (pre-adolescent foster children) and their perspective may reinforce the view of them as different, or as an "other" (Alldred, 1998). Although the attempt is made to put forth researcher biases and assumptions, the fact remains that these children's voices are

taken and fit into adult constructs for the purposes of research. Acknowledging this is simply a way of recognizing the constant necessity of being careful in interpreting research findings.

Conclusion

While the foster care system is complex and the task of hearing the children may be complicated, the need to do so is great. This project is meant to be a thought-provoking exploration of how foster children process their life experiences. What is evident from the findings is that these children need someone to listen, understand, and do something about what they hear. Not only are these stories compelling, but they are an apt vehicle for conveying the complex and vibrant life experience of each foster child. As we better understand the meaning and richness of these children's experiences, we will be better equipped to go forward with more meaningful and effective involvement in their lives.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Guide/Verbal Assent Script

Introductory/Building Relationship of Trust

Time to share information about the purpose of the project, learn about the child individually, and become comfortable.

Verbal Assent Script for each Child

Verbal assent from the child will also be obtained at this time, using language appropriate to the child in discussion, and including the following script:

> *"I will ask you some questions to learn about you and what things you have done in your life. Basically I would like to hear your life story. I am talking to children who have come into foster care because I want to learn what happens to them and how they feel about the things that happen. I hope that I can take what I learn from you to help make this a better experience for other children who go through foster care. If you don't want to talk about something you don't have to, and if you ever want to stop we can. Is that all right?"*

Interview Questions

The overall goal is to have the child tell his/her story. The main questions will be used, (not necessarily in this order) with subquestions used when necessary to facilitate story sharing.

Ecosystems [research questions 1-3]

Natural/Physical, Human Built, and Social/Cultural Environments

- Where were you born?/What are some of your earliest memories?
- Where did you live when you were a little girl/boy?
- What kind of houses have you lived in?

[further ecology questions are asked at the end under cultural and ecological influences]

Three Primary Systems - Biological Family, Foster Family, & Foster Agency

- What was your birth family like?
- What did you like to do for fun?
- How did you come to be in foster care?
- When did you come into foster care?
- What was that like?
- What else happened?
- How did you feel about that?
- What happened to your biological parents?
- How do you feel about them . . . ?
- Why did all of this happen?
- How do you feel about what happened?
- What do you think about being in foster care?
- What do you like best?
- What do you not like?
- What needs to happen for you to go and live with your birth parents/mother?
- What usually happens when you come in here for a visit?

- How often do you see your real parents?
- How do you feel about seeing your real parents?
- What do you think about the people here?
- What do you think about your foster parents?
- What do you like best/least about your foster family?

Child's characteristics

- How would you describe yourself?
- Are you usually healthy?
- When do you feel happy/sad/angry/scared?
- What kind of friends have you had?
- Do you or your family go to church/ believe in a God?
- How would your family or friends describe you?

Story Structure Questions [research questions 4-7]

Rendition of said and unsaid themes events [this portion of the story comes naturally from the other interview questions].

Development [likewise, much of this is answered through other questions].

- What do you think is going to happen?
- What do you want to happen?
- Where do you want to live?
- What will happen with your foster parents?

Interview/Story Creation Process

- How do you feel sharing this story with me?
  - Is it hard to talk about some things?
  - What other things would you like to include in your story?

Cultural & Ecological Influences

- Are you treated differently because of who you are/where you are from?
  - How is it for Whites/Blacks/Hispanics in foster care?
  - Who makes the biggest deal out of race (workers, other children in care, foster families)?
- How is foster care different for boys and girls?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to learn more about what foster children perceive and experience while they are in foster care. By hearing the stories of these foster children, we hope to learn more about what these children believe, feel, and expect. It is anticipated that as we better learn what the children experience during foster care, we will be better able to improve the foster care process for children and families. The children will share their stories in an interactive "interview," during which time they can draw, talk, and share what they want to about their lives. These discussions are expected to take about an hour. Children usually enjoy these types of experiences, but they will not be pressured to share if they would rather not.

I, _____, give permission as parent or legal guardian of _____ (child's name) to participate in this research study of Mr. Jason B. Whiting. I understand that:

- The child's participation is voluntary and without force and can be withdrawn at any time. The child can also refuse to answer a question or share information. This will be clearly communicated to the child.

- All information obtained in the interviews will be kept confidential and any written reports relating to these stories will not use names or other identifying data. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

- Questions for the child are open-ended and are designed to allow the child to decide what to share without pressure.

- Questions for the researcher can be asked at any time during the process. Additional questions about the study can be addressed to Jason Whiting, at (517) 432-2271 x.4, and questions about your rights as a research participant can be asked of David Wright, at (517) 355-2180.

- All interviews will be taped, and all tapes will be erased after the dissertation is complete. Only the researcher will retain the transcripts of the interviews.

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian _____

Appendix C: Demographic Information Sheet

Child's Name:

Child's Birthday/Age:

Child's Ethnicity:

Child's Gender:

Number of Siblings:

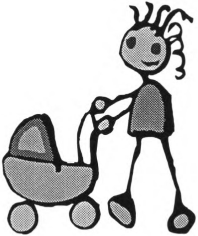
Number of Placements:

Date of entrance into care:

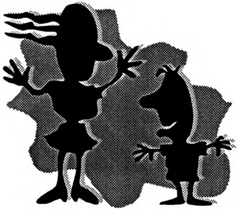
Reason for entrance into care:

Appendix D: Story Boards for Semi-Structured Interview

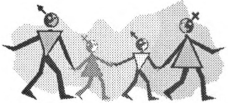
My Story



My Early Years



My Family



Foster Care



My Feelings





About Me!

What Happens Next?