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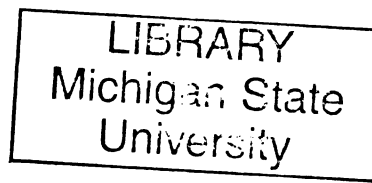
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EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

By

Temple Mathis Odom

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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

By

Temple Mathis Odom

Eight women whose children currently live or have lived in foster care in the past year were interviewed for this qualitative study. Using theoretical foci of Family Ecology Theory and Contextual Theory, the study proposed to look at the lived experience of mothers whose children have been in foster care. Eight women participated in an in-depth interview, and the transcripts were analyzed for common themes. The results demonstrate that the women in the study consistently experienced powerlessness and injustice both in families of origin and in the child welfare system. Also, participants showed poor support systems in families and in communities. A resilience factor was seen in some of the women who had taken personal responsibility for their progress through the foster care system experienced more positive outcomes of achievement and personal growth.

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This work is dedicated to:

My grandmother, my mother and my daughter,

Three generations that have taught me what it means to be a woman and a mother.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The opportunity to work on and complete a dissertation is a privilege. Despite the hard work and hours of self-doubt, this truly has been a life-changing experience for me. Part of the reason writing this dissertation was such a powerful experience was that so many people contributed to its creation, and their encouragement, advice and wisdom have made this project possible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	IX
LIST OF FIGURES.....	X
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	2
PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY	3
GUIDING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	4
<i>Human Ecology</i>	4
<i>Contextual Family Theory</i>	8
SUMMARY	13
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	16
FOSTER CHILDREN	16
FOSTER PARENTS	17
CONTEXTUAL ISSUES AND AT-RISK FAMILIES	20
FOSTER CARE AND BIOLOGICAL MOTHERS	22
<i>Visitation</i>	22
<i>Mothers who are in prison, drug addicted, or homeless</i>	23
<i>Contextual and Ecological Factors for Mothers</i>	24
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	26
QUALITATIVE METHODS.....	26
FEMINISM IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.....	27
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	28
SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT.....	29
<i>Sample</i>	29
<i>Participation and Recruitment</i>	31
INTERVIEW CONTEXT	32
DATA COLLECTION	32
<i>Genograms</i>	32
<i>Interviews</i>	33
<i>Field Notes</i>	34
DATA ANALYSIS	35
TRUSTWORTHINESS	37
THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER	38
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	41
RESPONDENT PERSONAL HISTORIES	41

EMERGENT THEMES	48
FAMILY ECOLOGY THEORY	48
<i>Separation and Loss</i>	49
<i>Visitation</i>	52
<i>Identity and Roles</i>	53
<i>Relationships with Family and Friends</i>	55
CONTEXTUAL THEORY	58
<i>Injustice in the System</i>	58
<i>Relationships in the System</i>	62
<i>Injustice in the Family of Origin</i>	66
OVERALL EXPERIENCE	73
 CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION	76
HUMAN ECOLOGY THEORY	76
<i>Relationships with Family and Friends</i>	76
<i>Separation and Loss</i>	77
<i>Roles and Identities</i>	79
<i>Validation and Achievement</i>	80
CONTEXTUAL THEORY	80
<i>Relational Injustice</i>	81
<i>Distributive Injustice</i>	82
<i>Injustice in the System</i>	84
OVERALL EXPERIENCE	85
CONCEPTUAL MAPS	86
KEY FINDINGS	90
<i>Experiences of Injustice Contributed to Eroded Relationships</i>	90
<i>Separation Experienced as Trauma</i>	91
<i>Experiences of Personal Achievement and Connection to Positive Outcomes</i>	95
METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS	95
<i>Self-Selection</i>	96
<i>Limitations</i>	96
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	97
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE	99
<i>Child Welfare and Foster Care Practice</i>	99
<i>Marriage and Family Therapy</i>	100
RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS	101
 APPENDICES	104
APPENDIX A: STUDY INFORMATION SHEET	105
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM	106
APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL LETTER	108
 REFERENCES	110

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 3.1: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SUPPORTING THEORIES.....	29
TABLE 3.2: DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS.....	31
TABLE 3.3: AREAS OF INQUIRY AND RELATIONSHIP TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS	33
TABLE 4.1: MATRIX OF FAMILY ECOLOGY THEMES.....	56
TABLE 4.2: CONTEXTUAL THEORY EMERGENT THEMES	71
TABLE 4.3: MATRIX OF OVERALL EXPERIENCES	75

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1.1: BRONFENBRENNER’S MODEL OF NESTED SYSTEMS.....	5
FIGURE 1.2: CONCEPTUAL MAP	14
FIGURE 3.1: EXAMPLE OF ECOMAP	40
FIGURE 5.1: ORIGINAL CONCEPTUAL MAP	88
FIGURE 5.2: REVISED CONCEPTUAL MAP	89
FIGURE 5.3: NETWORK DISPLAY FOR KEY FINDINGS OF INJUSTICE AND TRAUMA EXPERIENCES	93
FIGURE 5.4: NETWORK DISPLAY FOR DIFFERENCES IN WOMEN WHO REPORTED POSITIVE OUTCOMES.....	94

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Currently, there are approximately 500,000 children living in foster homes in the United States (Child Welfare League of America, 2004). In the state of Michigan there are 9,300 open foster care cases (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Children are removed from their homes because they have been abused, neglected or abandoned by their parents. In the state of Michigan, after children are removed from their primary home, parents must work with the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the court system in order to be granted the right to actively parent again.

Reunification is usually the primary plan for children and parents when children are initially placed in foster care, (Ansary & Perkins, 2001; Haight et al., 2005; Wulczyn, 2004). To achieve this goal of reunification, parents are often required by social services and the courts to attend therapy sessions, parenting classes, substance abuse classes, and may be asked to provide evidence of sobriety on a regular basis (Bass, 2004). By complying with these requirements and by attending regular visits, parents are afforded the possibility of reunification with their children.

In the course of providing therapeutic services to this population, the researcher has noticed that women are disproportionately represented among the ranks of biological parents trying to regain custody of children in the foster care system. Most of the women who do manage to obtain custody will single parent their children. In addition, most of these women have been ill-prepared to parent by their social and familial contexts: many are young mothers with a variety of stressors like significant childhood trauma or mental illness that impede the development of adequate parenting skills (Hollingsworth, 2004; Nair et al., 1997). Also, mothers working to regain custody are more likely to lack the

support of husbands and adequate financial means (Hollingsworth, 2004). The lack of research regarding the needs and perceptions of these mothers is evidence of missing information that is vital to the aim of educating and helping these mothers.

Biological families are offered many services after children are placed in foster care in the form of parenting classes, individual therapy, substance abuse counseling, and family therapy in the effort to educate and prepare them to properly care for and nurture their children (Bass, 2004). If the goal of child welfare services and of targeted service programs like individual and family therapy is to help mothers become higher functioning individuals and to also become better parents, that end can be accomplished more effectively with specific information regarding the population for whom the services are geared. Insight into the experience of mothers who have lost their children to foster care will help professionals better serve both parents and children when the goal of the services is to reunify the family.

Statement of the Problem

While there have been numerous studies on the experiences of children in foster care (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Gardner, 1998; Harden, 2004; Singer, Doornenbal, & Okma, 2004) and the demands on foster parents (Dozier, Highley, Albus, & Nutter, 2002; Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001; Pears & Fisher, 2005), there is a distinct lack of research regarding the experience and perspectives of biological mothers in the foster care system. This gap in the research is concerning because mothers who navigate the foster care system successfully and regain custody of their children will be expected to be appropriate and nurturing parents. Their journey through this process should be life-altering, but the current research does not offer much understanding into the mother's

world and experience as she tries to meet the requirements for reinstated parenthood. The current lack of knowledge regarding the biological mother's process could lead to the delivery of uneven or unneeded services and to the further marginalization of the target population. Since biological mothers are the great proportion of parents working with child welfare services for reunification, it seems that an understanding of their needs and circumstances would greatly enhance service delivery to this population. Further, by investigating their unique perspective, the researcher hopes to understand their roles and motivations while inside the foster care system. The need for this project comes from two primary problems: 1) very little is known about the experience of biological mothers in the foster care system, and 2) there is a lack of information regarding what biological mothers perceive they need as they prepare to parent again.

Purpose and Importance of this Study

The goal of this project was to use qualitative methods to study the lived experience of mothers whose children reside in foster care. Additionally, this study investigated how professionals can better serve mothers in equipping them for successful parenting.

These two areas of study were important to address because they are of central concern to the adequate parenting of children who have resided in foster care. Despite the fact that this study proposed to investigate mothers, the broader implications were for children. The goal of foster care services in this state is to provide temporary guardianship and care of children while parents are rehabilitated to the point where they are deemed fit to raise their children again. However, a focus on understanding mothers is needed because they will be providing the bulk of care for children that are returned home. If mothers are adequately supported and prepared for the task of parenting again,

the outcomes for children will be much better. This study investigated the experience and process for mothers as they journeyed through the foster care system. The goal of the study was to better understand this population so that the foster care system and all support systems in place can equip women for their renewed role of mothering.

Guiding Theoretical Framework

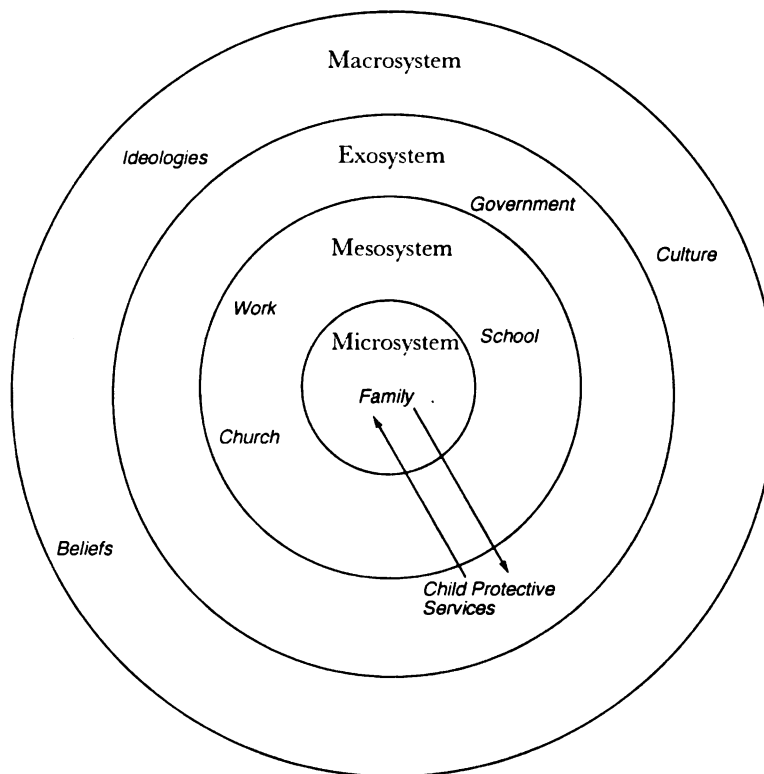
Human Ecology

Human ecology was the overarching theory in this project because it looks at the family as a system embedded in other systems and helps explain the roles and functions of members of the overall ecosystem. First, human ecology theory allows us to look at the participant within the context of the family and their environment (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Since the women under consideration have had their children removed to foster care and were in the process of working with the child welfare system to regain custody of their children, the context is of utmost importance. This theory helped guide the understanding of the individual as a part of a much greater social and cultural network and provided the means to narrow the focus so that the researcher could investigate the experience of each participant in terms of individual and unique contexts.

From Bronfenbrenner's (1979) perspective, contexts are embedded one within another creating the whole social, cultural, and physical environment an individual or family inhabits. The immediate family is found in the very center of these embedded contexts, and this is called the microsystem (see Figure 1.1). The mesosystem is occupied by other systems that directly impact the immediate family like work, school and extended family. The exosystem consists of "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but in which events occur that

affect or are affected by what happens in that setting”(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words this system is made up of the broader systems in society that impact the family like government and law enforcement. The macrosystem contains the cultural underpinnings, belief systems, and ideologies that form the basic fabric of the family’s life.

Figure 1.1: Bronfenbrenner’s Model of Nested Systems



Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of nested systems. Demonstrates how neglect and abuse can cause a component of the exosystem (social services) to directly impact the microsystem of the family.

This information on the various levels of context assists us in looking at the family when it experiences a dramatic shift such as a child being removed from the immediate family to live in foster care. At a very basic level, the immediate family is completely altered. A mom (and dad) are no longer responsible for the daily care of their children. The children find themselves in a new microsystem. With the entry of child welfare services into the lives of the family, the structure of the embedded contexts is changed.

This change occurs in a two-step process (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). First, something happens in the microsystem that impacts processes to the extent that reverberations are caused in the exosystem. Then the external system acts in a way that directly impacts the microsystem. For the purposes of this study, evidence of abuse, neglect or abandonment came to the attention of authorities. The result is that the exosystemic structure of child protective services becomes a part of daily life in the microsystem even though this entity may have been virtually unknown to the family prior to the precipitating events.

Thus, for the women in this study, their broader social context was as relevant as the familial context. Since human ecology theory states that a family and/or individual can only truly be understood from within their embedded contexts, this study proposed that the position the respondents occupy within the child welfare system was unique. They are the biological mothers who no longer parent their children due to abuse, neglect, or a combination of the two. Their perspective informs us regarding individual treatment within that system. Using this theoretical perspective we can also look at what they bring to the system and what the child welfare system offers them in return (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). The experiences a woman has as a mother making her way through the child welfare system in the quest to get her children back was the central purpose of this study.

Human ecology theory focuses not only on context of family and individual but also on interactions and adaptation the family must engage in for growth and development (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Because her children have been removed from her care, social services has become very closely tied to the mother's day-to-day life. In order to survive, she is required to interact with judges, lawyers, case workers, and therapists to adapt and

reach a new equilibrium within the context of these drastic changes in order to satisfy the requirements of child welfare services.

Human ecology allows us to examine the mother in this context and ask questions about whether her participation in child welfare services and her adaptation to their expectations is indeed supporting her in the quest to regain her motherhood. Bubolz and Sontag (1993) discuss the importance of human-derived rules in the family's environment as posing "limitations and constraints as well as possibilities and opportunities" (p. 426). Therefore how a mother perceives the rules and responds to the help she is receiving from child welfare services may be very important in examining her experience.

Another aspect of human ecology that was relevant to this project was the notion of roles. Roles can be defined as "a set of activities and relations expected of a person occupying a particular position in society, and of others in relation to that person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is important to note the relational quality of this definition. It is not just the expectations of an individual that defines a role but also the relationships in that individual's life. As a mother shifts from her regular parenting role, interactions with family and friends will change as well. She is no longer a caregiver but is a woman who must demonstrate competence to regain custody of her children. This is why Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes roles as creating a level of context in each person's life. This is important in the conception of the proposed study because these women have shifted from the role of active mothering to the ambiguous role of being mothers who live apart from their children. They may have expectations about what they should do while working with the child welfare system, but one must also consider what others in their

lives expect of them in this new role. A particular paradox of this situation is that they must show themselves to be adequate parents during a time in which they are not parenting. This study was interested in looking at the mother's role shift when her children were removed and how she responded to this change.

Human ecology theory guided the research in looking at the mother and her adjustment to new contexts and new roles while working with the social service system. This theory helped shape the research questions in considering ideas of interaction, adaptation, man-made rules, and changes to the individual and the environment. The unit of analysis in human ecology is typically the family or the children; however, since the proposed study looked at mothers in their broader social environment, the unit of analysis here was the individual. For the purposes of this study, the researcher was primarily concerned with the mother and her level of functioning within the child welfare environment.

Contextual Family Theory

Contextual family theory provided a clinical perspective to the proposed study. Conceived by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, contextual theory focuses on relational ethics, and the overarching theme of the theory is the need to bring about relational justice and fairness (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). Contextual theory also looks at transgenerational patterns and issues such as personal and global injustice to bring about change in family systems.

There are four dimensions to consider when using contextual theory: existential, psychological, power, and fairness (Goldenthal, 1996). The existential dimension consists of the facts in the life of an individual including biological, historical, and racial

facts. The psychological dimension consists of each individual's functioning in emotional and cognitive matters. This perspective of contextual theory is useful and unique in that it allows one to consider the individual's levels of functioning within their families. The third dimension is that of transactions and power. This is based on systems theory and is concerned with communication, boundaries, and roles assigned to family members. The final area is the dimension of fairness. This is the cornerstone of contextual theory and, when understood and put into use by families, helps them live in enhanced equality and fairness that improves family life for all members (Goldenthal, 1996). These four areas help create a theory of family functioning that is both philosophical and practical. Contextual theory lends itself to the examination of both families and individuals thus making it particularly useful for the proposed topic of this project.

The foundational principal of justice in contextual theory rests on the assumption that people must exist in families and communities that promote relational fairness in order to thrive (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). Personal injustices can cause several maladaptive behaviors. Destructive entitlement is one maladaptive behavior that develops due to the erosion of relational trust. A person who relies on destructive entitlement is insensitive to the ways in which his or her actions affect others. "People who rely predominantly on destructive entitlement in relating to others, however, have themselves experienced so much injustice themselves that they have become blind to the harm that they cause others" (Goldenthal, 1996).

Boszormenyi-Nagy (1987) states that the child who experiences repeated breaches of trust in relationships with primary caregivers will become a person who is "entitled to

make the rest of the world accountable to repay his damages”(p. 125). This concept helps us understand the transgenerational nature of maladaptive behaviors and the nature of legacies in perpetuating child neglect and abuse. The idea of family legacy is not meant to absolve people of personal responsibility simply because they have also experienced abuse and ill treatment. Rather, this concept helps us look at the relational fairness embedded in the context of a person’s life (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991). A person’s ability to make appropriate choices is indeed impacted by the overall fabric of their life. An individual must still make responsible choices or suffer consequences (ie: having children removed from the home), but this theory helps us understand why they sometimes fail to do so.

Women who find themselves separated from their children by the intervention of child welfare services, may have been the victims of some level of injustice in their lives (Haight et al., 2005). The transgenerational nature of victimization or injustice is such that families pass down experiences of eroded trust from one generation to the next. Therefore these injustices are perpetuated and can lead to the over-utilization of destructive entitlement or overentitlement that hinders a person in the development of give-and-take relationships (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). A woman who has her children removed from her care because of abuse or neglect may have difficulties with basic relationships because of her own experiences of injustice and eroded trust. Contextual theory would support the notion that if one has been treated unfairly in her primary and secondary relationships in life, she may be continuing a cycle of injustice in relationships with her offspring. In fact, this intergenerational pattern of relational injustice “sets the stage for many so-called ‘emotional distortions’, manifested in close relationships:

projective distortion, parentification, scapegoating, idealization, etc” (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). Contextual theory helped to guide this project in considering how relational injustice contributes to a woman’s inability to parent properly and her ongoing experiences as she tries to regain her role as mother.

Another type of justice attended to in contextual theory is that of distributive injustice which is broader and more global in nature than personal injustice. This refers to experiences or conditions that impact a person’s destiny and in turn affect the way they function in society (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991). Distributive injustice such as poverty, racism, and mental or physical illness may cause a person to act with destructive entitlement within the context of society. Therefore they will feel they are ‘owed’ something for all they perceive they have lost.

Women involved in child welfare services often have many forces working against them. Some are women of color, many are young women, and many experienced neglect or abuse in formative years (Haight et al., 2005). It is important to keep in mind that these women may also be struggling with distributive injustice as they try to get and keep jobs, keep appointments required by child welfare services and face the task of parenting with little or no help. According to contextual theory, this concept was crucial to the proposed study because the perceptions of fairness or injustice by women in the foster care system will have impacted their responses to treatment and their ability to become competent parents.

Ideas from contextual theory help us understand some of the behaviors of women who abuse or neglect their children. Because of their own experiences of breached trust, destructive entitlement may not allow them to fully appreciate the unfairness that has

taken place in their children's lives as well. Contextual theory also informed this research project by helping the researcher think about the participants' experiences in the child welfare system. Thus, this project examined a mother's experience of personal and distributive justice or injustice while in that system. Did mothers feel helped and supported as they tried to reunify with their children, or did the perceived injustices in the process of traveling through the system further demoralize them (Bass, 2004)?

Because contextual theory is based on ethical accountability (Goldenthal, 1996), it will also help guide the research by establishing and maintaining trustworthiness in all aspects of the project (especially with respondents) by attending to possible areas of unfairness or injustice, and by giving voice to the unheard ranks of mothers who are engaged in the process of regaining custody of their children.

Contextual Theory with a Feminist Lens

Contextual theory has not always been considered a mainstream Marriage and Family Therapy theory perhaps because of its unique focus on relational ethics such as fairness and justice (Dankoski & Deacon, 2000). However, it is a very useful theory in families because it attends to such issues while also providing a clear structure and process for carrying out change in the relational ethics of the family. Dankoski and Deacon (2000) note that contextual theory and feminist theory share common ground because of the mutual focus on power differentials and marginalized voices in the family. A hand-in-hand approach to using contextual theory with a feminist lens provides a way to look at broad social systems while also attending to the need for social change (Dankoski & Deacon, 2000).

Another layer that this study added to the contextual approach is that the idea of the importance of mothering. The power of the experience of becoming a mother and of the practice of daily mothering is very important to this project. Mothering is a uniquely female experience (Glenn, 1994) and the goal of researching women who have been separated from their children was to look at their perceptions of mothering while involved in the process of reclaiming their day-to-day motherhood. Using contextual theory with a feminist lens and a view toward the importance of mothering allowed this study to focus on justice and relational fairness with particular care placed on the need for system change in order to support mothering in the population under consideration.

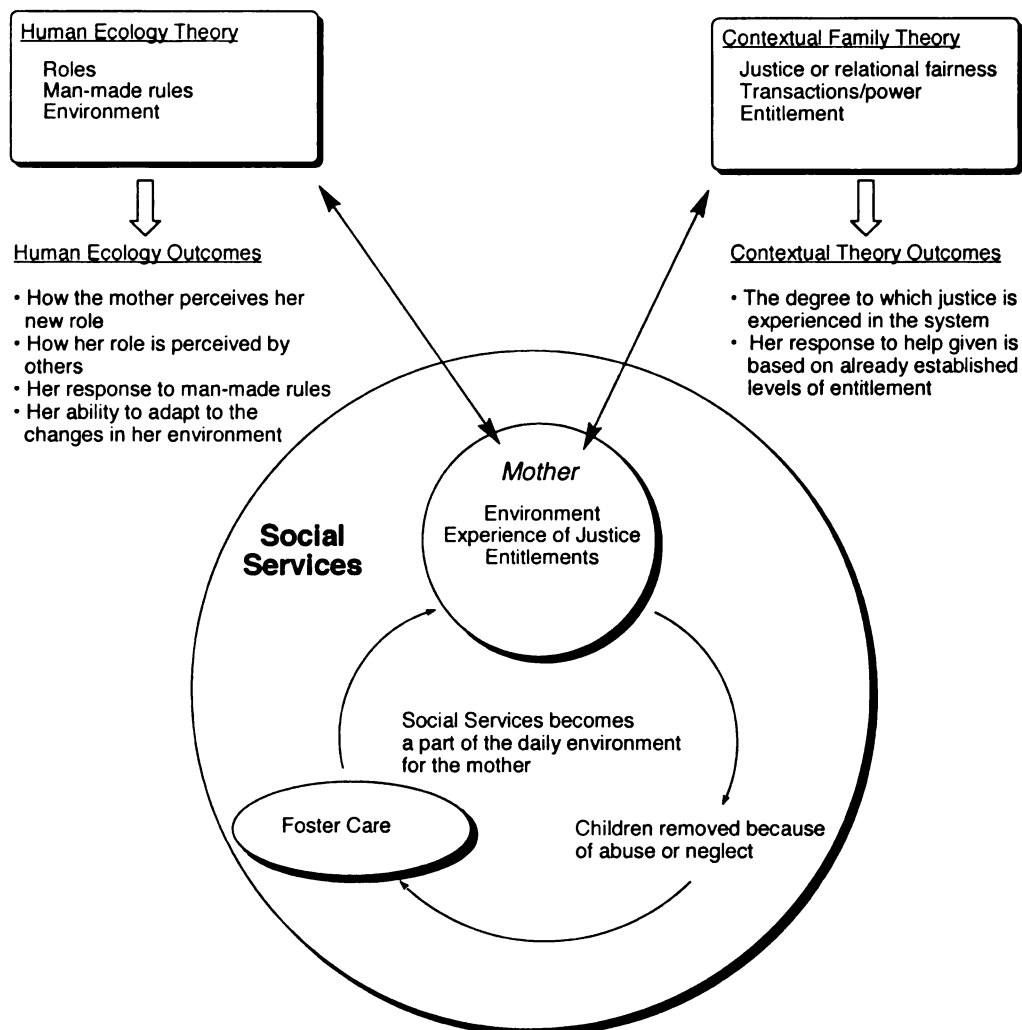
Summary

These two theories or perspectives taken alone are very helpful in studying and understanding families and individuals. When combined for this project, they were particularly useful. The perspective of human ecology allows the researcher to fully explore context and how changes in a mother's context can radically alter her life. This theory allowed for questions regarding adaptation, roles, and the return to equilibrium. Contextual theory allowed for questions concerning past and present injustices in an individual's life. This theory also shed light on the importance of relational fairness. For the purposes of this study, that relational fairness was examined between the biological mother and her interactions with family and within the child welfare system. This intersection: relational fairness/justice and context created the need to use both of the discussed theories.

Therefore, this research project used the ideas from human ecology and contextual theory to ask questions about how mothers, who experienced the removal of their

children, perceived their experience and how they have reacted to the current state of their lives as both individuals and mothers. These theories aided in the construction of appropriate research questions that aimed to uncover and study the lived experience of biological mothers as they try to work within the child welfare system to achieve reunification with their children.

Figure 1.2: Conceptual Map



This study was qualitative in nature and utilized the discussed theories to construct research questions. The research questions helped generate areas of inquiry that helped

guide each interview. Figure 1.2 shows the theoretical map for this study and possible outcomes based on the intersection of theory and research questions.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Qualitative research is often drawn from very general questions; and therefore, topics in qualitative study may have several bodies of related literature (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Such was the case for the current study with literature drawn from the areas of foster children, foster parents, at-risk families, supervised visitation in foster care, and finally, biological mothers in the foster care system. This literature review begins with an overview of research that has been conducted on other members of the foster care or child welfare system. The purpose of this review is to demonstrate a gap in the current literature regarding experiences and perspectives of biological mothers. Also, this review will demonstrate the use of member perceptions (ie: perceptions of foster children and foster parents) as a means of studying a relatively unknown phenomenon.

Foster Children

Studies on foster children cover a wide span of topics and methodologies. The research in this area is prolific. The work reviewed here focuses on these areas: factors concerning placement (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Frame, 2002; Harden, 2004), the special needs of foster children (Cross, Leavey, Mosley, White, & Burd, 2004; McNichol & Tash, 2001; Needell & Barth, 1998), the mental health difficulties faced by foster children (Fish & Chapman, 2004; Garwood & Close, 2001), attachment issues (Gauthier, Fortin, & Jeliu, 2004; McWey & Mullis, 2004), and treatment modalities (Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2001; Racusin, Maerlender, Sengupta, Isquith, & Straus, 2005).

In particular the research in this area focuses on the needs of foster children and how foster parents require support from the child welfare system in order to adequately care for these children (Harden, 2004). The research on infants cites that often these babies

are so needy they tax the energy and willingness of foster parents (Fish & Chapman, 2004). Combined with high needs and the probability of psychological distress (Garwood & Close, 2001), the attachment piece also requires attention. Gauthier, Fortin and Jeliu (2004) discuss the importance of psychological parents and how foster children can be further harmed if they are removed from foster parents to which they have truly attached. Also, children with higher levels of attachment are less likely to struggle with mental illness, behavioral problems, and developmental delays (McWey & Mullis, 2004).

In looking at treatment for foster children, one approach presented was a developmental psychopathological model that was designed to help children form healthy attachments despite a past history of relational trauma (Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2001). In contrast to the importance of the attachment approach, a review of treatment modalities identified self-regulation as the hallmark need of foster children (Racusin, Maerlender, Sengupta, Isquith, & Straus, 2005). In this review the authors cite two approaches to the treatment of foster children: symptom-focused treatments and systemic interventions. Based on outcomes, there was little support for the efficacy of symptom-focused treatments (ie: attachment treatments) and much better empirical support for systemic interventions (ie: treatment delivered within the foster care setting) (Racusin, Maerlender, Sengupta, Isquith, & Straus, 2005).

Foster Parents

The research on foster parents is also quite deep. One prevailing topic is that of meeting the needs of foster parents and helping them have the resources required to provide both physical and emotional nurturance (Dozier, Highley, Albus, & Nutter, 2002). Based on the above research, another study was conducted on the foster mom's

state of mind and how this directly impacts attachment to foster children and further treatment (Dozier & Sepulveda, 2004). The implicit goal for both of these studies was to understand the needs and motivations of foster mothers.

Another area of interest in the research on foster parents is not only the identification of needs but also how to directly support specific needs. A study that discussed the levels of grief and loss for foster parents was focused on the particular ways that professionals can help foster parents cope with the grief and loss that is integral to the foster parent experience (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001). In a review on the state of foster parenting, a list of available treatments and support strategies is offered to provide broad-based support for these families (Heller, Smyke, & Boris, 2002). It is also important to note that support for foster parents by professionals must be administered in some way and that services targeted for foster parents were deemed more time consuming for case workers than were services targeted for foster children (Zlotnick, Kronstadt, & Klee, 1999).

One of the purposes of foster parent support is to provide healthy families for children, and the other purpose is to retain foster families to prevent shortages (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003). One study looked at the qualifications for becoming a foster parent and the trainings offered to potential foster parents (Nasuti, York, & Sandell, 2004). They found that the trainings and qualifications were not culturally sensitive to African American families and may be inadvertently barring those families from being a more active part of the foster care system. In a longitudinal study, Nasuti, York and Sandell (2004) found that families most likely to continue fostering had more resources, especially income-based, than did families who dropped out. Retention rates

for single parent families and African American families were lower but not when controlling for income.

Most of the work presented here on foster children and foster families focuses on survival and meeting the short term needs of foster children and families in the present. This is appropriate due to the crisis nature of some of this work. However, perceptions of foster children and foster parents are also a part of the broader body of work in this area. Foster parents were asked to offer their input on the privatization of foster care in a Midwest state. The overall conclusion of the study was that foster parents needed and wanted better communication within the system (Friesen, 2001). Friesen (2001) also found that foster parents view themselves as advocates for the children they are fostering. In another study, the needs of foster parents were articulated by the parents themselves including: good working relationships, cultural sensitivity, harmonious, and stable family relationships, adequate payment for services, and that a range of training be made available to them (Brown & Calder, 2000).

Foster children's perspectives have also been studied from a variety of angles. Bass, Shields and Behrman (2004) offer a very comprehensive review of the child welfare system in which they recommend that the experience of the child needs to be attended to in treatment and research. One particular study looked at conflict between children and parents and found that foster children did not engage in conflict with foster parents with the same violence or forcefulness as did birth children (Singer, Doornenbal, & Okma, 2004). This reticence was attributed to the ongoing issues of foster kid's fear of disruption and their ongoing feelings of impotence in family relationships. In another study, researchers interviewed adults who had once been foster children. They looked at

who these (now adult) foster children viewed as their true parents (Gardner, 1998). Not surprisingly, there was a stark mixture of experiences given by the respondents ranging from having supportive and kind treatment in some foster homes to outright neglect and inhumane treatment in other homes. These perceptions of the meaning of family were directly derived from the individual's experiences. The above studies attend to the experience of children and foster parents in the child welfare system. One of the primary differences between research conducted on foster children and foster parents versus biological parents, is that the perspective of the biological parent is not represented in the literature. This missing piece is one of the rationales of the current project.

Contextual Issues and At-Risk Families

Some pertinent literature on at-risk families was helpful in conceptualizing this project because women whose children have been removed share many characteristics with families described as at-risk. At-risk families have also been termed "fragile families" (p. 15) and are characterized by struggles with poverty, drug use, mental illness, and lack of family or social support (Bass, 2004). These resources helped solidify the contextual theory idea that trauma and losses experienced in early life may contribute to a person's difficulty to establish nurturing relationships with their own children. Fraiburg, Adelson and Shaprio (1975) wrote an important clinical discussion of mothers of babies in peril. Using an infant mental health model, they reported that mothers who remembered abuse but had repressed the emotions of abuse were more likely to continue the cycle than were mothers who reprocessed this information and identified with the original feelings of fear, pain, and trauma (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975).

Another study on at-risk families and maternal insecurity, (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Juffer, & van IJzendoorn, 1998) discusses the two types of insecure representations: dismissing parents who do not acknowledge the importance of others or past experiences with current significant relationships, and preoccupied parents who cannot focus on the needs of their children because they remain focused on past relationships. They found that, similar to Fraiburg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1975), women with insecure representations (preoccupied type) had better outcomes when interventions included discussions of their past significant relationships (eg. relationships with parents). Another study showed that in families identified as “at risk”, outcomes for infants were found to be better when mothers participated in interventions with a therapist they trusted and when mothers were invested in the process of improving (Heinicke et al., 2000).

When early maternal memories are accessed and addressed in the present through interventions and therapy, mothers can be helped in relationships with their own children (Zelenko & Benhan, 2000). After processing their early memories of abuse and loss, they are more aware of how their actions affect their children. While these studies focused on the importance of acknowledging past trauma as a means to resolve current parenting difficulties, a contextual framework can further broaden the scope of understanding. A woman’s experience in child welfare services is layered upon her experiences of childhood and young adulthood. The incidents of justice or injustice will continue to impact how she relates to the world and to her children. A mother’s experience of distributive justice in the child welfare system is a central piece of the proposed study.

Foster Care and Biological Mothers

Visitation

Studying and understanding the issues pertaining to supervised visitation has been a recent trend in foster care research. When describing the time biological parents get to spend with their children living in foster care the word *visit* is used “to describe the only contact the parent and child have, and the only hope that they have of maintaining or restoring their relationship” (Fish & Chapman, 2004). This area of inquiry in the literature is important because reunification with biological parents is the primary goal for most children who live in foster care (Ansay & Perkins, 2001). This area of research is also important to the proposed study because it includes the biological mother and offers some insight into the needs of mothers in the child welfare system. The research has demonstrated that supervised visits between mothers and their children living in foster care are often very complex and difficult to manage (Haight, Black, Workman, & Tata, 2001), and when mothers visit their children, they struggle most with the leave-taking aspect of the visit showing an inability to stay focused through the difficult time of saying goodbye (Haight et al., 2005). Consistent with the contextual components of the research cited above, struggles during supervised visitations between moms and their children have been linked with the past trauma experienced by the mother.

Because of the crisis atmosphere of removing a child and the resulting fall-out for both mothers and children, Fish and Chapman (2004) note that ongoing support for mother and child is important, especially during supervised visits. The factors that led to the removal of the child along with grief and loss may compound the relationship difficulties making family interactions during visits difficult at best. However,

researchers have found that attachment can be maintained and strengthened during visits and that this dedication to preserving the parent-child bond is both valuable and necessary (McWey, 2004).

In another study on visits between parents and children, (Loar, 1998) a case study illustrated how to improve visitation by structuring for better outcomes and how to tailor visits to fit an individual family's needs. Further, researchers have identified specific factors that can help or hinder the effectiveness of visitation (Kovalesky, 2001), and outcomes on bonding assessments completed during supervised visitation may help professionals identify parents who are more likely to endanger their children again upon reunification (Ansary & Perkins, 2001).

The supervised visitation area of foster care research does not focus solely on the biological mother, but it does offer information on her role in that area of study. The two primary areas of focus are how to help mothers improve the time they have with their children and how help professionals evaluate mothers during these visits. The purpose of supervised visitation is to help parents maintain an existing relationship with their children with the hopes of making it better so that successful reunification can be realized (Ansary & Perkins, 2001).

Mothers who are in prison, drug addicted, or homeless

Some of the research on the biological mothers of children in foster care is focused on special populations such as mothers in prison whose children were living in foster care or kinship care (Beckerman, 1994). In this study, the researchers concluded that women did not have the information they needed to adequately advocate for themselves in the most basic way such as having knowledge about how they could have the opportunity to

appear in court. Also, they lacked the means by which to contact case workers and even to fully appreciate their rights as parents. In a study focused on another special population of biological mothers, researchers found that more than half of homeless women had children living in foster care or out-of-home care (Zlotnick, Robertson, & Wright, 1999). They also found that factors contributing to the mothers' homelessness were mental illness and substance use. An additional finding was that many of the homeless women had experienced childhood trauma or abuse.

Contextual and Ecological Factors for Mothers

Haight, Black, Workman, and Tata (2001) noted that often, case workers are unprepared to address the overwhelming ecological and contextual factors in the lives of the biological families they are helping. In lieu of providing what is really needed, often case workers will assign parents to parenting classes because the system requires the class or because completion of a parenting class provides a concrete outcome. However, if the parent has demonstrated adequate or good parenting skills, the requirement to take a parenting class can further humiliate the parent and undermine the trust in the parent/case worker relationship (Haight, Black, Workman, & Tata, 2001).

Not surprisingly, women with psychological instability, low social support, chaotic life events, and drug use are at high risk for losing their children to foster care (Nair et al., 1997). Women who experienced disruption in the care of their infants were more likely to be younger women, drug users, and suffering from depression.

Another important study found that women with mental illness were more likely to lose custody of their children than were women without mental illness (Hollingsworth, 2004). This same study also found that, upon comparison, poor, single women were at

more risk of losing custody of their children than were married women with more economic means. Therefore, information that may seem demographic in nature like marital status, age, and SES was more likely to predict risk from the perspective child welfare services. Women with these factors have fewer means and less support and lose custody of their children more often.

As demonstrated in the above studies, most of the research conducted with biological mothers whose children live in foster care is demographic in nature. The studies point to the factors that contribute to the loss of children to foster care: drug use, alcohol abuse and homelessness. They also focus on the mother's role in visitation, how she can be supported, and what she needs to improve upon to enhance the time she gets to spend with her children. However, there is a distinct lack of information in the current research regarding the experience of the mother. The mother's perspective of how this experience impacts her life, and subsequently her parenting, is missing. When foster children and foster parents were asked to contribute their perspectives and experiences, they were able to add to the body of knowledge by identifying their perceived needs and the factors that were both good and bad in their experience of the child welfare system. In order to truly represent mothers as a part of this process, their voice needs to be acknowledged and their perspective needs to be added to the current body of research in order to provide the most helpful and comprehensive services possible.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of mothers whose children have been removed from their home to live in foster care. More specifically this study looked at ecological and contextual factors that contribute to the experience of a mother in the foster care system. The mother was the source of information for this study. This study used qualitative methods for inquiry and focused on a phenomenological approach as a means of collecting, coding, and analyzing data.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research methods can be defined as “processes used to make sense of data that are represented by words or pictures and not by numbers” (Gilgun, 1992). Because qualitative methods are so important in examining questions of experience, perception, and meaning, this method was used for the proposed study (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). In another study with a similar population to this proposed project, researchers using a mixed design of qualitative and quantitative data found that the qualitative data was more useful in identifying factors that contributed to the individual functioning of the respondents and in highlighting how ecological changes effect relationships (Hollingsworth, 2004).

A phenomenological approach was used to elicit the lived experience of the respondents. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that embraces and utilizes the subjective interpretation of a person’s reality. Rather than considering it a “methodological taboo”(p. 264), phenomenology allows the researcher to utilize subjectivity as a topic for inquiry (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994).

This idea comes from Schutz's work in social phenomenology in which he established a few basic tenets. First, he stated that all people take for granted their own subjectivity and assume that others experience the world as they do. Second, he identified the meaning-making process by referring to a "stock of knowledge" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994) that each person possesses and that helps them categorize, interpret, and understand their own experience. Out of their stock of knowledge a person creates categories or constructs that helps them put words to their experience. And finally, language enables them to convey the meaning of their experience (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). This perspective was useful in the proposed study because women conveyed a personal story in their own language and shared the meaning they have attributed to that experience. Therefore, by using phenomenology, the researcher was able to make use of each respondent's subjectivity and use it as a means to look at the commonalities of several mothers' experiences in the foster care system.

Feminism in Qualitative Research

Historically, feminist researchers have been interested in giving voice to those who cannot speak for themselves because of age, social status, power differential, or gender (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). Feminist ideologies fit well with qualitative research because they attend to the experiences of those who would otherwise remain hidden and unknown. Feminist perspectives pay attention to the plight of women and how they are stripped of power and rights in a dominant society of patriarchal systems. This study focused on women who had temporarily lost the right to parent their children. The gender and power issues were important in the conceptualization of the study. Using the feminist perspective in the design of the study allowed for the exploration of the

experiences of these mothers under conditions in which they were powerless and were subject to the mandates of others regarding their children.

Beginning in the 1970's the notion of women being "absent and invisible" (p. 159) began to emerge in the literature (Oleson, 1994). While biological mothers are not absent from the phenomenon of losing children to foster care, their voices and experiences have been somewhat invisible in the literature. The feminist structure of the current project helped illuminate some of the issues faced by these women whose children live in foster care.

In carrying out qualitative inquiry with a feminist perspective, the researcher was aware of the importance of avoiding exploitative practices in data collection and in using a reflexive stance. The purpose of this aim was to prevent the further victimization of the population under scrutiny during the process of the interview, analysis, and reporting of data. The researcher occupied a position of power, but used the ideas supporting feminist research to ensure that each story and piece of data was accurately presented while also attending to possible researcher bias.

Research Questions

The research questions for this project were the following: 1. What is a mother's lived experience while her children reside in foster care? 2. What ecological factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system? 2a. How does the mother adapt to her change of status when children are removed? 2b. What is the mother's role during the reunification process? 3. What contextual factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system? 3a. How does the mother experience justice or injustice in the foster care system? 3b. What is the mother's perception of power in this

experience? Table 3.1 lists the research questions along with the corresponding theoretical underpinnings.

Table 3.1: Research Questions and Supporting Theories

Theory	Research Questions
Human Ecology Contextual	1. What is a mother's lived experience while her children reside in foster care?
Human Ecology	2. What ecological factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system?
Human Ecology	2a. How does the mother adapt to her change of status when children are removed?
Human Ecology	2b. What is the mother's role during the reunification process?
Contextual	3. What contextual factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system?
Contextual	3a. How does she experience justice or injustice in the foster care system?
Contextual	3b. What is her perception of power in this experience?

Sampling and Recruitment

Sample

Purposive sampling was used to obtain the group of respondents for this study. "Purposive sampling is a practice where subjects are intentionally selected to represent some explicit predefined traits or conditions"(Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). The respondents were recruited from a program at the Family and Child Clinic at Michigan State University. The program is called Families in Transition (FIT), and all the clients served were parents whose children currently live or have lived in foster care in the past year. The purpose of FIT is to provide family therapy and therapeutic supervised visitation for the parents and their children.

Families who participate in the FIT program have had their children removed from their care because of abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The families are referred by a

Department of Human Services case-worker, and their participation in the program is mandated by the courts. Most of the FIT clients are women who are not married and who did not graduate from high school. They are typically in their early twenties and usually work at low-paying jobs. Often, these families receive some sort of government assistance, but this is sometimes interrupted by the removal of their children. These families are required to: find State-approved housing, keep adequate paying jobs, attend all substance abuse checks, attend all parenting classes, attend all supervised visitation, and attend therapy.

This study focused on the mothers in the program whose children are living in foster care or have lived in foster care in the past year. The data for the study was drawn from the mothers only. The sample consisted of 8 women who participated in the full interview. When saturation was achieved (meaning that no new information is emerging from the analysis), recruitment of new respondents ended. There were no restrictions on age of respondents or on the number of children living in foster care. The primary criteria were that the respondent is a mother and has children by birth that currently reside in foster care or who have lived in foster care in the past year.

Of the eight women who participated in this study, six were Caucasian, one was African-American, and one was Latina. The age of the respondents ranged from 19 – 35 with a mean age of 27. One of the respondents is married, one is separated, three are divorced and three are single/never married. Seven of the eight respondents became mothers as teenagers. Each respondent experienced the removal of all of her children. Some of the children were never returned home but were living with biological fathers or in adoptive homes. Two of the respondents were pregnant at the time of the interview.

Four of the respondents have regained custody of some or all of their children. The other four are waiting for court dates to determine the outcome of their case. Four of the women in this study irrevocably lost children during the process of trying to regain custody. Table 3.2 lists the respondents with corresponding information including number of children total and the number of children that remain in foster care.

Table 3.2: Description of Participants

Name	Ethnicity	Age	Children	Children Returned
Stacey	African-American	27	7	2 returned (others pending)
Belinda	Caucasian	35	4	4
Allison	Latina	26	2	2
Yasmine	Caucasian	34	8	3
Cherise	Caucasian	19	2	1 Pending
Greta	Caucasian	27	6	2 Pending
Anna	Caucasian	22	3	3 Pending
Leanne	Caucasian	26	3	2 Pending

Participation and Recruitment

Participation in the study was voluntary, and a respondent's ongoing progress in the FIT program was not contingent upon a contribution to the project. Therapists in the FIT program assisted with the recruitment process by providing their eligible clients with information regarding the study and how their clients could participate. Women interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher and set up a time to be interviewed. Child-care was provided for the women if needed. At the end of their participation, respondents were given a \$35 gift certificate for a local retail store. All of the respondents were extremely grateful for the compensation and accepted it gratefully.

Interview Context

Most of the interviews were conducted at the Family and Child Clinic at Michigan State University. This site was appropriate because it offered the respondent the comfort of familiar surroundings and the researcher the ability to adjust the environment regarding sound and recording of interviews. A room with comfortable furnishings was used, and interviews were scheduled during times of low traffic in the clinic. Another advantage to using this interview site was the ability to provide childcare in a room equipped with toys within close proximity to the mother. Confidentiality was maintained with this arrangement because the interviewees were already clients of the clinic, and their presence at the clinic for an interview was not obvious to anyone in the vicinity. One interview was conducted at the home of the respondent upon her request.

Data Collection

Genograms

The data for this project was collected in one stage. First, the researcher constructed a genogram of the respondent's family. Genograms are basically a picture of a family, and they provide a way of quickly and succinctly drawing the whole family tree. The genogram is constructed of symbols and lines and will be drawn while the respondent talks about her family according to guided questions posed by the researcher. The genogram can depict transgenerational patterns such as alcoholism, child abuse, depression, divorce etc., and it can cover as many generations as needed. For the purposes of this study, the researcher was able to get three generations on the genogram, and the focus was on ecological and contextual factors within the family of origin.

Interviews

Interviews are the most prevalent source of information for qualitative studies because they allow the researcher to investigate meanings and subjectivity (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). An interview was an appropriate means of primary data collection for this study based on the topic and the research questions. The interview was semi-structured to allow for probing questions while maintaining the overall integrity of data gathered from each respondent. Since the design of this study was phenomenological, it was important to allow for unique experiences to emerge in the interviews. Therefore, the interview followed a set path of areas of inquiry in which the researcher was able to probe for the relevant information regarding each individual's experience. (see Table 3.3) By doing this, each area of inquiry was covered for every respondent while allowing room for the different stories and experiences to be told.

Table 3.3: Areas of Inquiry and Relationship to Research Questions

Research Question	Area Of Inquiry
1. What is the lived experience of mothers whose children live in foster care?	Overall experience while her children are living in out-of-home care. <i>Probes might include: How has this experience changed your life? What will you take away from this experience?</i>
2. What ecological factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system?	Family history. This information will be covered in the construction of the genogram. The narrative of how the children were removed from the mother's care. <i>Probes might include: Tell me the story of...; What events led to...?</i>

Table 3.3: Areas of Inquiry and Relationship to Research Questions (Continued)

2a. How does the mother adapt to her change of status when children are removed?	<p>The narrative of how the mother changed from daily parenting to weekly visits. <i>Probes: Tell me about how you adjusted to seeing your kids at visitation time? What made visits better? Tell me about your relationship with the foster family...</i></p>
	<p>The narrative of the mother's change of roles within family context and with friends <i>Probes: Tell me how your family reacted when the kids were removed...; How do you explain your situation to friends?</i></p>
2b. What is the mother's role during the reunification process?	<p>The mother's definition of parenting while her children are not in her care. <i>Probes: How do your children react when you (discipline, or bring gifts, or leave visits) ...? What is your job as mom now...?</i></p>
3. What contextual factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system?	<p>Transgenerational experiences of fairness. This information will be covered in the construction of the genogram. <i>Probes: Tell me about your relationship with your (parents, siblings, other significant people) ...; Who was the most significant person in your life as a child and why?</i></p>
3a. How does she experience justice or injustice in the foster care system?	<p>The mother's perception of how she's treated by case workers, judges, lawyers and therapists. <i>Probes: Tell me about your relationship with the case worker ...; How were you treated during court hearings or therapy sessions?</i></p>
3b. What is her perception of power in this experience?	<p>The mother's perspective on who really has the power to influence reunification. <i>Probes: What has been in your control....?; In your opinion, what would help you get to reunification?</i></p>
	<p>The mother's perceptions regarding her needs. <i>Probes: Who has helped you the most?; Tell me about your successes...</i></p>

Field Notes

Following each interview, the researcher wrote field notes to record thoughts, impressions and questions that were elicited by the interview. The field notes gave the researcher the opportunity to quickly record initial impressions of the interview and any ideas or questions that will be helpful in shaping the overall project. The use of genogram, interview, and field note data provided more depth from which the researcher was able to analyze and draw conclusions.

Data Analysis

Seven of the eight interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. One interview was conducted while the researcher took notes and recorded as many verbatim statements as possible. The primary investigator transcribed all of the recorded data then the constant comparison method was used to code the data. The benefit to this approach was that it allowed the researcher to code and analyze simultaneously (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Glasser and Strauss (1967) state that the purpose of this method “is to generate theory more systematically” (p. 102) than the process of coding and analyzing in separate steps. The researcher used a second researcher to evaluate the consistency in the coding process and the emergence of categories.

The constant comparative method takes place in four stages (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). In the first stage, the researcher creates categories for each incident revealed in the interview. Categories and incidents initially emerge together and then subsequent incidents emerge that fit into the existing categories. An important part of this first stage is the ongoing comparison of new incidents with the other incidents coded into the same category. During this process, the “constant comparison of the incidents very soon starts

to generate theoretical properties of the category” (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). This, in turn, aids in the development and construction of the theory. During this first stage, the transcripts were reviewed and emerging incidents and categories were highlighted.

The second stage of “integrating categories and their properties,”(p. 104) consists of comparing incidents with the specific “properties of the category” (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). In stage three, the data reduction begins as categories are combined to represent more abstract ideas. From Glasser and Strauss’s (1967) perspective, this data reduction accomplishes two important things: “1) parsimony of variables and formulation, and 2) scope in the applicability of the theory to a wide range of situations, while keeping close correspondence of theory and data”(p. 111). During this third stage, the researcher also constructed ecomaps as a part of the data reduction process in looking for emerging themes within each interview. These ecomaps were a pictorial representation of the respondent and any related ecological or contextual factors. The ecomaps also included a place to record broader themes as the data was reduced to the emergent themes. (See Figure 3.1).

The fourth stage in Glasser and Strauss’s (1967) method is writing the theory in which the researcher identifies her or his contribution to the broader theoretical context. It is also during this fourth stage that the researcher demonstrates the ability to interpret and apply the findings to the overall theory. This theoretical sensitivity is important to the overall process because when used correctly it allows the researcher to produce descriptions of the data that not only represent the findings and the theories but also put the findings into the appropriate place in the broader theoretical context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This theoretical integration will be presented in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Trustworthiness

The term trustworthiness is used in qualitative studies to define the means by which the researcher demonstrates the validity of the study. Trustworthiness is established first in the theoretical foundation of the study. The theoretical basis for the study contributes to the project by providing the framework from which the researcher can ask the primary research questions. The two theories chosen (Human Ecology and Contextual theory) fit well with the chosen topic. The supporting theories also provided the rationale for the research questions. Further, the theoretical base established the focus towards a qualitative inquiry that shaped the process of gathering data in a consistent and useful way.

Since, “validity is strengthened when information is corroborated in different ways” (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993), the data for this study was collected in three forms: genograms, in-depth interviews, and field notes. The genogram was constructed during the interview, and the researcher recorded field notes following the interviews to record any initial thoughts or questions generated by the interview. Using multiple sources of data for each respondent provided the researcher with a rich supply of information. This supply of information based on interviews, genograms, and field notes, together, provided a more thorough base of data to be analyzed. The primary investigator was deeply involved with each phase of this project from conceptualization and conducting each interview, to personally transcribing each interview and consistently coding the data for every respondent. This enhanced trustworthiness in that only one lens was used for conceptualization, interview, and transcription. Finally, the reliability of the study was enhanced through the use of a second researcher who is highly skilled in working with

the population under consideration. This second researcher was a key informant who assisted with verifying that the coding and analyzing of raw data was consistent and accurate. She also provided feedback regarding the emergence of themes and the corresponding relevance to theory (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993).

The Role of the Researcher

In the past eight years, my clinical work has focused on families affected by adoption and foster care. In the course of being a part of the Families in Transition (FIT) program at the Family and Child Clinic, I have had the privilege of working with the biological parents of children in foster care. No single client or case has been “easy”. In working with these clients, I find that their lives are riddled with trauma, loss, and chaos. Their experiences and stories never fail to touch me. While I sometimes get frustrated with the lack of consistency or motivation on their part to do the work of therapy, I cannot ignore the circumstances in which most of them exist. The prevailing stories are those of abuse, neglect, and pain – and this is the parent’s story that is also being perpetuated in the lives of their children.

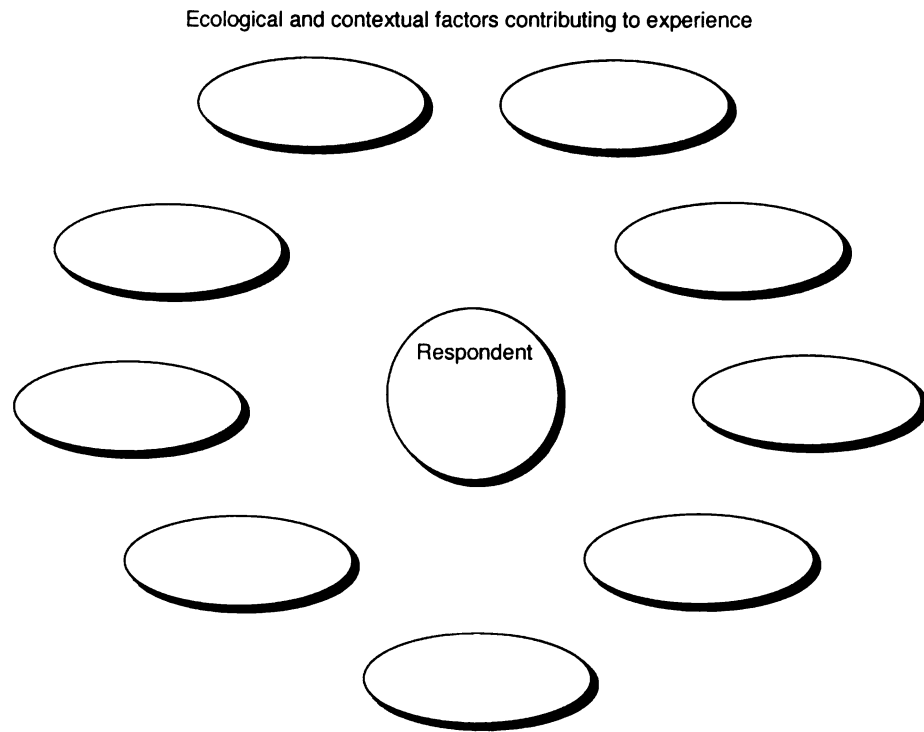
From a personal perspective, I am moved to help women who share with me the journey of motherhood. I have been so changed and transformed by my own experience of motherhood, that I was interested in learning more about these mothers whose children were taken away from them. These personal musings were the beginnings of this project.

From a professional perspective, I am appalled at the state of our foster care system and the demoralization I witness at all levels: case workers, biological parents, foster parents, and children. Every one is striving, but it seems that little good is being accomplished. This desire for reform also drives some of the motivation for this project.

My primary goal was to give voice to the women I interviewed. My hope is that in some way I can help them.

I must acknowledge that I have particular biases that impacted the research. First of all, I am a member of a privileged part of society. I have never been in want of food, clothing, shelter, or luxury by comparative standards. Thus, I do not know the levels of despair experienced by the population I am studying. Additionally, I have suffered very little discrimination based on my SES and race. Many of the women I interviewed are disadvantaged on several levels. Finally, I have had the resources of a loving family, loyal friends, higher education, and spiritual conviction that inform me and protect me from the harshness of life these women have faced. I cannot know their experience on a personal or visceral level, but I can bear witness to their experience and make it known to others.

Figure 3.1: Example of Ecomap



Emerging Themes

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The findings of this study are presented in two parts; a summary of each respondent's history including the narrative each respondent provided recounting her story of how and why her children were removed from her care and the findings stemming from the research foci. The results are organized in this way because the personal histories and the narratives of the removal given by each respondent do not address the research aims on every level, but they do offer insight into the ecological and contextual constraints of the respondents' experience. These personal histories and summaries of child removal also help the reader understand each mother's perspective more completely.

Respondent Personal Histories

Genograms were constructed at the beginning of each interview. Following the genogram construction, the researcher began the audio taped portion of the interview. Each interview began with the request that the respondent tell the story of how and why her children were removed. From the genograms and the interview, the researcher was able to glean stories of respondents' personal histories that help put their experiences in context. The following summaries will put the overall data in context with the life experiences of the women studied.

Belinda

Belinda is the youngest of four children. She described her family of origin as being very cold-hearted. The only person she was close to in her family was her mother, who died when Belinda was 19. She is also the only respondent in this study who did not become a mother in her teen years. During her journey through the system, Belinda was

faced with even more rejection from her family. At first, her children were placed with her sister. When Belinda called her sister, she lied and said she did not have the children. Also, when Belinda and her husband were awarded their rights again, her brother got up and left the courtroom in protest.

Belinda and her husband had four children, but began to experience some significant problems in their marriage. Belinda had requested a protective order against her husband because she stated that they had been having marital difficulties. This action on her part brought case workers to her house to investigate. When Protective Services told her that they were going to require her to complete some programs, she refused these services. Protective Services left, but they returned with a court order, and the children were removed the following day. She described the scene through many tears and stated that, “the youngest one was hanging on to me because she didn’t want to go.” She believes that she and her husband were punished for trying to fight the system.

When the Child Welfare workers came to their house to take the children, they also took pictures of the house and stated that the house was too dirty. Belinda said she felt so violated by the whole process. In the two years it took for she and her husband to get their children home, Belinda had four case workers. At this point, she continues to exhibit a trauma response to her experience. She wept for most of the interview. She also cannot remember her youngest daughter’s birthday because she missed two birthdays, and this difficulty remembering the date now may point to how difficult it was for her to be separated from her youngest child for two birthdays in a row.

Anna

Anna was raised by her mother. She stated that her mother cared more for her gentlemen friends than she did for her own children. She also said that her own mother should have lost her children. In her story, she discussed how she received no guidance from her mother, and that she felt inadequate to the task of managing her life because she never had any help. Anna left home at 12 and began living with an older man. She reports that she did not become sexually active until several years later. When she married her husband, she was 19 and pregnant. He already had a young daughter from a previous marriage.

When describing how her children were removed, Anna reported that her husband brutally beat her step-daughter (his daughter). She became frightened, and she called the authorities. Three days later, a judge ruled that she would not be able to protect her children when her husband was released from jail. She asked the authorities if it would have gone better for her if she had physically retaliated against her husband, and they said 'yes'.

Allison

Allison said that during her childhood, her father was both verbally and physically abusive. Even though she described her mother as being supportive, she also said that her mother expressed misgivings about Allison's ability to be a good mother. She married young and moved to the Middle-East where she had two children; however, Allison fled the Middle-East with her two young sons because her husband was hitting her and her oldest child. She returned to her childhood home in Michigan to live with her dad, but had to leave his home because he once again became physically abusive as well. She was

in the process of applying for assistance for housing when she came to the attention of Protective Services. They told her that the best option was to place her children in temporary foster care until she could find housing. She voluntarily placed her children in a temporary foster home with the understanding that she could get them back at a court hearing the following day. Because of her circumstances, she was unable to get a ride to the courthouse and missed the court date. The temporary care led to a three-year battle for her parenting rights.

Stacey

Stacey's parents divorced when she was young. She described her father as a child molester who victimized her step-sister. She also spent some time in foster care where her sister was sexually abused again. She did not report a personal experience of childhood sexual abuse, but Stacey became a parent as a teen as a result of rape.

When Stacey described how she lost her children, her story began with this phrase, "I met this guy." She went on to relate how she met a man on the internet who eventually came to live with her. He was watching her children while she was taking classes. She arrived home one day to find him leaving the house to take her daughter to the hospital. After examining her daughter, doctors found that her broken arm could only have been inflicted by an intentional twisting action. Stacey left her boyfriend. She and her children received in-home services for a while, but the children were eventually removed because Stacey violated court orders by spanking her son.

Yasmine

Yasmine's mother had many male partners. In fact, she did not know who her biological father was until she was 18. Her mother had told her another man was her

father for many years. As a result of her mother's lifestyle, Yasmine spent a lot of time with her grandparents. She even stated that her grandfather was the most significant person in her younger years. Then she went on to relate that he was the person who introduced her to alcohol and also began sexually molesting her at the age of 10 or 11. This sexual abuse continued until she got pregnant at 16 and married her boyfriend. By the time of our interview, Yasmine had 8 children, and all of them had been removed from her care.

In her most recent court involvement, her youngest three children were placed in foster care. Similar to other respondents' stories, Yasmine's case began as a result of domestic violence. Yasmine had filed a protective order against her boyfriend, and then she heard that Protective Services was going to come and take her children. Five of her older children had been removed previously. Out of panic and after some drinks with a friend, she fled the state with her children. In the middle of the night, she got sleepy and ran off the road. When authorities arrived, she was arrested, and her children were transported back to Michigan and to a foster home. The reasons for removal in her case involved both domestic violence and substance abuse. All of these five respondents came to the attention of the authorities in the system because of abuse that they did not inflict upon their children.

Greta

Greta's mother died when she was four. Her father raised her, but she also spent quite a bit of time with her maternal grandmother. Her grandmother was a very stable and loving presence in her life. Greta was one of the only respondents who was able to report a significant attachment to a parental figure.

When her children were removed, Greta was the single parent to three children. According to her narrative, Greta's children were removed because her daughter sustained an accidental curling iron burn and later a fall where she hit her head. Greta stated that she was forced into signing a Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) because she would not admit to physically abusing her child. This is an allegation she denies to this day.

Greta had three more children while still in the court system. All of these children were removed when they were only days old. When the oldest of these three children was born, Greta called Social Services of her own volition, and they immediately removed the one-week old child. That child was placed in an adoptive family out of state, and Greta has never seen her since. The other two babies were removed from her in the hospital. She was able to begin visitation with one of them very soon, but she was unable to see her youngest child for about six weeks after he was taken from the hospital.

Cherise

Cherise stated that her mother was addicted to 'crack'. She reported having to rely on herself for her entire childhood. She "raped" by her father when she was a young child and then also by a cousin when she was 12. Eventually, she was placed in foster care as an adolescent. She became pregnant and was moved to a maternity home where she had her first child.

Cherise's children were removed because she had to leave the maternity home where she had been living. Because she was 18, she was no longer able to live at the maternity home. She chose not to return to foster care, but got an apartment and a job. Protective Services failed to complete her home investigation on time, and when she was in the

hospital after delivering her second child, they told her she would lose both of her children if she refused to sign away the rights to her first child. She convinced the biological father of her first child to step in, and he now has full rights. She is now trying to get custody of her second child.

Leanne

Leanne's parents divorced when she was a child, and she was raised by her father. She reports that this was a time of utter chaos in which no one was really paying attention to the needs of the children. One of her early and enduring traumas was that her older brother sexually molested her for 10 years, beginning when she was 3 years old. She said that her mother knew about the abuse and did not do anything to stop it. She was also sexually abused by the brother of one of her friends when she was about 12.

Leanne was a single parent when her children were removed. Leanne reported that her life was a mess and her house was dirty and her children were unsupervised. She was the only respondent who stated that she deserved to lose her children. She realized that she was not caring for them properly, and while she reported a great deal of shame in her narrative, she also stated that losing her children had helped her in the long term to become a better mother. She stated that the work she did with her personal therapist was life-changing for her. Leanne also began weeping during the first question of the interview. She continued crying periodically throughout the entire interview.

The seven other respondents reported feelings of fear, betrayal, anger, and shame that they had been falsely accused of abuse or failure to protect when they felt they were doing their best at the time to protect and care for their children. As the respondents shared these personal stories, guilt, shame, and regret were a common theme. They also

expressed frustration at having been in impossible situations. There was a sense that they believed they had done their best in the face of insurmountable odds. But the most prevailing theme came from the five respondents who felt unjustly punished for something they did not do. While some of them expressed that they would change events if they could, the overwhelming experience was injustice, especially for those mothers who felt they were doing the right thing in protecting their children from other abusive people.

Emergent Themes

When the data was reviewed as a whole, several themes emerged. Most of the themes related directly to the research questions and the theoretical foundations of the questions. The themes are presented here by the theoretical category in which they best fit. The main Family Ecology themes were: visitation, separation and loss, identity/roles, and relationships with family and friends. The main Contextual themes were: injustice in the system, relationships in the system, and injustice in the family of origin. The final theme in this presentation accounts for the overall experience of the respondents as they moved through the system. This is not attached to a theoretical area, but stems directly from the first research question. Each main theme has several sub-themes. These themes and sub-themes are presented in a data matrix at the end of each section. Within the matrices, examples of the sub-themes are given. These are actual quotes to provide evidence of some of the coding and data reduction process.

Family Ecology Theory

The Family Ecology perspective focuses on the mother's environment and how she moved through the process of trying to regain motherhood in a fluctuating environment.

For a woman who has had her children removed, her micro-system and mesosystem must change drastically. Her children effectively become a part of her mesosystem rather than her day-to-day life. She must cope with this role and identity shift. She becomes more of a spectator in their lives, an ancillary person in their growth and development while they are living in foster care. She must be content with periodic visitation rather than daily quality and quantity time with her children. This theory also focuses on the relationships the mother has in her life. It was evident by looking at this data that many of the women were lacking basic relational support.

Separation and Loss

Separation from Children

All of the women in this study were separated from their children. It was one of the criteria for inclusion in the project. However, seven of the eight mentioned the strain of separation in the interview. The only respondent who did not mention this strain was Yasmine, and she was the respondent who reported the most positive experience and the best outcome. She indicated that the gains she made in this process helped her become a more competent parent and that sacrifice had been worth the cost. She also felt more in control of her children's fates because she had pre-selected her God-sister to be their foster mother if Child Protective Services came to take her children. The other seven women spoke of the pain of separation with great difficulty and emotion. Their words tell the story.

Anna:

"They try to make them; erase what memories they do have. They're hurting the kids more than the parents because the kids are the ones that are going to lose their memories of their mom and dad."

Belinda:

“So we didn’t know if we’d be a family again or not, and that just tore on me, my kids and my husband too.”

Allison:

“I was so upset. I couldn’t drive home; I was crying. I had to stop. My baby, I was like hugging him. I couldn’t believe they were going to leave, because I hadn’t been away from them for a second since they were born. I slept in Pontiac in a shelter because I didn’t want to leave the city they were in.”

Allison did not get her children back until her youngest, her baby, was five years old. She spoke not only of the general loss but also of the loss of the opportunity to parent him during his toddler years. Greta also experienced profound loss in that she had three of her babies removed at birth. After her rights were terminated on her oldest three children, she had another baby. They did not recognize this in the system while she was at the hospital, but she willingly called a case worker a week after her daughter was born, and they came right away and took her baby. She has not seen that baby since that time. That baby now lives in another state far away with adoptive parents. She went on to have two more babies, and both of those babies were removed in the hospital. She went two and a half months before she was allowed visitation with one of those babies. Those two boys are the only children she has the opportunity to reclaim.

Loss of Bond with Children

Another concern the respondents discussed was that this loss would contribute to an overall loss of their bond with their children. When they are granted the right to parent again, they will be fully reinstated in that role, but some of them wonder how the children will react to another change in their parenting constellation. Stacey was very sad when

she noted that her daughter, who is now 18 months old and has been in foster care since she was 8 months old, cried when the foster mom left at visitation. Stacey knows that this means her baby has attached to someone new. She acknowledged that the foster parents take good care of her baby, but she is quick to say to the foster mom, “I’m getting my baby back, you can’t have her.”

Belinda also mourns the time she missed with her youngest daughter. By the time her daughter was returned, she was in school. Belinda had planned to spend special time with her in the year before she had to go away to school every day. She now sees this as a squandered opportunity.

Trauma Response to Loss

Seven of the respondents voluntarily discussed that they struggled psychologically and emotionally when their children were removed. Their statements reveal trauma responses to this sudden loss. Anna stated that her ongoing issues with depression had worsened throughout the process. Both Stacey and Leanne reported that they felt “crazy” at first and didn’t know what to do. Leanne discussed her grief response in detail. She said that when her children were removed, she would cry until she was convulsing and throwing up. She went on to say that she was unable to accept help from her family for a while because she was so overwhelmed with grief. Belinda stated that she has trouble remembering her youngest daughter’s birthday. Missing two of those important birthdays was so painful for her that she has developed a mental block in that area.

This trauma response is important because it reveals further victimization in these women’s experience. The initial removal is bad enough, but the ensuing grief and loss

responses these women went through graphically illustrate how devastating the sudden loss of all of one's children can be.

Visitation

Another key theme that emerged in all of the interviews was the issue of visitation and how families adapt to this means of spending time with their children. When asked about how they adjusted to visitation, almost all of the women answered using the same phrase, "It was hard." They discussed overall visitation difficulties like how terrible it was to only see their children for an hour in a room with a case worker watching and taking notes. Several also mentioned that the leave-taking at the end of the visitation was also very difficult and continued to be difficult over time. In discussing visitation Greta said,

"I don't know if you ever adjust to it. It's just something that you do, and it's the only time you get to see your children."

Discipline in Visitation

The women also reported struggling with discipline during visitation times. Some said that they only got one hour with their children, and they didn't want to spend that precious time disciplining the children. Others said that their children were especially unruly during visits, and that made it hard to have good visitation time. Finally, they also said that being on display for the case workers made them nervous and unsure of what they could and could not do during the visit. This identity confusion became clear in other areas in each interview. The problem of trying to understand their own role as they tried to prove their fitness to parent came through in all of the interviews.

Identity and Roles

Challenge to Mother's Identity

The idea that someone was trying to strip away their motherhood was a common theme in almost every interview. The respondents felt challenged by case workers, judges and even foster parents. When asked about her role in her children's lives, Anna said,

"I feel that my role in their life right now is an outsider. I don't feel I have a role in their life. I don't feel I'm their mom."

Some of the respondents expressed that they still felt like moms to their children during their separation, but that the encroachment of foster parent's fondness toward their children made them nervous. Several of the women echoed strains of the statement, "You can't have my baby" in reference to foster parents.

Failure, Shame, and Regret

The feelings of shame and regret were expressed often in the data as well as a sense of failure. Some of the mothers reflected that losing their children was a very shameful experience for them. Cherise reported that she never told anyone she lost her children. She would always tell people they were with their father if she was asked. Regret seemed to surface more for the mothers who felt they could have done something different to change their current circumstances. Yasmine stated that she didn't fight hard enough to remain clean and sober when she lost her first five children. She feels this failure led to her youngest three children spending some time in foster care as well. A few of the respondents stated that this outcome was the direct result of their own failure and that if they had been better moms, their children would still be with them.

Validation and Growth as a Mother

In contrast to feelings of shame and regret, many of the mothers experienced validation of their motherhood during this experience. They also reported that they had made gains in their abilities as mothers. Cherise proudly stated that she knows what her baby needs by his cries. When asked if this kind of love was demonstrated to her, she stated that she never had this kind of love as a child, but just loved and understood her own children by instinct. Many of the women got validation for their stance as a mother from their own children. They felt that their children still responded to them appropriately. This validation seemed to provide for them a hope for a better future.

Some of the mothers also cited that they had grown as mothers because of this experience. Yasmine said that it was both a good and bad experience for her because she was able to finally get sober and become who she needed to be for her children. Other moms discussed how they had learned parenting techniques and information about their children's development that really informed them as mothers and made them approach parenting with more confidence. Leanne expressed her growth in the following way,

“It has brought me the closest I will ever be to hell, and I’ve had to come out of that to become my own person...They would never have known what it’s like to have a good mom if this hadn’t happened, but this is the hardest thing I have ever been through.”

Personal Achievement

Finally, most of the women reported personal achievement as a part of their experience. They were able to say proudly that they had kept jobs, obtained housing and completed the court's requirements. For some of them, it seemed that this was one of the first times they had felt so proud of an achievement in their lives. The only respondent who did not discuss any personal achievement was Anna whose experience was

overwhelmingly negative. She is also the only mother who was least likely to get her children back. The other women interviewed were either already parenting again or were on the verge of getting their children back home. Anna, however, did not have that hope nor that sense of achievement at the time of the interview.

Relationships with Family and Friends

Domestic Violence with Spouses or Partners

From a family ecological perspective, it was important to note that half of the women in the study experienced domestic violence at the hands of their husbands or boyfriends. This is in addition to the incidents reported earlier of domestic violence in the families of origin. The respondents only discussed these events in passing, usually in the narrative of removal or in the construction of the genogram, but it seemed important to note that several of the women were living in continued cycles of violence and victimization at the time their children were removed.

Family Support

Despite high levels of abuse, sexual abuse, and partner domestic violence, five of the women reported having good family support during their experience. Stacey said that her siblings (the same siblings that used to join in teasing her at school) just kept encouraging her. She said it made a difference for her. Belinda, in particular, felt supported by her husband's family. However, Belinda also felt that her own family of origin wanted her to lose the children forever. She said that when she and her husband were awarded their rights, her brother left the courtroom angrily. Cherise even noted that her family just didn't care and she had been forced to deal with her circumstances with no support. Out of the eight interviews, the respondents discussed ten family relationships: five of the

relationships were supportive and five were not supportive. Some of the women had both supportive and non-supportive families which accounts for the total of family relationships being greater than eight.

Social Support

The respondents did not report on this area consistently. Only one woman said that she had good support from her church community. Three women said that they felt a distinct lack of social support. Two women reported that their children living in foster care caused their social circles to change. Greta noted that some people stopped trusting her because they were afraid she would call Protective Services on them. Stacey said that her friends wanted her to live a party lifestyle with them because she was unencumbered when her children left. She said it was necessary for her to get new friends.

Table 4.1 shows all of the emergent themes and sub-themes that came out of the Family Ecology theory. Most of the sub-themes have examples of quotes from the respondents. Also, the table shows the frequency out of eight that each sub-theme occurred.

Table 4.1: Matrix of Family Ecology Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme*	Example
Basic Survival	Needing housing, car or job (2/8)	“I need a car and a house and a job” “I need a house”
Visitation Issues	Overall Difficulty (7/8)	“At first it was just terrible” “It’s a big thing when you see them” “They didn’t want to leave when it was time to go” “I don’t know if you ever adjust to it, but it’s the only time you get to see your children”

Table 4.1: Matrix of Family Ecology Themes (Continued)

	Discipline in visitation (5/8)	<p>"I didn't want to spend the whole hour disciplining them"</p> <p>"They wanted to play"</p> <p>"They wouldn't listen"</p>
Separation/Loss	Separation from children (7/8)	<p>"She's been gone half her life now"</p> <p>"They had never been away from me"</p> <p>"She was hanging on to me because she didn't want to go"</p> <p>"I went two months without seeing my kids"</p> <p>"I don't know what my kids are doing"</p>
	Loss of Bond with children (4/8)	<p>"The baby cried when the foster mom left"</p> <p>"I missed important time with my youngest daughter"</p> <p>"Three of my babies were removed from the hospital when they were born"</p> <p>"The kids are going to lose their memories of their mom and dad"</p>
	Kid's experience of loss (2/8)	<p>"Our son was thinking about committing suicide"</p> <p>"He was devastated when they took him from me and to be placed with strangers"</p>
	Loss of Family Rituals (1/8)	<p>"We couldn't give them gifts at Christmas"</p>
	Trauma Response to Loss (7/8)	<p>"I can't remember their birthdays anymore"</p> <p>"After I lost my children, I wanted to die"</p> <p>"After they were gone, I would cry until I was throwing up"</p> <p>"I went crazy at first"</p>
Identity/Roles	Challenge to Mom's Identity (7/8)	<p>"You can't have my baby"</p> <p>"I didn't feel like a mom"</p> <p>"My role in their life right now is an outsider"</p> <p>"She (foster mom) is very attached to my baby"</p>
	Validation of motherhood (4/8)	<p>"They still treat me like a mom"</p> <p>"I know my baby's cries"</p> <p>"I feel like I'm their mom, just not full-time"</p>
	Personal Achievement (7/8)	<p>"I was able to maintain my house"</p> <p>"I deserve a chance to parent"</p> <p>"I'm learning from my mother's mistakes"</p>

Table 4.1: Matrix of Family Ecology Themes (Continued)

	Growth as a Mom (4/8)	“I understand what my children need now” “The professionals tell me I’m a wonderful mother” “They would never have know what it’s like to have a good mom if this hadn’t happened”
	Failure as a Mom (3/8)	“I didn’t fight like I should have” “I failed”
	Shame/Regret (2/8)	“If I could go back, I would have stayed in foster care until I was 21” “I didn’t tell very many people”
Relationships with Family and Friends	Changes in Social Circles (2/8)	“I lost a lot of friends” “I’m doing a fair job of separating myself from the hood”
	Family Support (5/10)**	“They kept encouraging me” “They understood” In-laws very supportive
	Lack of Family Support (5/10)**	“I felt like they wanted us to lose the kids” “My family didn’t care”
	Domestic Violence with Spouses or Partners (4/8)	
	Good Social Support (1/8)	“Our church was very supportive”
	Lack of Social Support (2/8)	“I depend on myself” “A lot of people blame me”

*Numbers indicate how many respondents out of the total (8) were coded for that theme.

**Numbers indicate the frequency out of 10 relationships discussed in the eight interviews.

Contextual Theory

Injustice in the System

Contextual theory was used to build the foundation of this project to help the researcher look at the participants in terms of equitable or inequitable experiences as they shared their version of moving through the process of earning back their right to parent. Questions posed were meant only to elicit the experiential responses from each woman, but the theme of injustice came out repeatedly in each interview. The theme of injustice

in the system presented itself as the respondents talked about perceived powerlessness, the unfairness of their situation, the sense that they were being punished for doing nothing wrong, feelings of having capitulated to the powers of the system sometimes under coercion, struggling with chaos in the system and an experience of being invisible with no voice. It is important to remember that the terms 'justice' and 'injustice' are used here because they are a part of the terminology of Contextual theory that is always focused on bringing about relational fairness. The justice or lack of justice is not an objective state in the lives of the respondents. It is not intended that the term 'justice' be interpreted in a legal sense. Rather, experiences of injustice reported here are based on the respondents' accounts of their personal journeys through the child welfare system. These sub-themes are presented here to further expound on this main theme of injustice.

Powerlessness

Five of the eight women interviewed stated that they felt powerless in this particular situation. This feeling of powerlessness seemed to stem from two areas: the inability to have any control in the process and timing of having their children returned and the inability at times to get their own life under sufficient control in order to parent. When asked what she could control in this process, Stacey said,

“Nothing, nothing was in my control. Still ain’t. The only thing I control is what I decide I’m going to eat.”

Belinda also expressed this feeling of powerlessness as she discussed how she never had a clear time-line for getting her children back. Every three months she said that the case worker would add a new requirement based on a new charge against them. Finally she stated,

“When they just added more things...well it wasn’t good enough for them...what more can you do?”

Unfairness

Perceived unfairness was also experienced by four of the eight women interviewed. This theme came out most strongly for the women whose children had been taken because of abuse not caused by them. Stacey expressed this when she described how three of her children were being spanked in their foster homes. This seemed vastly unfair to her because they were removed when she spanked her son for getting suspended from school. Another respondent, Anna, lobbied to have her children moved from her sister’s care into the care of a regular foster home because she knew that domestic violence was common in her sister’s home. She experienced this unfairness keenly because she lost her children, but her sister has not been penalized for allowing the same kind of abuse. Further, Anna felt that calling the police when her husband was beating his daughter was the best way she could handle the situation. The seeming unfair retaliation of the system felt extremely unjust to her.

Punished for Nothing

Similar to the theme of unfairness, the experience of being punished for nothing was also expressed by some of the respondents. In Allison’s case, she left an abusive husband and then had to leave an abusive father. She felt that this was the best course of action to protect her boys. She felt punished for asking for help with housing because that was when her situation was made known to Protective Services. Here she says,

“Well the way it happened was that I could understand if I did something wrong, but I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t leave them anywhere or beat them. You know, hurt them in any way. I

just asked, I went to the State, and I just think the system is so corrupt. They say they want to help people but really they don't care."

Coercion and Capitulation

One of the more frustrating aspects of the respondents' experience of injustice was that of being coerced and then having capitulated under pressure. For some of the women, they were pressured into signing away the rights of one child in order to gain the rights to another child. These feelings of betrayal were clearly expressed by Cherise,

"Well, to me, I think it was kind of blackmail. After having a baby, after having my baby took out from the hospital from me, um, my attorney came to me and told me they were pushing to terminate rights for my oldest son. And they were like, 'if you don't sign off on your oldest son, both your rights to both sons will be terminated.'"

In this instance, she said she had no choice but to capitulate because she didn't want to lose both of her children on the same day that she gave birth to the second child.

Capitulation was also evidenced in the women's stories as they discussed the only way they survived the system was by doing exactly as they were told to do. Several expressed that no matter the request, the best way to make it through was total compliance.

Chaos in the System

Another way the respondents registered feelings of injustice was by discussing the chaos in the Protective Services system. Allison's case took three years, two Counties and 10 case workers. Belinda's case took two years to finalize, and she worked with four case workers. Greta lost her oldest four children because her attorney refused to listen to her wishes. The case worker told her that it didn't matter what she did; she was never going to get her children back. After firing her lawyer and being assigned a new case worker, she has the chance to reclaim custody of her two youngest children. This chaos

in the system was experienced as injustice to the mothers because they felt that the system was holding a double-standard. They felt they were expected to be perfect, yet case workers, lawyers, and therapists could mess up, drop out, and disappear with no consequences. Further, they knew that all the chaos caused them to spend a longer time seeking reunification.

Being Invisible/Not Heard

Only two of the eight respondents discussed this aspect of their experience. But they both said that the judges, therapists, and case workers did not really know them, and that all they were being evaluated on was written somewhere on a piece of paper by someone who did not know anything about their true character. All of the respondents participated in the study quite willingly. They were very open about their stories, pain, and experiences. Several of the mothers told the researcher that they were glad to get the chance to really tell their side of the story. This theme of feeling invisible with no voice seems to have contributed to their willingness to be a part of the project. And this aspect of giving voice to the voiceless was one of the foundational concepts for this project.

Relationships in the System

The data that emerged as a part of this theme was very complex because of the number of relationships each woman has in the system. She has relationships with case workers, foster parents, therapists, lawyers, and judges. Sometimes she has multiple relationships with these professionals as we saw in the above section on chaos in the system. The data here will be presented in blocks. On the table that follows, the breakdown of each relationship will be provided.

Relationships with Foster Parents

This relationship was particularly intense for most of the women interviewed. Some of the women had multiple foster parents they were dealing with, and ten foster parent/mother relationships were discussed. While some of them had good relationships with the foster parents of their children (four out of ten relationships discussed), the majority did not have good relationships with the foster parents of their children (six out of the ten relationships discussed). For instance, Stacey's six children were living in five different foster homes. Also, Allison, Leanne and Belinda had children in foster homes where a relative was caring for their children. For Leanne and Belinda this was a good thing because they had more access to their children's lives than the other mothers. For Allison, this was not a good situation because Protective Services placed her boys with her abusive father who was actively seeking guardianship of the boys. She stated that her relationship with her dad throughout her experience felt like a war.

Anna reported that initially her relationship with the foster mom was really good. But one day they exchanged a few words, and the foster mom cut off all contact, refusing even to see Anna at drop-off and pick up times for visitation. Cherise also reported a similar incident. She had been attending church with the foster family in order to maintain extra visits with her son. She asked the foster mom not to have her son refer to foster mom and foster dad as 'mommy' and 'daddy'. The foster mom immediately cut off contact and extra visits with Cherise.

For those respondents who did share good relationships with the foster families, they were still reserved in their estimation of the benefit of the overall relationship. However positive the relationship was, most of the respondents indicated a certain level of distrust

and of being usurped in the parenting role. Leanne reported that she had a pretty good relationship with her baby's foster mom but that she believed the foster mom had become too attached to the baby. Greta said that she felt it worked against her that so many of the foster parents were also prospective adoptive parents. She indicated that the conflict of interest for the foster parent made it more difficult for her as the biological parent to establish and maintain credibility. She went on to relay this account,

“They wouldn't talk to me (the foster parents). After visitation, I would come out and ask them about how school was doing, and my case worker at the time told them not to speak to me that she didn't want them to speak to me. And then after court when they were out in the lobby, they wouldn't talk to me neither.”

Greta was hurt and frustrated by this treatment because she felt she had a right to know how her children were doing and what was going on in their lives.

Two of the moms said that while they were grateful for all the foster parents had done for them and their children, they also were experiencing feelings of guilt. They felt somehow beholden to the foster parent for caring for their children, and these feelings made them less likely to voice concerns for themselves and their children.

Relationships with Case Workers

Another complex theme is that of the relationship with case workers. Five of the respondents reported bad relationships with case workers and four reported good relationships with case workers. The reason the numbers do not add up to the total number of respondents is because some of the women had multiple case workers and some of the women did not report in this area.

Yasmine reported a very good relationship with her case worker. She also felt that her own compliance contributed to the positive nature of their alliance. She approved of

all the services the case worker suggested and really felt the case worker advocated for her. Allison also stated that she only got her children back because of the case worker,

“I think I got the kids back more because of the case worker, the foster care worker in this County and the kid’s Guardian ad Litem. They were really trying to return to me and if they weren’t, then I would have lost 100% because the judge was ready to say ‘forget it’.”

Her ability to form a good working relationship with a case worker was significant because she had had about 10 case workers by that time.

Those who reported poor relationships with their case workers ranged in the reasons from feeling the case workers were incompetent to feeling that the case workers didn’t understand them or have the time to devote to their particular case. Leanne stated that her case worker usually didn’t call her back when she left messages. Greta and Cherise felt that their case workers couldn’t possibly understand their needs because they didn’t have children of their own.

Relationships with Therapists

Only one respondent reported having a bad relationship with her therapist. Cherise stated that she was having trouble trusting her new therapist because the previous therapist had “run her mouth” to the case worker. For a person who already felt coerced in signing a TPR (Termination of Parental Rights), this was a difficult blow to her ability to join with and trust other professionals in this experience.

Most of the respondents reported having very good relationships with their therapists. Leanne said that her work with her individual therapist had been “life changing”. Yasmine connected well with all three of her therapists and said that her work with each helped her to become a better mom. Belinda stated that the person who

was most helpful to her was the FIT therapist who understood her, her unique situation, and who helped her advocate for herself. Anna, whose experience was primarily negative, said that her FIT therapist listened and did not judge her the way she felt other professionals did.

Relationships with Other Professionals

Relationships with judges, lawyers, and referees are included under this theme. Most of the respondents didn't have much contact with these professionals outside of court dates, but some of their interactions weighed heavily in their perception of overall experience. For instance, both Belinda and Cherise felt publicly humiliated and chastised by judges on their case in the courtroom. Also, Greta felt that her lawyer acted in ways that completely disregarded her best interests and those of her children. She said that he usually did the exact opposite of what she wanted him to do in the court hearings.

By contrast, Greta now has a new lawyer who she says fights "tooth and nail" for her. She said that at her last court hearing, she could hear him arguing for her all the way out to the lobby. It was evident by the tone of her voice that his willingness to take up her fight truly buoyed her own self-confidence and self-respect. Greta was the only respondent to report good relationships with judges or lawyers. Her newfound confidence in her lawyer gives her hope for the future.

Injustice in the Family of Origin

Experiences of injustice in the family of origin were expected in this project because of the Contextual theoretical base and because of the researcher's previous work with this population. The data for this section of the report was derived from the interview and from the family history information that respondents gave during the construction of the

genogram. Respondents were surprisingly open about sharing their experiences of loss, abuse, and betrayal in their families. No single respondent indicated a family in which she felt she could trust her parents to protect her. All of the respondents experienced some form of loss or abuse in their relationships with their primary caregivers as children or young people.

Physical/Verbal Abuse

Four of the eight respondents reported being abused physically, verbally or both in their homes while growing up. Stacey reported that her step father was abusive and that her brothers and sisters have always been her greatest support system. But when she was discussing this, she also mentioned that her brothers used to join in with others at school when they made fun of her. Allison reported that her experience in trying to gain independence was difficult because she had always been under the care of her father or her husband, both of whom were physically abusive. When asked about her relationship with her father she said,

“He was mean. He used to call me names and hit me.”

This abuse seemed ongoing in her life because for the three years that she was fighting for the right to parent again, her two boys were living with her abusive father.

Anna also experienced severe physical abuse in her family of origin. She spoke of being afraid that her mother would beat her to death. This history of abuse will always be with her. She feels particularly maligned by the system because she thought she did the best possible thing by calling the police when her husband abused his daughter. She still does not know what she could have done different to protect her step daughter and still be a mother to her other children.

Sexual Abuse

Physical abuse and sexual abuse are reported separately because the respondents who stated that they had been physically abused did not report personal incidents of sexual abuse. Four of the women interviewed reported sexual abuse in their family of origin. Stacey reported that her biological father had molested her sister, but he did not molest her. Leanne said that her older brother sexually abused her for 10 years, from age 3 to age 13. Also, at the age of 12, she was raped by the brother of a friend. Her outrage at this injustice was evident especially when she discussed how her mother knew of the familial abuse and did nothing to stop it. She felt betrayed by her entire family and protected by no one.

Yasmine reported sexual abuse by her grandfather. She stated it so casually in the course of the interview it almost seemed out of place. In response to the question, "Who was the most important adult in your life when you were a child?" she stated that her grandparents had taken care of her because her mother didn't spend much time looking after her. She indicated that her grandfather was very important to her. When asked if he was good to her, she said,

"Yeah, yeah. For the most, I mean, other than there was...he had me drinkin' with him so that I wouldn't tell grandma he was drinkin' cuz he wasn't supposed to drink, and then as I got a little older, then there was some molestation involved...when I was probably eleven, twelve."

She went on to relate that the molestation continued until she got pregnant with her first child at 16. She cited the person who sexually abused her for five years and introduced her to addiction as the most important person in her childhood. It wasn't clear

from her account of things if she even understood that experience as an injustice in her life.

It is also important to note here that sexual abuse in the sample was widespread but it was not necessarily isolated to the family of origin. Of the eight respondents, four were raped. Two of the women who were sexually assaulted did not report any sexual abuse in the home. If all of the sexual abuse is taken together, six of the eight respondents were sexually abused, sexually assaulted, or both at some point in their lives.

Chaos in the Home/Divorce

Most of the women interviewed reported high levels of chaos, distress, or divorce in their homes while they were growing up. A look at Allison's genogram shows divorce for three generations. Yasmine's mother had many male partners, and the identity of her biological father was not revealed to her until she was an adolescent. Cherise reported that her mother was a "crack" addict and that she was placed in foster care as an adolescent. In fact, she entered motherhood while still a foster child herself. And Anna said that she would have been better off in foster care rather than in the care of her mother as her account describes,

"She showed her gentlemen friends more love, more attention. She'd rather have them than her kids. She could have lost her kids, she probably would have been better off. I probably would have a better life. I'd probably still have my kids. I would have made better decisions."

More than all the other respondents, Anna reported the most negative experience. She was also very ambivalent about foster care in that she felt she would have been better off in a foster home, but she could see no value of a foster home for her own children.

Lack of Parental Attachment

In each interview there was no evidence of attachments with father figures. All eight respondents discussed either abusive fathers or absent fathers. None of them reported any kind of paternal support. Similarly, six of the eight reported poor or lost attachments with their mothers. Greta and Belinda both lost their mothers when they passed away. Greta was four and says she has only vague memories of her mother. Belinda was 19, but says that with her mother's passing went all of her familial support. She describes the rest of her family as "very cold-hearted".

Cherise stated that her mother is now clean, sober, and wants to play a motherly role in her life. Cherise seemed to find that laughable and says that it is too late for her mother to try to raise her. She further stated that her own maternal instincts had nothing to do with the way she was raised. She says that she only learns from her mother's mistakes.

One of the most poignant accounts came from Anna's interview. She said that she got no love or affection from her mother and that her mother did not deserve the role. She expresses regret and loss in the following words,

"Well, if she'd just been there a little bit more and would have showed me the right way and the things to do right and the things not to do then maybe my life and the predicament I'm in now wouldn't have happened."

The only two women to report close relationships with their mothers went on to contradict these statements later in the interview. The data shows, at best, that two of the respondents had ambiguous attachments to their mothers and two of the respondents lost their attachments to their mothers through death. While the data shows loss of both

mother and father stability for almost all of the respondents, it also very clearly outlined loss in the process of regaining parenthood for these mothers.

Table 4.2 shows the themes and sub-themes related to Contextual theory. Some quotes of participants are included as well as frequencies for each sub-theme.

Table 4.2: Contextual Theory Emergent Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme*	Example
Injustice in the System	Powerlessness (5/8)	“Nothing was in my control” “I’m in an impossible situation” “I’ve put my life on hold until they’re done messing with me”
	Unfairness (4/8)	“3 of my kids were getting spanked in foster care” “I don’t think I’m a child abuser” “I felt violated”
	Punished for Nothing (4/8)	“I didn’t do anything wrong” “They removed my kids because they said I didn’t protect her”
	Capitulation (4/8)	“Voluntarily signing away my rights was the worst thing I could have done” “They also pressured me into signing a TPR for my oldest” “I’m kissing their butts”
	Coercion (4/8)	“They convinced me to leave them in temporary foster care” “I think it was blackmail”
	Chaos in System (4/8)	Case took 3 years & 10 case workers “They procrastinated and failed to give me a home inspection in time” “I’ve been in the system 4 ½ years”
	Being invisible/not heard (2/8)	“They don’t know me for who I am” “The judge doesn’t see me for who I am”
Relationships in the System	Obligation to Foster Parent (2/8)	
	Bad Relationships with Foster Parents (6/10)**	“He would never let me see them” “She cut off extra visits” “The other foster families wouldn’t talk to me”

Table 4.2: Contextual Theory Emergent Themes (Continued)

	Good Relationships with Foster Parents (4/10)**	
	Good relationships with case workers (4/8)	“My caseworker this time has been really helpful”
	Bad relationships with caseworkers (5/8)	“The caseworker took my oldest kids away because I wouldn’t admit to being a child abuser” “My case worker usually doesn’t call me back”
	Good relationships with therapists (5/8)	“She listens to me and doesn’t judge me” “My work with my therapist has been life-changing”
	Bad relationships with therapists (1/8)	“One of my therapists ran her mouth to my caseworker”
	Good relationships with other professionals (1/8)	“I have a good lawyer”
	Bad relationships with other professionals (4/8)	“The judge told me I was a bad mom” “The judge congratulated me for a good decision, throwing it in my face” “My first lawyer wouldn’t listen to me” “My lawyer is an idiot”
Injustice in Family of Origin	Physical/Verbal Abuse (4/8)	“He used to call me names and hit me” “My brothers joined in when others made fun of me at school”
	Sexual Abuse (3/8)	“He molested me for several years” “I was raped at 7 by my dad and again at 12 by a cousin” “My brother molested me for 10 years”
	Chaos in the home/Divorce (6/8)	Parents divorced when I was 6 Respondent’s mom had many sexual partners Respondent’s mom – heavy drug use
	Lack of Parental Attachment (7/8)	“I did not get that nurturing from my mom” “My mom died when I was four” “I didn’t have that (love) from my mom” “My mom flaked out, she knew about the abuse and didn’t do anything”

*Numbers indicate how many respondents out of the total (8) were coded for that theme.

**Numbers indicate the frequency out of 10 relationships discussed in the eight interviews.

Overall Experience

The data that speaks to the respondents' overall experience while their children lived in foster care is presented separately because this area of inquiry did not stem directly from the theoretical conceptualization of the project. However, since learning the experience of these mothers was the initiating inquiry for this study, this piece is extremely important. The experiences of these mothers have been well-represented in the data above, but they were also asked to discuss their perceptions of their own journey directly, therefore, the following synopses of the respondents thoughts on the overall experience will conclude this presentation of the data. Table 4.3 depicts the sub-themes, frequencies and quotes for the category of "overall experience".

Fear

When discussing their experiences in global terms, most of the women mentioned fear. They feared the total loss of their children and some feared this with good reason. Greta, Yasmine, Stacey, and Cherise had all lost children irrevocably. They were also left with the fear that the children that had been returned to them could be taken away again at any time. This fear led directly to an overall fear of the system. About half of the women discussed fearing the system. Allison stated it this way,

"I guess I'm afraid of the system. I'm afraid that they can do corrupt things to families and break apart families. They violate people and get away with it. And they can say anything they want to say and do anything they want to do and get away with it."

A few women also talked about being fearful of messing up. They noted that anything they did or said while under the court's jurisdiction could be used against them. Some felt unable to trust the professionals assigned to help them because they had been betrayed before.

Positive Experiences and Divine Encounters

Three of the women reported positive outcomes in their experiences. Yasmine, Leanne, and Greta all stated that this process had helped them to become better mothers. They each took responsibility for their past failures and were able to grow during the time their children were away from them. The primary difference that they stated was that they took the services offered to them and used the services to their full advantage. Greta said the parenting classes were really helpful. Yasmine had very good relationships with all three of her therapists, and Leanne even stated that her work with her therapist had been “life changing”. Also, two of the women discussed how their dependence on God had helped them through the experience. They both related that they had turned to God because of this experience, and they felt their new-found faith was crucial to their survival in difficult times.

General Experience

While it is obvious that some of the respondents were able to glean important lessons from their time of separation from their children, the reports of overall experience were very grim. Following are some of their words.

Anna:

“It’s like the worst thing to ever happen in life.”

Stacey:

“It was very traumatic. It was the worst thing that ever happened to me in my whole life.”

Belinda:

“I feel like I’ve been abused by the system.”

Allison:

“I have to put my life on hold until they’re done messing with me.”

Greta:

“It changes it (life) dramatically because your kids aren’t there, so there’s no way to move on. It’s like a roller-coaster that goes up and down, and it don’t stop.”

Yasmine:

“They have the power and control, but in the long run it was up to me to do what I was supposed to do and utilize the services to get them back.”

Cherise:

“Like, me signing off my rights, that was a bad experience for me. Overall, it has it’s ups and downs, so it’s a good experience and a bad experience.”

Leanne:

“It’s really sad to say that I’ve lost my kids and gained so much. I needed these circumstances to help me grow up. If they hadn’t been taken, my kids would have had a messed up childhood like I did.”

Table 4.3: Matrix of Overall Experiences

Theme	Sub-Theme*	Example
Overall Experience	General experience	“It was horrifying” “Hell” “Both a good and bad experience” “It’s like a roller coaster that goes up and down and it don’t stop” “It’s the worst thing to ever happen in life”
	Fear of Total Loss (5/8)	“They could at any time take them away from me”
	Fear of the System (4/8)	“I don’t trust the system” “I feel anything can be used against me”
	Positive Experience (3/8)	“I’m kind of glad this stuff happened like it did because now I could get the help and be a better mom for my kids” “This experience made me realize what was wrong in my life” “I’ve lost my kids, but gained so much”
	Divine Encounter (2/8)	“Ever since they took my son, God has really been on my side” “I prayed to God every day”

*Numbers indicate how many respondents out of the total (8) were coded for that theme.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Human Ecology Theory

Human Ecology theory was used to conceptualize this project because it offered a way to look at the population of interest while considering context and how the changes in context and environment may influence experience. The research questions derived from Human Ecology Theory were as follows: What ecological factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system? How does the mother adapt to her change of status when children are removed? What is the mother's role during the reunification process?

The data demonstrates that the primary ecological factors contributing to a mother's experience were: relationships with family and friends, shifts in roles, challenges to her motherhood and the trauma brought on by separation from children. The data also showed that women actually adapted fairly well to their role-shift. While they had to assimilate their feelings of grief and loss, they did not cease to feel and act like mothers while they were separated from their children. The respondents stated that they still felt like mothers and that they retained a role even when living apart from their children. They also demonstrated that part of their role in reunification was to comply with the system. Some discussed that working hard to meet the requirements of the system brought them feelings of achievement and personal growth. The results as they relate to Human Ecology theory are discussed in detail below.

Relationships with Family and Friends

A noteworthy finding of this study was that none of the women had consistent support from family or friends. Out of the eight interviews, ten family relationships were

discussed. Five of the relationships discussed were supportive, but five family relationships also revealed a lack of support. The reason for this is that some of the same respondents cited both supportive and unsupportive relationships in their family networks. It seems clear from Human Ecology standpoint that the lack of family support played a role in the experience of these women as they tried to regain custody. Some of the responses also pointed to very complex and ambivalent relationships with family. At least two of the respondents said that formerly abusive parents were now supportive. They expressed gratitude for the help, but they conveyed a sense of regret for not getting the help they needed from family earlier when it might have preserved their connections with their children.

There was also a deficit in the area of social support. Only one woman spoke of supportive friends and a supportive community at her church. If we understand individuals and families in terms of their embedded contexts, this stark lack of support may demonstrate that when these women were in crisis, they did not have many human resources at their disposal for help or advice. Without this critical network of connections, their failures as mothers can be seen also as a failure of their relational support systems.

Separation and Loss

Since human and family ecology is concerned with looking at the family and individuals in their context, separation of family members is a key factor for families separated by the Child Welfare system. Most of the respondents in this study recounted vividly traumatic separations from their children. The significance of this goes beyond the immediate and lasting emotional turmoil; rather, this separation thrusts both mother

and children into a new context. The children are forced to change their microsystem in a matter of minutes or hours often changing schools as well. The mothers cease to be mothering. Mothers and children become a part of each other's mesosystem with weekly hour-long visits.

Most of the mothers spoke of this separation as very traumatic. They also discussed fears for their children because some of them did not know at first where their children were living and who was taking care of them. Two basic aspects of human ecology theory come into play here. The first is that it is not natural for families, especially children, to be able to separate in such a fashion with no transition. This study focused on a mother's experience, and the results demonstrated the mothers' eroded trust in the Child Welfare system because of these sudden and harsh separations. However, trust is also eroded in the children who thrive on consistency and predictability. The other aspect that this separation addresses is that the mothers who had children removed very rarely had supportive families and communities that could take in their children. This lack of support could point to why women in these impossible situations are unable to continue parenting their children.

Another aspect of loss and separation is that of visitation. Most of the women interviewed were only able to see their children weekly for one hour. The exceptions were those few who had children placed with relatives or friends who allowed extra visits. All of the mothers agreed that visitation was hard because they wanted to spend the time with their children rather than spend that time demonstrating their parenting or disciplinary skills. The required separation of children living in foster care also causes the mother's role to shift dramatically.

Roles and Identities

Human ecology is concerned with how people adapt to roles and role changes in their lives. In fact, roles have also been described as creating actual context in people's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Certainly the role of mother is a large role that, according to the theory, would have to shift when children are removed from the home. The aspect of visitation discussed above points to this role shift. Human ecology is also concerned with adaptation, and when asked how they adapted to the role shift, most of the mothers talked about how hard it was to parent their children for such a short time in front of a watchful audience. They discussed how difficult it was to only see their children for an hour a week, but that the primary adaptation was just coping with the situation because they had no other choice.

Women also experience an identity shift when their children are removed from them. They no longer have the same day-to-day responsibilities for their children. This identity shift was most difficult for them to assimilate into their lives when they felt their motherhood was directly challenged. The mothers mentioned having to tell foster parents that they could not have their children permanently. They also discussed the pain of feeling coerced into signing away their rights to some of their children in order to win back the rights of other children. All of these challenges to the mother's identity and claim to her children contribute to the overall experience.

This study proposed that these role shifts and challenges to mother's identities would play a large role in how the mother's felt about themselves as moms and as active parts of their children's lives. However, many of the mothers stated that they still felt like moms even though they were not getting to spend daily time with their children. They often

spoke of the connection they continued to have with their children. In this they showed some resilience in being able to maintain solid relationships with their children. They also spoke positively about feeling ready to parent again. While the separation and role shifts may have been dramatic and difficult, most of the mothers reported that their identities as mothers remained intact.

Validation and Achievement

One reason the mothers may have reported sustained identities as moms is that many experienced a sense of validated motherhood and achievement during their journey through the system. This achievement can be seen as an adaptation to the new context of parenting from a distance. Many reported feeling that they were better mothers for having made it through the trials and tribulations of their own experience. Some said that the services were very helpful and that they were much better equipped to be good parents. However, the most powerful theme to come out of this area was that of personal achievement. The women reported achievements with glowing pride that they had met the requirements of the system and that they were able to prove themselves, keep jobs, find suitable housing, and be in a viable place to reclaim their children. They expressed this in terms of wonder. This personal achievement that is also an adaptation to the circumstances seemed to bolster their confidence and their ability to believe that they could overcome obstacles of extreme difficulty.

Contextual Theory

Contextual theory was used in the conceptualization of this study to help the researcher look at aspects of justice, fairness, and power as they relate to women who have lost their children to foster care. Clinically, this theory is concerned with

identifying injustices in people's lives and helping them bring about relational fairness for themselves and others with whom they are connected. For this study, Contextual theory was used based on the assumption that people must live in families and exist in communities that promote relational fairness in order to thrive (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). The research questions that stemmed from Contextual theory were: What contextual factors contribute to a mother's experience of the foster care system? How does the mother experience justice or injustice in the foster care system? What is the mother's perception of power in this experience?

The primary contextual factors that appeared to contribute to experience for the respondents were injustice in families, distributive injustice, injustice in the system and resulting eroding relationships. There were multiple layers of injustice in the lives of each respondent, with only a few experiencing just or fair dealings with case workers or therapists. When respondents discussed the injustices they experienced in the system, they used terms like "violated" and "blackmail". The results for the experience of power were mixed. Some of the women said they felt powerless in this situation and that they had no control in their own lives or destinies. Others took a different view of this and stated that as long as they were compliant with the system, they felt they did have the power to achieve reinstated motherhood. The specific results related to Contextual Theory are discussed below.

Relational Injustice

According to the theoretical assumptions of this study, relational injustices may contribute to a woman's ability or inability to parent her children, thus this aspect of Contextual theory is very important in understanding the findings of this study. The data

demonstrated relational injustices on many fronts for the participants of this study. There was evidence of severe injustices in the family of origin for each respondent including chaos in the home, divorce, physical abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and a lack of attachment to parents. The respondents indicated that some of these injustices led directly to their poor decision-making as parents. Some of them even stated that if they had gotten what they needed from parents, they might have traveled a different path in their lives.

It is very interesting to note that none of the respondents spoke of a happy childhood or of overwhelmingly supportive parents. They had all suffered in one degree or another at the hands of their family members, and some of them had suffered tremendously. This suffering and injustice in the family of origin made it impossible for these women to grow and develop in a safe environment. The respondents did not have fair or equitable relationships modeled for them. They were ill-equipped to face motherhood and thus experienced many levels of failure and loss.

Distributive Injustice

Contextual theory is also concerned with how global injustice affects individuals and families. This type of global injustice is referred to as distributive injustice (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991) and sets the backdrop for a person's life and the context in which all of their relationships will take place. Distributive injustice includes life events and situations such as poverty, discrimination, racism, and living in violent surroundings. The women who participated in this study had certainly faced distributive injustice in their lives. One example of this is poverty. While the study did not inquire directly about income or socio economic status, it was clear that each

woman in the study was just barely keeping a job and paying the bills. Two noted that they really needed to find jobs. Not a single woman in the study had the power that money would have offered her in terms of finding suitable housing, having reliable transportation and being able to prove to the courts that she could be sufficient as a sole supporter of children.

Another example of distributive injustice in the lives of the respondents was the issue of ageism. Those women in the study who were mothering at a young age also experienced discrimination and hardship because of their developmental stage and the prevailing attitude that teenage mothers are unfit to raise their children. It may be true that they were not prepared to take on the responsibility to parent when they became mothers, but they all chose to try to parent rather than ending their pregnancies or placing their babies for adoption. Their choice to parent demonstrates a desire to do so. They were simply trying to accomplish a task that had not been appropriately modeled for them. They found themselves in impossible situations where they were deemed unfit to keep their children. This injustice was felt keenly by the women because they all stated that they were doing the best they could at the time.

Living in poverty-stricken or unsafe neighborhoods also contributed to the environment of the respondents. Only one woman was able to discuss having supportive community networks that were available to help her and to build her up as an individual and mom. For the most part, they described their family members and community as unreliable in its ability to support and encourage them in their motherhood.

Injustice in the System

What about injustices encountered while these women were in the system? There certainly were many for the respondents interviewed. One of the most strident protestations heard was from the women who felt they were treated unfairly when their children were removed under charges of domestic violence. Four of these women did not inflict the physical harm and one felt she was falsely accused. This type of injustice made it difficult for them to reconcile themselves with their need for help and improvement as mothers. This gap in being able to personally understand the need for removal and their own responsibility in the matter points to the differences this study found in women who discussed negative experiences versus women who reported more positive experiences. The three women out of this group, who reported some good experiences overall, found ways to take some personal responsibility. That shift in their thinking seemed to tilt their perception back toward personal efficacy. The other women in this group found it difficult to reconcile the events. They saw only heartache and separation as outcomes for their families. The perceived unfairness seemed to contribute to the experience of fear that many cited in discussing the overall experiences in the system.

This study proposed that injustices suffered at the hands of the system authorities would further demoralize women in their quest for regaining their parenthood (Bass, 2004). The data did not seem to indicate this level of demoralization. While the women interviewed did cite many instances of injustice in the system: bad relationships with professionals, poor interactions with foster parents, unfairness, and coercion, this process did not seem to demoralize them. In fact, many of the respondents spoke of feeling a

certain level of personal achievement and power for having made it through the gauntlet of the requirements in order to get their children back. One respondent did not cite any achievement or empowerment, but she was also the only mother in the study who did not have much hope of ever regaining custody of her children. However, the other seven women did report a deep level of distrust and fear for the system as a result of their experience. From a Contextual theoretical perspective, these injustices seemed to erode the relationship between the mothers and the system rather than to erode their sense of who they were as mothers.

Overall Experience

The most foundational research question of this project was, “What is a woman’s lived experience while her children reside in foster care?” The purpose of this inquiry was to ask some basic questions of a population about which we empirically know very little. There were three primary findings of this question. The first was that the mothers communicated that losing a child to foster care was the worst thing that had ever happened to them. This assertion is fairly strong considering most of the women interviewed had already experienced significant trauma and loss in their lives. But their message was that losing their children was the worst thing the system could have imposed upon them. For those who felt the removal of their children was unfounded and unfair, this sentiment was even more pronounced. Feelings of injustice at the hands of system authorities was one of the main findings of this study.

The next finding was that of fear. Most of the women expressed fear of the system’s power and the fear that they would lose their children forever. This fear was not unfounded because some of them had already lost children permanently at the time of the

interviews. They were also afraid that the system could re-enter their lives and start the process all over again. This fear coupled with the feelings of injustice and unfairness discussed above were the main factors that emerged in the study. While women demonstrated the ability to maintain motherly roles and identities and to adapt to contextual changes, they were not able to avoid eroded relationship with the system at large.

The third and less prominent finding for general experiences is that of a positive experience while in the system. Three of the women interviewed said that their experiences were still difficult and undesirable but also essential in helping them become the mothers they wanted to be. The key difference between these women and the other five respondents was that they claimed more ownership of their own process through the requirements of the system. They cited more positive relationships with professionals and more helpful outcomes from the services provided than did the women who characterized their experiences as primarily negative. These three women did not demonstrate the same level of trust erosion with the system because they felt much more empowered by their own level of responsibility. These three women could also understand and articulate their own culpability in their children's removal, and that psychological shift seemed to separate them from the other women.

Conceptual Maps

In the initial phase of this project, a conceptual map was created to show the links between the theory and the proposed research aims of the project. The original conceptual map is provided in Figure 5.1. Following the data analysis and theory integration, a new conceptual map was created to reflect the findings of the study and to

depict how they tie in to the theoretical base. This revised conceptual map (see Figure 5.2) shows some of the outcomes demonstrated by the respondents in the study based on theoretical categories. Not all of the outcomes are represented on the map. The map also shows the mother in her microsystem and the process that takes place in her macrosystem as she works to regain her parenting rights.

Figure 5.1: Original Conceptual Map

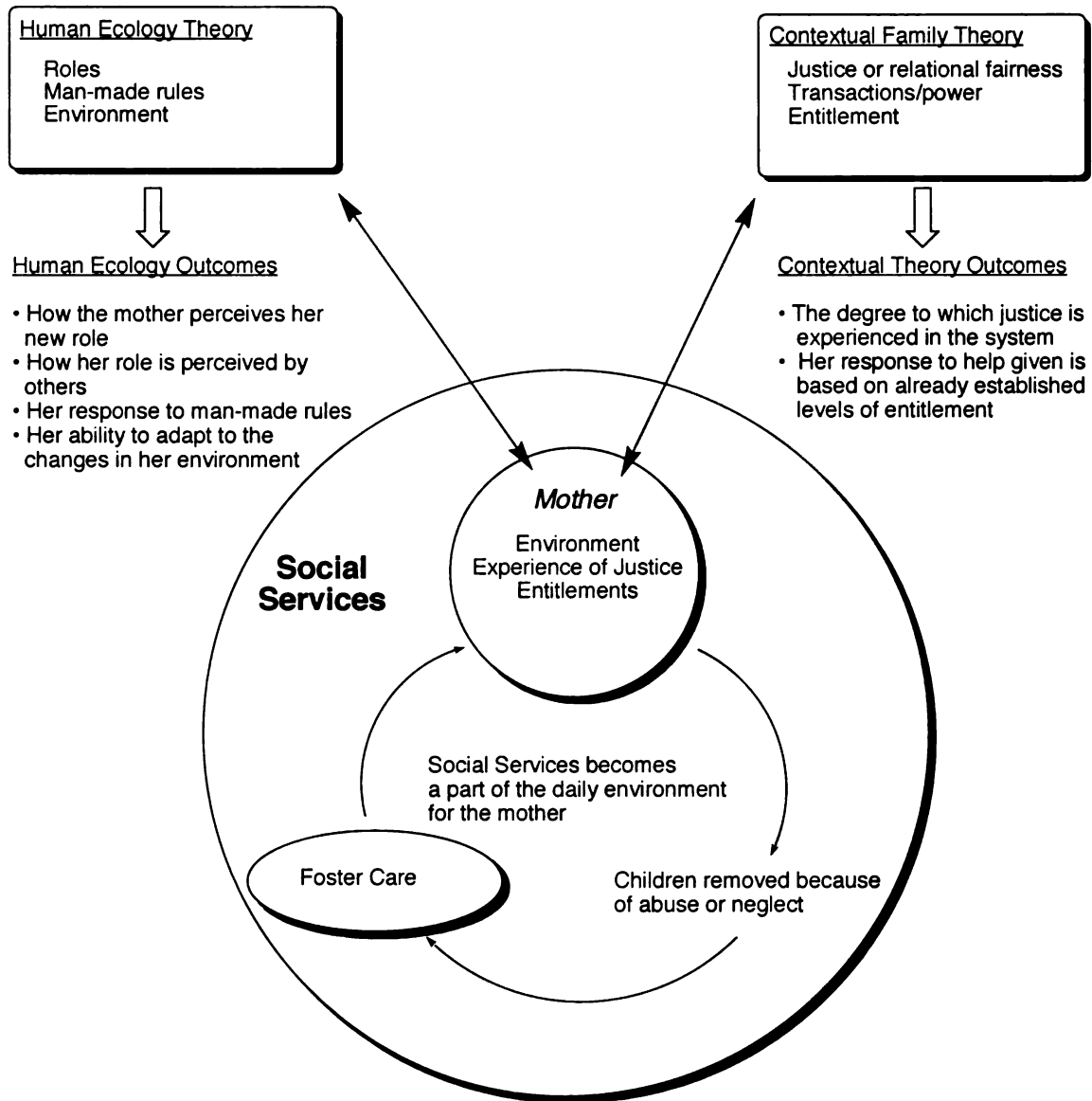
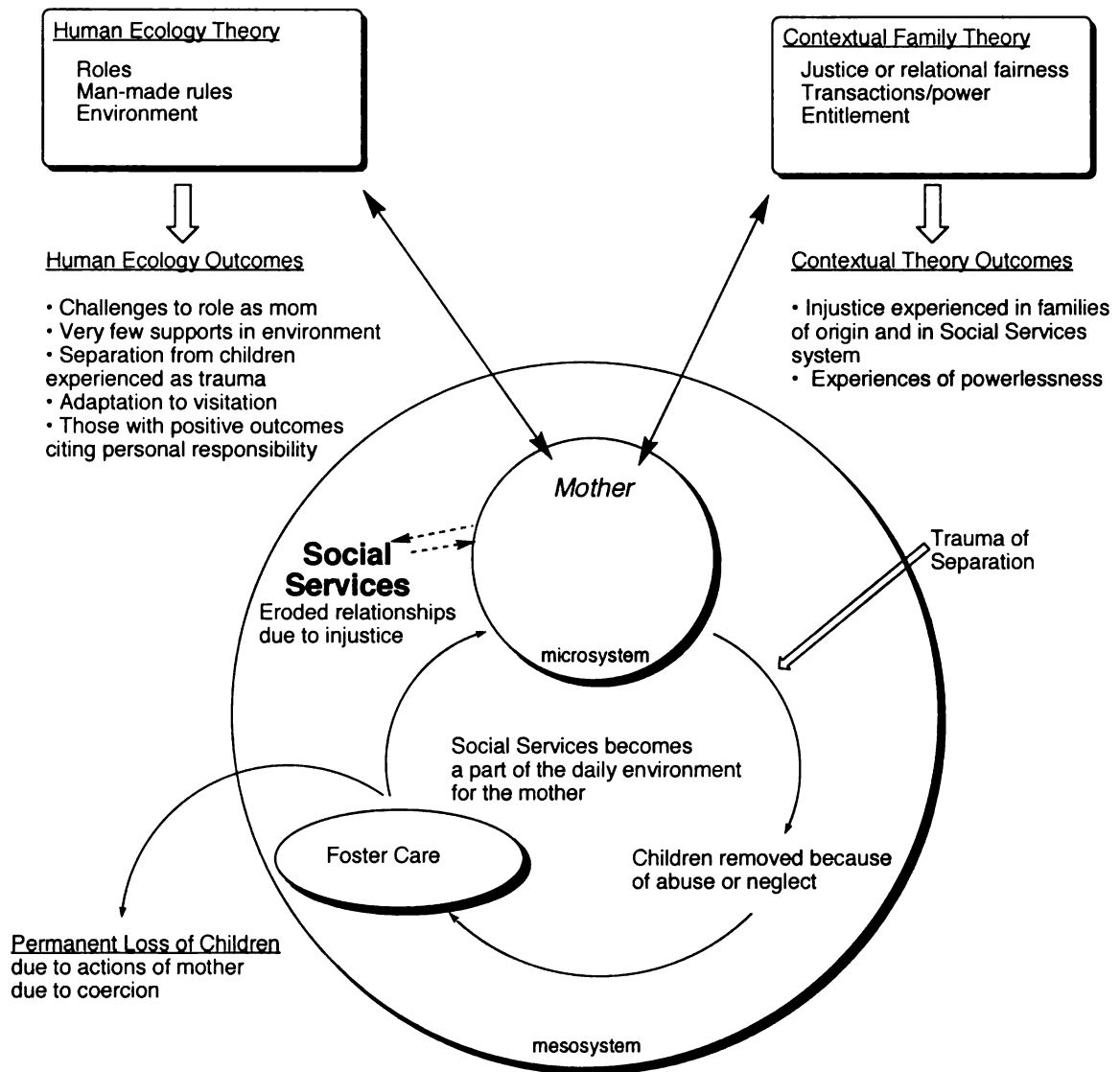


Figure 5.2: Revised Conceptual Map



Key Findings

The discussion above focuses on the findings interpreted through the theoretical lenses of the study. Here the three key findings are presented as a summary for the data collected and the theoretical discussions. These are no more important than other findings, but each had a compelling quality that seemed to warrant further scrutiny and discussion.

Experiences of Injustice Contributed to Eroded Relationships

This study proposed that repeated injustices experienced by the respondents would contribute to the inability on their part to parent well and to form just and appropriate relationships with their children. While the qualitative nature of this study makes it impossible to prove this assertion, the data does point to the fact that all of the women in the study experienced many layers of injustice in their families, communities, and in the Child Welfare system. For the respondents in this study, this experience of injustice seemed to lead to the erosion of healthy relationships that further impaired their ability to parent and to report positive experiences while in the system.

The injustice they experienced at home or in society may have impaired their ability to become adequate parents. Since many of the women also reported having little support from primary caregivers and began parenting as adolescents, one might assume that they were ill-equipped to parent in the first place. Thus, without adequate supports for parenting, it is not surprising that these women found themselves in situations that attracted the oversight of the Child Welfare system. Further, when they continued to encounter injustices in the system, they struggled to form working relationships with the

only people who could return their children. This may mean more time in the system and further experiences of victimization and humiliation.

This finding was key in that injustice could be seen in many layers of the lives of every woman in the study. Some had been able to be very resilient, and all but one mother in the study were hopeful of getting at least some of their children back. But the relationships with the system were often damaged beyond repair. Those who reported fear and a deep mistrust for the system will probably be less likely to ask for help should they find themselves in troublesome situations again.

Separation Experienced as Trauma

The second key finding is that separation from children, such as these women faced, was experienced as traumatic. It is important to note that this study did not set out to discover whether the removal of the respondents' children was indeed justified. Rather, the purpose of this study was to investigate how the mothers viewed the separation. All of the mothers discussed the difficulty of this separation and some had come to understand that their experiences of grief and loss were normal. However, the traumatic nature of the removal of their children and the subsequent change in their daily lives was not being attended to by the authorities of the system. The women discussed how difficult it was to not know where their children were. This trauma felt like betrayal to them, especially when they were faced with foster parents who refused to enter into a relationship with them or foster parents who cut off the relationship. In fact, those in the study who acknowledged that their own sadness was normal seemed to come to this conclusion without the help of professionals in the system. They did not talk about being helped with their separation, grief, or loss issues.

This trauma of separation is presented as a key finding because it was a pervasive finding and because it has implications not only for mothers but also for children. If mothers experience this traumatic reaction to losing their children, how do the children react to being abruptly separated from home and living with strangers? It should not be assumed that children will always be resilient under these conditions nor that they will be grateful for being separated from the only security they know, however flawed it may be. Figure 5.3 shows a network display illustrating the above two key findings in this study.

Figure 5.3: Network Display for Key Findings of Injustice and Trauma Experiences

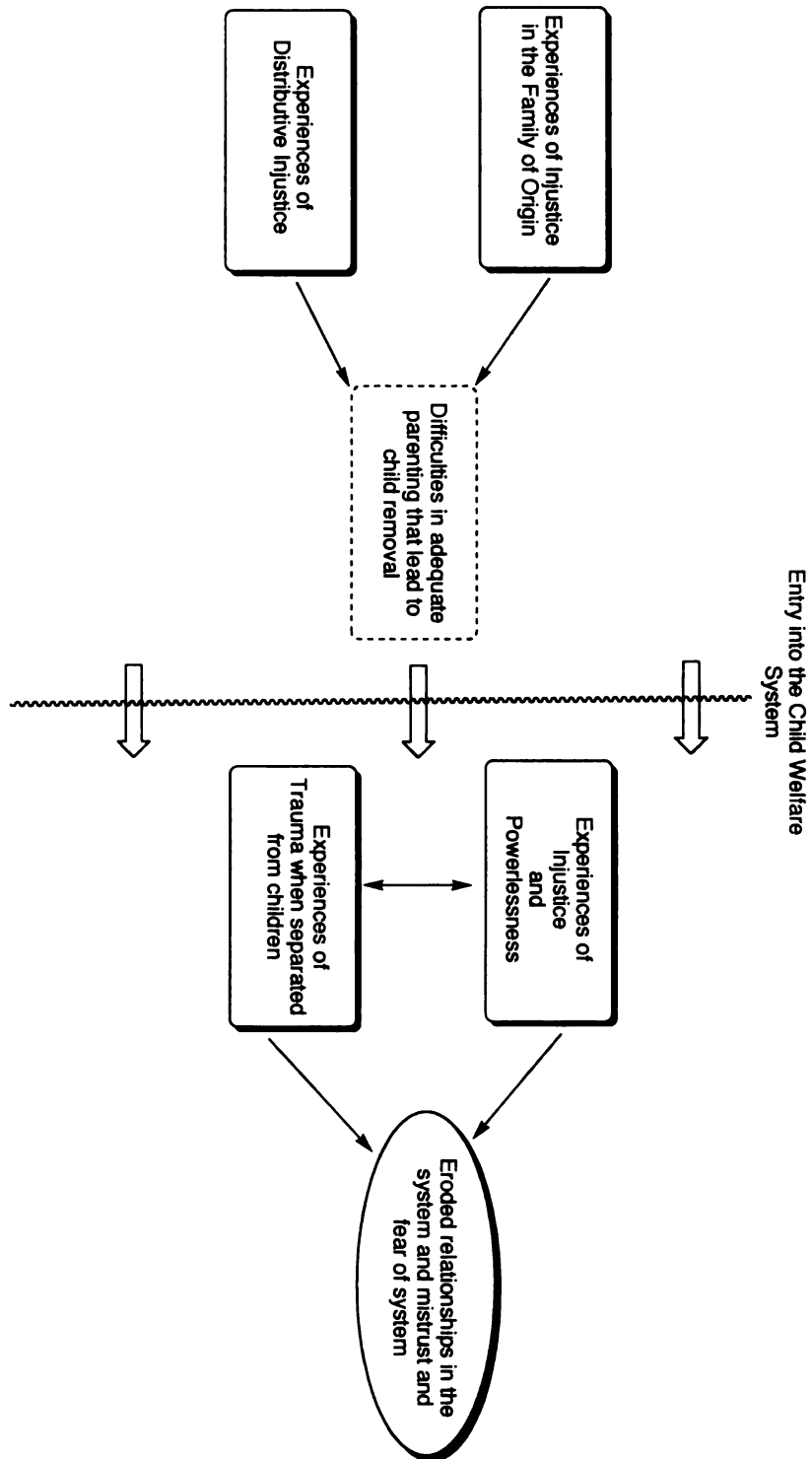
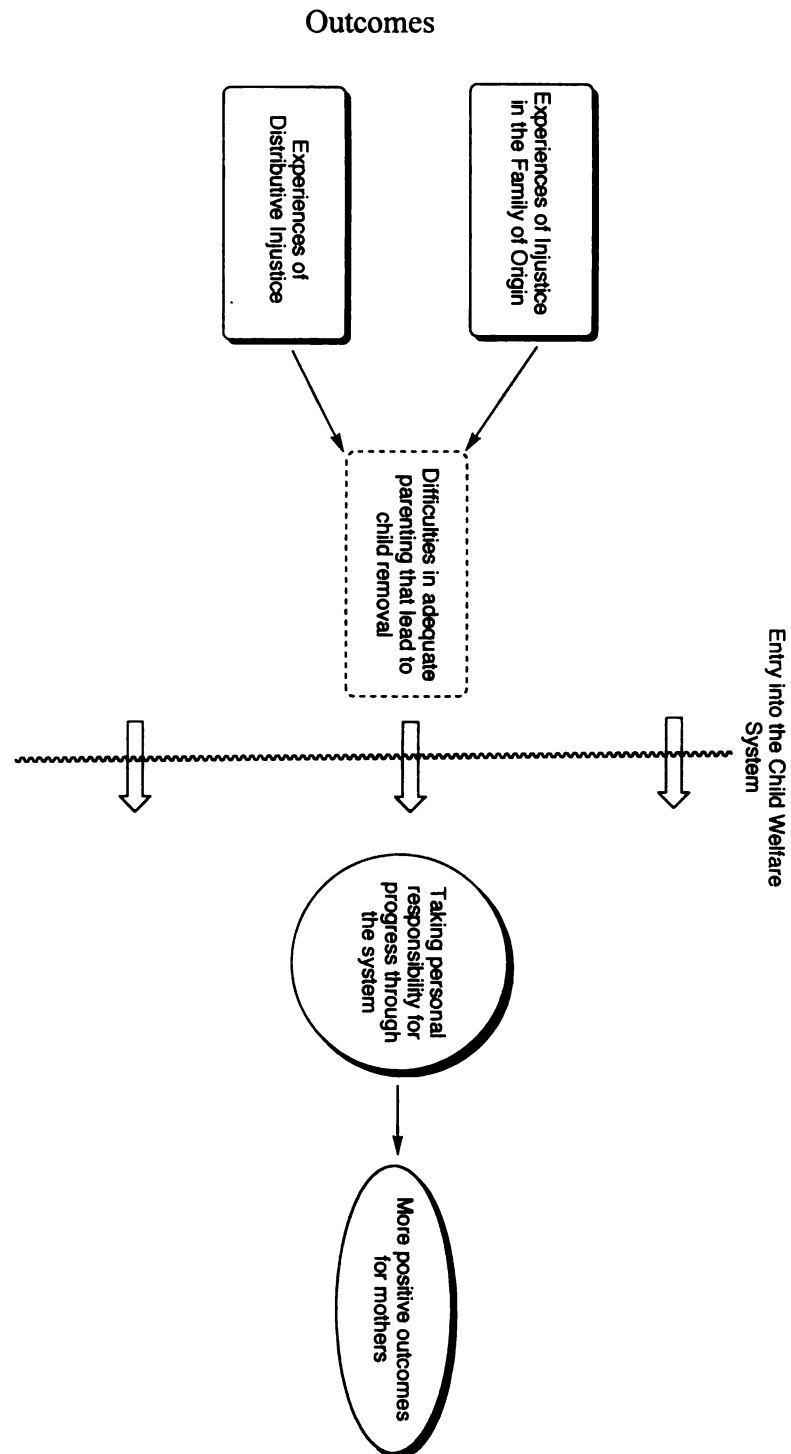


Figure 5.4: Network Display for Differences in Women who Reported Positive



Experiences of Personal Achievement and Connection to Positive Outcomes

Despite the injustices and loss, almost all of the mothers reported growth and personal achievement as a by-product of their experience. This outcome was not anticipated, but it points to a resilience factor. Three of the mothers even stated that the process, however painful, had been good for them. All three discussed how the services, when used appropriately, had been instrumental in helping them become better mothers. They conveyed a sense of pride at their achievement and growth, and they stated that they felt they would be better mothers because of their experience. The difference between the women who reported positive experiences and those who had more feelings of overwhelming negativity was that the three who reported positive experiences took personal responsibility for their journey through the system. All three said that they realized ways in which they had not been appropriate as mothers and that using the services to their advantage helped them understand themselves and their children better. While the experience of positive outcomes was not pervasive in this study, there was such a striking difference between those who reported positive outcomes and those who didn't that it seemed to be an important finding. A network display in Figure 5.4 illustrates these phenomena as manifested in the data.

Methodology and Limitations

This project was designed to be a solely qualitative study. While it was sufficient to answer the research questions, there were some limitations that need to be noted and addressed.

Self-Selection

The eight women who participated in this study were all volunteers and freely gave of their time. They were pleased with the small monetary gift but several noted that it was not necessary for their participation. Because respondents were recruited from the Families in Transition (FIT) program at Michigan State University, it was assumed that each participant had a fairly good working relationship with that therapist and was in some way personally invested in the goals of the study. They were very willing participants, and each respondent was very forthcoming in their responses and comments. It is possible that the respondents participated because they saw an opportunity to share their unique story and found value in that process. However, because of the self-selection and the recruitment process, this study did not include non-FIT mothers or perhaps mothers who were less invested in making their story known. The FIT therapists focus on joining with clients and on providing a safe place for family therapy to take place. This overall warmth and receptive attitude may have skewed the sample somewhat. Also several of the respondents commented on their positive relationships with FIT therapists, and this connection, while positive, may have influenced their decision to participate when they might otherwise have declined.

Limitations

This project used only qualitative methods, and while an oversight committee was a part of the planning and approval process, there was a single primary investigator. Therefore, human biases are reflected in the theoretical foundation, the research questions, the interview questions and the analysis of data. At all times, the researcher tried to be aware of those biases, but their influence was unavoidable.

Also, since a semi-structured interview protocol was used, no two interviews were exactly the same. This semi-structured interview made it possible for the researcher to follow the respondent's comments and to allow for a general flow of the overall narrative. However, because of the way respondents answered questions, the data was not collected in exact uniformity. And respondents did not answer questions in the same fashion as they also tailored the interview to their own narratives.

Upon reflection, standardization of some of the questions about family history in the genogram portion of the interview would have been beneficial. The purpose of the genogram was to gather family of origin background, but respondents were somewhat uneven in providing this information. For instance, when it became clear that many of the respondents had experienced sexual abuse or sexual assault, it seemed that a generalized question regarding sexual abuse history would have been helpful in gathering more accurate data. As it was, the respondents shared this information of their own choosing prompting the researcher to believe that others in the study may have experienced this type of trauma but did not share it in the interview.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because the results of this study are not generalizable to the broader population, the first recommendation is that further qualitative and quantitative studies be conducted looking at women whose children live in foster care. The current study contributes to the literature in a unique way because it looks at the biological mother's perspective. The perspectives of children and foster parents have been represented in earlier studies, but the perspectives of biological mothers in the Child Welfare system have not been explored until now. The reason these findings are important is that many of these

mothers will go on to parent their children again. If, as this study indicated, mothers in the Child Welfare system are facing widespread injustices and feelings of powerlessness, how prepared are they for the weighty task of parenting again? In light of this, current practices need to be examined to look at ways biological mothers can be supported by the Child Welfare system rather than victimized by it. In particular, future research should focus on ways to improve overall service delivery to biological mothers and on maintaining family bonds while children live in foster care. Also, the occurrence of injustice in the Child Welfare system needs to be better documented for the purpose of institutional change.

Another area for future inquiry would be to study the differences between women who report positive experiences and those who report primarily negative experiences. This study showed that the women who reported more self-efficacy and also more positive experiences, also reported a greater sense of responsibility for their own contributions to the process. It would be very interesting to research this topic further to see if it applied to a broader scope of the population.

Work has been done with foster parents in helping them cope with separation, grief, and loss (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001). Based on the findings of this study, it would seem beneficial to research and more clearly understand separation, grief, and loss for biological mothers whose children live in foster care. This area of inquiry would also have implications for research on attachment issues in the foster care system.

Finally, more research needs to be conducted concerning fathers whose children live in foster care. Their role is no less important, but their presence is definitely lacking in

the literature and in the cases that have come to the FIT program. We need to understand better how to involve fathers in this process and how to address their needs too.

Implications for Practice

Child Welfare and Foster Care Practice

The purpose of agencies that remove children from their parents and place them in foster homes is to protect children and to ultimately preserve families. The research presented here is not intended to undermine the need for such agencies. However, the data from this study suggest that mothers may perceive their journey through these agency systems as unjust and traumatic. It seems clear that several things could shift in agency practice that would make the requirements more client-focused for the ultimate goal of protecting and serving children. First, more stable relationships need to be built between agency professionals and biological mothers. Some of the women in this study stated that their case workers had been very helpful. But some of the others experienced quite the opposite from case workers. The construction of more healthy alliances between agency professionals and biological mothers would require more in-depth training in the area of working with this population. Second, in order to facilitate the foundation for better working relationships and a client-centered focus, case workers need training and assistance in the specific needs of this population. A better understanding of family history and trauma along with a knowledge of the repercussions of separation, loss, and grief for both biological parents and their children would assist agency professionals in daily interactions with mothers and in providing useful services to clients. It is also important that agency professionals understand the complexities of relationships between biological and foster parents. These complexities are difficult to

navigate, and case workers need specialized training in how to mediate and facilitate relationships in all of these areas. Finally, ideological change in the structure of child protective services would make it possible for agencies to reduce case loads for case workers, provide trainings, and seek alternatives to abrupt dissolution of families. If systemic and ideological changes were made, agencies would be able to see the need for parents and children to spend more time together and the need for building strong alliances so that biological parents could experience more achievement rather than humiliation.

Marriage and Family Therapy

Marriage and family therapists are uniquely equipped to serve this population in therapy because they are trained to work with complex family systems and they are interested in the collaborative effort of professionals in the process of helping families. One of the implications for practice with this population is to develop and maintain a focus on working with the issues of separation and loss for all family members. This would involve delving into intricacies of family history to look at loss in the past as well as attend to the compounded losses that mothers face when living apart from their children. This work should be ongoing with any client who faces these circumstances so that they can move forward with the task of regaining their parenthood.

Another area of this work that could be served by marriage and family therapists is offering comprehensive therapeutic services for clients whose children live in foster care. The FIT program at Michigan State University provides these services at this time. The FIT program offers individual, couple, and family therapy to those referred by the Department of Human Services. However, this full range of service is rarely fully

referred or utilized by case workers. The FIT program is based on an Infant Mental Health model that stresses the parents' reconciliation of their own past traumas as a part of their current journey in parenting their children (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975). Another model that would be useful is the Structural Ecosystems Therapy (SET) model that focuses on healthy family bonds, collaborations between helping professionals, and helping parents build working alliances with those helping professionals (Nelson, Mitrani, & Szapocznik, 2000). These types of approaches make it possible for the marriage and family therapist to become an advocate for the family and to provide another layer of support for them as they work to achieve reinstated parenthood.

Researcher Reflections

This project has been an incredible learning experience for me. I so appreciate the willingness of the participants who provided me with so much rich data to work with. I have been working with mothers like the respondents in this project for about seven years. In the data collection process, I was allowed the luxury of simply asking the questions and recording the answers. I was always surprised at the openness of these women and what they were willing to share with a stranger. However, it is important for me to note here that my sympathies to their plights were far more aroused in my role as researcher than they were in my role as therapist. My explanation for this is a small example of why it is so difficult to provide services and treatment for this population. This explanation is that working with these moms on a week-to-week basis is sometimes very difficult. Unwilling clients do not make a therapist's job easy. And as a therapist, my role went far beyond listening to the sad stories of their lives. Rather, I was charged with trying my best to help them attain a higher level of personal functioning and parental

functioning. I found that my role as researcher allowed me to simply soak up their stories. Separately, these stories were very powerful. When taken together they were, at times, overwhelming. It was difficult, sometimes, to face the task of digging through the data once more. But my reward was that I promised them their stories would be heard, and through this project that process has begun. I now better understand what these women need. I hope that I can continue this work so that others may also see them for who they truly want to be – good mothers who care for their children.

During the course of this project, I found myself imagining what it would be like to have my crying children taken from my home and knowing that I would not know where they were sleeping that night. To be perfectly honest, (and to echo the words of some of the mothers I studied) that is one of the worst things I can imagine. But I also have to acknowledge that I live in a sheltered world where I have many layers of protection against such a thing happening to me. I had parents who loved me and love me still and who gave me the opportunity to develop into a whole person. These same parents would also step in and raise my children if they needed to do so. I have a supportive husband who co-parents with me and who treats our children and me with love and kindness. I have many friends and social supports that help me to be a better mom. These same people would help me at any time of day or night should I be in crisis. However, the fact that it is unlikely my children would be stripped from my arms, should not make that practice humane for some and abhorrent for others. It seems we need to look at the infrastructure of these protective services we have built and discover how we can truly help people who have no other help. No part of this project was meant to absolve women of the harm they may have caused their children. They must bear that responsibility.

However, this project was aimed at knowing them and hopefully being able to offer them more hope and more opportunities to be the mothers their children need.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Study Information Sheet

Experiences of Mothers with Children in Foster Care

A research project is being done through Michigan State University to learn more about mother's experiences while their children are living in foster care. You are invited to be a part of this study. The purpose of this study is to find out how you have coped with the many issues connected with living apart from your kids while they reside in foster care. Specifically, I am interested in your experiences with social workers, therapists, and family members. I want to investigate your experience as a mother so that your perspective can be heard and better understood. By participating in this study, you may be able to help other women who are in the same situation. You may also be able to help professionals understand how to better meet your needs as you try to regain custody of your children. Participation in this study will include one interview with the researcher. Each participant will be given a \$35 gift card for a local retail store at the completion of the interview. If you are interested in learning more about the project, please contact me for more information.

Sincerely,
Temple Odom
(517) 256-0068

Appendix B: Consent Form

Experiences of Mothers with Children in Foster Care

You are being invited to participate in a study that will focus on the experiences of mothers whose children are living in foster care. This study seeks to investigate how you have faced the many issues connected with the experience of living apart from your children while they reside in foster care: family opinions, working with case workers, visiting your children and dealing with all the demands of the social and court system. The information for this study will be gathered through interviews. The information in this study will be used for the completion of a doctoral dissertation. This dissertation will be published at MSU and will be made available in the library at MSU. Some of the findings of the study will be published in a professional journal. Your identity will be kept confidential at all times during the course of the study and in the publication of the results.

The questions will be specifically related to your family history and your experiences during the process of trying to regain custody of your kids. Your answers to the questions in the interview are given on a voluntary basis and refusal to answer questions will be respected and will not result in penalty. You may refuse to answer any questions at any time. Participation in this study will involve one audio-taped interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet and will be used only by the researchers. By signing this consent form you are agreeing to be audio-taped for the interview.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be given a \$35 gift card to a local retail store in appreciation for your time. Should you decide not to participate in this study, you will not be penalized in any way. Regardless of your decision to participate, your progress in the FIT program will not change in any way nor will your legal custody case be affected in any way. If you decide to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. If you decide to participate, your privacy and anonymity will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact the chair of the researcher's dissertation committee:

Marsha Carolan, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Family and Child Ecology
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824
(517) 432-3327

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously if you wish:

Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Director
Human Research Protection Program
Michigan State University
202 Olds Hall
East Lansing, MI 48824
(517) 355-2180
irb@msu.edu

Your signature below signifies your voluntary agreement to participate in this study and your willingness to participate in the audio-taped interview.

Signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name _____

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Initial IRB Application Approval

October 17, 2006

To: Marsha CAROLAN
13B Human Ecology
MSU

Re: IRB # 06-541 Category: EXPEDITED 2-7
Approval Date: October 16, 2006
Expiration Date: October 15, 2007

Title: EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

The Institutional Review Board has completed their review of your project. I am pleased to advise you that **your project has been approved.**



The committee has found that your research project is appropriate in design, protects the rights and welfare of human subjects, and meets the requirements of MSU's Federal Wide Assurance and the Federal Guidelines (45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR Part 50). The protection of human subjects in research is a partnership between the IRB and the investigators. We look forward to working with you as we both fulfill our responsibilities.

Renewals: IRB approval is valid until the expiration date listed above. If you are continuing your project, you must submit an **Application for Renewal** application at least one month before expiration. If the project is completed, please submit an **Application for Permanent Closure**.

Revisions: The IRB must review any changes in the project, prior to initiation of the change. Please submit an **Application for Revision** to have your changes reviewed. If changes are made at the time of renewal, please include an **Application for Revision** with the renewal application.

Problems: If issues should arise during the conduct of the research, such as unanticipated problems, adverse events, or any problem that may increase the risk to the human subjects, notify the IRB office promptly. Forms are available to report these issues.

Please use the IRB number listed above on any forms submitted which relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the IRB office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 517-355-2180 or via email at IRB@msu.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D.
SIRB Chair

c: Temple Odom
3728 Shearwater Ln.
East Lansing, MI 48823

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