

Exploring stories of trust from foster youth in college

by

Anne DeLuca

B.A., Doane University, 2011
M.A., Kansas State University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Student Affairs in Higher Education
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

Abstract

This narrative study explores the experiences of five college students who were formerly involved with foster care. This study explores the ways former foster youth students tell stories of trust built or trust broken with adults before and during college. The data analysis revealed themes that add to the body of research by providing a clearer understanding of the experiences students share about trust-building or distrust throughout childhood and college. Themes identified before college include: covering up home life during childhood, distrust in biological family, shifting trust to an adult outside of the family, and a revolving door of adults as a barrier to trust building. Themes identified during college include: trusting professors, building boundaries with others, and ongoing management of family status. Finally, participants shared living between trust in self and needing reassurance throughout college. By contributing to the current literature, higher education professionals are encouraged to use these findings to advocate for full-time staff and nuanced programming for foster youth. University leaders are encouraged to use these findings to ensure the needed supports are in place for each student.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Christy Craft

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Dedication

I want to thank my family who gave me the opportunity to go to college. Without their support and investment, I would have never had such a strong foundation to build my education and career. At the time, I didn't realize what a gift from my parents my undergraduate degree was. Thank you for letting me truly pick where I wanted to go to college and for cheering me on!

There are no words that can really capture how much I want to thank my husband, Brent Friedeman. Since 2008, he constantly (daily, really!) reminded me I was smart and capable of reaching my goals. He supports me through every milestone, and he does it while making me laugh. From competing in thousands of rounds of speech to attending Doane, packing up and moving to Manhattan, working together full-time in a cruddy T-shirt factory, surviving on \$2 burger baskets, earning our masters' together, marrying, adopting our pup, starting new jobs, living through a pandemic, and then packing up and chasing another adventure.... You're my P.I.C.! Thank you, Brent, for everything you've sacrificed to help me reach this milestone.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The summer after my first year of college, I signed up to work as a camp counselor at a sleepaway camp called Camp Catch-up, a camp for siblings who were separated by the foster care system. I met the group of kids with whom I was assigned to work and immediately jumped into summer fun. We swam, I took their family photo, we played games, and we made smores at night. On the surface, many would see an average camp, but throughout the weekend, small moments consistently reminded me the kids at this camp were facing a very different childhood from the one I experienced. When creating necklaces in the art room, the youngest sibling said, “We have these beads at my foster mom’s house.” When having lunch, the brother shared that he missed the way “mom used to make smiley-face pancakes.” While these were small details, they were constant reminders we were at a camp for foster youth.

Finally, on the last day of camp, we rolled up sleeping bags, braided hair, and exchanged friendship bracelets. We stood outside playing rock-paper-scissors until we heard, “The bus to Kearney is here! Come on Kearney kids, get on the bus!” I stood next to the oldest sister as she watched her two youngest siblings board the bus. The older sister was not placed in a home in Kearney, so she knew it was time to say goodbye. The oldest sister began to cry while she looked up at the yellow school bus and waved goodbye from the sidewalk. Her siblings were riding the bus back to their separate foster homes four hours away. I hugged the oldest sister and said, “It’s okay, you will see them soon!” She shook her head and wiped tears from her swollen face. Through quick breaths, she replied she didn’t know when or if she would see them again. Before camp, she hadn’t seen them in nine months. The bus with her siblings drove down the gravel road, and she just sat on the curb and cried. This memory will stay with me forever.

I share this as an important part of my history that shapes my perspectives and fuels my drive for foster youth advocacy. As a person of privilege who grew up in one home, with two parents, resource security, and the opportunity to pursue education, I feel responsible for contributing research regarding this understudied population. My goal is to contribute research about the persistence and retention of foster youth in college. This study will focus on how the concept of trust impacts former foster youth (FFY) success during college. I will focus on foster youth throughout the state of Kansas as I believe I have a unique opportunity to enact change and continue to build programming for foster youth within higher education institutions in Kansas and Nebraska. This introductory chapter will help readers understand the foster care system, while highlighting the journey foster youth go through as they persist toward a college degree. This chapter will address some of the barriers foster youth face, identify the purpose of the current study, and present research questions addressed by this study. Finally, this chapter will end with definitions of relevant terms used throughout this study.

Background to the Problem

In the past four years, leaders throughout Kansas have worked to reform the Kansas Foster Care System in efforts to standardize each foster child's experience and increase accountability within the system (Rothschild, 2020). In February 2020, the Kansas Senate passed legislation that requires the Kansas Department of Education to submit report cards, graduation rates, and demographic data for all high school students in the foster care system. Senate Bill #384 would have provided accountability and established measurements to lead Kansas foster youth toward successful futures (Rothschild, 2020). However, in May 2020, Governor Laura Kelly vetoed the bill, stating, "I cannot... sign a bill establishing a new discretionary spending program that is unrelated to Kansas COVID-19 response efforts" (Rothschild, 2020, p. 3).

In March 2022, Gail Finney, a state representative from Wichita, urged the approval of a Foster Youth Bill of Rights (Carpenter, 2022). This bill was designed to provide foster youth with an outline of their basic legal rights, including having access to all personal documents when aging out of the system (Carpenter, 2022). The push to reform the Kansas Foster Care system opens a national discussion about the well-being, educational pursuits, and futures of foster youth. Currently, there are approximately 391,098 youth in foster care in the United States, with 63% of these children removed from their homes because of neglect and 36% removed because of a parent's drug abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). In 2021, there were 6,845 children in the foster care system in Kansas, with 20% of these children removed from their homes because of a lack of supervision, 17% because of physical abuse, and 12% because of physical neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Nationally, at least 70% of foster youth indicate they are interested in attending college; however, only 10% of former foster youth enroll (Day et al., 2011; Gaille, 2017). College is an uncommon path for high school students in foster care because there is often a larger focus on basic needs like safety and shelter, "leaving education as an afterthought rather than a targeted outcome" (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010, p. 759). To help with the financial responsibility of college, foster youth in Kansas can apply for tuition waivers until their 23rd birthday. To keep their tuition waiver, students must meet specific criteria and remain in good academic standing (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2020). In Kansas, the number of approved tuition waivers has reflected a downward trend since 2014.

The Kansas Foster Child Education Assistance Act serves as a tool to help foster youth go to college; however, only 3%-5% of FFY who enroll in college actually graduate (Day et al., 2011; Fryar et al., 2017). Foster youth enroll in college at low rates compared to their peers, and

their college graduation rates are five times lower than non-foster youth students (Kinarsky, 2017). Low graduation rates are attributed to academic, financial, and emotional barriers (Avant et al., 2021; Fox, 2016; Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Kinarsky, 2017; Merdinger et al., 2005; Morton, 2018; Piel, 2018; Salazar, 2012). Studies that explored the outcome of foster youth who graduate from college found FFY college graduates had higher incomes, higher rates of employment, and a greater likelihood to own a home while having a lower chance of being on welfare assistance than did FFY who did not graduate from college (Avant et al., 2021). Increasing the college graduation rates of FFY would also create tremendous national dividends. It is estimated “7000 additional graduates would earn over \$1.8 billion more during their working lifetimes and contribute 430 million in additional taxes” (Fryar et al., 2017, p. 9). Currently, foster youth in Kansas are not pursuing college degrees or graduating from college at rates equivalent to non-foster care students.

Problem Statement

Enrolled foster youth experience college in ways that differ from those of their peers. Existing literature about FFY who are enrolled in college highlights these differences when exploring, barriers and relationship building. Foster youth face significant challenges during their transition to college, including poor independent-living skills, lack of previous academic rigor, and lack of identity development (Day et al., 2011; Kinarsky, 2017). Other studies found FFY students reported facing barriers, including financial instability, homelessness, and lack of mentorship (Fox, 2016; Fryar et al., 2017; Jones & Dean, 2020; Piel, 2018). Additional barriers include the pressures of taking on additional jobs or going without resources like food, school supplies, or textbooks (Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). The literature related to the retention of FFY has highlighted how resilience and grit can be harnessed for study

habits and homework completion (Fox, 2016; Hass et al., 2014; Merdinger et al., 2005; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Additional studies about retention programming have focused on the use of mentorships, homework checks, and semester-long workshops to increase FFY student engagement (Cheatham et al., 2021; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Kirk & Day, 2011; Piel, 2018; Salazar, 2012; Watt et al., 2013). Programming that is strengths-based or resilience-focused is an essential tool to help FFY complete their postsecondary educations (Fox, 2016).

Several studies that focused on attributes of foster youth, barriers to education, and retention programming found FFY students report a distrust of adults (Akin et al., 2017; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Heyman et al., 2020; Kirk & Day, 2011, 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The report of distrust in adults was never the main focus of a study; however, it consistently surfaced throughout the literature. FFY students commonly report a “lack of connections with adults who will be there for them” (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010, p. 760). Existing studies explore retention programming, barriers, and reports of hurtful past relationships with adults; however, there are no primary studies exploring the way FFY students share instances of trust building or broken trust with adults before and during college.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This narrative study explores the experiences of college students formerly involved with foster care. Specifically, I am interested in hearing key stories about trust before and during college and how trust-building impacts a students’ collegiate success:

1. How do participants describe their experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult throughout their childhood?
2. How do participants describe their experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult throughout college?

3. How do experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult play a role in their higher education experience?

Significance of the Study

Advancing the knowledge about trust will inform future retention programming and can be used to build stronger university connections with FFY. This study may help us understand how FFY build trust and engage with those who offer support in college. This study may also add knowledge to retention programs across the U.S. by informing readers how students articulate and construct meaning about relationship-building between students and adults.

Operational Definitions

Foster Youth, Foster Care, Foster Youth Alumni, FFY

For the purposes of this study, “foster youth,” “foster care,” “foster youth alumni,” and “FFY” will all be used interchangeably. Foster youth have been called FFY or foster youth alumni (Fryar et al., 2017; Salazar, 2012; Salisbury, 2016; Sethi, 2021). Additionally, the terms “foster youth” and “foster care” encompass several definitions and unique experiences. For example, some children have had one placement during their time in foster care and return to their biological families, while others reported upwards of 15 different placements. One child said, “I was in 10 different high schools growing up. I was in and out of residential treatment” (Watt et al., 2013, p. 1412). Historically the word “orphan” was used to describe children without parents and families; however, this term is no longer used because of the stigma surrounding orphan trains, orphanages, and mistreatment of children.

Adults

The term “adults” was used in this study to describe the people with whom foster youth interact. Instances of trust or broken trust with adults before, during, and after college is the

focus of this study. This does not negate the idea that foster youth themselves may also be considered adults or young adults. The term “adult” is not used as the opposite of foster youth or FFY; rather, it is used as noun that foster youth can use regardless of their own identity. I use the word “adult” since most foster youth begin their lives with an attachment to one or more adults (Bowlby, 1999). Many stories were told or recalled from an age when there is a clear distinction between child and adult.

Retention

Students who persist throughout their academic experience may be retained from semester to semester. If a university has a high retention rate, this will mean they have a high number of students who graduate from their university. It is important to note retention may be measured from semester to semester or from year to year. For example, many institutions review first- to second-year retention rates (Tinto, 2006).

Trust

Researchers who examine trust in colleges collectively define trust as “the degree to which a student is willing to rely on or have faith and confidence in the college to take appropriate steps that benefit him and help him achieve his learning and career objectives” (Ghosh et al., 2001, p. 325). I used an operational definition of trust that focused on individual people instead of institutions. Bell (2017) broke trust down into “reliable trust--having faith people will do what they say they will do (actions) and disclosure trust--sharing personal information, expecting it will be handled carefully (keeping secrets)” (Bell, 2017, p. 248). Both definitions are valuable, because I wanted to understand how trust in adults contributes to a student’s successful university experience.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the study and described why it is focused on stories of trust from college students who were involved in foster care. I explained the rationale for the study, including existing barriers FFY face when they enter college, and presented the research highlighting foster youth's comparatively lower college graduation rates of foster youth. I outlined the research highlighting the importance of retention programming and guidance throughout college. I included the research purpose and questions followed by my subjectivity statement and definitions. The next chapter, a review of literature, will further examine the existing literature surrounding the research questions in the areas of the history of foster care; demographics and attributes of foster youth; national, statewide and local governance; barriers, mentorship and trust-building; and retention programming.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

This chapter provides a literature review about children and young adults involved in foster care. The chapter will inform readers about the history of foster care; current national, statewide, and local governance of foster care; and demographic information of people currently in and transitioning out of the foster care system. The literature review examines barriers foster youth face, including academic, financial, and emotional barriers, with an emphasis on trauma, trust-building, and mentorship among foster youth and adults. The chapter concludes with a review of literature related to existing foster youth retention programs. Focus on these areas will provide readers with a foundational lens from which to view the participants' stories.

History of U.S. Foster Care

In the early 1800s in the United States, children without caregivers were organized through “poor laws,” which placed kids in other homes as servants until they transitioned into adulthood (Sethi, 2021). Children completed housework in exchange for room, board, and basic living needs (Sethi, 2021). The idea of using children for work became more popular throughout history. In 1854, children were transported via orphan trains throughout the Midwest and adopted by farmers as free manual labor. It is reported that over 7000 children were transported until 1929 (*National Orphan Train Complex Museum*, 2021). Attitudes about “orphans” shifted in the early 1900s when the U.S. Government began passing legislation to regulate and fund the care of foster youth. Foster youth were no longer viewed as burdens who should work; rather, they were recognized as children deserving care. Two significant pieces of legislation driving this shift included the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which earmarked federal funding for courts to oversee the child welfare programs, and the 1997 Adoption Safe

Families Act, which regulates the amount of time children can remain in foster care before adoption or reunification (Sethi, 2021).

Governance: National, Statewide, and Local

Currently, foster care in the U.S. is comprised of federal, state, and local agencies. On a national level, foster care falls under the Children's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This entity "focuses on improving the lives of children and families through programs that reduce child abuse and neglect, increase the number of adoptions, and strengthen foster care" (*Children's Bureau [CB]*, 2022, p. 1). On the state level, local department of health and human services regulate foster care. Many states utilize both public and private local agencies to facilitate the transitions within foster care. Given the number of entities involved in the management and regulation of children through the foster care system, a given child may have a vastly different experience from that of another child. There are also stark differences in the way local agencies report up to the state level. For example, one state reporting agency may report that children are removed from a home because of drug abuse, whereas another may treat drug abuse and alcohol abuse as separate categories. Inconsistencies in data reporting make it difficult to take a pulse on both the state and national level. Inconsistent data points will be visible and noted throughout this literature review.

The Department for Children and Families (DCF) is the Kansas state agency responsible for providing child-welfare services to children and their families. When a child is removed from a home in Kansas, the DCF uses one of four private agencies to facilitate placement of the child. During this time, the placement family develops a case plan and works to ensure the safety and health of the child (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2020). In Kansas, foster youth

officially age out of the system when they turn 21. This means they no longer receive financial or emotional support from the state.

National Foster Care Data

There are approximately 391,098 youth in foster care in the United States, with 63% of these children removed from their home because of neglect and 36% removed because of drug abuse from a parent. Additional circumstances for removal include a caretaker's inability to cope, physical abuse, housing, child behavior problems, parent incarceration, alcohol abuse, abandonment, sexual abuse, child disability, and parent death (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The median age of children in foster care is 6. Races and ethnicities include: 2% American Indian/Alaska Native, >1% Asian, 20% Black or African American, >1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 21% Hispanic (of any race), 46% White, 3% Unknown/Unable to Determine, and 8% Two or More Races (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). In 2021, 47% of children in foster care were discharged and reunited with their parent(s) or primary caretaker(s). The remaining 53% were discharged through living with other relative(s), adoption, emancipation, guardianship, transfer to another agency, becoming a runaway, or death of the child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

State of Kansas Foster Care Data

In 2021, there were 6,845 children in the foster care system in Kansas, with 20% of these children removed from their homes because of lack of supervision, 17% removed because of physical abuse, and 12% because of physical neglect. Additional reasons for removal include: drug and alcohol abuse, inadequate housing, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and abandonment (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2022). The median age of children in foster care

in Kansas is 9. Races and ethnicities of foster youth in the state of Kansas include: 1.4% American Indian/Alaska Native, >1% Asian, 20% Black or African American, >1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 78% White (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). In 2021, 56.9% of children in foster care who were discharged were reunited with their parent(s) or primary caretaker(s). The remaining 43.1% were discharged through living with other relative(s), adoption, guardianship, or other planned permanent living arrangement. OPPLA is a permanency option used only when other options, such as “reunification, adoption, or guardianship, have been ruled out” (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2022, p. 1). While both the national and state level have data and demographic information about the children in foster care, the categories and data points are not consistent among national and local reports. These inconsistencies are also visible when reviewing high school graduation rates of foster youth.

Education of Foster Youth

Nationally, at least 70% of foster youth indicate they are interested in attending college; however, only 10 percent of FFY enroll (Day et al., 2011; Gaille, 2017). To help students attend college in Kansas, foster youth can apply for tuition waivers until their 23rd birthday. Students must meet specific criteria and keep their grades and course completion rates at high levels (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2020). The number of approved tuition waivers in Kansas shows a downward trend since 2014. Graduating high school seniors who were in foster care often focus on basic needs like safety and shelter, “leaving education as an afterthought rather than a targeted outcome” (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010, p. 759). One study surveyed 200 college students who came from foster care. When asked, “How well did the foster care system prepare you for college?” 63.8% answered “not very well” (Merdinger et al., 2005,

p. 884). The Kansas Foster Child Education Assistance Act helps foster youth go to college; however, only 3-5% of FFY who enroll in college end up graduating (Day et al., 2011; Fryar et al., 2017).

Barriers to Success

It is estimated the college graduation rates of non-foster care students are five times higher than those of foster youth (Kinarsky, 2017). These comparably lower rates are attributed to the academic, financial, and emotional barriers former foster youth face. Each of these barriers is explored in the following sub-sections.

Academic Barriers

Foster youth may face academic barriers given the inconsistencies in their high school educations. Many foster youths are obligated to move schools at the time they are identified as needing foster placement. Students do not have the flexibility to transfer at the beginning or end of the academic quarter or semester. Many students leave their K-12 grades in the middle of lessons or projects and need to catch up with others at their new schools. Moving in the middle of an academic year can have significant implications, including “loss of credits which puts them farther behind” (Morton, 2018, p. 74).

Financial Barriers

Many studies have emphasized that foster youth experience increased pressure from unsafe housing, stemming from a lack of employment or an obligation to pay for school (Fryar et al., 2017). The Foster Child Educational Assistance Act Program waives tuition; however, foster youth are still responsible for paying for room and board, laundry, campus fees, additional course material and books (Kansas Department of Children and Families, 2020). Another study suggested barriers include insufficient financial aid knowledge and support staff who are

undertrained to support students who have foster care backgrounds. When students work with staff who are not familiar with the needs of FFY, students may face longer wait times or incorrect guidance, and they miss out on resources (Fox, 2016). Additionally, while many college students can rely on the safety net provided by their families, many FFY college students must take on additional jobs or go without resources like food, school supplies, or textbooks (Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). One study found “five to ten percent of youth in foster care are dealing with credit issues caused by creditor error... mixed identity, incorrect use of a young person’s name, or identity theft and fraud” (Fryar et al., 2017, p. 14). In my pilot study in which I interviewed college foster youth, one participant shared that it felt like she could never get ahead. For example, she wanted to go to the free furniture amnesty day, but she did not have a truck, and she did not have a truck because she did not have any credit to take out a loan. Finally, other researchers examined the outcomes of 659 foster care alumni throughout Oregon and Washington and found that when leaving foster care, only 33% of foster youth had a driver’s license, only 47% had health insurance, and only 38% had at least \$250 in their bank account (Pecora et al., 2005). Foster youth are entering college with very few resources.

Emotional Barriers

The most common reasons for children entering the foster care system include neglect and abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The impact multiple childhood traumas like neglect or abuse have on adults can be measured using the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Scale. This scale was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is used to measure the number of traumatic events throughout childhood. There are seven ACEs, which are separated into abuse, neglect, and household

challenges. This scale is helpful in understanding our participants, as these categories are common experiences for children in foster care. The CDC asserts there is a positive relationship between the number of ACEs a person experiences throughout childhood and toxic stress. It noted toxic stress can change brain development, making things like decision-making, stress responses, and paying attention difficult (Felitti et al., 1998). Others noted that students who experience toxic stress can experience “lower grade point averages, higher rates of school absences, decreased reading ability, higher rates of suspensions and expulsions, and higher rates of school leaving” (Morton, 2018, p. 75). Individuals who experienced a higher number of ACEs throughout their childhood were found to have negative outcomes, including “social, emotional and cognitive impairment, adoption of health-risk behaviors, disease, disability and social problems, and early death” (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 256). Children who are involved in the foster care system all share the same ACE of being removed from a permanent home, which “is a traumatic shock for many children” (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013, p. 138). Other researchers found foster youth are exposed to ACEs more frequently than non-foster youth (Turney & Wildeman, 2017).

They found that when children enter the foster care system, foster youth reported experiencing fewer ACEs, but the impacts of those experiences are still damaging. They explained that “time does not erase the effects of childhood adversities... what happens during childhood may literally become part of one’s psychological being, contrary to the adage that time heals old wounds” (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013, p. 131). When former foster youth enter college, their ACEs are not left behind. ACEs change physical brain development which can impact emotional regulation, stimuli responses and affect the way individuals process stress and intake stimuli. Growing up in trauma changes brain function which can lead to reluctance to build new

relationships and to explore outer stimuli (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013). Given the prevalence of ACEs among foster youth, these physical impacts on the makeup of the brain may impose barriers to a student's access to their education (Felitti et al., 1998). Universities must consider that ACEs occur at a high rate for students in foster care and universities must be prepared to support students who've experienced these impacts.

Relationship Building

Foster youth face barriers that revolve around a lack of trust in and mentorship from adults. A lack of existing relationships can result in poor mental and emotional health, which can lead to behavioral problems (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). Without existing relationships, students carry a great burden of "being one's own advocate: making use of existing services but never expecting people to volunteer their support or care" (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1204). If students do not accept support or care from adults surrounding them in college, they may experience a low sense of belonging and a lack of information about resources, which, in turn, puts students at a high retention risk (Cohen, 2022).

Trauma Theory

Many foster youths face a phenomenon from trauma theory coined as ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is processing a loss that is unclear, in transition or has very little closure compared to a loss from death, divorce, moving away or loss of friendship (Boss, 2000). Boss explained, "People hunger for certainty. Even sure knowledge of death is more welcome than a continuation of doubt" (Boss, 2000, p. 6). Foster youth are in the unique position to face both physical loss (the physical absence of a parent or caregiver) and psychological loss (the absence of the concept of a nuclear family or consistent care). Individuals experiencing ambiguous loss may struggle with the grieving process because traditional coping mechanisms for dealing with

loss may not be as effective when the loss is unclear or ongoing. Foster youth may face ambiguous loss when they are removed from a home, and they may also face this loss with every rotation of teachers, therapists, judges, case workers, and foster parents. Implications surrounding ambiguous loss include emotional challenges, gaps in identity formation, and lack of guidance for how to grieve or move forward from loss. Boss (2000) posits that identifying a sense of meaning and hope are ways that individuals can process ambiguous loss.

Attachment Theory

Some existing literature used attachment theory as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between foster youth and adults (Heyman et al., 2020; Tucker & MacKenzie, 2012). Attachment theory describes the way infants and young children trust and connect with their caregivers (Bowlby, 1999). Children who have high levels of attachment feel senses of safety and security, which provide environments for exploration and growth (Haight et al., 2003). Children who do not have secure attachments in childhood may feel threatened or unsafe, resulting in a survival mentality throughout childhood (Bowlby, 1979; Haight et al., 2003). Attachment begins at birth as a result of physical touch and comfort, and then the concept of attachment expands into social and emotional negotiations between the parent and child. “By the third birthday... the child’s sense of security no longer depends so much on the actual presence of the parent as on mutual trust and understanding” (Haight et al., 2003, p. 119). When children feel strong senses of connection, they have bases to return home to, gaining confidence to thrive, and these childhood connections increase their sense of belonging throughout life (Cohen, 2022). Gaining confidence, testing boundaries, and feeling the security to put oneself out there are signs of growth and belonging on a college campus. Developing attachments to

adults or mentors provides the security needed to thrive and grow in college (Haight et al., 2003; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016).

Trust-building between Youth and Adults

Children who enter the foster care system must pause, eliminate, or strain their existing attachments, leaving little room to build trust. Secure attachments are rare, as the foster care system has been described as “a revolving door of relationships” (Curry, 2019, p. 374). The existence of this strain has echoed throughout other studies, which found FFY experience a “lack of connections with adults who will be there for them” (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010, p. 760). Children in foster care may interact with family members, foster parents, case managers, therapists, staff at care facilities, and mentors (Curry, 2019). On average, “more than a third of foster children and youth experience more than two placements each year” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022, p. 1). These details illustrate how often youth must engage and disengage with new adults throughout their time in foster care.

There are no primary studies about foster youth that focus on trust; however, distrust between foster youth and adults was often listed as a secondary finding in foster care research (Akin et al., 2017; Day et al., 2011; Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Heyman et al., 2020; Kirk & Day, 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). One researcher found many FFY have had disrupted or abusive relationships with adults, which “impacts their ability to establish secure attachments to trusted adults” (Heyman et al., 2020, p. 7). Instability throughout the life of a child in foster care can hold significant implications, including an inability to develop new secure attachments, and hinder their ability to develop interpersonal relationships (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Trusting adults and finding mentors play significant roles in the

retention of all college students; if foster youth are not engaging in relationship building, their distrust of adults may impact their overall success at college (Geenen et al., 2013).

Mentorship During College

Day et al. (2011) suggested foster youth have a higher college dropout rate because they lack strong connections coming into college. Having someone to discuss coursework, relationships, professors, and the pressures of college with is essential to a student's success (Day et al., 2011). One study suggested students struggle because there is no time to transition from child to adult. Instead, "they are faced with an abrupt end of support at a time when they have not yet mastered the educational, social, or economic survival skills necessary to be independent in the community" (Hass et al., 2014, p. 387). Samuels and Pryce (2008) interviewed foster youth and found their personal narratives express feelings of abandonment. Many students said they felt "different from their peers who had ongoing security and support" (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1204). One study found some foster youth who did not thrive in college "blame themselves, rather than the lack of existing resources and supportive relationships as primary barriers" (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1207). Entering a new college environment without an advocate or guide puts foster youth at a disadvantage.

To summarize the academic, financial, and emotional barriers listed above, Dworsky and Perez (2010) assembled the six most common barriers reported among foster youth support programs:

1. The child welfare system has traditionally done a poor job of encouraging foster youth to pursue post-secondary education.
2. Foster youth who have a high school diploma may not be prepared for college level work.
3. Most foster youth cannot depend on parents or other family members to play for college.

4. Under federal law, all wards or dependents of the court are considered “financially independent,” which means that their parent or guardian’s income does not affect their eligibility for financial aid.
5. Foster youth are more likely to exhibit mental health and behavioral problems than their non-foster peers.
6. Student services personnel at most post-secondary institutions are not familiar with or prepared to address the unique needs of young people transitioning out of foster care. (pp. 255-256)

With all these barriers in mind, universities across the U.S. have developed support programs designed to support the unique needs of foster youth.

Existing Retention Programming for FFY College Students

Foster youth retention programs are designed to improve the retention and program completion rates of students from foster care (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). One study wanted to determine the differences in retention between foster youth and low-income first-generation students. The researchers found “the students who had been in foster care were significantly more likely to drop out before the end of their first year than low-income, first-generation students who had not been in foster care” (Day et al., 2011, p. 2338). This study is significant because it emphasizes that FFY students have unique needs and experiences that may not be addressed with other interventions (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010).

While programs across the nation vary, several studies examined ways to identify or create positive outcomes for at-risk foster youth. Researchers suggested it is important to focus on the strengths of former foster youth instead of pointing out shortcomings or deficiencies (Fox, 2016). In connection to strengths, the idea of resilience has echoed throughout foster youth

research. Using a resilience-based intervention program has been shown to empower students as it positively reinforces behaviors and provides resources to focus on individual strengths (Fox, 2016). While the term resilience has been researched with several environments in mind, the term is often used to describe “educational resilience” within foster youth (Hass et al., 2014, p. 388).

Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success (FACES), developed at Texas State University, dedicated three years to researching policy and the current state of Texas State’s Foster youth affairs. Since launching the program, FACES staff regularly emails students, informs them of scholarships, and provides consistent support. Their students have extremely high levels of participation. Texas State reported that students emailed with staff; participated in welcome events, teambuilding ropes courses, tailgating, and holiday parties; had one-on-one coffee meetings with staff; and ended the year with an awards banquet (Watt et al., 2013). FACES centers its program around pride and strength. “Staff worked to create a survivor's identity, to instill a sense of pride that they have made it to college, and to celebrate that identity rather than to approach the students as vulnerable, deficient individuals in need of assistance” (Watt et al., 2013, p. 1412). The Texas State FACES program is leading research and developing training programs from which other institutions may learn.

Using a strengths-based approach helps FFY further develop the skills they bring to college. Texas State is not alone in using this approach; others agree using resilience and strengths programming will “engineer changes necessary to steward former foster youth into and through postsecondary education” (Fox, 2016, p. 4). Researchers from Texas State shared that their methods focus on “redefining identities, respecting autonomy, and utilizing assets” (Watt et al., 2013, p. 1411).

Another study conducted a complete review of foster care literature and suggested “individual attributes such as assertiveness, independence or autonomy, and persistence were critical to their success” (Geiger & Beltran, 2017, p. 193). Many programs emphasize the importance of building a program that increases agency within the students and provides a sense of community. One study found mentoring may be positively associated with “improved adult functioning, such as the promotion of healthy behaviors, educational success, improved self-esteem and the development of resilience” (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 45). Creating consistent and reliable programming is key; one study suggested foster youth are more likely to accept life advice and confide in an adult when the adult invests time and honesty into the relationship (Heyman et al., 2020).

Dworsky and Perez (2010), who conducted interviews with 10 different administrators of FFY support programs, found some foster care support programs required applications while others were non-selective. One study examined 12 college programs across the Midwest and found seven common areas of support: academic preparedness, mentoring, academic support, housing, financial assistance, emergency assistance, understanding familial financial pressures, youth’s personal challenges, and the need for advocacy (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Dworsky and Perez (2010) also identified the importance of guidance when “choosing courses, choosing a major, grad school exam prep, access to a dedicated computer lab, and tutoring” (p. 764). While all programs differ, some common resources include “scholarships, priority access to housing and course registration, tailored academic services, mentoring, and referrals to off-campus services, among others” (Salazar, 2012, p. 141).

Researchers have agreed there is a significant lack of data when evaluating the effectiveness of FFY retention programming (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005;

Salazar, 2012, p. 141; Watt et al., 2013). Another challenge to these programs is that not all foster youth want to be identified as such. Other researchers interviewed foster youth and found “a few youth noted being treated differently, or simply did not disclose their foster care status to others” (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1203). The private nature of a student’s history with foster care makes programming and evaluation of success challenging.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, I reviewed existing literature about FFY who had transitioned out of the foster care system. I outlined the history of foster care in the United States and included national, statewide, and local governance structures. I outlined demographic information of current foster youth in the U.S. This chapter helps readers understand how the childhood experiences of FFY manifest into financial, academic, and emotional barriers throughout college. After reviewing the gap in literature surrounding trust-building with adults, this chapter explored existing retention programming. This study will serve as a small step toward increasing foster youth engagement with retention programming. The topics discussed in this chapter aimed to create a foundation of knowledge for readers to have when reading through the stories of trust-building from FFY in college.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter includes a description of the methodology selection, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods. This chapter ends with a focus on the theoretical framework and reflexivity statement. The primary purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the experiences of college students formerly involved with foster care; more specifically, I am interested in hearing key stories of trust building or broken trust with adults before and during college and how trust impacts their success in higher education. The specific research questions guiding my study are as follows:

1. How do participants describe their experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult throughout their childhood?
2. How do participants describe their experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult throughout college?
3. How do experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult play a role in their higher education experience?

A qualitative design was the best approach for this study for several reasons. First, qualitative research is used to study how one individual or group of people experiences different facets of life, including feelings, relationships, power dynamics, events, race, class, identity, health, politics, and education (Bhattacharya, 2017; Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Durdella, 2017). Unlike quantitative research, which relies heavily on statistics and percentages, qualitative research gleans concepts and ideas through interviews and by co-constructing student stories. Understanding how FFY students describe their stories leads to a deeper understanding of how they build relationships with adults during college. Understanding relationship-building is not something that can be fully captured through quantitative research. Past qualitative research has

been used to study individuals who offer counternarratives or to discover stories from underrepresented populations like FFY (Kim, 2016). Qualitative research was fitting for focusing on a small, complex group of students who have very distinct experiences.

Additionally, qualitative research methods allow for flexibility in interview protocols. I used semi-structured interview methods during each interview (Durdella, 2017). This flexibility to adjust questions on the spot was needed for student populations who have gone widely understudied. Since this population of students has been the focus of little research, there were no existing research questions or tools I could rely on to craft interview questions (Bhattacharya, 2017). Learning about details and events encouraged me to pivot toward uncharted depths.

Narrative Inquiry

Voices from FFY about trust are absent from the existing higher education literature. I used narrative inquiry because I wanted to look at how each participant used storytelling to make meaning of their unique experiences. Conducting a phenomenological study would have been valuable if I were trying to describe the homogenous experience of being in foster care. Grounded theory would have been valuable if I were trying to identify a collective process of trust-building used by foster youth; however, it is the unique experience of each student that offered answers to my research questions. Narrative inquiry uses “interpretive lenses... all revolving around the narrative and stories of research participants” (Kim, 2016, p. 6). Narrative inquiry is not framed in truth; rather, it uncovers how individuals retell and perceive their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). Stories are retold around “perception, thought, memory, and imagination (Kim, 2016, p. 144).

When studying trust as told by FFY, I understood that “each story has a point of view that will differ, depending on who is telling the story, what is being told, as well as when and where

the story is told” (Kramp, 2014, p. 108). Put simply, students told me stories in the ways they wanted their stories told. Narrative inquiry differs from other research approaches as I was not seeking to discover a truth; rather, I sought to understand how students positioned themselves within the stories told. For example, when a student shared about a time their trust was broken by a parent, I was interested to know if they thought they or the parent was at fault. What reasons did they share for the trust being broken? I was interested to understand how the participants position themselves within the instances of trust. Riessman (2008) explained, “positionings of the self in personal narratives signify the performance of identity” (p. 13). In this case, a narrative inquiry was fitting to better understand how students understand their place at a university or how they come to author their relationships with adults and resources on campus. As professionals in higher education, we know universities offer support; however, we do not know how FFY perceive such campus-level support.

Narrative inquiry also provided a chance to shift focus away from the shortcomings or deficits of FFY students. I used narrative inquiry to understand how FFY make meaning of their relationships before and during college. Looking at trust through a qualitative lens helped me shift away from a trust vs. no trust framework. For the purposes of this study, trust is not considered to be binary. Narrative inquiry helped me understand the contexts and history surrounding a student’s trust. Hearing about significant life events or minor daily interactions was valuable because narrative inquiry assists humans to “make life experiences meaningful” (Kramp, 2014, p. 107).

Finally, I chose narrative inquiry as I believe this methodology provided the opportunity to offer participants a sense of agency and power. When children are in the foster care system, they have very little control or power over their safety, shelter placements, and future. Children

often feel powerless, and their voices go unheard (Bauer & Thomas, 2019). Narrative inquiry was used to learn more about FFY because “power runs throughout the process of authoring, telling, and evaluating stories” (Loseke, 2021, p. 11). This study used storytelling as a relational activity between the student and me as an audience (Riessman, 2014). I asked questions to understand FFY “thoughts, feelings, ideas, examples, and situations—as narrated by them” (Kramp, 2014, p. 113). I also acknowledged my role as someone actively participating in the study. I was transparent about how my own history, profession, and values inform this study (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Constructionist narrative is a type of narrative inquiry. I used a constructionist lens, because unlike other narrative methods, “the constructionist approach stresses the constantly changing elements in the construction of narratives rather than reading them as finished products of particular circumstances that may change over time” (Esin et al., 2014, p. 205). This was particularly helpful as I worked to gain the participants’ trust. Some participants slowly added more details to their stories the longer we interacted. For example, one participant shared that their home life suddenly changed, and by the third interview, they had shared all of the details leading up to the significant change. Constructionist narrative let me focus on the ways students told stories, not simply if they can recall memories. Constructionist narrative placed the value on how participants construct their stories in that moment and put little focus on the events themselves (Esin et al., 2014). Constructionist narrative inquiry provided the space to understand how a memory was being framed and shared through the lens of a FFY college student.

My goal was to be an active participant in their storytelling, to learn how their memories and stories were constructed and why they were presented in particular ways. I sought to understand how stories of trust were shared and did not focus on if the stories were truthful or

consistent. Constructionist narrative was also fitting because of the personal nature of this research. Actively participating in storytelling allows the researcher and participant to build a relationship (Flick, 2016). Through journaling and memo-writing, this narrative inquiry is presented with the researcher as part of the story, interacting and learning about FFY on campus. This will be apparent in chapter 4, when I describe a participant's body language or instances when I chose not to inquire more about a sensitive topic.

Participants

Narrative inquiry is “best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2014, p. 55). Using narrative inquiry required me to be selective about which stories were included in the study. Each story needed to meet the narrow criteria and directly answer the research questions. Using a small number of participants allowed me to build deeper relationships with them, something that would have been more challenging with a larger sample.

In 2021, there were 14 undergraduate students at Kansas State University who were considered FFY. I conducted three interviews each with five of them. As outlined in my method, my goal was not for statistical generalizations; rather, I sought rich depth, detail, and transferability (Loeseke, 2011). “The extent to which the findings can be transferred from one case to another depends on the similarity between the respective contexts” (Schreier, 2018, p. 4). Each participant was involved with foster care; but each foster care system, university experience, and family placement was distinctive.

Using a smaller sample size was ideal to allow me to understand context through a more comprehensive and in-depth interview process. I completed the interviews within a two-month window, and I dedicated my time toward depth and understanding each participant. Creswell

(2014) explained, “the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual” (p. 208). Narrative inquiry was the ideal tool to understand the complexity, depth, and detail of each student when co-constructing their story.

Research Site

Since the participants were students who were then attending or had recently attended Kansas State University, I conducted the interviews via Zoom. Kansas State University is a public four-year institution that enrolls about 20,000 undergraduate students with a 96% acceptance rate (U.S. News & World Report LP, 2022). Kansas State University has a 41% four-year graduation rate, with business, agriculture, and engineering serving as the most popular majors (U.S. News & World Report LP, 2022).

Participant Selection

Participants were selected through criterion sampling. This method is used to find participants who “meet or exceed a specific criterion... making them information-rich cases” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). Using criterion sampling helps researchers be intentional when selecting participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, participants had to be students who then attended or had attended Kansas State University and who were then or formerly involved with foster care. I chose a four-year public university because this university type is the most common path for foster youth seeking a college degree (Kirk & Day, 2011). Additionally, I used a four-year university as I wanted to examine stories from sophomores, juniors, seniors, and recent alumni to capture stories from each year of college.

Involvement with foster care can be defined as anything from one placement during a child’s time in foster care, followed by a return to their biological family, to an indefinite number of placements before aging out of the system. A student may age out of the foster care system if

they turn 18 before being adopted or before returning to their biological family. Students are also considered FFY if they were in the foster care system and then adopted (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Participants were students or new alumni who had enrolled within the past five years. I chose the past five years as the timeframe as I wanted to understand trust-building from the student perspective. If students are recalling their trust-building at ages beyond their early 20s, we would be learning through a young adult's lens rather than a college student's. I also selected students who were at different stages of their college careers, including a sophomore, junior, senior, and one-year graduate. Including a participant from each year of college and graduate school offered insight to different milestones and challenges each academic cohort traditionally faces. Participants were identified by reaching out to the president of the independent student organization Fostering Success. Fostering Success is an initiative founded in 2020 under the K-State Parents and Family Program. The initiative offers resources to FFY and opportunities for students to connect with each other. I followed up individually with each person who was interested and enrolled them in the study once they signed the informed-consent document.

Also, given the population of participants, I paid each of them \$75 for their participation in the study. The \$75 gift card was awarded after the final meeting.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, and I encouraged students to schedule the interviews with extra time so they could decompress and relax before and after the interview. Interviews were recorded via Zoom. After interviews were conducted, they were uploaded and transcribed with Happyscribe, a paid online transcription service.

Each student was asked to fill out an electronic copy of the consent form. This form outlined the details of the study and explained how the interviews would be recorded and used in my dissertation. All students were reminded that they were only encouraged to share what they were comfortable with, the interview could be stopped at any time, and they had full control and agency over their transcripts and recordings. If at any time a student felt like I had misrepresented their words, we would re-negotiate the story. This is the process of sharing results with the participant to decrease variability between details shared and details presented as results. Re-negotiation was further outlined in the data analysis section of this dissertation.

I conducted three 45–60-minute interviews with each student. I used semi-structured interviews to allow for flexibility. Using semi-structured interviews “gives authority to the storyteller, whom you acknowledge as the one who knows and tells” (Kramp, 2014, p. 111). Giving authority to the student during the interview was important to build trust and show support. Encouraging participants to guide the discussion kept me from having too much influence on the co-construction of stories. The process of storytelling is not one-dimensional; rather, a story evolves as the listener engages, asks questions, reacts, and affirms the storyteller. I relied on my interview protocol to ensure participants were sharing their stories and not the stories they thought I wanted to hear.

In a pilot study I conducted in 2021, I interviewed two students about hope. At the end of the interviews, I asked them, “Is there anything else you’d like me to ask? Or anything you thought I would ask, and I didn’t?” One student replied, “I thought you’d ask me to share a time when I lost hope.” They continued to share about an experience, and at the end they said, “Did I give you the right answer that you needed for your study?” I shared with the student that my research is not a math problem, it is more like a news article; whatever they answer is exactly

what I want to know. This experience showed me how important it was to follow an interview protocol, which helped me be transparent about why I conduct research and helped me build rapport and trust with participants.

During and after each interview, I updated my researcher journal to capture their stories and details of the interaction. It was important to note the tone, facial expressions, and body language of each participant (Saldaña, 2011). Updating my research journal included writing down additional questions and making connections to previous interviews. Next, I completed my post-interview checklist. The items on the checklist included:

1. Thanked student for their time and scheduled for the next interview.
2. Upload voice recordings to my password-protected laptop.
3. Sent a thank you note to the student.
4. Transcribed each interview.
5. Returned to transcriptions and made additional notes.

All voice recordings and transcripts were password-protected on a laptop and cell phone. All devices will remain in my possession or locked in my home. All transcripts and audio recordings will be deleted three years after the completion of my dissertation defense.

Membership Role

I conducted the interviews from the position of an adult. While I think students were comfortable and very forthcoming, there may have been instances when a student did not share details because of their previous experiences with adults. This idea aligns with research findings that relate to a lack of trust in authority, faculty, and staff. Bhattacharya (2017) offered insight by organizing the observer into three categories: peripheral membership, active membership, and full membership. Each level correlates to the amount of involvement with a group. In this

context, I consider myself to be an active member of the Fostering Success group, even though I have formally transitioned out of my role as Parents and Family Program Director.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a three-stage process, including a) preliminary data analysis b) restorying the information with a three-dimensional space narrative structure c) re-negotiating the story with each student to create an accurate report of the participant's life (Durdella, 2017; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). I began the preliminary analysis using close readings, followed by open data categorizations (Loseke, 2021). First, I reviewed notes, ideas, and analytic memos created during each interview. I highlighted stories and ideas that shared similar attributes regardless of their relevance to the research questions. This allowed me to forge new or unseen connections and truly began an inductive analysis (Loseke, 2021). Next, I continued the preliminary data analysis by returning to my research questions. I conducted open coding to group together segments of the narratives that helped answer each of the three research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For example, any data that discussed moments of building trust in college was put in group A, instances of trust in childhood were put in group B, and instances of trust impacting higher education were put in group C. This grouping allowed me to visually see what parts of the interviews to focus on. The preliminary analysis helped me stay familiar with the data and build and adjust the next round of interview questions. Researchers must read their data often and slowly to fully grasp the smallest of details (Loseke, 2021).

Following the preliminary coding and after all the interviews were complete, I started the restorying process. I reanalyzed the raw data using a graphic organizer to “identify important information into a table or map to code, sort, and group the data” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 343). I chose to restory using the three-dimensional space narrative structure, which was

created to put stories into a semantic space. This process included printing out stories and laying them out in a large space. I grouped stories together and drew connections through visual and physical reorganizing. The stories were separated into the categories of interaction and situation (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Interaction refers to the people in the story and their accompanying points of view. I evaluated the stories based on continuity by asking how details added up and whether past elements matched present elements? This was beneficial since my interview questions focused on both the past and the current processes of trust-building in college.

Finally, I focused on situation, which refers to the “storytellers’ landscape,” including the setting or existence in time at which the story is set (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 339). The process of restorying helped me piece together a narrative, even if the participants did not share details in a chronological order. For example, in the first interview, a student talked about their classmates, but during a different interview they discussed the professor of the same class. By restorying, I positioned these two details into a cohesive story and presented it back. After the restorying process, I used concept coding to better understand the concept of trust. Concept coding was most appropriate for this study because I was interested in learning about the concept of trust.

Concept coding has been used in the past to explore concepts like “romance, economy, and technology” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 152). The idea of trust shares similar conceptual attributes: “a concept suggests an idea rather than an object or observable behavior. For example... one can see and touch a church building, but not the concept of spirituality or religion” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 153). Using a coding method that helps capture a concept like trust “stimulates reflection on broader social themes and ideas” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 153). Concept coding helped me use my

preliminary analysis and three-dimensional space restorying to characterize themes that illuminate the larger overall concept of trust. When FFY explained their interactions with adults in college, I better understood (a) what events took place (b) how they felt, and (c) if they believed the interaction was fair or safe (Loseke, 2021). Stories were evaluated based on their cognitive, emotional, and moral meanings (Loseke, 2021).

The last step was re-negotiating and reordering the data to accurately tell the participant's story. This step was necessary because my goal was to accurately represent their narratives. The preliminary examination, restorying, and concept coding were done through my lens, so I needed to reorder the data through the "lens of the epistemological framework" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 209). In this case, I evaluated the groups through the lens of meaning making constructionism and interpretivism. This reminded me to expand my analysis beyond the plot of each story; I evaluated the story in relation to the conditions in which the story was told. The lens of meaning making was valuable because it pushed me to look beyond the words of the narrative. "Narrative inquiry opens up forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We can ask the following question: Why was the story told that way[?]" (Riessman, 2008, p. 3).

After this, I made interpretations and repeated the entire process. This cyclical analysis included close readings, plot and idea grouping, categorizing by research question, analyzing through meaning making, and ending with concept coding. This resulted in categories that were "responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, pp. 212–213). This study was informed through the lenses of social constructionism and interpretivism.

Theoretical Framework

Constructionist research is conducted under the assumption that reality is created, changed, and inhibited by social actors. Furthermore, “meaning does not reside in persons, objects, events, or experiences but rather is a human creation” (Loseke, 2021, p. 38). Our reality exists because humans attach meaning to all existence. The following statement can help clarify the idea of meaning vs. being: “before there were consciousnesses on earth capable of interpreting the world, the world held no meaning at all” (Loseke, 2021, p. 43). Given this assumption, I needed to understand how my presence influenced, shaped, and co-constructed student stories. There is no absolute reality to be discovered; rather, I am presenting a construction of reality that includes myself as a part of the environment (Norton, 1999). This aligns with the restorying process that occurred during data analysis. Constructionist framework was valuable for this study as it gave me an opportunity to share my own histories, biases, and interpretations of data. Findings are presented as moments in time when research was conducted.

Narratives must be understood as constantly fluctuating and shifting; it would be a disservice to read them “as finished products” (Flick, 2017, p. 206). Acknowledging my personal standpoints within a study provides context and acknowledges myself as an active participant in constructing a participant’s reality (Norton, 1999; Riessman, 2008). Given that I already had established relationships with some of the research participants, it was imperative I acknowledge how my presence, attitudes, and interactions affected the construction of student stories. I also conducted research through the lens of interpretivism.

The notion of interpretivism “does not guarantee truth” (Norton, 1999, p. 3). Interpretivists seek to understand how and why someone experiences any given reality. Data are analyzed to understand the point of view of the individual going through a particular experience.

The interpretivist lens assumes humans are subjective, and their emotions, thoughts, experiences, and values are all created through interaction (Bhattacharya, 2017). Details of an interaction, such as “language, gestures, expressions and actions,” are essential to understand the subjectivity and complexity of humans (Goulding, 1998, p. 53). Additionally, understanding student stories through interpretivism provided an opportunity to not only research the words shared, but add observations in my research journal about participants’ tones, body language, and emotions as they shared their college experiences.

Reflexivity

I identify as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied woman who has never faced resource insecurity. Throughout my life, I have never questioned my safety or right to an education. It was through my work with Camp Catch-up that my worldview began to shift. Why were these innocent siblings who enjoyed playing together and telling jokes to each other forced to live apart? I could not stop questioning why some kids have privilege and others do not. While pursuing my bachelor’s degree, I read Jonathan Kozol’s *Shame of the Nation*, a book highlighting the vast inequity throughout our education systems in the U.S. This was another space where I questioned whether I had “earned” my accomplishments or just been lucky. I have since learned that the phrase “hard work will pay off” is only true if you benefit from the existing systems that perpetuate inequality throughout the world. Now, as someone nearing the finish line of a Ph.D. program, I know my identity afforded me many unearned privileges. Therefore, I approached this research with the utmost responsibility to contribute to existing higher education and foster youth literature.

This research was conducted with the reality that I was learning about foster youth as an outsider. Regardless of how many interviews I conduct, and despite my firsthand experiences

over multiple summers at Camp Catch-up, I will never truly know the fear that comes with being removed from a home or facing resource insecurity as a child or young adult. Given this reality, students may not have felt compelled to share details with someone they considered an outsider. Additionally, it is a fact that some foster youth have experienced traumas primarily from adults, which leads to less trust-building (*Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACEs]*, 2021). Participants may simply not trust me because I share attributes with individuals who have broken their trust in the past.

As an active participant in each interview, I approached each interaction as someone who does not inhabit the role of student or FFY. I brought a level of empathy and understanding of the challenges students face in higher education. My goal was to approach students with transparency about why I was conducting research. My goal was to learn from each participant's stories, to strengthen or build retention programming specific for FFY college students.

This study may reflect my existing biases related to income, upbringing, and education. While I did my best to account for these differences between researcher and participants, each facet of my identity may have instilled in me unknown biases. Efforts to reduce biases included using interview guidelines and following memo-writing strategies (Saldaña, 2011).

Summary

Throughout this chapter, I explored qualitative research as a methodology. Specifically, I outlined why narrative inquiry was fitting to answer the research questions. This chapter explained the research site, participant selection method, and data collection method. Additionally, I explained how my role as an interviewer impacted the data collection process. Finally, I explained the data analysis methods, including concept coding, restorying, and outlining the constructionist narrative theoretical framework. After outlining the data analysis

method, the chapter ended with a reflexivity statement. The following chapter includes a short introduction of each participant followed by findings organized into eight themes.

Chapter 4 - Findings

In this narrative study, I explored the experiences of individuals who were or are currently involved with foster care and enrolled at a four-year public university. Their lived experiences, from early childhood through their journeys to college, and their motivation to earn their bachelor's degrees provided the foundation for this study. The study's goal is to provide insight for administrators, professors, faculty, and staff as to how to support foster youth college students and increase their graduation rates. This chapter presents the lived experiences of the students, giving voice to their childhood and college experiences. Three interviews each were conducted with the five participants. Email communication was used to have participants review and confirm the information they provided. From these interviews, eight major themes emerged as influences or considerations in their trust-building experiences throughout childhood and college.

The themes and biographies of the participants will be this chapter's focus. The eight themes are: (a) covering up home life means safety (b) distrust of biological family is a key memory (c) shifting trust in childhood, stories addressing the question, "If I tell someone, will they help me?" (d) a revolving door of adults is a barrier to trust-building (e) trusting professors: personal connections and confidentiality (f) building boundaries: "it's easier not to share" (g) managing family relationships is ongoing (h) living between trust in self and needing reassurance.

Many of the stories about broken trust during childhood in chapter 4 may be upsetting to readers. When deciding which content was appropriate to include, I considered that all five participants shared they never felt like their stories mattered. Luz shared that foster care is so misunderstood because it gets watered down into stories like *Little Orphan Annie*. Victoria

emphasized that “everyone has a family story, so why does my family story make so many people uncomfortable? Why is my story such a burden to hear?” For this reason, I decided not to censor their experiences. Stories were included to provide an accurate depiction of each student’s lived experiences relating to trust-building with adults. All participants shared details willingly through open-ended questions and were never pushed to share more than they were comfortable with. I often prefaced questions with “please feel free to share as much, or as little as you’d like, or you can pass!” This reassurance was consistent throughout my interview process. As a result, the lengths of student stories vary. Some are rich in detail and depth, while others are a few factual sentences. Additionally, not all themes have stories from each participant, which is also reflective of the fact that every experience in foster care is different. Themes were selected if three or more participants shared a story relating to the theme. Judy explained, “We’re all in the same storm, but in different boats. Some students are in a yacht and others are surviving in a rowboat.” Findings included in this chapter all contribute to each participant’s collective narrative.

Participants

Before introducing the overarching themes in detail, provided below is an overview of each participant. Each participant is introduced by their accomplishments and goals, not by their engagement with the foster care system. This is intentional and serves as a reminder that a history with foster care is not always visible on the surface.

Shirley

Shirley graduated from her College of Education program in three years in the Spring of 2023. Her entire family attended her college graduation. In fact, they sat in the front row. Shirley joked that her dad ended up taking more pictures of the historic football coach of the university

than his own daughter! They celebrated by grilling wings in the backyard and spending time together. At the time of this writing, she is spending the summer in Texas with her boyfriend and dog, Ranger. She loves spending time at home at a slower pace. She will begin teaching in the Fall of 2023.

Harrison

Harrison is a rising senior earning his degree in engineering. He came to a four-year public institution after completing his first year at community college. Initially, he was in electrical engineering, where he learned his real passion was in architectural engineering. Harrison is currently on pace to graduate with a 4.0 GPA, a goal he set for himself early on. Upon receiving his degree, he plans to pursue a PhD with a long-term goal of being a professor. At the time of this writing, he serves as the president of an on-campus club and is a homeowner. Harrison has enjoyed doing puzzles and having wine nights with his mentors since growing up.

Judy

Judy is a senior pursuing her bachelor's degree to become a teacher. Contingent upon her graduation in December 2023, she has accepted a fourth-grade teaching position. Judy is passionate about DIY crafts and inventions. She is also passionate about going to Disney World as much as possible. Judy goes to the gym every day, loves *The Nightmare before Christmas*, is engaged, and is planning her wedding.

Victoria

Victoria is a junior thinking about studying psychology. Victoria is a big lover of animals. In fact, during one of our interviews, she held her pet snake. She also has a new kitten named Junebug. She is proud of being debt-free and the home life she has created with her three cats, pet snake, and boyfriend. Victoria chose her university without doing a campus visit,

although she always knew she wanted to go to college. None of her family went to college, so she set a goal to be the first.

Luz

Luz is a rising junior double majoring in fashion studies, entrepreneurship and innovation. Her dream job is to work in sustainable fashion. Luz knew she wanted to go to her university since the age of 12. She loves her university and attributes a lot of her success to her engagement with TRiO programs. Luz holds multiple part-time jobs and loves to keep things organized. In the future, she would like to advocate for other students like her because she knows how tough college can be.

Each participant had unique goals and challenges they faced. When analyzing their thoughts and feelings about trust throughout their childhood and collegiate experience, eight themes emerged that showed how similar they are. The eight themes are: (a) covering up home life means safety (b) distrust of biological family is a key memory (c) shifting trust in childhood, stories addressing the question, “If I tell someone, will they help me?” (d) a revolving door of adults is a barrier to trust-building (e) trusting professors: personal connections and confidentiality (f) building boundaries: “it’s easier not to share” (g) managing family relationships is ongoing (h) living between trust in self and needing reassurance.

Covering Up Home Life Means Safety

All five participants shared an instance of when they chose to lie or deceive people outside of their family. While each participant had this experience in their childhood, their motivations for deception were different. Three participants were deceitful to maintain the status quo of their family, and two participants were deceitful because of pressure from their birth parents. Judy, Shirley, and Victoria all felt an intrinsic pressure to cover up what was happening

at home. No one pressured them to be deceitful; however, they chose to be untruthful to teachers and peers in order to avoid trouble or judgement.

Judy grew up in a tough part of town with her two younger siblings. She entered the foster care system when she was 15 because her mother was addicted to methamphetamines. Growing up, Judy often looked after her siblings and tried to shelter them from her mom's alcohol and drug use. For a long time, Judy felt internal pressure to make things seem okay to the outside world:

I saw a lot of things, and so I sheltered my siblings, and I didn't want everyone to know.

Everyone hears that when you go into foster care you get split up. So if someone asks how things are....“Things are GREAT! Mom's busy! She's at work!” I made it seem OK so that we weren't getting welfare checks.

Shirley's birth mother had her parental rights severed when Shirley was in sixth grade, although Shirley is still in contact with her. Shirley is also very close with her parents, who adopted her when she was 13. Shirley explained she blocked out many of her memories before being adopted but felt similar, self-imposed responsibility from sixth to eighth grade, when she lived with her birth mother. During these years, Shirley was in charge of paying rent, she was allowed to skip school, and her house was never clean. She did not want to go to school because she did not want her teachers to know her mom was not picking her up from school on time:

Some days, I wouldn't go because I knew she [her birth mother] wouldn't be able to come pick me up till, like, 6:00 p.m. So I'd be sitting outside the school from, like, three to six, like, making sure the teachers didn't see me.

Victoria has a younger sister and entered the foster care system when she was seven. She felt pressure to deceive others at school about her home life:

Growing up, I had to act one way in front of a bunch of people at school because sometimes I'd have a lot of things going on, but I couldn't tell anybody about it because I didn't want to get in trouble or just be talked about. It's like... they [my peers] just start gossiping instead of being there for me. When it's crazy stuff like that [her home life], people want to talk about it and I just have to gauge whether I'm safe or not.

Victoria felt she had to be careful with her word choices. She did not specify details of this memory, but until the age of 17, her experience growing up “was definitely bad,” pushing her to be careful with what she shared outside of her home.

Two participants shared that throughout their childhood, their birth parents expected them to lie or bend the truth to avoid getting the family in trouble. Luz is one of eight siblings, and she was nine when she first went into foster care. She was in and out of foster homes and temporary residences until she aged out on Aug 1, 2021. This date is notable because she began college that same month on August 14. Throughout her childhood, her birth parents were in and out of jail due to crime fueled by their addictions to crack cocaine. Luz's mother would make her and her sister steal. “She would just shove it [unpaid merchandise] in our jackets.” Luz said her mother was a kleptomaniac and dishonest.

Harrison's biological father was formerly a police officer and often played the role of a loving father when other adults were around. Harrison always played along as a survival instinct; he recalled one example when he ran away from home and his father smoothed things over with the police:

He's waiting at the front door, and he's all smiles and laughing, joking with them about like, “oh, yeah, I did this stuff when I was a kid. Whatever, blah, blah, blah.” And then the door shuts. Different person. Different person completely. Just, like, 100% raw.

Overall, stories participants shared about deception are significant. Being encouraged by a parent or having self-imposed pressure to deceive others reinforces the thought that it is important not to trust adults or peers outside the family.

Distrust of Biological Parents Is a Key Memory

All five participants no longer trust their birth parents. Participants each recalled one story from their childhood about losing trust in their biological parents. This theme is illustrated with stories about a key turning point. After the turning point, participants could not rebuild their trust and return to their former innocent views of their parents. This theme is significant and serves as a reminder that all five participants entered the foster care system as a result of a traumatic event or series of events resulting in a loss of trust and stability.

Luz and her siblings attempted reintegration with their birth parents six times. Luz recalls that every time they were close to reintegrating, her mother would not pass her drug test. After their sixth try, Luz's parents signed away their parental rights. She points to one memory from this day when she decided she would never trust people again:

I think when I stopped trusting people, it was right before I turned 12 and they [her birth parents] had just given up their rights. And we were supposed to have our goodbye visit. So all six of us, we go to the freaking courthouse, and we sit there for two hours, and we all are fucking sitting there, all six of us. It was literally our goodbye visit. But she didn't come. We had brought them presents and everything, it was literally awful. It was like being abandoned again, except you didn't get to see their face while they abandoned you. They just did not come. That's when I decided I was literally never going to trust anybody again. Because no. How are you not going to show up to a goodbye visit with your six

children? And I cried in the car. But after the car, I didn't cry anymore about the goodbye visit.

Judy blocked many of her memories about her time before being adopted, although she will never forget the moment she stopped trusting her birth mom. Before entering foster care, she witnessed her birth mom ask her little brother to pee in a cup for her drug test:

We stopped at a gas station... my little brother was asked to pee in a cup for her. And it traumatized me how much it traumatized him. On one hand, absolutely no child should have to do that. But on the other hand, it's the fact that he was upset by it made me think that there was more that he knew. You know what I mean? It wasn't like, oh, go pee in the trees. It wasn't like that. It was something inside of him said, like, I'm not supposed to do this.

After being adopted, Shirley still actively tried to have a relationship with her birth mother. One turning-point memory was when she drove three hours to visit her birth mother:

She's an alcoholic, so she would be like, oh, "I've been sober," and then you figure out she's not. Or like, I went to see her, and she doesn't have a car because she can't drive, and I had to take her to Walmart to get something for us to do. And then snuck off to go buy beer and try to hide it from me. So that broke my trust. I'm like, okay, I'm going to drive three hours down here to see you, spend time with you, and you're going to go behind my back and do the one thing that, you know, pissed me off and then make me drive three hours home.

Victoria's experience was significantly different from those of other participants. During our first interview, Victoria didn't share many details about her life before foster care. Following her lead, we focused on lighter topics. Finally, when asked if she was still in contact with her

birth parents, she answered “No, mostly because I don't know... it's kind of traumatic how that all happened. It was kind of like a two birds, with one stone kind of thing... so my dad murdered my mom.” I said I was sorry to hear that, and she shared that her father sends her letters from prison but she will not answer him. In reading her body language and the tone of the interview, we never discussed the details of the passing of her mom or incarceration of her dad; however, throughout our three interviews she often said things like “after going into foster care” or “before foster care.” She also shared that since this event, she has not wanted to visit or send return letters to her biological dad. This leads me to believe this event from her childhood was a key moment of losing trust with her biological father.

Victoria shared that her time in foster care left her feeling small. A story about losing trust with her foster family was they never provided new clothes for her, even though her foster parents were given funds:

A lot of times growing up, the clothes I had and some of them I still have were donated to me and that would be my only clothes. I learned, not only did they [foster parents] get paid monthly, once a year, they would also get an allotment just for getting clothes. I found out that one lady I stayed with used the money to pay for her children's college tuition. So I feel like it very much instilled in me that I do not matter to other people. It's hard for me to believe that I matter to other people, that I am not just someone that is an annoyance or a nuisance. Like, I'm trying to work through it, but people were literally being paid to take care of me, and I was still too much of a nuisance. So I had to try not to have needs. Which is crazy because every child has needs, but especially traumatized children.

Harrison's mother passed away when he was in kindergarten. His father remarried, and Harrison shared that "things got tough around third grade." Harrison explained he did not have a key moment of distrust as he could not really remember a time when he ever trusted his biological father.

Shifting Trust: "If I Tell Someone Will They Help Me?"

Three participants shared that growing up, they were in a physically and/or emotionally abusive household and decided to tell someone about it. Some stories were about their biological families, and others were about foster families. Participants had to identify an adult who met two criteria: 1. Someone who would believe them 2. Someone who would help remove them from their unsafe environment. Victoria's foster family was verbally and at times physically abusive. She explained her considerations before speaking up:

If you try to tell people you're being abused, you have to really be able to gauge someone out to tell them, because telling the wrong person can make the situation so much worse and makes it to where you can never tell anyone again.

Reading Victoria's facial expressions, tone and body language during the interview, I did not ask follow-up questions or ask for further details about what went on in this foster home, nor did I ask for specifics about when she told an adult she needed help. Judy shared that when she told or confided in an adult about her home life, she was removed from her home. Judy explained that a teacher saw self-harm marks on her arm and asked her about them. Judy said everything just came out: "I cried a lot, but I think overall it was more like relief. I was a little bit scared of what the next step was, but I did not have to be the person who was holding it all in anymore."

Being removed from the home after trusting an adult was not Harrison's experience. He explained that in third grade, he told his school counselor his dad was physically abusing him at

home. He said, “the situation had deteriorated significantly into physical violence, and other things were being said that would lead a person to believe it's going to get even worse.” Harrison told his school counselor:

I know where his gun is, I know it's loaded. Next time he touches me, I'm going to kill him. It's getting worse. You know it's getting worse. It's going to be him or me. He's going to kill me eventually. If you guys don't take me out, they're going to tell him this and I'm dead.

Harrison shared that upon telling this to his school counselor, he was taken to a medical center where he was observed over the weekend. Unfortunately, at the end of his observation, Harrison’s fear became his reality. He was told his father, the person physically abusing him, was about to pick him up from the hospital. Harrison remembered:

On the way home, it's like silent for the whole ride until we got a couple of miles left. Well, then he pulls off the highway early at an early exit. Now we're taking like a weird-off-the-direct path now. Not the normal path to get home. Well, we pull up to the stoplight... waiting to turn left. And the only thing he said to me on that whole drive was he told me that if I ever pulled that shit that he would have no problem putting me down. That's what he said to me.

Harrison recalled being afraid:

I knew it was going to get worse, I was just trying to get out before then. The only thing you can really do in a situation like that is to just not give any reaction. So I'm shut off. But the first thing I do when I get home, I go upstairs, I go in my closet and shut the door and then I can lose my composure. And then I call one of my friends and I tell her about that. And she told me that I need to take everything he said previously that I can

remember, and I need to take everything that he said just now and everything he's done, anything I can remember, and write it down. So I took all that to school and gave that to them. I was pretty much 100% certain the next day that that was the last time I'd ever be in that house. They came and picked me up, and then here I am now. That was the last time I talked to him.

Participants all shared the common story of having to trust an adult outside of their family as a means of survival. These stories are significant, as it signifies a shift from protecting their home life and recognizing they need to trust an adult different from their parent.

A Revolving Door of Adults Results in a Barrier to Trust-building

Participants shared that throughout childhood they were obligated to interact with countless adults, including case workers, therapists, foster parents, teachers, and lawyers. Participants shared that every time they would move foster homes, the people in each role would change. Shirley shared that interacting with so many adults was traumatic:

I feel like as a foster kid you always hurt. The trauma of having the revolving door of people in your life makes it hard for me to trust and create relationships with people. I feel like I even still struggle with the mentality of everyone that I trust has left through that revolving door.

Victoria explained that she couldn't rely on the adults around her to follow through on promises or tasks. It was hard to hold adults accountable when they were always changing. As a result, she has become extremely independent:

I've gotten hyper-independent, very able to figure things out on my own, very resourceful in that way, just because a lot of the time I would ask for help, and nothing would happen. Or even with being in the foster care system, sometimes your worker gets

changed so much, or they have like a caseload of 100 kids. It's unfortunate that we don't get all the assistance we need, you either sink or swim. Even if you have people telling you not to worry about it, you quickly realize that you very much have to worry about these things. It's hard to let go sometimes because it's hard for me to trust that people will get it done like they say they told me they would.

Harrison, Victoria, Judy, and Shirley shared they value their independence and do not like to rely on others for tasks they can handle themselves. Each participant explained they like to pick out their own schedules and do not rely on their advisor. Judy said she knows she is supposed to trust her advisor, but she prefers to pick everything out herself:

I think in college we're supposed to trust our advisors and that they know what's best for us. But I think the fact of the matter is, especially when you go to a university the size of ours, is that you're not the only person that they have. I'm super self-sufficient and if this is the class I want, and this is the schedule I want, it's going to happen regardless of what you think needs to happen for my schedule.

Participants explained they prefer to be in control of life decisions because they had so little control throughout their childhood.

Trusting Professors: Personal Connections and Confidentiality

Participants all shared stories of building trust with professors. Participants shared stories of building personal connections, which increased trust. Additionally, participants said it was easier to trust a professor when they knew confidentiality was a part of their job description. Judy shared she trusted her "school dad" because they had a similar upbringing:

He went through a really similar upbringing. He kind of talked about how he grew up in a home where his mother was a meth addict and he kind of felt uncertain about a lot of

things growing up. And now he doesn't really have a relationship with her. We have a lot in common. It was like to the point where I would talk to him about why my relationships weren't working out or how grades were going and how my adoption was, or when my biological mother contacted me because he's not in contact with his either.

Judy shared that this professor often provided guidance and offered honest feedback. When he felt Judy was making a mistake, Judy recalled a conversation, “he was like, okay, I'm not mad, but I'm going to have to dad out on you. Do you realize what you're doing?” Luz shared it was easier to trust a professor because he showed evidence that he was a trustworthy person: “He talked about his kids and about being a dad, so I trusted him more. It sounds so stupid and so simple, but I trusted him because he takes care of his family.”

Similarly, Shirley described that during her junior year she shared with a professor on the first day of school she was adopted. She shared feelings of some initial regret, and then the two became close:

My junior year, one of the teachers I really like, she did like an introduction slide and shared that her son was adopted. So, then I wrote that I was also adopted. But then we got talking about it, like the next class period. And then I was uncomfy because I was like, I don't know this person, and here I am sharing that I was a foster kid. Normally I'm not spilling the tea, that I'm a foster kid, on the second interaction. But then we got a lot closer, so it worked out in the end.

Harrison also found a connection with a professor he considers a friend. “We got like, the same music, taste, everything.” Harrison also shared a story about when his trust in his professor increased. Harrison was the only undergraduate who was awarded for his extra time he devoted to research:

You know what kind of boosted my trust? So my professor, he has this laboratory, and it was in this little staff office with two desks, and he told me that I'm actually going to have my own personal desk in there.

Additionally, participants shared that it was easier to trust an adult at college when they knew their job description required their discussions to be confidential. Shirley shared this about her professor, "I know she can't tell anybody because she legally can't, which was, like, made me feel safe to spill the tea." Stories of trust-building with professors helps readers understand ways they can increase trust with their students.

Building Boundaries: "It's Easier Not to Share"

Participants shared instances when they did not share with others about their time in foster care. Stories include moments of lying on assignments, feeling pressure to deceive peers, or feeling like they didn't want to make others feel uncomfortable.

Victoria said she rarely trusted her professors because she felt pressure to disclose more than she was comfortable with. Victoria does not trust professors with details about being in foster care and feels bad when she lies on assignments. She recalled a story when a professor requested information about her family. Victoria said she could not do the assignment, and the professor encouraged her to just "make something fit!"

It's kind of upsetting, when they make an assignment for parent things, that say mom and dad. It's really insensitive. It really sucks because it makes you feel weird. It puts you on the spot. It's like, wow. Now to do this assignment, I either have to lie, and it takes a lot of energy to have to lie, I'd rather just not lie, or explain all this to them. Then for them to be like, oh, surely there was something that would fit? NO, there wasn't! If there was something that I could just kind of make fit or mold into this assignment I would. I don't

have a nice family story to write about for my English paper, so can I literally do anything else? You don't want to have to convince someone. You just want to say, like, I need to get through this without having to acknowledge my family. I don't want to have to explain my whole story, and I'm like, I'm not going to justify it anymore.

Victoria shared she is very hesitant to share about herself because she feels it makes professors lose respect for her:

I feel like a lot like all of a sudden, they don't think you're capable and so they don't want to give you things or give you opportunities because you're not capable anymore. But, what you really just needed was just an extra little bit of support in that moment because you're so completely capable. But now your teachers all of a sudden just think you're incapable, which sucks because that kind of makes it worse.

She and other participants said it is very hard to get absences excused without having to disclose traumatic pieces of their lives. Victoria was experiencing mental health challenges and had to disclose she was in foster care. She highlighted a positive interaction that she wishes others could learn from:

I did have a teacher's assistant who said, you don't have to explain anything else to me as long as you're doing your part with student life. He was like, I'm not entitled to your story, and I respect that.

Another instance when participants felt like they couldn't be truthful about their history in foster care was during sorority recruitment. Judy said she worried being truthful about her childhood would keep her from being selected. Judy and her mom rehearsed to prepare her for her rush interviews, "so when I went through rush there were several things that I went over and scripted because I wouldn't have been asked to come back had I been completely honest." Judy

shared hiding her truth became difficult because during sorority recruitment they asked her how life was growing up. Judy said her answers felt like they came from someone who had their life handed to them in a silver spoon. She recalled answering sarcastically, “I love sushi and let’s get Starbies [Starbucks] after this!” Judy explained she considers how others will pass judgement about her childhood: “It does worry me that people are going to hear and then assume that because I’m predispositioned to addiction and alcoholism that I’m going to turn out just like my mother.” Shirley shared a similar story where she was coached not to disclose anything outside of perfection during sorority recruitment:

In recruitment, we were told [by peers] not to overshare about our lives because we don't want people to think we're different or I didn't come from the perfect family. I wasn't, like, supposed to talk about it because that's not allowed.

Finally, Luz explained that the time she felt most out of place was when she was in a sorority, “Yeah, when I was in a sorority, anytime parents' weekend is really big, or like, mothers' weekend, you know, all that bullshit. I’m like, really? Like, no.” Each participant who discussed sorority recruitment or sorority events felt like they could never represent themselves in a genuine way.

All five participants recalled stories of friends responding to their foster care stories with pity or empathy. Each participant explained that the way their peers responded to their childhood keeps them from wanting to be truthful about their past. This hinders participants’ ability to build honest relationships with peers. Victoria said she hardly shares the truth about her family because of reactions from peers:

I kind of just tell white lies. Or just avoid it. I don't really tell people because they’re like “oh, my parents do foster care,” and now they think they know a whole bunch about it

when they don't. And it feels kind of patronizing, kind of condescending. Or they're really uncomfortable. It makes *them* so sad. They can't even really be your friend anymore because they just don't really see you on the same page because they're sad for you, but I don't want them to feel sad for me. I just want them to be my friend and just be nice to me.

Victoria wishes she could openly share her upbringing with others, but it makes them too uncomfortable:

I think it would be nice to just be able to just tell people straight up, yeah, I was in foster care. I don't like having to go through all the energy of creating a fake backstory for myself so people are more comfortable. I just want to tell my story. A lot of people say that their family makes up a big part of who they are. I want to be able to talk about this really big part of my life that makes me who I am. I'm not trying to get pity. I don't want pity. I hate it, actually. Sometimes I just have to pretend I have a normal family situation going on because it makes other people more comfortable.

Luz also shared that friends respond with pity. She explained similar feelings that people shouldn't pity her childhood because it's part of who she is:

I hate pity. So I hate when it's like, oh, that must have been so hard. Okay. Yeah. And what's the point of pitying? They're giving me pity for someone that doesn't even exist anymore because I'm outside of foster care. I'm not that person anymore. People like, give me the eyes, the head, tilt, I'm so sorry. No! It's always going to be a part of me. I feel like it's a big part of me. It's a big part of my identity and what made me me today. Like, that's how I was raised. That was my upbringing, foster care. To me, it's like me asking someone a memory of their childhood. I don't have to tell people the worst parts

about it. I try to stray away from that. But if people really want to know, I'm like, yeah, shit's horrible, system sucks, but I'm alive nonetheless. So life goes on. Life goes on outside the system. I think that's what's hard for people to understand. Life goes on after it.

Harrison explained his thought process when deciding if he wants to disclose pieces of his childhood. He will share about his time in foster care with peers, but only if it serves a purpose.

What I consider is, are they going to be able to process that information? And then is it absolutely necessary? If they're not going to be able to process it, if it's going to be weird for them afterwards, if they're not going to know how to deal with it, then it's a waste of time.

Judy and Shirley explained that it was easier to discuss their time in foster care after they had been adopted. Discussing family was easier once a chapter was closed or after pieces had fallen into place. When their story had a happy ending, it felt easier to open up. Judy explained:

I think it was like a book that wasn't finished, and then after [being adopted] it was like the story has already been written in a way so I don't have to talk about all of the good things that may be ripped away from me now. I can talk about all of the good things that I know are solid and all of the things that are coming in the future.

Shirley explained that it was easier to share her story once she was adopted because it simplified the way she connected with others.

I think after my adoption was finalized, I was even more open about it. It felt more like, I don't know, like, yeah, I'm in foster care, but I'm in this loving family and I found my place, as opposed to like, yeah, my mom got her rights taken away, so we're just kind of chilling and maybe I'll live there next month, maybe I won't. Who knows?

When a family was still in transition, it was harder to share with peers.

Managing Family Relationships Is Ongoing

This theme is included because when students enter college, they are still part of their families. Stories included instances of building trust with adoptive families and instances when family hindered their college experiences. Two participants shared similar stories, including butting heads with their new adoptive families before building trust. These stories are significant because these are key moments when a participant trusted another parent figure. When Shirley was adopted at age 13, it was the first time all the spotlight was on her. She no longer had foster siblings, and for the first time she was the only child in the home:

My parents always tell me it was like breaking like a wild horse because it's like I had never really been in the situation of having two parents before. And I remember that almost freaked me out. Being in a household that had two parents and being in a household where I wasn't worried about money also freaked me out for quite a while. There was like one night at dinner, I remember I was just, like, freaking out. They sat down with me at the table, and they were just kind of like, we are not going to leave you. They were like, this is your home. It's OK. You don't have to worry about money. You don't have to worry about where your food is coming from. And then my dad was like, I'm not leaving you, I'm not going to leave. He's like, I'm here.

Building upon this trust, Shirley shared that her adoptive family helped her let go of some survival instincts that were no longer serving her:

For a long time, every time if somebody even opened, like, a pop can I turned my head. Or like if I saw my parents drinking a beer, I'd get super anxious. I'd be in a bad mood. It would just flip a switch almost because all I'd seen is somebody who can't just have one

or two beers, they [her birth mom] always had to take it to the max. And there was a while when I first came around that my [adoptive] parents stopped. My [adoptive] dad is just like a social drinker. Had one or two beers with his friends like twice a month. And then there was a while when he would ask me and in a way explain, 'hey, I'm not going to take it too far. Is it okay with you if I have two beers?' You know what I mean? And then he'd like, make sure I'm OK rather than just doing it. And then he would have me hold him accountable for only having two, just to help me trust that he can stop at two. Because he was like, I'm not an alcoholic like your mom, we don't take it too far here. And just letting me see I could trust him by him by almost putting me in a little bit of control of the situation, which back then was very helpful, if that makes sense.

Instances of becoming accustomed to the safe environment provided by a foster family help readers understand the significant transition participants faced and continue to face throughout college. Three participants shared instances of being pulled away from college to manage their transitioning relationships with their birth family or foster family. Participants shared that these occurrences often came at the cost of their time, energy, and focus.

Judy shared she has to consistently assess if her birth mother is being truthful. In December of her sophomore year, her birth mother, whom Judy was not consistently speaking with, reached out to her younger sibling in distress. Their birth mother explained she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Judy recalled she was skeptical of her mother's story and didn't trust she was being honest:

When she first reached out, I had said, I'm going to start by saying I'm not ready to have a relationship with you, and I don't know when or if I will be. Jamie told me of your diagnosis. I'm very sorry to hear, but I'd like to know more. Could you please give me

more information on it? This is something both Jamie and I should be aware of as it is our medical history and can directly affect us. [Months later her mother replied], hey, my beautiful child, how are you? I rarely ever get on Snapchat, so I didn't read your message until now. And I'm not sure what to say since I don't know much except my cervix biopsy results came back positive for carcinogens. I'm going to get a second opinion before I accept that kind of news. I love you bunches.

Judy shared she didn't respond because she felt like her mother first said she was sick, and now claimed it was an unclear biopsy report. Judy shared it was common for her birth mother to reach out with stories and then ask for financial support. Judy tries to be cordial with her birth mother but is consistently disappointed in the way her mother reaches out and then changes the details of her story.

Victoria shared that during the fall of her freshman year, she decided she no longer trusted her foster family. She shared that her foster family consistently didn't invite her to things, canceled her cell phone plan on her birthday, and blamed her for her sister's overdose. These signs convinced Victoria to cut off communication with her foster family. Victoria shared:

I had been crying and being really sad, because she [her foster mom] wouldn't talk to me, and I thought she had forgotten about me. It's because there's so many other kids she has there. She kind of just collects kids. It's like, you say you love me and you see me as your child, but you didn't talk to me for months and not even say happy birthday to me. My first semester was so good, but then after that, it really affected me because it's like, how am I supposed to think when I have that type of stuff going on? It just made me feel really worthless. I was like, I can't do this anymore.

FFY college students are still working to build healthy boundaries with their families, including their biological families, foster families, siblings, stepsiblings, and adoptive families. Compared to their peers, some foster youth are aging out of the system right as they enter college, leaving them vulnerable to rebuild or redefine their family relationships.

Living between Trusting in Self and Needing Reassurance to Persist

All five participants shared they trust themselves to persist through college. Some attribute their self-trust to a survival mechanism they learned in childhood. Participants explained they developed a heightened sense of observation, which influences how they engage with others. Shirley, Luz, and Victoria shared they constantly assess the body language, tone, and context of their surroundings and try to predict how others feel about them as a means to avoid danger. Shirley explained:

I went to counseling for a while and we talked a lot about how I've had trauma as a kid and I observe people differently than the people who don't have bad trauma. I'm sitting back watching body language watching actions. My counselor said when your brain has trauma, you perceive situations at a more intense level because your brain is wired that way.

Luz echoed the idea of being very observant before she trusts another person:

I analyze a lot so I can tell when someone's not trustworthy I just analyze body language. My therapist would say it's my survival instinct. My body is always running. I've always been in this survival state. That's why anytime I go in any room, I always know where the nearest exit is. I'm always thinking the fastest way to get out of any situation. My brain runs a mile per minute because I'm trying to think of every outcome, every situation that can happen and what's the best thing, how to make the best decision.

Victoria shared:

I really pay attention to what people say. I don't know, just like how they talk about other people. I think it's something I developed to protect myself and be good at gauging situations whether I'm safe or not. I think that mostly came from the guardians I lived with a lot of the time. A lot of them could switch up really fast, like emotion wise. So I just had to really gauge out how they're feeling or just gauge out, I don't know, they're abusive situation.

Participants shared insights about their heightened senses. Many referred to this as a positive skill they've cultivated throughout their upbringing, but many explained being on edge and consistently assessing their surroundings can be exhausting.

To balance out or turn off this critical assessment of others, participants said feeling more reassurance while in college makes a difference. Judy shared this applies to both her fiancé and her professors: "If my fiancé's not as responsive or he says something different, I automatically assume he's mad." Judy explained that her internal thoughts include: "Something's happening, he's getting distant, what's going on? What do I need to prepare for? Do I need to cancel our lease?" Judy explained she has felt this with a professor as well when she listed the professor as a reference. The professor followed up with some questions and Judy immediately felt like she did something wrong:

I'm like, oh, my god, I've disappointed one of the people I'm closest to. I'm like, we had this close bond and I've just ruined her trust. I ended up explaining the situation. She essentially was like, of course I'll be a reference. I just wanted you to be mindful of this kind of procedure!

Judy explained it is very reassuring when professors use emojis. “There's so much tone and interpretation lost in text and even emails that I'm like, I feel like the emojis are necessary.” Luz shared she only began to like one of her professors after they were reassuring in person:

At first I didn't like her because I thought she was being passive-aggressive through her email. It's really hard to read tone through emails. But then I met with her in person and she was like, you're doing so good! And I was like, I know, I'm just mentally ill.

Shirley spoke directly to needing reassurance. One example she shared was in regard to her boyfriend:

I feel like I'm very much like an overthinker and an overreactor, and so it's just like it's nice to have that reassurance and not have to ask for it all the time. If I'm worried about something, he can usually see that I'm worried about something and then talk to him about it from there rather than me sitting and worrying about something and then him having literally no idea. Reassurance definitely helps that he's able to pick up on that.

Two participants did not use the term “reassurance,” but their stories pointed to a need to be reassured and convinced they are OK. Luz approaches relationships with adults with her defenses up. She explained:

When I first had my meeting with Dr. Andy, after that, I was worried that she would start being mean to me because I always just think people are going to be mean to me. I guess I just expect the worst. I always tend to expect worse things to happen to prepare myself.

Victoria explained that throughout her entire childhood she has felt like a burden to her foster families and guardians. Now that she is slowly starting to make friends, she has a hard time trusting that people want her around:

It's just really hard because even when people had incentive to care about me, people didn't. So how am I supposed to believe that people care unless I have something to bring to the table? And even then, I still don't believe they care about me, because that is all people have proven to me is that they have not cared about me.

Victoria explained she has recently been invited on a trip to a friend's home eight hours away, and while she is excited, she still questions if they really want her there. Her tone was not positive when she spoke on this subject; rather, it sounded like she was asking me if I thought they liked her:

I got invited to vacation with some of my friends who I haven't even known for too long, I guess they're really fond of me. This was originally like a whole friend group that they have welcomed me into. And we're going to one of the friend's homes, like their own personal home. So obviously they must like me enough to feel comfortable and wanting me to be in their home. [right?]

Participants said reassurances offer relief from their constant observations and analyses of tones of emails and face to face interactions.

Finally, students shared that they trust in themselves to graduate from college. This idea was explained through the terminology of breaking the cycle, proving others wrong, and knowing their education was the way they would find success. Victoria will be the first in her biological family to go to college and graduate:

Graduating from college was always my plan. None of my birth family has gone to college or even graduated high school. So I just thought it was really important for me to try to not continue that cycle.

Judy shared she has no doubt she will graduate: “I have way too much discipline and fear of failure to allow myself not to graduate. I've been on this master honor roll for a long time.” Luz echoed this confidence:

I knew I wanted to go to college not because it was, like, a thing I had to do. It's a thing I knew I could do, and that was the only way I was going to get out. That was the only way out of the cycle of my parents of not getting anywhere. And just, like, the cycle of foster kids that don't get anywhere after getting out of the foster care system. I just have to get out. I have to graduate.

Harrison shared that he will graduate:

When I went back to school, I told myself, I said, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this to the max. I'm not going to mess around. I'm going to do as well as I possibly can. And was a promise to myself at the time. Now, I'm on track to have a perfect 4.0 GPA for graduation.

Shirley, who graduated in December 2022, shared:

I didn't want to be like my biological mom. I wanted to amount to something, prove that I was not a statistic because I was a foster kid. I never doubted if I was graduating or not. I was pretty pumped and proud when I graduated.

The stories and testimonies outlining their confidence to graduate is notable. Each participant was 100% confident they would walk across the graduation stage.

Summary

Participants shared stories about trust throughout their childhoods and into college. Stories were broken up into eight themes: (a) covering up home life means safety (b) distrust of biological family is a key memory (c) shifting trust in childhood, stories addressing the question,

“If I tell someone, will they help me?” (d) a revolving door of adults is a barrier to trust-building (e) trusting professors: personal connections and confidentiality (f) building boundaries: “it’s easier not to share” (g) managing family relationships is ongoing (h) living between trust in self and needing reassurance. The following chapter includes a discussion of findings which answer each research question. Included is limitations of the current study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings of the current study in relation to the current literature on foster youth and trust-building. This chapter also addresses the implications for future research. The chapter concludes with several recommendations for administrators and researchers as they seek to understand how to support foster youth during college.

This narrative study explored the experiences of FFY college students. Specifically, I was interested in hearing key stories about how such students explain instances of trust, distrust, and relationship-building before and during college and how trust or distrust is present in their collegiate experience. This study provides insight into the lives of foster youth through the lens of the following research questions:

1. How do participants describe their experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult throughout their childhood?
2. How do participants describe their experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult throughout college?
3. How do experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult play a role in their higher education experience?

How Do Participants Describe their Experiences of Trusting or Distrusting an Adult throughout Childhood?

Based on the findings of this study, participants shared stories about trusting or distrusting adults through childhood, which focused on the following themes: (a) covering up home life means safety (b) distrust of biological family is a key memory (c) shifting trust in childhood, stories addressing the question, “If I tell someone, will they help me?” (d) a revolving door of adults is a barrier to trust-building.

Covering up Home Life Means Safety

This study found participants were deceitful because of pressure from their family or internalized pressure. The concepts of lying, deception, or secret keeping are complex as they bring into question the motivations, context, and moral compass of an individual (Setoh et al., 2020; Talwar et al., 2004; Talwar & Lee, 2008). The idea of secret keeping can take different forms, including failure to volunteer known information or sharing false information. Both bring into question a child's executive function and their "conceptual and moral knowledge of a lie" (Talwar & Lee, 2008, p. 876). However, lying or deception to cover the transgression of a parent changes the motivations for secret keeping or deception (Talwar et al., 2004).

The motivations for this type of deception or secret keeping can include maintaining their loyalty to their family and fear of negative consequences (Talwar et al., 2004). Each participant who talked about deception expressed a fear of negative consequences. Judy was afraid of splitting her family up, Victoria feared judgment, while Harrison feared physical retribution from his father. The impact of secret keeping through childhood involves "the creation of boundaries between self and others, and this includes both emotional and cognitive boundaries" (Gordon et al., 2014, p. 14). When a child feels pressure to conceal or fabricate information, they may encounter low self-esteem as a result of the guilt, shame, and social isolation that follows patterns of deception throughout childhood (Michaelson & Munakata, 2016; Setoh et al., 2020).

Social isolation is a repeated finding throughout foster youth literature (Day et al., 2011; Kinarsky, 2017; Merdinger et al., 2005). This finding suggests foster youth who shared memories of deception may feel isolation compared to their peers. Lacking social support or feeling isolated can impact their college experience. Students who enter college with social support have increased self-esteem. Additionally, "youths with greater amounts of perceived

social support before entering college were more likely to finish college than were youths with lower amounts of support” (Okpych & Courtney, 2021, p. 41).

Another prominent implication of deception throughout childhood includes pattern development. Individuals who use deception and lying to problem solve may encounter difficulty with communication, which makes it a challenge to build healthy, genuine relationships and seek support (Talwar & Lee, 2008). It is not clear from this study what impact deception during childhood had on participants’ collegiate experiences; however, there may be a connection between deception during childhood about foster care and deception during college about history with foster care, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Distrust of Biological Family Is a Key Memory

The theoretical framework of attachment theory posits that when children lose the security of their parent, it impacts their agency to explore, develop, and grow (Bowlby, 1979). Furthermore, tenets of attachment theory have implications that span across a person’s lifetime. It is notable that during the interview process, participants brought up similar key moments of distrust with parents. This supports the founding tenets of attachment theory that a child’s life events can be considered “a sequence of... events that reach backward and forward in their causes and effects,” meaning these stories or their experience with foster care are not “outcomes or ‘ends’ in a foster child’s life trajectory. Instead they are ‘middles’ with something before and something after” (Tucker & MacKenzie, 2012, p. 2217). Uncovering the similar experiences participants had at this key moment during childhood helps readers identify that this key memory still holds space in each student’s narrative as they enter college.

Participants sharing a memory of broken trust with adulthood has implications surrounding relationship building. The child/parent relationship is created through millions of

interactions that shape a child's sense of trust. Once this trust is broken, their sense of security and safe space shrinks (Bowlby, 1979). Developing a strong sense of safety and attachments with parents has implications across a person's lifespan, impacting the following: trust-building, exploring new environments that give space for optimal growth, identity formation, creating a moral framework, and defending against stress and trauma (Gordon et al., 2014; Laible et al., 2019; Setoh et al., 2020). Each of these are areas that help students when they enter college.

The second implication with this finding is that each participant shared a story of distrust that included neglect or abuse, which are considered ACEs. Those who experience ACEs can grow up facing emotional distress, low self-esteem, difficulty forming trusting relationships, attachment issues, emotion-regulation problems, insecurity, parenting challenges, mental-health issues, and difficulty in seeking help (Liming et al., 2021). The low attachment as a result of an ACE must be considered as we build supports for foster youth in college.

Shifting Trust in Childhood: “If I tell Someone Will They Help Me?”

Participants' stories of sharing secrets about their home life was significant. Studies that focus on deception to cover up a family or parent's transgressions found children may encounter several effects. First, they may feel conflicting loyalties, and second, they must assess their risk for danger at a very young age (Gordon et al., 2014; Talwar et al., 2004; Talwar & Lee, 2008). Given the prominence of this experience in my study, I was surprised to find very little research about the moment a child reports abuse to an adult outside the family. This may be attributed to the sensitive nature of this topic and the specificity of the studied population.

There are similarities between this study's findings about this key moment and research about children who testify in court against their parents. Findings from these studies emphasize

the importance of power dynamics, trust, and fear of consequences, although their findings focus on ways to measure truthfulness in a child's testimony in court (Talwar et al., 2004).

A Revolving Door of Adults Is a Barrier to Trust-building

Participants shared they were obligated to interact with so many different people because of their experience with the foster care system. This finding is consistent with organizational structures of foster care on a national level. A child balances their existence between their biological home and their placement, which may include new siblings, foster parents, foster extended family, and enrollment in a new school (Dansey et al., 2019; Tucker & MacKenzie, 2012). Additionally, there are judges, lawyers, case workers, and social workers, which have high rates of turnover (Look, 2023).

Children need time to process the loss and grief attendant with entering foster care (Look, 2023). This process has been coined as “nonfinite loss, ambiguous loss, unresolved grief and/or complicated grief... the revolving cycle of loss and grief as endured by foster youth” (Look, 2023, p. 126). While this study did not focus on this phenomenon, I would be interested to understand how the revolving door of adults impacts a student's ability to trust that individuals will follow through on what is asked of them. Other studies note behavioral problems may be present across a lifespan as a response to the stress and instability experienced throughout childhood: “In the foster care system, the pattern of broken relationships accelerates as children are moved from one foster home to another” (Crenshaw & Garbarino, 2007, p. 161). A revolving door of adults throughout childhood results in attachment and trust issues stemming from lack of continuity (Bowlby, 1979; Liming et al., 2021). This idea was made manifest when Victoria discussed the barriers she faced when trying to hold the adults in her life accountable. She explained it was hard to stand up for what she needed because the adults came in and out of her

life so frequently. Judy also shared that being obligated to interact with so many different adults required her to repeat herself and really become self-reliant to navigate her life.

The idea of developing a sense of self-reliance is present in Samuels and Pryce's (2008) research, which found foster youth often take on the role of "survivalist self-reliance" and may reject new relationships that may threaten their sense of identity (p.1203). This was apparent when participants said they prefer not to rely on their advisors to pick out classes. Each participant shared that they don't like to rely on others to get things done. This may be a result of "self-reliance in response to prior negative help-seeking attempts" (Miller et al., 2020, p. 8). In the context of college, self-reliance can be both a positive and negative attribute "if a tendency to not seek support prevents capable young people from managing mental health challenges or accomplishing their academic goals" (Miller et al., 2020, p. 11).

Furthermore, constantly shifting between different environments results in issues related to identity formation and belonging (Dansey et al., 2019). Participants may have trouble identifying someone to rely on for guidance and mentorship, things that are essential when developing a sense of self and identity (Greeson, 2013; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Kirk & Day, 2011; Thompson et al., 2016)

How Do Participants Describe their Experiences of Trusting or Distrusting an Adult throughout College?

Based on the findings of this study, participants' stories about trusting or distrusting adults through college focused on the following themes: (a) trusting professors: personal connections and confidentiality (b) building boundaries: "it's easier not to share" (c) managing family relationships is ongoing.

Trusting Professors: Personal Connections and Confidentiality

These stories are significant because they show the participants were still open to building relationships with adults, even after their experiences throughout childhood. The stories shared about building relationships with professors were insightful, showing foster youth still rely on their intuition and are assessing professors. Building relationships with professors highlights the importance of situation building in the first weeks of a student's college experience, to give students adequate time to build relationships with professors or administrators. Securing an adult "in their corner" can help students gain access to imperative support tools, such as academic, emotional, financial, personal, and professional development, as well as someone who can serve as an advocate or mentor throughout their college experience (Cheatham et al., 2021; Kinarsky, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2021; Salazar, 2012, 2013).

Implications resulting from positive student-teacher relationships

Include gains in classroom engagement, and cooperation as well as enhanced academic outcomes... secure relationships can evoke a sense of psychological safety and such, a relationship can help to facilitate credibility, risk taking, motivation, introspection, and focused attention among the relationship members. (Harris & Dalton, 2014, p. 43)

Participants shared that knowing an adult's commitment to confidentiality also helped students open up. This finding aligns with existing research, which posits "confidentiality is an important ingredient for the establishment of trusting and effective relationships" (Harris & Dalton, 2014, p. 48). Clearly communicating the expectation of confidentiality and creating situations ripe for relationship building with a professor early on can provide the structure needed to support foster youth.

Building Boundaries: “It’s Easier Not to Share”

Students shared instances of when it is easier to deceive others about or simply omit these pieces of their childhood. The omission of history has three implications. The first is the internalization of stigma “in relation to how they believe others are viewing them and their family situation” (Dansey et al., 2019, p. 38). The conscious choice of keeping their status secret can result in shame and a fear of being found out (Dansey et al., 2019). Victoria explained she doesn’t share her status to teachers because she doesn’t want them to expect less of her. Additionally, Judy shared she worries others will associate her with being genetically dispositioned to drugs and alcohol like her birth mother. Finally, Luz said other people have the wrong idea about foster youth, and she doesn’t like it when people incorrectly assume things about her life.

The second implication is participants perceive there are consequences to their truth, such as bullying or exclusion (Dansey et al., 2019, p. 38). Victoria, Judy, Luz, and Shirley shared instances of feeling like they would be left out or gossiped about if they shared their histories. Luz’s testimony about family weekend and mom’s weekend was consistent with research, which states “campus policies and programs designed to invite family members to campus were also a source of anxiety, exacerbating feelings of marginalization” (Johnson, 2021, p. 154). Furthermore, Judy and Shirley both decided to omit their histories as foster youth for fear of being denied acceptance into sororities.

The third implication is using deception or secret keeping as a problem-solving tool. Individuals may develop a pattern of secret keeping or deception as a means to problem solve (Talwar et al., 2004). This study found participants actively assessed whether to disclose their

histories for reasons of ease or necessity. While each student has agency and control of their history, omitting identity or engaging in deception can place a significant burden on our students.

Managing Family Relationships Is Ongoing

Family privilege is a form of human capital and is defined as “benefits, mostly invisible, that come from membership in a stable family” (Seita, 2005, p. 82). Students cannot step away from their families. Those who felt like they were part of a loving adoptive family spoke to this phenomenon. This was apparent when Judy and Shirley explained it was easier to discuss their history in foster care after they were adopted. Stories of building trust with an adoptive or foster family are significant. Both Judy and Shirley explained they have good relationships with their adoptive family members, who give guidance and advice. Shirley explained the importance of her adoptive family building trust and giving her the space to grow. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of “authentic inclusion, everyday family interactions, and for foster parents to ‘care enough’ to set boundaries and consequences for behavior” (Storer et al., 2014; Whiting & Lee, 2003).

This study found three participants experienced the negative effects of managing family relationships during college. Victoria and Judy both shared instances when they had to create boundaries with their foster family or biological family during college to protect their wellbeing. Connecting back with biological or foster families after aging out or discharging from foster care is not uncommon: “[R]egardless of living arrangements, research reports high levels of contact with family and relatives” (Jones, 2013, p. 227). Furthermore, children and young adults report still feeling loyalty to their biological or foster family, “even when contact with them remains problematic” (Ie et al., 2022, pp. 5–6). This study found Luz aged out of the foster care system

less than a month before she entered college. The timing of family transitions ahead of attending college creates a challenging circumstance for foster youth.

How Do Experiences of Trusting or Distrusting an Adult Play a Role in Their Higher Education Experience?

Based on the findings of this study, the experiences of trusting or distrusting an adult play a role in the participants' higher education experience by creating situations where students are living between trust in self and needing reassurance. Participants shared that their experiences trusting and distrusting adults throughout childhood and college have created a sense of self-trust. This aligns with literature that suggests many foster youths develop a strong sense of resilience and self-advocacy and create smaller social circles as a means to navigate. The self-assurance found in this study aligns with literature surrounding Hope Theory and the concept of resilience.

Hope Theory was developed in 1991 to understand how and why individuals reach their goals. In this study, participants all shared they had high trust in themselves to graduate college. This may be a result of the basic tenets of Hope Theory. Hope is not just a feeling; rather, it is “a dynamic cognitive motivational system” (Snyder et al., 2002, p. 820), which can be influenced and nurtured to help individuals reach goals (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 570). Theorists agree the concept of hope is not a personality trait; rather, it is a fluid idea that can shift throughout a person's lifetime (Snyder et al., 1991; Strayhorn, 2015). Viewing hope as an idea instead of a trait individuals possess means universities can create programming to increase and inspire hope or belief.

Furthermore, the idea of self-trust can be seen in literature touching on resiliency. When resilience is discussed in relation to vulnerable populations like foster youth, the definition is

consistently shifting between “the balance of risk and [the balance of] protective factors present in youths’ environments” (Shpiegel et al., 2022, p. 442). Foster youth who showcase resilience in the face of adversity are more likely to attain their goals. Literature suggests connecting college-aged foster youth with mentors promotes resilience and smooths “the often rough road of emerging adulthood for youth who age out of foster care” (Greeson, 2013, p. 47). Understanding the connections among, hope, resilience, and goal attainment may be a strong way to further assess the impact of trust-building throughout childhood and college.

This sense of self-trust is juxtaposed with a need for reassurance because of consistent observations of others as a learned trauma response. Participants who reported a sense of relief when professors included emojis or went out of their way to praise them made students feel like they belonged. It is unclear if needing reassurance is directly related to college students in general or if participants seek a greater level of reassurance as a result of not having a safety net to fall back on.

Limitations of the Current Study

Limitations of this study include my novice experience with conducting a qualitative narrative study. Upon completing my data analysis, I found areas where I would have liked to ask additional questions. As a researcher who was not involved with foster care, my upbringing and experiences created gaps in understanding and knowledge. In the future, I would like to work with a co-researcher who was formerly involved with foster care. This would allow for a greater understanding and connection to participants. Additionally, learning about stories of trust from a population who had significant trust-breaking experiences is a catch-22. The length of my relationship with each participant may also serve as a limitation to this study. In spite of the limitations, some useful implications for both practice and research result from this study.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study offer valuable insights regarding the role of trust-building among FFY college students. The findings present implications for practice. Student-retention and university professionals can use these findings to better create a roadmap for FFY students. It is recommended that staff tailor programming to the specific needs of foster youth. Basic tenets of this programming should include:

- Invest in at least one full-time professional staff member to serve as a program advisor for foster youth. Foster youth will often share similar attributes with other high-risk groups like first-generation or low-income students. However, foster youth are less than half as likely to graduate compared to these populations (Okpych & Courtney, 2021). The common experiences of relationship disruption, placement instability, and more frequent occurrences of ACEs warrant nuanced programming and staff trained to support foster youth. Dedicated, trained staff can enhance students' motivation, self-esteem, and academic pride (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Students are “more likely to engage with campus-based services that are individualized and provided by support people—including faculty, staff, and counselors—who understand their lived experiences and foster care background” (Miller et al., 2020, p. 11).
- If universities are unable to provide resources toward a full-time advisor, I suggest an assessment of how to build a sense of belonging among foster youth in college. The below suggestions are reflective of the work of both Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging and Schlossberg's Transition Theory which include working toward an inclusive campus environment, increase engagement and involvement, increasing cultural competence

throughout the university and providing academic and financial support (Schlossberg, 1981; Strayhorn, 2015).

- Connections with foster youth ahead of the first day of school. Programs like TRiO or summer bridge programs create a strong sense of belonging in students (Schlossberg, 1981). Those who are trying to navigate the world of higher education without an existing family or peer-support group may start their college experience behind their fully supported classmates. Having a representative working with the public child-welfare agency, local foster youth-transition programs, and campus-based admissions, student services, and academic success staff help bridge support for foster students in college (Morton, 2018).
- Allowances for this full-time staff member to access the needed resources and spend time to build trust. This staff member must illustrate patience by opening up multiple methods of communication, being nonjudgmental in communication, being available to students, and working to build strong connections to other university support programs that can aid in referrals and additional relationship building (Salazar et al., 2021). This staff member must consider findings of feeling isolated and pressure to disclose. Consistency, honesty, and reliability are all needed to build trust.
- Spaces for foster youth to engage with peers. This outreach must be intentional as foster youth have developed a sense of self-reliance and often feel like the “other” compared to peers. Students would benefit from consistent direct outreach and connections to similar peers or near-peer mentors (Strayhorn, 2015).
- University-wide training about how the concept of family impacts a student’s collegiate experience. A cultural shift is needed on a university-wide level. Enrollment, welcome

week, class assignment, and family weekend should all be opportunities for administrators to assess how their language or assignments are creating situations where foster youth feel pressure to lie or omit their history. Cultural shifts may lessen the pressure foster youth feel to share. A piece of this cultural shift includes identifying faculty and staff who were formerly involved with foster care. Like identifying first-generation faculty and staff, this can help bring visibility to the number of individuals who share this history. In addition to identifying faculty and staff, universities should also provide the identified staff with professional development and career mentorship. This support into adulthood aligns with what is known about the lifelong impacts of growing up in the foster care system.

- As higher education practitioners, it is imperative to provide retention programming that does not focus on deficits of foster youth; however, programming which touts resilience and grit that many foster youth bring to college fails to address the systems which perpetuate the need for students to exist through resilience and grit. If retention programming puts emphasis on these attributes, it should be done with the goal of providing a setting where students do not need to be resilient or endure grit. A re-examination of the systems, practices, and collegiate environment are needed so students can access their education in the same way that their non-foster youth peers experience. Programming should be designed with a goal toward equitable access to their education.
- Financial and housing support, including, but not limited to, tuition scholarships, housing during fall and spring semesters, financial incentives for academic performance, stronger connections to paid internships, funds for professional attire, and earning scholarships for study-abroad opportunities (Unrau et al., 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

Situation creating to learn from foster youth is imperative to move forward. “Without hearing and heeding the voices of those affected by the policies and practices we create, our efforts to improve the systems designed to help them are doomed to failure” (Hass et al., 2014, p. 388). The needs of FFY college students will continue to shift, and it is in the best interest of both the student and university to be intentional about engagement and amplify the voices and agency of FFY college students before enacting policy changes (Salazar, 2012).

Understanding stories from students who did not persist through college would provide a strong counternarrative to this study. I would be interested to understand if students who did not persist trusted anyone on campus or if they had a high sense of trust in themselves to persist. Additionally, I would be interested to know how many ACEs they experienced throughout their childhoods. Finally, several participants mentioned other instances of distrust with other adults. While these references were not frequent enough to create an entire theme, understanding how foster youth come to create peer-support groups, develop romantic relationships, or manage relationships with bosses are all areas of relationship building that have gone understudied.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings of this study provide insight into the lived experiences of trust among foster youth. Stories focused on trust-building and trust breaking throughout childhood and college. Additionally, this study provided insight into how trust plays a role in their higher education experience. While providing many insights and conclusions, this study also leads to more questions and a need for additional research examining how the concept of trust throughout a lifetime plays a role in the higher education experience of FFY.

Conclusions

Overall, sharing these stories can provide foster youth with a platform to connect, heal, and grow. It can also raise awareness among educators, peers, and the broader community about the unique challenges they face, ultimately fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment. However, it's important to approach these discussions with sensitivity, respect for privacy, and a focus on empowerment.

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Appendix A - Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE:

Exploring Stories of Trust from Foster Youth in College

**PROJECT
APPROVAL
DATE:**

3/15/2023

**PROJECT
EXPIRATION
DATE:**

5/15/2024

**LENGTH OF
STUDY:**

14 months

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Christy Craft

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Anne DeLuca

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Christy Craft, ccraft@ksu.edu, 785-532-5940

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:

Lisa Rubin, Chair

Committee on Research Involving Human
Subjects

203 Fairchild Hall

785-532-3224

Brad Woods

Associate Vice President for Research
Compliance

203 Fairchild Hall
785-532-3224

PROJECT SPONSOR:

N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore the experiences of college students who were formerly involved with foster care. Specifically, I am interested in hearing key stories about how such students explain instances of trust and relationship-building before and during college.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted. We will have three rounds of interviews with projected questions for a third round. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribed data will be analyzed and summarized and sent back to you for review to ensure its accuracy. This will provide an opportunity to ask questions or to clarify details.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

Data will be gathered through in-person interviews in a study space which has an all-glass soundproof wall. Data will be securely stored on researcher's personal laptop which is password protected. All names from this study will be pseudonyms. All emails, recordings, and transcripts will be wiped clean from researcher's personal computer and recording device after three years. Discomfort could occur if you share the challenges you faced after you apply to college.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

You will receive a \$75 [Visa](#) gift card.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Audio recordings will be done on the researcher's personal iPhone. They will be stored in the Voice Memos app. Recordings will then be uploaded into the researcher's personal ONE Drive in a locked office. All devices are password protected. Data will be securely received through an in-person interview in a study space which has an all-glass soundproof wall. All names used in this study will be pseudonyms.

Future Research:

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

**PARTICIPANT
NAME:**

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

DATE:

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**WITNESS TO
SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a signature.

DATE:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a date.

Appendix B - Interview Protocol

Research Questions:

1. What key stories do participants tell when they describe their experiences when trusting an adult?
2. How does trust-building with adults during college contribute to the success of former foster youth in higher education?

Semi structured interviews will be conducted via Zoom. These questions are intended to build over several rounds of interviews and adapted in subsequent rounds of interviews as new information is discovered.

1. Have you been busy today?
2. How are classes going?
3. When is your first exam?
4. How do you like to study?
5. Do you have a favorite place on campus?
6. I can't figure out dinner for tonight- what pizza place is best in town?
7. Is this drink your "go-to" drink?

After getting a drink and walking back to the Multicultural Student Center we will sit down, and I will ask participants to sign an informed consent form. After they have signed the form, I will remind them that I will be recording the interview and taking notes and doodles in my notebook. I will ask them if they have any questions before we begin.

1. Who helped you get to K-State?
 - a. Can you tell me more about your relationship with this person?
2. Can you describe the longest relationship you've had with an adult?
 - a. Can you share a time when you reached out to this person for help?
 - b. What are some words you would use to describe this person?

Question 2b should drive additional questions which aligns with my methodology of having semi-structured interview questions. Based on the answers to question 2b, I will ask the following.

3. Depending on the words the student shares- ask them how they define those words. How do you define _____?-
4. If the student only shares positive attributes, ask them: Have you ever engaged with an adult who showcased the opposite attributes?
5. Can you tell me about a time an adult in your life caused disappointment or made you feel unsafe?
6. Can you share a time when you were reminded of this memory during college?
7. What factors do you consider when deciding who to rely on?

Interview Protocol Questions Round 2

1. When you are faced with a challenge that you can't solve, walk me through how you decide to ask for help? Who do you ask and how long do you wait?
 - a. What are some factors you consider before asking for help?
 - b. Who are the people you would turn to when asking for help?
2. Can you share a time in college when you needed help but didn't reach out. What kept you from asking for help?
3. How often in your daily life do you talk about being in foster care?
 - a. What considerations do you think about before sharing this information?
 - b. Can you tell me about a time when you shared and felt uncomfortable? Can you tell me about a time when you shared and felt empowered?
4. How many different offices do you have to work with in college? For example, are there any forms or paperwork that you need to complete because you were in foster care?
5. How do you feel about your professors?

Interview Protocol Questions Round 3

1. Can you share what your last communication was like with your birth parents?
2. Can you share instances when you felt like you trusted adults at K-State?

3. Can you share instances when you felt like you did not trust adults at K-State?
4. In one week, how often do you interact with adults on campus?
5. How do you feel about the amount of time you work with adults on campus?
6. Share a time when you worried you would not persist at college. What doubts did you have?
7. Tell me about the last time you reached a goal.
8. Please share what type of barriers you faced when reaching that goal?