



“What doesn't kill you makes you stronger”: Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care

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ABSTRACT

This interpretive study explores the experiences of 44 Midwestern young adults in the process of aging out of foster care. This paper highlights the degree to which they endorse self-reliance as they reflect on past experiences, offer advice to foster youth, and identify barriers to achieving their own life goals. Findings suggest that this identity must be understood in multiple contexts including societal expectations of independence and autonomy, foster-care and family of origin as developmental contexts, and current scholarship on youth aging out of care. We argue that vigilant self-reliance can be a source of resilience but also a potential risk in facilitating the very connections to supportive relationships that research suggests can produce positive outcomes in adulthood. This article advances a holistic life course perspective [Stein, M. & Wade, J. (2000). *Helping care leavers: Problems and strategic responses*. London: HMSO.] on the development of independence and self-reliance in adulthood to expand current conceptualizations of these and more recent ideals of interdependence promoted in child welfare policy and practice.

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1. Introduction

Across the United States, nearly 20,000 youth² age out of foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Child welfare research has increasingly turned its attention to this population, which is neither returned home to biological parent/s nor adopted. With overwhelming consistency, this research suggests a startling constellation of increased risk factors for outcomes including homelessness, early pregnancy, incarceration, victimization, and poverty (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Havlicek, & Bost, 2005a). Foster youth also experience risks related to their socio-emotional well being. A recent collaborative study by Harvard Medical School, Casey Family Programs, and state agencies in Washington and Oregon found that former foster youth (ages 19–30) demonstrated post traumatic stress disorder rates up to twice as high as U.S. War Veterans (Pecora et al., 2005). In a comparative study, Lawrence, Carlson, and Egeland (2006) report foster youth in their sample indicated mental health and behavioral problems at rates more severe and more frequent than children from similar backgrounds (e.g., maltreatment) who were not placed in foster care. Even in studies where mental health is one of many outcome domains assessed, foster youth exhibit depression (Barth, 1990) and other psychological health problems at rates significantly higher than in the general population (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005).

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² The terms youth and young adult will be used interchangeably in this paper following more contemporary understandings of ages 18–25 as a transitional period to adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

In-depth interview research with foster youth provides additional insight into the foster care experience. These findings emphasize foster youth as uniquely disenfranchised – that foster care is not always a developmentally caring context for the children involved (Edmond, 2003). Indeed, some youth report experiencing additional harm once they enter foster care including physical, sexual, and verbal abuse by caregivers as well as by other children in the home (Courtney et al., 2005b). Foster youth report lacking information about their care status or the official reasons why they initially entered care (Curran & Pecora, 1999; Knipe & Warren, 1999). They are rarely involved in the decisions made about their short or long-term case plans (Unrau, 2006), and have minimal if any control over maintaining core relationships with those to whom they are attached, most notably siblings (Harrison, 1999; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Mullender, 1999). Youth perspective studies further indicate youth lack emotional support as they make these transitions in and out of foster families or systems of care, and experience enduring insecurities about the stability of their placements (Kools, 1997).

This growing literature on foster youth outcomes illuminates a legitimate concern that this population will experience their adulthood in the context of other public service systems and institutions (Courtney & Barth, 1996; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). It further suggests that entering foster care is a unique trauma; one that must be considered in addition to the familial abuse and neglect that occasions a child's removal from home. Ultimately, existing scholarship suggests that aging out of foster care is a challenging location from which to launch a successful and productive adulthood.

1.1. Building independence through policy and practice

Foster care is rarely considered an ideal long-term placement option for children. Still, recent estimates suggest that as many as 25% of youth who enter care will stay in state care until they are too old to remain (Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994). Although the phenomenon of youth aging out of state care is not new (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005), national legislation and the development of theory and practice to support the success of this group in adulthood is still in its infancy. The Foster Care Independence Act (Pub. L. 106-169) and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (FCFIP) were signed into law December 14, 1999. This legislation, which amended the 1986 Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative (Pub. L. 99-272), removes age barriers attached to gaining independent living services, doubles funding, and allows monies to support post-secondary education, vocational training, housing, health care, and counseling until the age of 21. Independent living programs, however, have traditionally focused on the policy's more easily measurable goals tied to physical and economic independence. Both in the U.S. and internationally, there remains great conceptual lacunae surrounding key concepts and outcomes related to notions of independence and how to achieve successful outcomes for this population (Horrocks, 2002), particularly in terms of relational aspects of well-being. Consequently, despite the endorsement of interpersonal connections and support networks in the language and philosophies within these initiatives, more easily measurable outcomes like job and housing retention tend to dominate current intervention efforts (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

Scholars are just beginning to specifically explore supportive social networks and relationships as protective factors against many negative outcomes predicted for this population (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). General resilience and youth development literature outside of foster care contexts has long identified the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults including its positive effects on self-esteem, psychological health, educational achievement, and social skill development (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006). Yet there are some unique aspects of being in foster care that may challenge one's sense of interpersonal connection (Bamba & Haight, 2006) and likewise, affect one's use of, or openness to, receiving or requesting support. Said differently, how youth learn to cope with their circumstances prior to entering care and make sense of their often multiple placements and caregivers during care matters in how they view themselves and their connections to the world around them. Given recent trends and existing language in the FCFIP promoting mentorship, support networks, and permanent family-like connections (Collins, 2004) it becomes important to explore with youth what facilitates or constrains their relational connections and use of existing supports.

This paper explores what we have learned from interviews with youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care and their use of what we will call *survivalist self-reliance*. We examine dimensions of this identity as both a healthy and resilient asset as well as a potential challenge for youth in building informal connections and mutually supportive relationships into adulthood. This study contributes to the growing literature on youth aging out of foster care, the broader literature on transitions to adulthood for vulnerable populations, and the conceptualizations of independence and its development among foster youth. Consequently, it is also an answer to the call for more theoretically informed child welfare research (Stein, 2006).

2. Methods

Increasingly, scholars using methods of inquiry labeled “qualitative” are calling for more complex and rigorous approaches to both data collection and the analysis of findings (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). Establishing the rigor of a study begins by clarifying the philosophical tradition guiding one's method and analysis, as well as providing transparency in the subjective positionalities of the researchers (Anastas, 2004; Drisko, 1997; Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005). This study is situated in the tradition of interpretive science, which requires analysis to expand beyond a literal description of data toward conceptual findings, thereby avoiding the sense that the quotes “speak for themselves” (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). Instead, this paper makes use of quotes to explain conceptual themes drawn from interpretive analyses of the interviews. Interpretivists believe that knowledge is socially constructed; one's research is shaped by both the subjective world of one's participants as well as the assumptive world of the researcher (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). Specifically, this study applies a critical interpretive approach through use of the

Extended Case Method (ECM) (Burawoy, 1998). This adds to the study's philosophical base assumptions grounded in Critical Theory (Apple, 2003); that our knowledge, personal agency, and development are facilitated and constrained by the socio-political structures within which we live. Use of the ECM guides our inductive analysis of in-depth interviews to ultimately expand and critique prevailing conceptualizations of independence and self-reliance in foster care. These conceptual structures are not only central to child welfare policy but speak to core ideals advanced and revered within U. S. society, its policies, and cultural ideology (Reindal, 1999).

The use of the ECM has been noted for its unique approach to conducting theoretically linked analysis in exploring the experiences and outcomes of older foster youth (Hines, Merdinger, & Syatt, 2005). Studies that use the ECM are distinct from an exclusively grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that they take similarly grounded and inductively created findings but then map them onto an existing theory or concept. A *multisystemic* ECM analysis (Sullivan, 2002) was additionally useful in this study to critically examine how foster care histories and coping mechanisms can be understood within a broader societal and policy context. These findings are ultimately used to both build upon and complicate existing conceptual frames of self-reliance and definitions of independence in adulthood often applied to this population through child welfare policy and practice.

In order to evaluate the rigor of one's study, researchers must also be transparent in providing information for the reader by answering questions central to who is doing the research and positioning one's relationship to those participating as informants. Both authors of this paper are trained social workers and hold Masters and Doctoral degrees from schools of social work. We have both also worked as social workers in the field of child welfare. This came to bear on our analysis of the stories of these young adults as experiences with which we felt some level of familiarity. In some cases, our analyses were enriched or challenged by our different and shared insider understandings of child welfare practice and policy. Further, as social work identified scholars, we endorse the values of the profession which promote, among others, ideals of social justice, self-determination, and the centrality of human relationships (NASW, 1999). Our choice of a method and philosophy of science that values an "emic" perspective is indisputably tied to these aspects of our backgrounds.

However, it was crucial to the rigor of analysis to introduce alternative critical perspectives beyond our own in order to ensure balanced interpretations and trustworthiness (Anastas, 2004; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Lincoln, 1998). In this study, we made use of weekly debriefs with our interviewers, critical reviews of our analytic process by members of the larger research team not involved in the qualitative project, and routine considerations of alternative/competing interpretations, including the use of negative and critical case analyses (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Likewise, we made use of an audit trail (Padgett, 1998; Shek et al., 2005) to document decisions made throughout the data collection and analysis process and to further enhance the rigor of this study (Shek et al., 2005).

2.1. Sample

This study is part of a larger longitudinal panel study, The Midwest Evaluation of Adult Outcomes of Former Foster Youth (Courtney et al., 2005a). The sample was drawn from three states, two that require youth to exit care at age 18, and one allowing youth to remain in care until the age of 21. Survey data were collected when youth were approximately 17, 19, and 21 years of age. In-depth interviews were also conducted with a sub-set of 44 youth, when youth were on average 20. A second wave of qualitative interviews will be completed when youth are on average 22 years old.

In order to obtain a sample for the qualitative study, a Latent Class Analysis was conducted on the first wave of survey data. Latent class analysis (LCA) is an analytic approach that models the individual diversity of a sample using a latent categorical variable to classify participants into subpopulations or profiles (McCutcheon, 1987). Using the Wave I data from the larger study of 732 youth, four conceptual groupings were produced across seven key variables: employment, grade retention, parenthood, problem behavior, type of placement, placement stability, and runaway history.³ A pool of 90 youth was then randomly selected using a stratified sampling method. A simple random sample was drawn for each of the latent classes that were roughly proportional to class size within the larger survey population, with the exception of the smallest of the four latent classes which was oversampled. This sampling method was chosen to ensure the qualitative sampling pool was representative of the diversity within the larger survey population.

From there, 60 potential participants were purposively selected across the four groups to ensure proportionate representation of gender, race/ethnicity, and rural/urban residence. Our target sample was 45; we were able to locate, recruit, and interview a total of 44 youth. The final sample in our qualitative study remained proportionately similar to the LCA groupings. However, females comprise a greater proportion of our sample (61%) than in the larger study (51%).

2.2. Data collection

A final sample of 44 youth completed semi-structured audio-taped interviews lasting approximately 1.5 h. Interviews were designed to explore their foster care histories, their understanding of why they were in care, and what relationships they maintained with biological family and various foster parents/siblings over time. We were interested in gaining the youths' perspectives on what society sets as normal and ideal life stages and their feelings about their own development relative to these

³ A more detailed explanation of both the survey study and explanation of the LCA methods and analysis used is explored in an earlier publication by Keller et al. (2007).

norms. Interviews also explored their current relationships with biological and foster families, romantic partnerships, religion and spirituality, parenting experiences, and if they believed their foster care backgrounds affected the more adult aspects of their lives. Each interview closed with collecting their advice to foster youth, case workers, and the child welfare system.

All interviewers completed summary contact forms which included basic descriptive information about the interview, as well as space to record limited field notes (e.g., describing interview location, interpersonal dynamics during the interview). All four interviewers involved in this multi-state project met weekly throughout the data collection process to review audio-tapes and debrief. This helped to maintain a level of consistency and rigor in the data collection process and to ensure the quality of data collected. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and were then downloaded into NVivo, a computer assisted data management program. This was used both to securely store transcripts and memos, as well as later aid in analysis. All quotes used from these interviews make use of italics as the standard indicator of emphasis, and capitalized letters to indicate increased volume (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

2.3. Analysis

Analysis for this project followed a multiphase approach typical of interpretive qualitative methods (Morse & Richards, 2002), but specifically of ECM (Burawoy, 1998). This means that analysis begins by articulating and explaining the conceptual and theoretical findings grounded in the interview text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), but moves to higher levels of abstraction ultimately using these inductive conceptualizations to expand or rework prevailing theoretical knowledge.

The present analysis began within the context of a research team involving the two authors of this paper, as well as a doctoral research assistant. We initially read through five transcripts using an open coding method (Schatzman, 1991). Additional meetings were held after coding another five transcripts to further refine codes conceptually. Through exploring ways of labeling the meaning of the text (codes) and articulating themes and patterns within the data, we established consensus around our final coding scheme. Using NVivo and the coding scheme, each transcript was double coded.

The second phase of analysis involved examining data within and across established codes to search for patterns and a conceptual organization for themes. This process, referred to as corroborating and legitimating, requires the research team to establish the empirical evidence that supports or contradicts the analyses' findings (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). One of the most theoretically saturated findings within all coded domains of the interview was the way youth identified, often with pride, as self-reliant and as survivors. This thread ran through all coded text: their advice to other youth, their optimism about their futures, identifying themselves as their only barriers to success in adulthood, and the meaning they made of events in their lives. From this analysis we developed a conceptualization of how these youth constructed an identity as self-reliant survivors. These findings are applied in this paper to expand prevailing conceptualizations of independence and the mechanisms through which this population might successfully achieve it after exiting care.

3. About the young adults

At the time of our interview, 24 youth had exited care. Of the remaining 20, only three young adults were still living in a foster home. Therefore, the majority of our sample was either officially out of care or was already living outside of a paid caregiver's home. Table 1 describes other characteristics of the sample.

Although most were in care for over six years, a large number of participants experienced less than three placements. This is slightly lower than the average four placements typically noted in research for youth in long term care (Courtney & Barth, 1996) and lower than the average number of over four placements among youth in the larger study. Most frequently named two to four supportive relationships ($n=29$); one youth noting 11 people and two youth stating "no one" was supportive to them. As the following sections will explore however, the existence of supports did not inform how or if youth actually made use of supportive resources.

Participants endured significant losses and disconnections particularly related to their biological family systems. These were in addition to their shared experience of removal from home, abuse and/or neglect by parents and other caregivers, and loss of sibling connections and friends when placed into care. A subset of 20 youth noted the death of a total of 27 key adults in their lives. Of these, the death of nine mothers, five fathers, and eight grandmothers precipitated their entry into foster care or a move into non-relative care. Youth also noted other negative events while in care including abuse by caregivers ($n=5$) and arrest and jail time ($n=6$). Two youth were incarcerated in state facilities at the time of our interview and one youth became homeless during the tracking process for the interview. Yet it is the meaning they attach to these and other events that explains their shared identification as survivors, and their optimistic pursuit of independence and success.

4. Findings

This study found that the young adults we spoke to experience their development in the context of competing tensions between their independence and dependence. On the one hand, youth have minimal individual control or power throughout their foster care experiences. In the words of one participant, "I haven't been able to live a real life...my life has been lived for me by the state!" Youth were equally concerned that becoming too dependent on the foster care system seriously risked one's adult independence. On the other hand, there were times when these same youth noted aspects of their lives where they grew up too early or too fast; most sensed they were on their own even before entering foster care and certainly before their official

Table 1
Sample demographics and characteristics (N=44)

Average age	20
Gender	
Male	17
Female	27
Race/ethnicity	
African American	27
White	9
Multiracial*	6
Latino/a	1
Native American	1
Reported number of years in foster care	
1–2 years	1
3–5 years	3
6–10 years	15
Over 10 years	25
Reported number of placements	
1–3	24
4–6	9
7–10	3
11+	8
Placement history	
With biological family only	12
With non-relative care only	13
Placed in both types of care	19
Current living situation	
<i>Youth still in care (n=20)</i>	
On own in apartment	6
With biological family	3
In college dormitory	1
In foster home	3
Independent living apartment	7
<i>Youth out of care (n=24)</i>	
On own in apartment	13
With biological family	7
In adult residential home	1
In prison	2
Homeless	1

*Five biracial African American/Latino, one Native American/White.

“independence” from the child welfare system⁴. Coping with these tensions lead to what we will call *survivalist self-reliance*. Three interrelated mechanisms are noted as contributing to this identity: premature conferral of adult status and independence, “growing up without your parents” as a developmental task, and survivor pride in disavowing dependence. Attention will ultimately turn to the implications this holds for theory-driven practice with this population.

4.1. Premature conferral of adult status and independence

“I think I've been in *independent living* all my life. The only thing that's different (now) is that, I'm by myself. I've had to support my family ever since I was 12. Take care of my brother and sister, like literally.”

Two months from exiting care, this 21 year old female lives in an apartment provided by an independent living program. Like her, many youth referenced relational patterns and roles within their biological family systems as critical to shaping their first sense of adult roles and independence. Parents whose psychological and physical presence was impaired by drugs and alcohol ($n=18$), mental illnesses ($n=5$), or who were described as generally neglectful ($n=14$) often left youth to assume caretaking behaviors which in turn began to foster a sense of being independent. Conferrals of adult roles and identities, however, occurred in other interrelated ways. For example, youth also explained that they were not removed as quickly as other siblings because they could take care of themselves or instead, became the ideal foster child because they did not require a lot of caretaking or help.

Conferrals of independence were not only executed by parental figures. Sometimes supports and care were not provided because one's needs were assessed (or neglected) in the context of a system that must respond to more severe levels of need and crisis. This 20 year old became a mother at 18, is currently unemployed, and trying to finish her GED before she exits care in a few

⁴ This is echoed in the larger survey's Wave III data where 66% of the sample ($n=590$) reported feeling they matured faster than others and 67% felt they took on adult responsibilities earlier than their peers.

months. However, the caseworker feels she is doing well and does not require her help compared to the other youth on her caseload. This young woman interprets that as confirmation of her independence and therefore, her success:

“It’s like you not even ward of the state...because you handling everything on your own. I’m looking at myself...I must be real independent because some caseworkers take you to pay your rent, sit by your side...I don’t have that. My caseworker say, ‘I ain’t even got to worry about you. I know you got it.’ So I figure I’m there...you know? I’m getting the compliments. I know I got it. I’m ready for this world!” (Interviewer: would you say that you’re successful?) Yes...by me being so young, I’m doing kind of better than the average older person....I feel I done got this far, I’m successful!”

Early conferral of independence and appraisal (by self and others) as not needing the same supports as “the average” person or child begins to send a series of messages that even without these supports, one is doing well. However, comparisons to the average person her age might suggest some aspects of her life (e.g., teen pregnancy, single parenting, unemployment, and failure to complete high school) are serious risk factors for her long and short-term success in adulthood (Maughan & Champion, 1990). In fact, additional concern exists when noting that in most states, this youth would have left care at least two years earlier at the age of 18 while she was pregnant.

Aging out of care, or the revocation of one’s ascribed identity as foster *child*, might also be seen as a conferral of adult independence. Relationships to biological parents at this stage of life again seem to place these youth out of sync with other young people their age. As society witnesses an increasing number of 18–25 year olds delaying some aspects of independent adulthood to receive continued parental support (Arnett, 2000), the young adults in our study indicate an inclination toward *providing* rather than *receiving* aid from their parents. Youth who maintained connections to their biological family systems often provided a range of supports to their younger siblings, grandparents, and even their own parents. Although one may assume this was occurring solely out of need due to the poverty within their families of origin, this was not always the case. Youth often noted rejecting parental offers of support and instead felt more secure in the role of provider. This will later be explored as an aspect of their disavowal of dependence. For example, this young woman describes taking care of her younger siblings and being treated like an adult early on because her mother suffered from (frequently untreated) schizophrenia. Although her mother now attempts to offer support, this youth notes these offers with humor and refuses them, affirming her role as the *giver* of supports:

“It’s funny to me...she’ll call and ask, ‘do you have food in your house? I’ll go buy you some food.’ Or, ‘Do you got some money? Cause I’ll give you some money.’ And I would have to tell her, ‘I’m fine, you use that for the two little ones.’ I’m ok, I’m taking care of myself. I really don’t need her for that. I mean if *she* need help with the kids. If they need clothes or if she need money...or anything like that, you know, I help *her*.”

The conferral of early adult independence and offering support to one’s parents as a young adult did not mean that youth felt they were fully grown up and confident in early adulthood. Many talked about feeling a sense of *having* to grow up, but still feeling insecure about their abilities to be an adult. This young man notes his mother conferred his adult independence when he was 13 years old. Although his grandmother, with whom he later lived, does not confer this status, he still feels a sense of having to grow up fast:

“My grandma used to tell me, ‘as long as you are in my house...you are not grown’...that’s what she used to tell me. But I think it is situational; I think some people are forced to grow up faster than they would like to. I think I was one of them...I felt like I was on my own.”

When interviewers ask him if he now feels that he is an adult he replies, “I think I’m 70% into being an adult. I need 30 more percent and I’ll be a full adult.” Although feeling some degree of insecurity about one’s adulthood is arguably normal during early adult years, many noted a unique need for foster youth to grow up “100%.” This need to be fully mature was not only tied to experiencing early conferrals of independence or autonomy. Youth also noted how their childhoods and early adulthoods were marked by realities they associated with being in foster care. One such reality is introduced as the second mechanism through which their sense of survivalist self-reliance developed — navigating the developmental task of, in their words, “growing up without your parents.”

4.2. Growing up without parents: learning to take oneself through life

“I ain’t been with my momma since I was ten. I see her from time to time but she wasn’t there for us...I still got love for my momma, I respect her...but, it’s just different. I look at her different. It ain’t the same like how momma and daughter should be. It’s not the same. (Interviewer: Do you still consider her family?) It might be harsh, but no.”

Foster care is an experience that can serve as a powerful context for development in ways that research is only beginning to distinguish as unique (Bamba & Haight, 2006; Kools, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2006). When asked directly about being a foster child, a few youth noted being treated differently, or simply did not disclose their foster care status to others. Most often, however, youth passionately rejected that being in foster care affected any aspect of who they had become. Yet when describing their family backgrounds and current transitions to adulthood from care, all youth noted feeling somewhat different than “normal kids”; believing it was a luxury or privilege to have the safety net of a nuclear family with protective parents at the fore, or to come to the rescue when mistakes were made even into adulthood. As one youth stated, “It’s a privilege to grow up how you suppose to.” In

noting it a privilege or luxury, their language is a reminder that despite societal expectations for children to be raised by and with one set of parents, there are many children who do not experience this developmental advantage.

As the quote that opens this section makes clear, the relationships foster youth experience, particularly with their biological parents, are complex and like any relationship, change overtime. Similar to this youth, some had contact with their biological parents during foster care and many sought out these connections after they exited foster care. Likewise, while youth sometimes expressed love or feelings of closeness toward biological mothers and fathers not all youth considered biological parents as family ($n=20$). In reflecting upon their experiences growing up, even youth who did include biological parents as family often noted their absence in the role of a parent during their childhoods. Therefore, readers should not assume that embedded within their expressions of being without parents is a literal absence of any relationship with their parents or a lack of emotional closeness toward biological parents. Surely, adults and parental figures were at a minimum physically present during their childhoods. However, their perceptions of parental figures as absent in their lives is tied to the ways in which they have made sense of their childhood experiences both within their biological families as well as in their foster placements. Consequently, these aspects of relational complexity are stated here as important context for examining their perceptions of their childhoods as “growing up without parents.”

Growing up without parents for this population was both a real and symbolic aspect to their existence in foster care. Some youth literally did not have parents on which to lean. Particularly among the 20 who experienced the death of caregivers (both biological and foster), these youth noted this loss as a marker of their adulthood. They described these losses as “reality shocks” that pushed them to feel they had to grow up immediately. Among the 13 youth who were placed only in non-relative care, some noted becoming so estranged from one or both parents that they used words like “associates” or “just like people on the street” to explain the level of felt disconnection. For these youth, many of their parents had been physically and/or psychologically unavailable prior to their entrance to foster care. That disconnection grew while in care; some just getting to know their parents in adulthood. Yet even when connections to biological parents were preserved through regular visitations or when youth lived with biological family members, being legally removed from parental care still symbolized a loss of parents and their secured membership in a stable nuclear family unit. This caused feelings of hurt, vulnerability, and disconnection. For example, this youth experienced two placements, one of which was with his biological aunt. Although he kept in regular touch with his biological mother throughout, he still had the sense of not having parents around as he grew up:

“I don't want to never see nobody go through what I went through... your biological parents not being with you...that hurts. You just can't go stay with somebody else and wake up to they family...they calling you they family and you know that is not your family. No matter how bad....they...try and help you. You don't see it that way because you know that is not home.”

Not surprisingly, growing up without parents was also said to affect their current transitions to adulthood. Youth said they lacked the continued security and ongoing support that other young adults had who had grown up with their parents. Consequently, the termination of foster care services heightened this reality. This young woman who had two placements, both with biological family members, explains how exiting the system can suddenly remind foster youth of their losses, “I'm feeling kind of secure in the system, then you're out of the system and you're like nobody! And you don't have any parents to fall back on....even an emotional investment...you don't have to fall back on.” In exiting foster care, not only do youth lose their ascribed identity as “foster child,” but also the structural and institutional context in which they are provided varying degrees of security and support. Additionally, they lack “emotional investments”; long standing relationships with adults who know them intimately and on whose love and care they can depend across life's developmental transitions. Interestingly, few youth dwelled on these losses and instead felt this only added to their sense of maturity in comparison to others (i.e., the *normal* child). In fact, youth like this young woman, felt the presence of parents delayed maturity and buffered other young adults from the “real” world:

“My mindset is older...than a normal child...I had to fend for myself a lot. Other people they're more....staying young minded, they grew up with their parents and they *still* stay with their parents so they was not forced to get out on their own and earn the *real* life.”

Another youth explains how, despite his longing for a delayed adulthood where he is free to make errors, he can't even permit himself to consider it briefly:

“I go into those phases...where I wanna be a kid again. But reality quickly snaps me back. My friends, they have a lot of family support, so they're making those mistakes...they have their family to back them. I don't have the luxury of making those types of mistakes.”

Ultimately, lacking the security of parents and associated nuclear family unit meant that some youth had childhoods and early adulthoods that required great emotional strength and autonomy. This included being one's own advocate; making use of existing services but never expecting people to volunteer their support or care. In the advice they offered other foster youth and throughout their explanations of what it meant to be in foster care, youth agreed that high levels of ingenuity and psychological endurance were literally essential to survival. This youth explains that life without the guidance of a trusted and familiar parental figure is a journey he must be strong enough to take himself through:

“When you living in these foster homes....you don't know these people...you have to be strong. It's mainly helped me...taught me while I'm out here traveling from here to there....I get more responsible...take care of myself more...So I'm 'a

continue to *make* myself. Take *myself* through this the best way I can. Be strong even though it be challenges. That's the ONLY way. Cause if you be weak you not gon' make it."

The perception of one's existence as *growing up without parents* and entering one's adulthood without the same safety nets as other youth, however, was not viewed by youth as a deficit. Having endured the experiences in their families of origin that lead to placement and various degrees of parental loss, youth specifically noted their personal strength to survive in the context of absent parental and familial resources as an important source of pride and self-esteem.

4.3. Survivor pride and the disavowal of dependence: making meaning of loss and hardship

"I believe that everything happens for a reason...it only made me stronger. I'm actually kind of proud of myself for it. It... helps you to get through anything because you can always refer back to your situation like, 'I've been through THIS!' "

The young adults we spoke to frequently viewed dependence on others or expressing personal and psychological vulnerability as posing a risk to one's independence and success. In the meaning they attached to their diverse stories, all extolled the importance for foster youth to learn early on how to be (and survive being) independent. Two aspects of survivalist self-reliance are explored here. First, these young adults actively reframed emotional pain tied to the past as relevant only as a source of strength and pride to buttress their self-reliance. Secondly, young adults often disavowed dependence on others as a means of protecting their self-reliant identities and pride. The use of "disavowal of dependence" conceptually leaves open space for the fact that some youth do use services and supports through formal service systems. As one youth notes, "Milk it for all you can and then when it runs dry pick up the pieces and go on about your life." However, they clearly did not expect the *people* in their lives to volunteer support and remained prideful in being seen by others as not needy and instead as highly self-reliant as this youth explains, "When I need something....it's hard to ask other for it. Pride comes in, plays a major role." Indeed, their life histories provided many lessons in how to survive without needing or expecting supports or protection from a consistently present adult or parent. The use of the term "disavowal of dependence" is used here to capture their resistance to asking people for help; recognizing earlier discussions about familial histories, perceptions of being on one's own long before legal adulthood, and their identities as self-reliant in ways that sometimes include active brokering and skills in navigating formal systems of supports. However, what remains constant is their attachment to an identity as self-reliant survivors who have endured the lack of support and help, particularly from their informal networks, over their life course.

Therefore, even later in their childhoods when positive parental or caregiver support existed, some youth viewed this as a potentially unhealthy relational circumstance from which one might not be able to transition away. In fact, this youth came to believe that being cared for as a foster child could reverse one's self-reliance; risking a lifetime of dependence on others. He notes his near escape of interpersonal dependence while he was in foster care:

"The most important thing that I've learned since I've been in foster care is...you don't want to get content, get stuck, get to the point where you are used to people taking care of you because it almost happened to me! You don't want to be that way, if you do that, then you will be dependent on people for the rest of your life."

The need for personal strength and autonomy was similarly noted when youth shared how they coped with the loss of a parental support or a familial safety net as children. They explained how they learned to push through the occasional yearning for an emotional attachment or supportive parental figure toward an understanding that these losses existed to make them stronger. Here, a young woman describes the meaning she now gives to her dad not being present in her life:

"I used to be like, 'I want my daddy!' But now...I think that he part of the reason that made me who I am...he played a big part in making me to be a stronger person. Knowing that he was one less person in my life to help me. That made me be a lot more strong to help myself."

Another youth shares the positive meaning he attaches to the inability of his parents to care for him and the death of his grandmother which caused him to enter non-relative foster care:

"I think DCFS taking me from my parents was the best thing that ever happened for me...I wouldn't have liked the person I would have ended up being. I don't like that my grandmother died, but I am thankful that she did because I like the person that I am now. If I would have stayed with her I would have ended up being a spoiled kid. I wouldn't have wanted to be that person. I like my bumps and bruises."

This pride in surviving the loss of potential and real supports (i.e., parents) on their own also meant that youth frequently resolved themselves to a future without others volunteering help or support. This was especially true as youth explained how they coped with emotional and psychological pain attached to their pasts. Specifically, youth understood their emotional problems as something they ignored, suffered in private, or that their pasts and associated pain only served to fuel their continued self-reliant survival. This young women's statement illustrates how youth viewed their emotional pain as a personal resource for survival, "My outlook on life, I don't blame anyone for what has happened, I just make the best of it. Even though it eats me up inside the things that did happen, I just use that to push me to go on." Consequently, even when youth believed they might need emotional support

or help, many either rejected it or pathologized others who seemed to require it. This youth explains that he rejected necessary therapy because of his preference to handle things on his own:

“There’s always been a lot of negativity in my life so I’ve learned how to deal with it myself. It’s not that it’s not that bad. I may shed a tear, but I can get over it. I had counseling that I didn’t never go through because even though I needed it, I felt as though I can get over it and through it by myself.”

As we continued to analyze the meaning youth attached to their family of origin and foster care backgrounds, we noted that many youth used phrases that indicated awareness of their experiences as different. Simultaneous to this awareness, however, was an active construction of this difference as something earned and of which they were proud. In fact, stating that they “earned the real life” or didn’t want to be “spoiled” by those who provided love and care to them hints to their perceptions of youth who had what they called “normal childhoods.” In other words, the uninterrupted presence of caring parents and parental support represents life in an overly protected and less reality-based world. Sometimes the presence of parents was associated as the antithesis of self-reliance. In disavowing dependence youth would say things like, “I don’t want to be a mommy and daddy, baby boy” or that experiencing their hardships alone allowed them to be independent and avoid the “typical statistics of a foster child” as dependent and troubled. Some youth even pathologized their siblings as letting foster care and the loss of parents bother them more than it should; lacking the psychological strength to move beyond the emotional pain of their pasts. This young mom, living in an apartment with the father of their infant, shares her thoughts about her brothers:

“Foster care affected *THEM* a lot more than it did me. Like my brothers, they just can’t handle things...they let it get to them. Growing up without their parents kind of left a hole in them...my brother’s now in jail, he tried to fill it with alcohol...his twin brother...he is living with my mom....he has been drinking...”

It is understandable how youth who have had to survive abuse or neglect, familial disruption, and who consequently develop an early sense of being on their own in the world might find great pride in disavowing dependence as young adults. Rather than accept or internalize negative stereotypes of foster children (Kools, 1997, 1999) or adopt an identity as victim, youth constructed their life stories as testimonies of survival against all odds. This became a source of resilience and strength to draw upon as they left foster care. It offers positive meaning to the negativity in their pasts, and provides a framework for reducing the power of that past to constrain their futures. However, as hinted to earlier, it also fosters an identity as a self-reliant survivor in ways that do not always facilitate seeking support even when self-identified needs exist.

This youth’s unmet needs were serious enough after leaving care that he became homeless. Instead of asking for support or help he affirms his survivalist self-reliant identity while also hinting to the lack of mutually supportive relationships in his life. He disavows the need for others and their support, “I don’t need to ask nobody for nothing. You know? I don’t need that. I don’t need nothing. I know that don’t nobody owe me nothing. I don’t owe them nothing. You know?” Later he is asked what his greatest barrier is to achieving his goals. In answering, he again references his self-reliance, but this time it is not viewed as a strength. He states, “Being hard headed. Not listening....to older people.”

Another youth explains why she often doesn’t ask for help from her informal network of supports. Like the youth noted earlier who declined therapy even when she need it, this young person declined informal support from someone who she earlier describes as one of her most close and valued relationships. Here she notes rejecting offers from her foster mother who wanted to provide support when this youth was aging out of foster care and pregnant:

“I don’t ask them because, I’m so prideful, you know, I’m stubborn, and I just depend on me....I don’t like to ask nobody for nothing. So...she asked me, ‘do you want a baby shower?’ and I said, ‘No, I don’t need nothing.’ But I did. But I don’t like nobody helping me. I don’t! I truly don’t like nobody helping me because I like to do it by myself.”

Again, this does not mean that foster youth rebuke all forms of support. In fact, throughout the interviews, despite their own resistance to asking for help, nearly all youth advise other foster youth to make use of any and all available supports, both while in foster care and as one transitions to adulthood. Yet this was neither for the emotional connection one would receive nor to achieve socio-emotional well-being. Rather, relationships were to be garnered to provide instrumental or technical forms of support (e.g., advice, information, access to jobs or housing). As this young woman’s statement illustrates:

“...just take advantage of the situation that you’re already in whatever you can get. Make as many friends as you can. Cause once you leave the system, you wanna have certain people that if you need a reference....you can call them...You wanna make some connections with people that if you need anything you can go back to them.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, taking on this role of self-advocate, and pride in disavowing dependence on others left many youth to also name themselves and specifically their “pride” or “stubbornness” as their only ($n=21$) or primary ($n=20$) barrier to success. Youth would offer comments like, “I’m my own biggest enemy” or simply respond with, “myself” when asked about what keeps them from achieving their goals. Even the three youth who name other barriers (e.g., family, foster care) use self-blaming language to explain barriers to success, as in the case of this young woman, “I think...I just needed to stop carrying around everything that had happened to me in foster care and get out there and do it.” These statements of self-blame became additionally important when our analysis revealed only five youth felt they were on track with their plans for education, housing, or life stage goals (e.g., partnering, parenting). Their statements of self as barrier represent in part an accurate recognition of the lack of supports to

achieve their goals. As one youth says, “there is no one...nothing else pushing me saying... ‘You need to achieve’ so it’s just me.” However, their identities as self-reliant cause them to blame *themselves*, rather than the lack of existing resources and supportive relationships, as primary barriers. Only one youth, in addition to naming herself, mentions the child welfare system and lack of familial supports as barriers to her success. Thus, being a self-reliant survivor means that youth perceive themselves as both their own most valuable advocate and source of hope, while also viewing themselves as their greatest enemy and threat to success.

5. Limitations of the study

There are certainly limitations to this study, and a few are briefly noted here for consideration prior to articulating the study’s implications. First, this study sought to provide a youth perspective. Consequently, we are missing other perspectives that are clearly relevant to a more complex understanding of the transitional experience to adulthood among this population. The field would be highly advantaged by case study designs that link and contextualize youth perspectives with their biological and foster family members’ perspectives, as well as those of their caseworkers and other professionals tied to the involved child welfare agencies (e.g., therapists, attorneys, youth advocates).

Second, although this study is longitudinal, we are unable to fully explore some of the long-term concerns raised by this first wave of data collection. Most notably, while our analysis hints to some costs of survivalist self-reliance, our data inhibit full exploration into the consequences of this identity across the life course. Likewise, although our second wave of data will be helpful from a developmental standpoint, studying foster care alum as they enter later stages of adulthood would enrich a more theoretically informed life course approach to practice. It is quite possible that the survivalist self-reliant identity will shift and change as young adults enter later stages of adulthood. To date, however, the development of this perspective is limited by the dearth of research that explores the potentially unique developmental strengths and vulnerabilities of adults with foster care backgrounds across their life spans (Horrocks, 2002).

Finally, this sample is drawn from a distinct regional location in the U.S. States vary widely in their policies related to the age at which youth must exit care, the services that are provided to youth while in care, and the service systems and resources available to them as adults. This study attempted to include some of this diversity through sampling youth in rural/urban settings and from three different states with different policy and service contexts. However, it is possible that foster youth in other areas of the country may face other challenges or supports that are particular to their regions of the U.S. Consequently, the implications that follow are offered in hopes of contributing to an ongoing discussion, particularly to advance the use of holistic life course approaches (Stein & Wade, 2000) to child welfare practice.

6. Discussion and implications

“I don’t tell people my story. ‘Where did you grow up?’ You don’t need to know that. ‘Who did you grow up with?’ It doesn’t matter. Cause I don’t want them to look at me different. Like they say, *‘if it don’t kill you it only makes you stronger.’*”

This study finds that among the young adults we interviewed, transitioning out of foster care is one in myriad life events that mark them as different, and consequently on their own. First, early conferrals of adult independence and lacking either the real or symbolic presence of their biological parents leave youth to feel responsible for their own development and safety. Second, recognizing others do not share this experience, youth felt they lived in a different and more adult world. Our analysis suggests that over time this can emotionally and psychologically disconnect youth from others (e.g., peers, foster parents) as evidenced by their repeated use of the phrase “on my own.” Finally, despite (or because of) conferrals of early independence and their advice that foster youth should make use of existing resources, youth indicate persistent fears of dependence and are resistant to seeking and receiving emotional supports in particular. Surviving and navigating the competing tensions between shifting levels of independence and dependence is their marker of success; a history of self-reliance they claim with pride as an identity to guide their futures. This final discussion advances a holistic perspective on their development of independence and self-reliance in an attempt to enrich and expand current conceptualizations of these, and more recent ideals of interdependence, promoted in child welfare practice and policy.

Some scholars have begun to advocate for holistic life course perspectives as an ideal theoretical lens for work with youth throughout their foster care experiences (Horrocks, 2002; Stein & Wade, 2000). In viewing foster youth holistically as developing beings, our lens widens as well as shifts to providing services and constructing policies that are developmentally supportive and are, at a minimum, not inhibitive of a child’s long term well-being (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000). A child’s development does not wait while the system constructs his or her permanent family; aligning or recruiting key adults to comprise the long-term context for development. This does not mean practitioners hasten decision making or compromise informed and individualized case planning solely for expedience and efficiency. Rather, our findings suggest this framework can underscore the necessity for caregivers, caseworkers, therapists, and other adults to communicate with and accompany youth throughout their time in foster care so they do not endure even unavoidable traumas on their own (e.g., removal from a parent, foster care placements, transitioning out of foster care.)

Secondly, foster youth do not “grow up” solely in foster care, but are affected by all of the contexts in which they have lived, even for short periods of time. The youth we spoke to noted experiences in biological families, foster families, and even the effects of absent experiences and relationships on their development and world views. Taken together, their experiences in these contexts were perceived as different, particularly in terms of the role of parents and an established sense of “home.” They share some experiences with other sub-groups of children who take on parentified roles in their families (Jurkovic, 1997) or provide assistance

to parents who are in need (see for example Rumbaut & Cornelius, 1995, on immigrant children and their parents.) Our finding that some youth offer help to, but reject assistance from, biological parents illustrates a difference between some foster youth and other young adults who may return home to parents for support or to delay adult independence (Arnett, 2000). Foster youth may be returning to re-establish, or for the first time create, a relational connection and a familial context (i.e., a home) with their biological parents. Surely these returns are complicated by a relational history with their parents of abuse and/or neglect, the meaning each family member attaches to the youth's removal from home, how each has coped with varying levels of physical and psychological parental absence, and sometimes continued parental struggles with addiction or untreated mental illness. Again, most of the youth we spoke to came to navigate these various terrains of development on their own. Consequently, providing or offering supports to parents may allow youth a safe way to build relationships in their biological families as valued (and valuable) members and in ways that do not threaten their self-reliant identities from which they draw great pride. These findings raise questions about the role of survivalist self-reliance as not only an outcome, but as an identity that may inform the processes by which some youth form relational connections into adulthood.

Thirdly, our findings suggest a holistic perspective must also expand beyond a focus on the family and child welfare system to include acknowledging the developmental context of a broader society, one that attributes positive meaning to surviving hardship through self-reliance and disavowing interpersonal dependence (Inglehart, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Reindal, 1999). Other scholars have criticized the degree to which policy and practice with older foster youth, particularly around assessments and development of their independent living skills, are embedded within dominant cultural values that pathologize relational notions of healthy adulthood and asking for support (Inglehart, 1994; Propp et al., 2003). In our study, youth also linked surviving without help as an indicator of independence and clearly associated this with success. Consequently, our findings reinforce the idea that youth are embedded within this shared socio-cultural context that reveres rugged individualism and personal autonomy (Reindal, 1999). Like others in U.S. society, they too pathologize needing help, namely emotional support. Therefore, the positive interpretations youth construct out of surviving past trauma and their reluctance to seek emotional support in particular is partially a reflection of the society and other cultural communities in which they are members. As such, youth pull from their social context available scripts to both make sense of and reconstruct their hardship as serving only positive purposes.

Like the youth whose quote opens this section, many youth used the socially popular aphorism, “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger” to describe the meaning they attached to their varied foster care experiences and familial histories. Within this sample, so many youth used this exact phrase that it operated as a mantra of sorts, thereby emerging as an appropriate title for this paper. This popular Friedrich Nietzsche quote is often evoked to proclaim human resilience and individual survival of past traumas. Perhaps reinforcing the self-reliant dimensions of this aphorism is its use in various iterations as titles to self-help books promising the development of emotional strength out of trauma (e.g., *Strong in the Broken Places*, Stanford, 2006).⁵ While youth use this expression throughout their interviews to proclaim success, however, it is less clear that embedded in this construction of success through survival is a process of emotional healing. Instead, they note how they or their siblings must push past times when they still “let foster care get to them” and privately endure emotional pain (e.g., “it eats me up inside”). None of the youth we talked to defined strength as synonymous with seeking or making use of informal or formal emotional or psychological supports, even when such supports existed. Rather, strength was represented through emotional autonomy – using the past only as fuel to achieve increased self-reliance. In other words, our findings suggest that their use of this phrase does not necessarily reflect the successful pursuit or achievement of emotional health and well being (i.e., emotional strength). Instead, this aphorism may offer socially sanctioned legitimacy to how they have come to cope with absent or disrupted emotional and relational supports through vigilant self-reliance. It also provides hope to the futures of these youth that if one can literally *survive* such trauma, s/he will automatically and only acquire strength. Unfortunately, considering the research indicating high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder among former foster youth (Pecora et al., 2005) and their increased risks for numerous mental health problems (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005), there is little evidence that what doesn't kill a child automatically or exclusively builds emotional strength.

Ultimately, our findings regarding identity and help-seeking join others in the field who ask, “What is independence?” This study concurs with the need to include the more relational aspects of its development in our policy and practice frameworks throughout a child's stay in foster care (Collins, 2004; Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). Independent living services continue to emphasize the economic and physical aspects of adult independence that are observable, measurable, and more easily taught than relational skills (Propp et al., 2003). It would be difficult to argue these are not crucial assets and skills, particularly for foster youth who often lack family and community support networks. For them, remaining outside of adult service systems will largely depend on their own abilities to gain the education, training, and other skills necessary to maintain stable employment and housing. However, our analysis suggests the young adults we spoke to are leaving foster care having missed out on some relational experiences, skills, and “emotional investments” that most child developmentalists would suggest are also fundamental to adult independence and well being (Quick, Joplin, Nelson, & Quick, 1992). Therefore, as the field begins to propose interdependence (Propp et al., 2003) as an alternative goal in adulthood, we must also examine assumptions about how one's sense of connection to others is developed in ways that ignore the experiences of youth and young adults with foster care backgrounds.

Scholars have raised doubts about whether a healthy or successful adult by any definition truly lives “independently” from others and is self-reliant in meeting most needs (Inglehart, 1994; Reindal, 1999). In child welfare, the term interdependence has only recently been used to reject policy and practice goals that use independence as a synonym for self-reliance and interpersonal

⁵ Ironically, this frequently evoked quote among the foster youth in our study was coined by a philosopher who also experienced similar childhood events including the death of his father at age 5 and entrance into state guardianship, spending most of his childhood years in boarding schools.

autonomy (see Propp et al., 2003). Primarily drawing from relational-cultural theory (Stiver, 1991), interdependence and help-seeking is viewed as empowering and as necessary to enhance growth and well-being across the life course. This conceptualization of human as social being underscores the import of more recent efforts to connect and preserve social support networks for youth as not only protective factors against risk (Collins, 2004; Perry, 2006) but as central to their healthy development. However, while important distinctions exist between notions of independence and interdependence, both are conceptualized as normative aspects of development emerging from (and depending upon) previous experiences of attaining emotional security and relational connection. In other words, even the independent adult is not assumed to be born independent; rather, independence gradually emerges from earlier states of dependence. Consequently, the conceptual difference between the two constructs is largely the degree to which one should remain interdependent into adulthood.

In contrast, the youth we spoke to indicated a different developmental trajectory of independence and interpersonal connection. Their independence emerged from a place of emotional insecurity and a sense of interpersonal disconnection. The self-reliant identity grew out of a need to provide some level of safety and security to themselves. Our findings raise questions for how practitioners engage youth to develop interdependence and relational connections as adolescents and young adults when these efforts may be experienced as a push “backwards” in their quests to protect their self-reliance. This certainly was the case for some youth who as teens finally experienced emotional support from foster parents, but believed accepting or expecting this relational connection might place them on an irreversible path toward lifetime dependence on others. An application of relational cultural theory and the notion of interdependence must account for varied routes to making these connections and perhaps even varied levels and expressions of those emotional connections. Additional research is needed to understand how we build and protect growth fostering relationships (Stiver, 1991) for youth while they are still in care so that they leave care with necessary emotional investments to take into their adulthoods.

Finally, the population of interest within this study is a group of young adults whose identity has been constructed within their families of origin, foster care, and a broader societal context. Research including this study illustrates that these environments are not always emotionally or psychologically protective and can be hostile to a child's evolving sense of security, safety, and belonging (Bamba & Haight, 2006; Kools, 1999, 1997). Our findings concur with other scholarship that notes the formation of unique self-protective coping skills (Kools, 1999, 1997) and social identities that evolve from pervasive experiences faced by foster youth, including relational losses, disconnections, and mixed messages about their personal agency and control (Jones & Kruk, 2005; Harrison, 1999; Horrocks, 2002; Molloy, 2002; Reid & Ross, 2005).

With few exceptions (e.g., Kools, 1999, 1997), however, scholars have not explored identity development as a relevant aspect of understanding youth in foster care. In other literatures, identity is conceptualized as a core aspect of human development; a powerful motivator of behavior as well as central to psychological health and well-being across the life course (Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Ruvalo & Markus, 1992). Particularly for populations that are disenfranchised, oppressed, and stigmatized, positive identities can buffer against a psychologically hostile structural or external context. Unlike other stigmatized and ascribed identities, however (e.g., those attached to a racialized or gendered status), “foster child” is a time limited status in one's development. Moreover, youth did not have pride in their foster care status, but rather in their survival of it and of their childhoods. Given the unique nature of this identity as “foster youth,” it is critical to continue youth perspective studies. This line of inquiry could deepen our understanding of how youth story their experiences in ways that function as both an identity of resilience and one that may complicate their abilities to seek personal supports or navigate mutually supportive emotional connections. Such studies can provide insights for guiding child welfare practice and the role of biological parents, foster care providers, case managers and others as central players in establishing a context that provides a range of opportunities for experiencing mutual support and interdependence. In this article we argue for the specific consideration of holistic life course frameworks that embed the meaning youth attribute to their experiences in a broader societal, developmental, theoretical, and practice context. As the field continues to wrestle with conceptualizations of independence, interdependence, and success, how youth measure their own successes must extend, at minimum, beyond their survival of foster care.

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