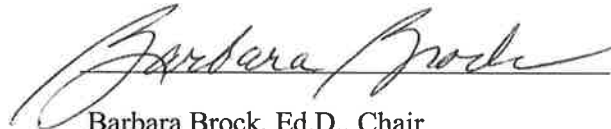



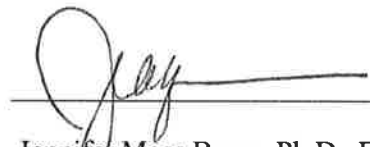



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SUCCESSFULLY AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE:  
A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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By  
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in  
Interdisciplinary Leadership

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Omaha, NE  
June 17, 2019

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## Abstract

Youth aging out of foster care confront considerable challenges when transitioning to adulthood. Research focuses overwhelmingly on negative outcomes for youth emerging from foster care. Youth in foster care in West Virginia must also cope with a child welfare system in crisis due to the opioid epidemic in rural communities. This constructivist grounded theory study explored the process youth experience when successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia. This approach to qualitative research emphasizes promoting social justice through the power of storytelling. Intensive qualitative interviews with five participants, all adults between the ages of 21 and 30, provided the core data source for exploration of the lived experiences of young people who had successfully aged out of foster care from placement in West Virginia. Findings, derived from a coding system with 25 initial codes, coalesced into an emerging theoretical framework for successfully aging of foster care in West Virginia comprising five theoretical categories: (a) reflection, (b) relationship, (c) resilience, (d) responsibility, and (e) resurgence. Multiple properties defined each category with saturation of the data. The Governor's Success Academy—a three-week summer experience for West Virginians in foster care in grades nine through 11 as part of the Governor's Schools of West Virginia—constitutes a solution in alignment with the findings and research presented in the study. The academy intends to foster collaboration among system leaders while providing direct services to youth in foster care. Implications include investigating whether the emerging theoretical framework applies to other contexts as well as further exploring the leadership of youth in foster care.

*Keywords:* foster care, aging out, emancipation, transition to adulthood

## Dedication

As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge.

—Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*

For my heroes who courageously told the stories of their lived experiences in foster care and Chris Morehouse with love and gratitude.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction and Background**

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is most successfully traversed with the support of parents, siblings, and other family members (Guan & Fulgini, 2016). Yet, according to the latest federal data on youth emerging from foster care, more than 50,000 young men and women, in 2017, faced the transition to adulthood without the support of their biological parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The same statistical report documented a discouraging 10-year trend from 2007 to 2017 when the percentage of foster children who left the system to reunite with their parents decreased (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). At the same time, policymakers challenged youth transitioning out of foster care to develop self-sufficiency instead of relying on a social support network (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Understanding how youth successfully age out of foster care offers system leaders a moral imperative to create change. As Nelson Mandela observed, “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children” (Office of the President, 1995, para. 1).

Youth who age out of foster care face overwhelming obstacles (Morton, 2017). Youth in foster care in West Virginia are further challenged by a child welfare system in crisis (Heyman, 2018). Yet relatively little has been published in the research literature about the experiences of young people who successfully transitioned to adulthood from placement in foster care. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of young adults who successfully aged out of foster care in West Virginia. The study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach to generate a theoretical framework to explain how youth experience successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Youth aging out of foster care confront considerable challenges when transitioning to adulthood (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). Young adults emerging from foster care are at significant risk of experiencing homelessness and suffering chronic mental illness (White et al., 2011). For example, Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney (2013) found that between 31% and 45% of participants in a longitudinal study of youth emerging from foster care had experienced homelessness at least once. In addition, compared to other young adults, youth aging out of foster care are more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed, suffer substance abuse disorders, and become incarcerated (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Snyder & Medeiros, 2013; Stott, 2012). Such problems may be especially acute in West Virginia where the foster care system is in crisis. According to the state's department of health and human resources secretary, West Virginia ranks first in the nation for the rate of children placed in foster care, with a 35.8% increase in foster care placements from 2015 to 2017 due to the overwhelming effects of the opioid crisis in rural communities (West Virginia Legislature, 2018).

Intrinsically, youth emancipated from foster care have endured trauma before transitioning to adulthood by having had to live with strangers due to abuse, neglect, or other adverse childhood experiences (Atkinson, 2008; Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014; Rebbe, Nurius, Ahrens, & Courtney, 2017). While federal data are not collected after emancipation, the National CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) Association reports stories of youth who transition successfully from foster care. For example,

Josh aged out of foster care when he was 18 and set his sights on an education and career that would enable him to have children of his own one day. In August, he

graduated from West Point as a lieutenant. He is getting ready to head to Texas to begin five years of active duty. (National CASA Association, 2017, para. 10)

Yet scant research appears to focus on positive outcomes for youth emerging from foster care. Generating a constructivist grounded theory of the process young adults who successfully age out of foster care experience served to increase understanding among caregivers and other allies committed to creating change in support of these marginalized members of society.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the process youth experience when successfully transitioning to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia. Successfully transitioning from foster care into adulthood was generally defined as having secured permanent housing and either employment sufficient to be self-supporting financially or full-time enrollment in post-secondary education.

### **Research Question**

Creswell (2013) recommended presenting a broad, overarching central research question to address the problem of a qualitative study. More specific to a constructivist grounded theory study, Charmaz (2014) advocated for the research question to drive the method for collecting data. Accordingly, the central research question that guided inquiry within this constructivist grounded theory study was as follows:

What theoretical framework explains how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia?



### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this constructivist grounded theory study was to generate a theoretical framework to explain how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia. The tentative theoretical framework has been grounded in data and other evidence collected from young adults who emerged successfully from the foster care system. Discernment and discovery through the application of constructivist grounded theory intended to carve a potential path to success for the transition to adulthood from foster care while promoting social justice for foster children.

### **Methodology Overview**

Understanding the experiences of young adults who age successfully out of foster care in West Virginia seemed well suited to qualitative research, given the deeply human, emotionally resonant real-world problems affecting a clearly marginalized group (Creswell, 2013). Quantitative analyses have exposed the dire circumstances afflicting youth aging out of foster care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; White et al., 2011; Dworsky et al., 2013). From a qualitative research perspective, relatively little appeared to have been revealed in the literature about the process of transitioning successfully into adulthood from foster care. As Creswell (2013) affirmed, “Grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain or understand a process” (p. 88).

I chose to conduct a constructivist grounded theory study because this qualitative approach, in particular, emphasizes promoting social justice through the power of storytelling (Charmaz, 2016). As Charmaz (2017) asserted, “Constructivist grounded theory propels our thinking forward in unanticipated ways and subsequently sparks new understandings of experiencing and redressing injustice” (p. 42). Creating a space for the

underrepresented voices of youth aging out of foster care to generate a meaningful, substantive theory comprehending the subjectivity of their experience while challenging oppression was critical to my stance as a researcher and advocate committed to constructionism and social justice.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

Charmaz (2014) wrote, “Just as the methods we choose influence what we see, what we bring to the study also influences what we *can* see” (p. 27). For example, some terms may be unfamiliar or risk being misunderstood (Roberts, 2010). Towards achieving transparency, the following terms were used operationally within this study:

*Aging out:* Leaving foster care in transition to adulthood at the age established by the state for the court to relinquish custody. West Virginia requires youth to exit foster care at age 18.

*Foster care:* As part of the child welfare system, children live by court order in the homes of foster families or other settings, such as group homes and institutions, in the absence of biological parents capable of providing proper care (Rymph, 2017).

*Successful transition:* Having secured permanent housing and either employment to be self-supporting financially or full-time enrollment in post-secondary education.

*Young adult:* For purposes of this study, a young adult is a man or woman between the ages of 21 and 30.

### **Assumptions**

Underscoring consideration of ethical issues throughout the research process, Creswell (2013) emphasized the need to be sensitive to vulnerable populations. Further, he explicitly encouraged researchers to practice reflexivity to mitigate bias by conveying

how our backgrounds and experiences may inform our intentions and interpretation of information when conducting qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013). In view of this admonition, I acknowledge I was a ward of the state who was placed in foster care from the time I was in second grade at the age of 7 until I was emancipated at age 21 as a sophomore at Georgetown University. I lived with six different foster families over the course of my childhood. My parents never gave permission for me to be adopted, which I learned was customary during the period from 1965 until 1979 when I was a foster child, according to a history of foster care authored by Rymph (2017).

My firsthand experiences as a foster child as well as my memories of how I successfully aged out of foster care obviously shaped my point of view and inspired my interest in studying the problem to identify an evidence-based solution. While allowing me to build trust with participants, my background also challenged my ability to remain objective. I exercised considerable care in how I shared my having been a foster child who had aged out of the system with participants. I was also mindful to avoid anticipating responses and interjecting my own thoughts to allow participants the full expression of their authentic experiences toward constructing an emerging grounded theory for successfully aging out of foster care.

In practical terms, I employed experience-based qualitative interviewing techniques, as recommended by Stelter (2010), to encourage participants to share emotionally resonant, holistic responses in a safe, supportive environment. Such practice was consistent with Charmaz (2014) insisting participants tell their stories without any preconception of content on the part of the researcher. I remained open to emergent

phenomena revealed during interviews, which was imperative given the sensitive nature of the subject matter the young adults discussed about aging out of foster care.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Creswell (2013) demonstrated the importance of disclosing limitations, delimitations, and biases within research studies designed from a transformative perspective. Clearly, constructivist grounded theory embraces a transformative approach to qualitative research by emphasizing collaboration with participants as well as advocating change for marginalized groups such as young adults aging out of foster care.

#### **Delimitations**

Having collected data through interviews with participants from non-metropolitan counties in West Virginia bounds the study and may have impeded application of the tentative theoretical framework to youth emerging from foster care in urban and other geographic contexts. Issues such as access and availability of services for youth in foster care in rural communities may have differed appreciably from those in cities and metropolitan counties (Balenger & Stone, 2008). Focusing on young adults in the age range of 21 to 30 years in order to attend to the relative recency of the transition to adulthood presented another delimitation of the study.

#### **Limitations**

Identifying a sufficient number of young adults who having successfully transitioned from foster care were also willing to participate in constructivist grounded theory research presented a major limitation of this study. These young men and women had already experienced trauma and likely sought to avoid further vulnerability. I coordinated with a leading private child welfare agency serving West Virginia to reach

out to prospective participants. My professional relationship with the agency appeared to alleviate some concerns on the part of participants and helped to ensure a respectful, sensitive research process.

Further, generating constructivist grounded theory relied on participants to remember and share their experiences during interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Youth who overcome cumulative traumatic events often demonstrate resilience (Masten, 2014). Nonetheless, the stories participants chose to tell may have been shaped by traumatic experiences in ways that do not accurately depict reality (Kiser, Baumgardner, & Dorado, 2011). Charmaz (2014) advised conducting intensive, in-depth interviews to address this limitation imposed by the subjectivity of participants' storytelling in constructing theory.

### **Leader's Role and Responsibility in Relation to the Problem**

Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2011) posited a theoretical model of identity leadership incorporating three actions: (a) reflecting, (b) representing, and (c) realizing. Identity leadership also recognizes how successful leadership is dependent on context, the quality of relationship between leaders and followers, and the capacity for transforming social reality (Haslam et al., 2011). Further, this model of leadership highlighted how prototypical leaders represent the in-group while countenancing the out-group.

In light of my background as a foster child and as an educational leader responsible for children from families in poverty, including foster children, I simultaneously hold membership in both the in- and out-group. Through the lens of identity leadership, I bridge the gap between the two groups. My conscious choice to affirm my affective affiliation with children and families in poverty allows me to build relationships among the poor and more affluent people whom I lead. In this way, I

fashion a space where followers—principals, teachers, children, and families—begin to experience their own agency and a shared social identity (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). The social identity youth emerging from foster care and I share held the possibility for me to question and understand deeply their experiences in order to share their stories to generate a theoretical framework of success for transitioning to adulthood.

Further, from an interdisciplinary leadership perspective, I join with other system-level leaders to eliminate barriers while promoting facilitators to the successful transition from foster care to adulthood. Understanding how leaders within foster care agencies and educational institutions as well as employers are best poised to address these issues affecting the transition to adulthood is essential to promoting positive outcomes for young adults who age out of foster care. Leaders not only influence successful transitions for foster youth but share responsibility for creating solutions. Collaboration among system-level leaders serving foster youth is especially critical. Intractable social problems require system leaders to catalyze change (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015).

### **Significance of the Study**

The study of successfully aging out of foster care was important for several reasons. First, understanding the process youth experience when aging out of foster care successfully presented a constructive counterpoint to the extant research literature focused mostly on the adverse consequences of foster care. Second, the study generated an emerging grounded theory for the process of aging successfully out of foster care. Such an emerging grounded theory offers caregivers and other allies of foster youth a means with which to focus efforts and funds on meaningful solutions to the challenges confronting foster children in the transition to adulthood. The extant literature offered a

limited starting point. For example, Gonzalez (2015) explored narratives of foster youth to describe the phenomenon of aging successfully out of foster care. Thomas (2016) likewise conducted a phenomenological study with a sample size of only three participants. By comparison, this constructivist grounded theory study recruited and interviewed a robust sample of participants to achieve saturation of the data to develop a substantive emerging theory. The resulting tentative theoretical framework seeks to inform thought and action among stakeholders committed to changing the status quo of low expectations and adverse outcomes for foster youth transitioning to adulthood. A constructivist grounded theory moves beyond narratives and phenomenological descriptions to provide an actionable framework for practical steps toward social justice for current and former foster children. Third, critical conversations with former foster youth provided the catalyst for the constructivist grounded theory to emerge in order to reveal authentic agents of change for the transition to adulthood.

### **Summary**

Youth aging out of foster care face overwhelming challenges in transitioning to adulthood. Despite the moral imperative, little research had examined how these marginalized young adults succeed in securing housing and employment. The purpose of this dissertation in practice was to generate a theoretical framework for how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia. The central research question was: What theoretical framework explains how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia? The emerging theoretical framework has been grounded in data collected from young adults who transitioned to adulthood from the foster care system.

A constructivist grounded theory approach to research emphasized social justice through storytelling. A limitation of this constructivist grounded theory study involving a vulnerable population was recruiting a sufficient number of participants. Focusing on youth was a delimitation, as was West Virginia being the site for the study. Personal bias was addressed by reflexivity to ground the emerging theory in the experiences of young adults who overcame adversity to age out of the foster care system in West Virginia.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

The research literature describing the experiences of youth aging out of foster care focuses, with few exceptions, on the critical challenges of transitioning to adulthood without the familial support typically enjoyed by young adults who set out to live independently. For example, youth emancipated from foster care disproportionately risk experiencing homelessness, unemployment, and behavioral health issues like depression (Curry, & Abrams, 2014; Munson & McMillen, 2010; Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

Accordingly, the following literature review will present findings related to each of the four major challenges confronting youth aging out of foster care: (a) housing and homelessness; (b) underemployment and unemployment; (c) inadequate education and college readiness; and (d) behavioral health. These issues are interrelated although addressed individually in this review. Finally, the literature review will summarize research surrounding mentoring and supportive relationships for youth emerging from foster care as a means to improve outcomes related to self-sufficiency and well-being.

### **Benefits of Housing, Employment, and Education**

Obtaining stable housing and either employment to be self-sufficient or enrollment in post-secondary education mark the successful transition to adulthood from foster care. Housing, employment, and education are likewise associated with wellbeing in general. For example, access to affordable housing contributes to psychological health among children and adults (Evans, Wells, & Moch, 2003). Housing likewise anchors people within social contexts that affect health and wellbeing with potential positive benefits (Diez Roux & Mair, 2011). Employment has been positively associated with

wellbeing and psychological capital as well (Cole, Daly, & Mak, 2008). Adults with higher levels of education not only earn more but are more likely to enjoy healthy lifestyles, which leads to greater civic and family engagement (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Achieving the benefits afforded by housing, employment, and education for youth during the transition to adulthood requires support and skill (Settersten & Ray, 2010).

### **Housing Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

Young adults leaving their parental homes frequently encounter difficulty locating adequate, affordable housing; as a consequence, increasing numbers of young adults return to live in their parental homes as part of the boomerang phenomenon (South & Lei, 2015). In contrast, youth aging out of foster care, who already lack parental homes to which to return, must rely on formal and informal social networks to identify appropriate housing (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010). Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, and Landsverk (2017) determined that youth emerging from foster care faced a similar risk of homelessness when compared to youth who were never in placement. Youth emerging from foster care, however, were at greater risk for unstable housing unless reunited with family members. The same study revealed interventions promoting independent living often failed to reduce the risk of housing problems among youth aging out of foster care. These findings were consistent with data reported by Dion, Dworsky, Kauff, and Kleinman (2014) who estimated between 25% to 50% of young adults exiting foster care lacked stable housing and so met the federal definition of homelessness by couch surfing, doubling up, moving frequently due to difficulty paying rent, and facing eviction.

Similarly, Tyrell and Yates (2017) concluded that youth who entered placement at an older age or who were placed with a relative prior to emancipation from foster care

tended to live in poor-quality housing over time, while better educated former foster youth, especially females, accessed higher-quality housing. Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney (2013) ascertained that youth who had changed placements often or run away from their foster homes were at increased risk of becoming homeless during the transition to adulthood. Males, in particular, were at a higher relative risk of experiencing at least one event of actual homelessness after exiting foster care (Dworsky et al., 2013).

### **Employing Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

Young adults who transition to adulthood from foster care frequently experience being unemployed or underemployed (Stewart, Kum, Barth & Duncan, 2014). Securing and sustaining employment becomes an essential task for foster youth transitioning to adulthood, which requires substantial social support to accomplish (Jones, 2014). Employment assistance programs for foster youth are, nonetheless, often ineffective due to an overemphasis on training in job seeking and interviewing techniques rather than curriculum-based career-readiness and job-preparation content (Zinn & Courtney, 2017). At the same time, youth aging out of foster care remain more likely to be unemployed and earn lower wages than their peers (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Youth who exit from group settings are especially vulnerable to unemployment, which highlights the importance of foster parents (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Even so, Gates, Pearlmutter, Keenan, Divver, Gorroochurn (2017) demonstrated a significant relationship between career readiness and employment among youth transitioning from foster care.

### **Educating Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

Youth in foster care experience a variety of educational challenges at the elementary and secondary level that pose barriers to academic achievement, which

directly affects outcomes in adulthood (Pecora, 2012). Recent research literature addressing education among youth aging out of foster care, however, appears to center on college- rather than school-based initiatives. Meanwhile, according to the most recent data available, of the estimated 10% of former foster children who enroll in post-secondary education, only approximately 3% to 5% graduate (Geiger & Beltran, 2017).

Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, and Bennett (2017) documented how youth aging out of foster care receive a variety of supports, including financial aid, housing, and counseling that do not translate into higher graduation rates for these young adults. Further, Okpych and Courtney (2018) attributed this lack of college persistence and completion on the part of youth who age out of foster care to the enduring effects of traumatic experiences before and during placement on psychosocial functioning leading, in turn, to avoidant attachment that involves a reluctance to rely on others. As Okpych (2012) posited about youth emancipated from foster care: “They are expected to achieve more at an earlier age than their peers who have not undergone dislocations in place and family” (p. 1394). Hunter, Monroe, and Garand (2014), nonetheless, determined that youth aging out of foster care, who have limited social capital within their biological families, achieve higher educational attainment due to increased social capital and more meaningful connections developed over the course of long-term placement in foster care.

### **Managing Behavioral Health of Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

Given the propensity for depression and other behavioral health concerns among youth aging out of foster care, appropriate planning and coordination of care are of paramount importance (Kang-Yi & Adams, 2015). Brown, Courtney, and McMillen (2015) determined, nevertheless, that the behavioral health needs of youth aging out

foster care remain high after emancipation despite a swift decline in the use of behavioral health services. Inadequately managed behavioral health may be manifested by poor decision-making skills in young adults emerging from foster care (Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017). Youth aging out of foster may also exhibit learned helplessness resulting from an inability to achieve permanency (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). Stott (2011) substantiated how placement instability leads to an increase in risky sexual behaviors and substance abuse among youth aging out of foster care.

### **Mentoring and Supportive Relationships for Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

Youth aging out of foster care, as a marginalized group challenged by multiple adverse childhood experiences, may benefit from mentoring (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). These youth often cope with a serious sense of loss and psychological distress as a result of placement as well as transitioning out of foster care (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010). Supportive relationships are, therefore, critical to youth aging out of foster care, especially when foster parents and youth have not developed a bond that lasts beyond placement (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2013). Mentors, whether formal or informal, have the potential to build sustainable social supports for emancipated young adults in life after foster care (Avery, 2011).

### **Leadership Among Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

Youth advisory boards offer an interesting avenue for understanding leadership among youth who age out of foster care. The John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 established youth advisory boards to provide current and former foster youth a voice in advocating for better lives as well as an opportunity to experience leadership (Havlicek, Lin, & Braun, 2016). In a critical analysis of youth advisory boards, Forenza

and Happonen (2016) concluded, “Foster youth advisory boards have not only been effective in bringing necessary change to systems but can also be credited to building leadership skills” (p. 118). Havlicek et al. (2016), however, identified concerns about tokenization and how the leadership of youth advisory boards represent only the most articulate voices of highly capable current and former foster youth. In a separate study of 14 youth advisory board leaders, Forenza (2016) confirmed that, despite privileged positions of leadership, the youth effected change by direct action and created legacies through relationship with adult allies. Forenza (2018) later authenticated how youth advisory board participants justify staying involved in leadership out of a strong sense of commitment to creating change by overcoming feelings of personal defeat and powerlessness resulting from placement in foster care. These findings challenge notions of youth aging out of foster care. As Forenza (2016) asserted, “The existing literature allies aging out with disempowering experiences” (p. 907).

Further, from a Jesuit-inspired perspective, Lowney (2003) posited that we are all leaders who lead all the time whether in obvious or subtle ways. The young men and women who participate in this study by sharing their experiences with the foster care system must be acknowledged as leaders. Equally important is recognizing the leadership of other adults who have supported youth in transition to adulthood from foster care. Foster youth and their supporters may also be understood as interdisciplinary leaders given how multiple challenges must be confronted in the process of successfully aging out of foster care. The practice of interdisciplinary leadership is simultaneously an individual and collective expression, as leaders embrace multiple perspectives from various disciplines while cooperating with other leaders (Brock, Cherney, Martin, Moss

Breen, & Oltman, 2015). Designing an evidence-based solution to a complex problem such as transitioning from foster care to adulthood will no doubt benefit from the insights and actions of an interdisciplinary leadership approach. Being attentive to how interdisciplinary leadership is enacted within the lived experiences of participants and their allies will amplify understanding about how leaders individually and together contribute to the process of successfully aging out of foster care.

### **West Virginia as the Site for a Study of Youth Aging out of Foster Care**

West Virginia is the site for this study exploring how youth successfully age out of foster care. West Virginia is the only state completely within Appalachia (Catte, 2018). The Appalachian region continues to experience serious economic decline due to restructuring in the mining and manufacturing sectors as well as a persistent knowledge gap (Deaton & Niman, 2012). Across rural America, young adults, especially high achievers, must regularly seek jobs and educational opportunities elsewhere. Past studies have suggested the educational system plays a significant role in this rural brain drain phenomenon (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011).

Low-income families in rural Appalachia have limited economic resources and few opportunities for supportive employment (Manoogian, Jurich, Sano, & Ko, 2015). Foster youth in West Virginia may be especially vulnerable to the adverse consequences of rural poverty. For example, Ahmadi-Montecalvo, Owens, DePasquale, and Abildso (2016) found adolescents in foster care in West Virginia have among the highest rates of tobacco and drug use in the nation. Yet, as the authors noted, “Because of the scarcity of information about foster care adolescents in West Virginia, few resources can be used to explain these findings” (Ahmadi-Montecalvo et al., 2016, p. 663).

### Summary

Youth who age out of foster care confront considerable challenges during the transition to adulthood. The research literature overwhelmingly documents the dismal prospects for youth emerging from foster care. Finding and maintaining reliable housing is a major challenge for youth who age out of foster care. The problem is most acute for foster youth who entered placement as adolescents. These foster youth, in particular, often fail to establish bonds with foster families and are placed in group settings. These same foster youth are the most vulnerable to experiencing homelessness when emancipated. Joblessness and underemployment exacerbate difficulties in securing adequate housing among youth aging out of foster care. Adding such adversity to the hardship of placement in foster care, youth who transition from foster care to adulthood often experience chronic behavioral health issues without adequate support. Youth who age out of foster care likewise often avoid behavioral health supports when offered. Such avoidance behaviors continue among the few former foster youth who enroll in college.

The focus of the literature surrounding the education of youth aging out of foster care was truly unexpected, given the emphasis on college readiness, persistence, and completion. The literature provided little evidence regarding the experiences and trajectories of foster children as students in elementary and secondary schools. The study involving foster children in West Virginia was also revelatory. Research on youth advisory board leadership was promising and reflected a constructivist approach from a transformative perspective. I am struck how the topic of leadership among young adults, including current and former foster youth, alludes to social justice and creating change.



Interdisciplinary leadership also offers a promising path of inquiry for understanding how youth successfully transition to adulthood from the foster care system in West Virginia.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study will be to understand the process youth experience when successfully transitioning to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia. Successfully transitioning from foster care into adulthood will be generally defined within the study as having secured permanent housing and either employment sufficient to be self-supporting financially or full-time enrollment in post-secondary education. Generating a theoretical framework to explain how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia will aid caregivers, policymakers, and other allies in developing targeted interventions to prepare foster children for the transition to adulthood. Foster youth will also benefit from a deeper understanding of what contributes to successful transition to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia.

### **Research Question**

The central research question that will guide inquiry within this constructivist grounded theory study will be as follows:

What theoretical framework explains how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia?

### **Research Design**

A grounded theory research design features collecting data in the field, mainly through interviews, to generate theory anchored in actions, interactions, and processes among people rather than a priori assumptions (Creswell, 2013). This characteristic of grounded theory is especially salient with regard to the study of situationally vulnerable

populations, such as youth emerging from foster care, who may be highly susceptible to preconceived notions and other bias based on background and socioeconomic status.

Glaser and Strauss (2017) initially proposed discovering grounded theory through a general method of comparative analysis. Glaser (1992) later critiqued this systematic grounded theory method as overly prescriptive and countered with an emergent approach. Charmaz (2017) subsequently advanced constructivist grounded theory as enhancing critical inquiry by asking probing questions about data and examining the role of the researcher within the research process. She further advocated, “Many qualitative researchers study disadvantaged people and want to help change their situations. If so, starting research *with* (not on or about) these people and their concerns moves our studies toward social justice” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 50). From this transformative perspective stressing social justice, marginalized young adults in partnership with the researcher may best tell the story explaining the process of successfully aging out of foster care through a constructivist grounded theory study.

### **Participants/Data Sources**

Data collection and analysis using a constructivist grounded theory approach are flexible while utilizing common sources of data from participants, including interviews, field notes of observations, and review of elicited and extant documents (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory, in particular, relies on language, discourse, and silences of participants collected during intensive, in-depth interviews to serve as the primary sources of data (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews also create a human connection with the researcher to allow participants an opportunity to reflect on events and clarify the meaning of experiences (Charmaz & Belgrade, 2012). In this study, participants—all

adults between the ages of 21 and 30—reflected on their experiences during placement in foster care while also describing their lives as young adults to focus attention on the process of aging successfully out of foster care.

### **Participants**

Creswell (2013) counseled conducting between 20 and 60 interviews to achieve sufficient data to saturate the model in a grounded theory study. Charmaz (2014) described grounded theory studies with sample sizes as small as eight to 12 interviews. Guetterman (2015) recommended remaining reflexive and reassessing sampling, including theoretical saturation, with particular attention to adequacy throughout the research process. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) had found data saturation occurred within the first 12 interviews. With these thoughts in mind, I collaborated with the private child welfare agency to recruit 18 participants with the intention of conducting 15 initial intensive, in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews with the same participants as needed. I remained open to the possibility of recruiting additional or fewer participants for data collection should circumstances warrant. As a storyteller and researcher, I was more interested in depth and the richness of details in the data associated with a constructivist grounded theory for aging successfully out of foster care. I interviewed five participants when saturation of the data occurred as outlined by Charmaz (2014) with all theoretical categories and essential properties for each category of the theoretical framework revealed with no new insights on the final interview.

### **Recruitment**

Prior to initiating recruitment of any participants, I obtained approval under exempt status from the Creighton University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix

A). I then gained access to young adults between the ages of 21 and 30 who were emancipated from foster care to participate in my study through referrals from the largest private welfare agency in my home state. The agency had regional offices located around the state. The chief executive officer coordinated with directors of the agency's regional offices to invite prospective participants who met the criteria of being a former foster child older than the legal age of majority who aged successfully out of foster care. After describing the project to participants referred by the agency, I then arranged logistics by text or phone as appropriate regarding time and place of interviews. I conducted interviews as participants became available. I also entertained referrals from participants who knew other potential participants who met criteria for the study.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Reflecting on the four challenges confronting youth aging out of foster care in tandem with other themes that emerged in the literature review, I drafted a protocol for semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol to explore the topic of successfully aging out of foster care tentatively incorporated six open-ended questions (see Appendix B). In actual interviews, I presented the six questions, accompanied by appropriate probe questions, in a sequence suggesting a life history approach. Haglund (2004) explained that using a life history approach, especially when interviewing young adults, offers researchers insights into how past events relate to current phenomena, as participants remember and reconstruct their lives. Similarly, this approach to qualitative interviews appeared to allow participants to respond more meaningfully to questions while ensuring adequate opportunities for the four main challenges as well as mentoring and supportive relationships to be addressed with greater depth and authenticity.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I scheduled an hour for each interview to take place in a quiet, neutral setting. Participants completed brief demographic questionnaire to collect data on gender, age, race, educational level, employment, and marital status (see Appendix C). Interviews were then recorded with a Zoom H2n Handy Recorder and downloaded to Rev.com for transcription. Upon return receipt, the transcribed interviews were reviewed for accuracy and transferred with field notes taken as observations before and after interviews to the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018.2 (VERBI Software, 2018) computer-based data analysis program for coding and memoing. In addition, timelines were completed by hand with participants in the manner Adriansen (2012) described for conducting life history research. Timelines were also transferred to the computer-based data analysis program.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected during interviews and observations were analyzed and coded using the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018.2 (VERBI Software, 2018) computer-based data analysis program. The researcher generated an emerging grounded theory for how youth successfully age out of foster care using a constant comparative method responsive to an emergent, qualitative research design.

### **Initial Coding**

I initiated coding by sensitizing concepts using an interpretative approach integrating a social justice perspective in the manner described by Charmaz (2014). I used gerunds to reflect action in line-by-line coding while interacting with the data and remaining open to variations, as initial codes were preliminary.

**Focused Coding**

The second phase of coding encompassed assessing and comparing initial codes. In the words of Charmaz (2014), “Assessing your initial codes involves comparing them with data and distinguishing those codes that have the greatest analytic power” (p. 140). Coding continued as part of the constant comparison model. As new questions and ideas emerged, interviews with the same and different participants were conducted for additional data through theoretical sampling. Interestingly, Charmaz (2014) does not use formal axial coding, preferring instead to embrace her own emergent analytic strategies over predetermined procedural moves. Accordingly, employed emergent analytic strategies based on data collected from participants during interviews.

**Memo Writing**

Charmaz (2014) encouraged memo writing: “Your memos will form the core of your grounded theory” (p. 191). Memos allowed me to develop chronologies of my research and the process explained by the emerging constructivist grounded theory.

**Validation Strategies**

Creswell (2013) stressed the need to establish validation strategies as part of qualitative research. Charmaz (2014), however, straightforwardly admitted, “A constructivist approach theorizes the interpretative work that research participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation. The theory depends on the researcher’s view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it” (p. 239). That being said, as a first-time social researcher, I employed regular member checking with participants; crafted rich, thick descriptions in reporting; and consistently consulted with

a peer reviewer as well as my chair and committee member as means to document the accuracy of the resulting tentative constructivist grounded theory.

### **Reflective Practice**

Flannery O'Connor (1979) wrote to her friend, "I have to write to discover what I am doing" (p. 5). I am mindful how writing out my thoughts in a journal helps me regain perspective and persevere. I often discover new things about myself and my personal projects by committing unvarnished words to private pages, especially when written during trying, uncertain times. Undertaking a study on youth aging out of foster care has proven challenging. Writing regular reflections about my experiences with participants and the research process allowed me to remain open and renewed while collecting pieces of data. In scholarly terms, maintaining a journal of my reflections allowed me to bracket preconceptions based on personal experience to engage more fully with participants.

As a routine practice, I wrote weekly reflections on Sundays recording observations about my dissertation journey. I emulated the steps of the Examen by recording my thoughts expressing gratitude for the gifts I received during the week gone by while acknowledging my shortcomings and looking forward to the promise of the week ahead. I also wrote a personal reflection about my encounter with each participant to honor the person's life story and contribution to the research. To be consistently accountable, each reflection comprised a single, double-spaced typewritten page with the date centered at the top. Weekly reflections as well as reflections about encounters with participants were archived within the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018.2 (VERBI Software, 2018) program as part of the data source for building the theoretical framework.



### **Ethical Considerations**

Charmaz (2014) framed constructivist grounded theory through the lens of a moral imperative: “Both theory and critique are all too often far removed from the people each purports to serve. Constructivist grounded theory brings people and their perspectives into the foreground” (p. 41). In planning and carrying out a study examining the experiences of youth aging out of foster care, ethical concerns were carefully considered throughout the entire research process. Sensitivity for the situational vulnerability of these underrepresented, marginalized young adults joined with specific safeguards for data collection, secure storage, and reporting to respect privacy and maintain strict confidentiality. All personal identifying information was rigorously protected. Pseudonyms replaced the names of participants to ensure anonymous reporting. All participants were provided a copy of the Bill of Rights for Research Participants as appended to the information letter (see Appendix D). I also repeatedly reminded the young adults whom I interviewed that their participation was completely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. I pledged as well to be intentional about ensuring reciprocity for participants who contribute to the research by giving back to foster children and youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care.

### **Summary**

The methodology for the study of youth successfully aging out of foster care adhered to a constructivist grounded theory research design. Data were collected through a brief demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observations, and timelines. Participants for the study were all adults between the ages of 21 and 30 who had transitioned successfully to adulthood from foster care. Data collection included

recruiting five participants and conducting five intensive interviews until saturation of the data was achieved. An interview protocol comprised of six open-ended questions guided the conversation. Ethical considerations included specific safeguards to maintain strict confidentiality. Journaling was a key reflective practice to facilitate bracketing of preconceptions and sharpen focus on the stories of participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

**Introduction**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the process youth experience when successfully transitioning to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia. Successfully transitioning from foster care into adulthood was generally defined as having secured permanent housing and either employment sufficient to be self-supporting financially or full-time enrollment in post-secondary education. All participants selected for interviews met the criteria for successful transition from foster care. The central research question that guided inquiry was: What theoretical framework explains how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia? The interview protocol to explore the experiences of youth aging out of foster care incorporated six open-ended questions (See Appendix A). The sequence of questioning reflected a life history approach, as described by Haglund (2004), to solicit more robust responses.

This chapter delineates findings of the constructivist grounded theory study exploring the experiences of youth who successfully transitioned to adulthood from foster care. Beginning with a brief review of the research methodology, the chapter segues into a demographic description of the participants. A discussion then ensues of the five major categories that emerged from analyzing data collected and subsequently coded from interviews with participants about their perspectives on how experiences in foster care served as preparation for successful transition to adulthood. Illustrative quotations taken directly from transcripts of the interviews supply evidence for the categories. The chapter concludes with further analysis and synthesis of the five categories as precursors

to the conceptual elements of the design for a cohesive theoretical framework elucidating the process through which youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

Intensive qualitative interviews with five participants provided the core data source for exploration of the experiences of youth who aged successfully out of foster care in West Virginia. Participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire as a preamble to interviews. Rev.com prepared transcripts for all interviews from audio recordings submitted electronically to the online platform by the researcher immediately after each conversation had ended. Upon receipt of the transcript from the transcription service, the researcher carefully compared the transcript with the audio recording to ensure accuracy of the data with only minor modifications. The researcher then coded transcripts line by line using the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018.2 (VERBI Software, 2018) computer-based data analysis program.

The coding system originally comprised 25 separate codes using gerunds to represent actions, as prescribed by Charmaz (2014). Coding continued using a constant comparative model. During focused coding, categories emerged from aggregating initial codes and distinguishing patterns among the most salient codes for constructing an emerging grounded theory of successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia. Memos captured comparisons and connections among codes, from which theoretical categories evolved. Saturation of the data for theoretical categories resulted from participants consistently echoing similar information related to multiple properties for each category. Charmaz (2014) posited that categories are saturated when sampling reveals no new insights or properties. The categories revealed by a constant comparative

analysis met this definition of saturation. The final interviews afforded no additional insight or properties. The codes coalesced into five theoretical categories as follows: (a) reflection, (b) relationship, (c) resilience, (d) responsibility, and (e) resurgence. Table 1 summarizes the code system by clarifying the relationship among the five theoretical categories and the 25 initial codes garnered from the five interviews included in the study for analysis.

Table 1

*Code System: Theoretical Categories with Constituent Codes*

Theoretical Category	Constituent Codes
Reflection	Being self-aware Being self-reliant Embracing self-love Practicing a faith tradition Reframing
Relationship	Communicating through intimate conversation Creating and sustaining relationships Entering romantic relationships Establishing emotional trust
Resilience	Adjusting to ambiguity Being proactive Coping with dysfunction Navigating difficulties at school Persevering Responding to chaotic situations Serving as caregiver
Responsibility	Accumulating college debt Demonstrating good behavior Solving problems Taking responsibility for siblings and other children
Resurgence	Advocating for self and others Coming to terms with parents and other relatives Committing to a life purpose Gaining perspective on family circumstances Cultivating skill and expertise

### Demographic Description of Participants

Table 2 illustrates the age range of 22 to 29 years for participants who were all young adults who had aged out of foster care in West Virginia. The information also includes the number of years each participant spent in foster care. In addition, educational level signifies the number of years of education each participant had completed. As noted, all participants had earned a minimum of a high school diploma. The highest level of educational attainment was a master's degree. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to participants to ensure anonymity and maintain confidentiality. Only one male participated in the study. The United States Marine Corps had awarded this young man an honorable discharge after four years of service. One young woman was a full-time graduate student. All other participants reported being employed full time. All participants described their race as Caucasian. Regarding marital status, three participants were single, one was divorced, and one was married.

Table 2

#### *Demographic Descriptors of Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Years			Number of Placements	Marital Status
	Age	Education	Foster Care		
Ashley	29	12	5	6	single
Hannah	22	14	5	3	single
Kayla	27	17	5	5	divorced
Natalie	22	16	13	9	single
Wyatt	27	13	5	7	married

### Reflection

Youth who experience foster care curate a capacity for reflection to become successful in adulthood. Rather than any outward manifestation or material resource, a sense of one's interiority is an essential feature of moving forward from the traumatic

experiences encountered in foster care. Youth in foster care who successfully transition to adulthood appear to develop capacities for self-love and self-reflection in order to endow themselves with an inward sense of unconditional love and nurturing that their birth and foster parents proved somehow incapable of imparting. In this way, reflection provides a means to reframe the past to orient present and future actions. Youth in foster care, in particular, learn to appreciate the inward journey in overcoming a lack of love in childhood. As Natalie explained,

Self-love is key. I guess I learned it actually when I had my daughter, or a year or so into me having my daughter. And I think that was my first time realizing what love truly was because I love her. Then I realized I could never be successful for her if I didn't love myself. And no one had taught me that along the way because I don't think anyone had loved me. I mean my sister did but like a sister. I guess learning to love myself has actually been the biggest key to making it through college these last few years.

Kayla made a similar claim about lessons learned in foster care placement about the practicality of regular reflection:

As I get older, the busyness keeps me from being the person that I developed in the foster care system. When you're in facilities, they have a structured routine. You have three hours of cleaning time to think during cleaning time. You have two hours of down time when you have nothing to do but sit there and think and come up with these solutions. I don't have that as much anymore.

Regarding the significance of being self-aware, Hannah said simply, "I am an old soul."

Reflection among youth in foster care allows for redirection and competency toward self-discipline that children normally receive from their parents. Without any consistent, reliable parental presence, youth in foster care, in essence, learn through reflection to parent themselves in an affirming manner in the absence of a loving family. Youth in foster care require relationship to develop emotionally, as do all children. Relationships, however, often elude these youth in the transience of placement.

### **Relationship**

Given the dissolution of families and separation from parents and siblings, reconnecting with the ability to create and sustain meaningful relationship is a key attribute for the successful transition from foster care to adulthood. Every participant shared painful memories of unexpectedly being separated from loved ones. Wyatt, for example, described the anxiety of disbanding his brothers and sisters this way:

When we were taken, they didn't really explain anything to us. A couple police officers came up to our door, one social worker, and all she said was, "Pack your bags, you're going." Then the most specific thing I can remember is us all lining up, all nine of us. One by one, people come in and take us away. We split up. We were all split up.

Wyatt was intermittently placed in the same foster homes as his two older sisters; however, he lost all contact with his other sisters and brothers. Wyatt later in the interview reflected on the lasting emotional effect of the separation while, according to field notes, crying softly and wiping away tears: "I saw my little brother for the first time last year after 15 years. He's in the Navy." Wyatt also conveyed grave concern related to the identity of his older brother: "One of the foster mothers actually changed my older



brother's name when he was about eight years old.” Apparently, according to Wyatt, the foster family already had a new baby with the same first name as his older brother.

The data suggested that rebuilding the emotional trust necessary for meaningful relationships requires courage and intimate communication in face of the repeated incidence of powerlessness inflicted by supposed caregivers. All participants recalled experimenting with the difficulties of learning to rely on adults. Kayla told this story when asked to share about adults who cared for her during placement:

There was an issue with another staff member at a facility where this staff member was extremely rude to me. Treated me like I was dirt. It was completely unacceptable. I called my social worker. The staff person expected for me to throw another fit like every other teenager. My social worker actually left her office. Came to the facility. Had a meeting with me and the staff person. Sat down and was like "You are not going to treat my child like this." The staff person apologized. She was very apologetic. We moved on. My social worker looked at me after the staff person left. She's like, "You are not going to be a little shit. You are going to act like a person." Seeing her stand up for me and seeing that there was somebody on my side made me want to be better.

For Kayla, when her social worker stood up for her in front of another adult, she reported feeling trusted and empowered. These actions on the part of her social worker built a bridge through relationship and possibly taught Kayla about the power of mutual trust. Establishing trust may be hard won between youth in placement and their caregivers. The participants all reported on the exceptional role social workers play in teaching trust.

Hannah, in another example, recounted establishing emotional trust with her social worker with this vignette:

We just get lunch, and we talk, and we spend time together. That poor woman has held me while I've cried. I've called her, and she's come to get me at two o'clock in the morning just so I could cry and then take me right back home. It means a lot to have somebody that you can kind of lean on and shoulder on.

Hannah was fortunate to establish a trusting relationship with her social worker that continued throughout her childhood in placement to adulthood. Hannah remarked how her social worker seemed unique in her steadfast commitment to Hannah and other children in foster care: “[My social worker] has helped a lot of children. She is a phenomenal woman. I think everybody should kind of model after her.”

Hannah further clarified how communication works in a healthy, trusting relationship, as exemplified by Hannah’s continuing connection with her social worker:

So, it's really just talking, listening to me. Kind of giving me advice, knowing I'm not going to take it, but at least steering me in the right direction. Telling me this is how it is, but, in the end, you have to do what's going to make you happy.

Hannah later described her relationship with her social worker succinctly: “A friend almost.” Remarkably, the strength of the bond between Hannah and her social worker endured at Hannah’s behest. Hannah quoted herself in conversation with her social worker: “I still want you to know what I'm doing with my life, and I still want to be able to talk to you.” Her social worker taught Hannah a lasting life lesson about friendship: Relationship establishes mutual emotional trust that is reciprocal between both friends.

**Creating and sustaining relationships.** Depending on a social network of friends was a common occurrence for participants in the study. Kayla commented, “The various temporary friends that I made along the way, each of them had their own purpose in my life. We've all moved on to different directions. At that time, those were the friends that I needed.” Ashley likewise expressed the joys of friendship: “We'd watch movies together. We'd go on trips together. She had a grandma; so we'd go to her grandma's house. We'd go hiking. And she was so nice.” Natalie plaintively attested to the absence of friends growing up: “I never had any sleepovers. I never had friends, never went out for the weekend.” Natalie also reminisced about her enduring friendship with a social worker: “She's still a friend. We email still today. She just met up with me a few months ago for dinner. We stayed in contact, we stayed friends. But I think that she was more my friend than a worker.”

Kayla concluded by defining how the temporary nature of foster care placement with constant transitions affects relationships with friends and others:

Because in coming up in foster care you get lost in the shuffle of "This is what a relationship is." Where I came up in residential placements, those relationships aren't formed for long term. Those relationships are formed for treatment. They go away. They were all temporary as I was coming up. At the time, when I was vulnerable and supposed to be learning how to form everlasting relationships, I was forming very temporary relationships that went away.

All participants reported a lack of sustained friendships in foster care due to frequent changes in placement. Participants all likewise reported having to move among various counties in West Virginia for placement, which likely made establishing and

keeping friendships even more difficult. The data suggested that youth in foster care rely on adults, most especially social workers, to serve as friends in lieu of peers their own age. The constant transitioning to new placements resulted in the youth in foster care having a limited number of reliable opportunities to attend any school for a prolonged period of time. This transitory nature of schooling impaired the ability of participants to make friends. Ashley offered this description of the loneliness she endured at school: “I don't remember half of high school because I spent a lot of it in a library crying.”

Despite difficulties associated with multiple placements, all participants voluntarily reported having friendships during placement in foster care. Committed, long-term relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend, however, proved more challenging and rewarding for youth in foster care, according to participants. The four women were in committed relationships as adults, while Wyatt was married. Love included not only self-love but created the possibility of a loving relationship with an intimate partner.

**Entering romantic relationships.** Physical intimacy distinguishes romantic relationships from friendships, which heightens the need for emotional trust. All participants revealed how opening themselves to romantic relationships contributed to their personal growth and emotional stability through vulnerability. As Ashley asserted, “I had a boyfriend, well, sort of a boyfriend. I liked him, but I knew it wasn't going to be forever and he was kind of my anchoring, I guess.” Ashley then explained how her boyfriend helped her create a different vision for her life: “He used to always tell me, ‘You need to get out of West Virginia. . . .You're no different. You're not going to fail. You need to get out of there.’ And I'm so glad he did.”

Kayla likewise considered the challenges and rewards of romantic relationships: I struggled to form and maintain relationships. I was very cautious about people that I was meeting in college. I had several relationships, on and off, for the first year. The summer after freshman year, I met this guy who became my husband. Kayla later averred, “I think relationships and my education are probably the biggest challenges.” All participants alluded to abusive relationships as part of their experience in foster care. While offering participants partnerships lending emotional and even economic stability, romantic relationships demanded significant trust to establish permanency. The intensity of emotional and physical bonds wreaked havoc with participants for whom attachment, as an enduring issue, provoked a fight or flight response. Participants had limited exposure to anything permanent in their childhoods, which further complicated developing a sense of belonging over time. Confronted with constant change and challenges during childhood, the participants nonetheless demonstrated a spirit of resilience as adults.

### **Resilience**

Resilience took many forms in the lives of participants while in placement. All five young adults reported having to respond to chaotic situations while tolerating ambiguity. Participants frequently experienced unsettling, perplexing events, such as sudden, unexpected changes in placement, with uncertain outcomes and no consideration for their agency. Through various difficult circumstances, the participants persevered. All participants suffered emotional abuse, while some were victims of physical abuse. In the words of Wyatt, “I would say that the foster families did more abuse than what our parents would ever do.” Natalie calmly conveyed the following with downcast eyes:

I was in a lot of really bad homes and I don't know how it happened so much. Statistically it makes no sense, but it just did. And I just was unfortunate; so I didn't really have any preparation. In the beginning, the first few were sexual abuse, and then after that, it was physical abuse and then the last ones were emotional abuse, which somehow were worse than the first ones.

Yet Natalie persisted, as she explained later in the interview:

That was kind of the thing that helped me make it through everything. I don't know what age, but at an early age, maybe in middle school or elementary school I had heard about college, was told about it. Then, in middle school, when they start preparing you for high school, they mention college a few times. And it was brought up again when it was just me saying if I get this then I can make it out and be something. I don't know. It was just that was my escape, like this was going to solve all my problems.

Viewing college as a goal and also an escape, Natalie focused on learning how to help others through social work. This commitment, in turn, supported her resilience, in particular, when Natalie gained insight into adverse childhood experiences (ACES):

Now I know because of social work. When I learned about ACES and how we need one resilient person to cling to and build our resiliency. I just thought back on my life because I have all 10 ACES. I thought back of who would be that person for me, who was that person that helped me get through it? And I kind of did find people along the way, many people along the way.

Kayla cast a somewhat positive light on the lingering effect of surviving chaotic situations when she confessed with a smile:

Another issue that I have is I thrive in chaos. Everything has always been chaotic in my life. If there's not something happening, I feel uncomfortable. It feels unfamiliar. The chaos of having the stress of two kids and going to school and a full-time job was familiar, so I did it. It's when things are still that I can't manage.

Kayla was resourceful in using her familiarity with chaos to fuel the realization of her ambition to prepare for a professional career as a social worker: “Education was definitely something that I used as a tool to be successful.” Kayla managed to complete both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in five years after a chaotic childhood spent in five different placements after her grandmother died. Kayla never knew her parents. Kayla motivated herself and assumed full responsibility for doing well in school.

### **Responsibility**

Responsibility took many forms in the lives of participants while in placement and beyond. All participants related being frequently responsible for children who were not their siblings as an unpaid babysitter. This expectation often supplanted participants being treated as family members by their foster parents. As Ashley emphasized, “She would also make me babysit their newborn baby. The state said I was not allowed to babysit. They wanted me to be a teenager. Those were the rules. And I was grateful.” Hannah offered a similar sentiment: “I think I was only wanted there to be a built-in babysitter.” Natalie likewise reported having domestic responsibilities as a child herself in foster care: “So I definitely took care of the other children and a lot of housework.”

At the same time, feeling responsible for taking care of younger birth siblings afforded participants a sense of purpose. Wyatt justified his avoiding any misbehavior, in particular resisting the temptation to run away, by stating with obvious emotion: “I

thought about it, but I never put it into action. I had younger siblings.” When asked to describe experiences that helped her succeed in foster care, Natalie replied without hesitation: “I think it was my little sister, I kind of always had to be strong for somebody. I don't know. I think that played a big role.” Family members were often at the center of participants’ concerns as a primary motivation to succeed during and after placement.

### **Resurgence**

Coming to terms with parents and other relatives presented a critical rite of passage for participants in reclaiming their own lives from the experience of foster care while also gaining perspective on family circumstances. This resurgence brought participants new ways of understanding and exercising their sense of agency by advocating for themselves and others without relying on either birth or foster parents. Participants redeemed a sense of self separate from parental figures to overcome adverse childhood experiences and break the chain of inherited trauma among generations.

When asked who had helped with preparing for adulthood, the participants all volunteered how avoiding emulating their parents informed their decisions to pursue lives of purpose as adults. Without fail, participants noted how their parents were neglectful and could not serve as role models for how to live responsibly as adults. As Hannah made clear, “I don't want to end up like my mom. So, obviously you have to work at what you want.” From Hannah’s perspective, “You can't make somebody change. My mom chose men a lot over her kids. We're really close now, but as a child—she's not fit to be a mother, she's more of a friend.” Hannah specified the devastating nature of her mother’s being unfit to parent: “As a child, she chose a man over me. She left me at a house by myself while she moved in with a man. No food, nothing like that.”



Ashley expressed compassion toward her mother but was equally clear eyed about her family's circumstances:

Good intentions. Despite the fact that she was incapable of being a parent at that time, she had really good intentions with me. And she always has, she always will. Mom is stage four bipolar. And I don't believe she was on her medication. So she'd sleep all day long. Or if she was on her medication, she was sleeping all day long. I mean, she was just not with it. There was no food in the house. We were coming home and crying, "Mom where is the food? There's no food in the house." She thought we were capable of taking care of ourselves, which we were. But it was just really stressful.

Given her mother's inability to provide for her children, Ashley confided her determination to do otherwise: "I wasn't going to be paycheck to paycheck like my parents. I was going to be able to feed my kids. I wanted options. I wanted to be a successful woman." Ashley continued, "I just have these big dreams. I want to get married and I want to have like a lot of kids, but I want to have a house first and have a white picket fence."

Natalie's mother contacted her for the first time in years when she turned 18. Natalie described making a difficult decision in response to this unexpected encounter:

It was weird because she messaged me on Facebook. But I did ask her a little bit about her life, but, because there was nothing different than from when she had removed me, aside from her no longer being an addict. I don't know, it just felt

like there was nothing to go back to. It was almost like that's the life I would have lived without foster care, and she hadn't changed anything. It was just too little too late.

Natalie was emphatic about deciding instead to go to college and become a social worker: "I started counseling that first year of college and just turning 18 and really being on my own officially. I kind of cut everybody off too because I came to school, and I was like, 'I'm done with that life.'" Natalie was equally determined to avoid the example of her foster parents as well, as she noted, "I said for years now that foster care taught me what not to do. And I've said that about many foster parents." She returned to the importance of love to posit plainly: "So it wasn't really about loving the child; it was about providing them a home and a shelter and food and water."

**Advocating for self and others.** Moving beyond assigning blame, the participants learned to advocate for themselves and others. Kayla provided the following example of how she began to change her behavior and to communicate her needs effectively:

There came a point where I couldn't be in that facility anymore. I needed to make a choice. Either it was to go to a group home or go to transitional living. They really wanted me to advocate for myself as to where I wanted to go from that facility. Transitional living, I don't remember why I didn't go for that. I really advocated to go to a foster home where I could go do A, B, and C. I ended up in the group home. To make that choice and to advocate for myself, in front of a bunch of adults, some of them I don't know from Adam, to sit there and say "This is what I need." They knew that I wasn't going to go anywhere I didn't want to.

Increasingly, Kayla began to trust her own judgment and the people available to assist in meeting her needs. As a further example of her evolving advocacy, Kayla told the story of how she eventually earned her master's in social work by expressing her needs and accepting support from faculty and staff:

What got me through is my communication. I would e-mail my professors: "This is exactly what's going on. This is where I'm at. This is what I'm working on for this project. This is what I'm lacking for this project. This is when I'll have this project done. Is this okay?" And they were open to working with me. They understood. Even when I had my kids in my undergrad, I had to bring my children to class in order to survive college. My professor would take my baby and take him out while I was taking tests. They were very supportive. I couldn't have done it without the staff at [my university]. With everything going on, I did get my master's.

Ashley made comparable claims about advocating for herself as well as her brothers and sisters:

I was very in control. I wasn't a mute child. I was probably too assertive, incredibly assertive. I know for a fact that there are plenty of case workers out there who would remember me because of my assertiveness. I wasn't rude. I was just very, "You said this. Where is this?" They didn't follow through on something, and I would call incessantly. I think it was also I was the oldest of all my siblings and had such a huge responsibility. I grew up way too fast.

Advocacy on the part of participants began to extend beyond the personal to embrace concerns about other children in foster care. For example, Hannah expressed her special interest in youth who age out of foster care and are forced into homelessness:

I've heard a lot of stories about kids as soon as they turn 18 they get aged out and dumped on the streets. I feel like that shouldn't be a thing. That should not be allowed. Point blank. That's not fair. There's nowhere for those kids to go. They've been in the system for years and then they're dumped on their butts. So they turn to drugs, crime. I feel like I'm tearing up. Help them. Let them see what their options are.

Kayla directly related advocacy to reforming the court system:

They put all this weight in a guardian ad litem. That's the person that needs to give a damn. That is the person the judge relies on. The judges only hear what's told to them. The department is in a lot of trouble every day because they didn't do X, Y, and Z. They rely on the guardian who has never met a child. My guardian met me twice. That's because I went to court twice. He talked to me a couple minutes before then. He mumbled some words to me that I couldn't tell you what he said. We went into the courtroom. He did not do squat.

Other participants had similar stories of appearing in court without knowing their guardians ad litem, with the exception of Wyatt who, when asked about his guardian ad litem, responded innocently: "What's that?" Clearly, Wyatt had no memory of his guardian ad litem, despite having lived with seven different families over the course of six years in foster care. This finding aligned with Kayla asserting, "They don't meet the

kids. They don't go out to the home. They're advocating and making these decisions for these kids. They change foster homes. The guardian ad litem, it's the same.”

Resurgence allowed participants the opportunity to reframe and transform the meaning of their experiences in foster care through advocacy for themselves and others. The participants reclaimed a sense of individual and collective agency after the traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect during placement. In this way, the participants could lay claim to defying the legacy of intergenerational dysfunction wrought by foster care. As Natalie emphasized, “I just think that if we talked to those children, did studies on those children, we would learn so much about the cycle. Because that's what it is. And I think if we can just do more prevention.”

### **Analysis and Synthesis of Findings**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the process youth experience when successfully transitioning to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia. The researcher sought to answer the following question: What theoretical framework explains how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia? Intensive interviews with five young adults who aged out of foster care in West Virginia resulted in the formulation of five theoretical categories as potential conceptual elements of an theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia: (a) reflection, (b) relationship, (c) resilience, (d) responsibility, and (e) resurgence.

Participants provided substantial evidence surrounding the experience of foster care placement, including a variety of actions contributing to a successful transition to adulthood from an overwhelmingly traumatic series of life events during childhood. Data saturation occurred when participants reliably confirmed revelation of multiple

dimensions for each theoretical category contributing to the conceptualization of a coherent emerging grounded theory for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia. For example, the theoretical category of reflection features the properties of reframing experience and embracing self-love. Reframing experience alone would be insufficient to constitute reflection as intended within the tentative theoretical framework without embracing self-love. Similarly, resurgence, as a theoretical category, comprises coming to terms with parents and other relatives in tandem with advocating for self and others. Advocacy is an essential element to the full expression of resurgence within the tentative theoretical framework explaining how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia.

Certain insights arise from further scrutinizing the five theoretical categories derived from actions leading to successfully aging out of foster care. First, the categories are inseparably interdependent within the process of successfully aging out of foster care, as described by the five participants in this study. Accordingly, youth who successfully transition to adulthood from foster care act in ways representing all five categories in combination although not necessarily simultaneously. Second, the first four theoretical categories—reflection, relationship, resilience, and responsibility—are enacted without any prescribed sequence; however, the process of successfully aging out of foster care likely culminates in resurgence as the result of interaction among the other four theoretical categories. A child in foster care could, however, begin to undergo resurgence to some degree without having fully mastered the other four theoretical categories. Finally, as Figure 1 illustrates, the theoretical categories are not weighted, which means no theoretical category plays a more significant role within the theoretical framework.



*Figure 1.* Successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia framework.

### Summary

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the experiences of youth who successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia. The research question guiding exploration was: What theoretical framework explains how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia? In pursuit of answers, the researcher conducted intensive qualitative interviews with five young adults who had aged successfully out of foster care in West Virginia, which meant participants had secured permanent housing and were gainfully employed or enrolled full-time in post-secondary education. Relationship, in particular, served as a marker of success in

securing permanent housing, as all participants lived with romantic partners upon emancipation from foster care. In the same way, responsibility was key to gainful employment. Participants revealed how discipline in terms of good behavior and conscientiousness in caring for children developed capacity for hard work and comity.

Analysis and synthesis of data collected during interviews revealed five theoretical categories as potential elements of a tentative theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia: (a) reflection, (b) relationship, (c) resilience, (d) responsibility, and (e) resurgence. The five theoretical categories are interdependent and of equal significance. The categories do not necessarily follow an established sequence, although resurgence may be a culminating element within the process of successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Introduction**

Youth who age out of foster care face overwhelming challenges when transitioning to adulthood (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). Limited research, however, has focused on positive outcomes for youth who transition to adulthood from foster care placement. This constructivist grounded theory study explored the experiences of youth who successfully aged out of foster care in West Virginia with the intention of designing a theoretical framework to amplify critical understanding of this process for stakeholders, including caregivers, system leaders, and youth in foster care.

Ultimately, a tentative framework comprising five theoretical categories emerged from the analysis of data collected from intensive qualitative interviews with young adults who had successfully transitioned to adulthood from foster care. This theoretical framework informed a proposed solution for equipping youth to transition successfully from foster care to adulthood while adding to the repertoire of system leaders and caregivers for how best to support youth aging out of foster care in West Virginia.

From a Jesuit-informed perspective on social justice, “Saint Ignatius wanted love to be expressed not only in words but also in deeds” (Kolvenbach, 2008, p. 149). Accordingly, the proposed solution presents practical implications for the implementation of a Governor’s Success Academy serving youth in foster care among various stakeholders committed to solving the problem of aging out of foster care in West Virginia. The involvement of youth and young adults who have experienced foster care is essential to the effective implementation of the proposed solution as an outgrowth of the findings in this constructivist grounded theory study. As Charmaz (2017) affirmed,

“Constructivist grounded theory brings people and their perspectives into the foreground” (p. 41). Young adults who experienced foster care not only served as participants sharing lived experience in the study but must be among the beneficiaries of the proposed solution as agents of personal and collective change advocating for self and others.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the process youth experience when successfully transitioning to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia. Successfully transitioning from foster care into adulthood was generally defined as having secured permanent housing and either employment sufficient to be self-supporting financially or full-time enrollment in post-secondary education.

### **Aim of the Study**

This constructivist grounded theory study aimed to generate a theoretical framework to explain how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia. The resulting tentative theoretical framework, grounded in data and other evidence collected from young adults who emerged successfully from the foster care system, comprised five theoretical categories—reflection, relationship, resilience, responsibility, and resurgence—and generally cohered with the research literature pertaining to the experience of youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care. Rebbe, Nurius, Courtney, and Ahrens (2018), for example, concluded that targeted strategies were necessary to offset predictably perilous trajectories related to wellbeing among young adults emerging from foster care. Applying the constructivist grounded theory to a proposed solution carved a potential path to success for youth in transition to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia while promoting social justice for foster children.

### **Proposed Solution**

The Governor's Success Academy—a summer experience for youth in foster care in West Virginia—constitutes a solution in alignment with the findings and research presented in this study. The findings have resulted in the generation of an emerging theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia comprising five theoretical categories: (a) reflection, (b) relationship, (c) resilience, (d) responsibility, and (e) resurgence. Each theoretical category consists of essential properties. Reflection, for example, incorporates dimensions of reframing experience and embracing self-love. This finding indicates youth in foster care have the capacity to shape their futures with purpose through love. Resurgence, identified by coming to terms with parents and other relatives as well as advocating for self and others, is unique among the theoretical categories. While the five theoretical categories are equally weighted, interactive, and non-sequential, successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia often culminates in resurgence. Youth in foster care, however, may experience resurgence and the other four categories any time during the successful transition to adulthood. All five theoretical categories are essential to successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia.

The findings supported foundations set in the existing research literature on aging out of foster care while breaking new ground with a modest contribution to understanding how youth successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia as represented by the framework. As an illustration, the research literature has well established the importance of relationships to the process of aging out of foster care. Collins, Spencer, and Ward (2010), for example, corroborated how youth in foster care rely on formal and informal

social networks to secure housing. The emerging theoretical framework for aging successfully aging out of foster care West Virginia affirmed this phenomenon while adding the dimension of how romantic relationships aid in obtaining housing for young adults successfully aging out foster care in West Virginia. Relationships were also featured in research by Thompson, Greeson and Brunsink (2016) focusing on how youth in foster care benefit from mentoring during the transition to adulthood. Relationships with non-parental adults serve as significant sources of support for youth in foster care confronting the challenges of adulthood (Duke, Farruggia, & Geramo, 2017). The findings in this constructivist grounded theory study, based on the experiences of young adults who had successfully aged out of foster care in West Virginia, revealed the special role social workers played in the lives of youth and young adults during and after placement.

Building upon the foundation set by the research literature, this study uniquely contributes an emerging theoretical framework offering a potential model for understanding how youth successfully age out of foster care in the context of West Virginia, which may be applicable to other states in Appalachia and elsewhere. The theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster in West Virginia suggests specific criteria for assisting youth in foster care during the transition to adulthood based on the five theoretical categories and the properties associated with each category. The emerging theoretical framework informs the conversation among scholars, system leaders, caregivers, and foster youth about how to respond to the crisis in child welfare in West Virginia by focusing on the experiences of young adults who have successfully emerged from placement. The emerging theoretical framework may also guide a course of action offering a potential solution.

The idea of the Governor’s Success Academy as a proposed solution resulted from reflection on the need to connect theory with practice. In essence, the researcher sought to understand how a theoretical framework could best respond to the crisis affecting child welfare in West Virginia in a practical, meaningful way. The proposed solution had to engage system leaders and provide direct services to youth in foster care. The solution likewise had to create connection among diverse system leaders to foster collaboration while cultivating leadership among youth in foster care. Finally, the solution had to be situated in West Virginia. Figure 2 illustrates the connection between system leaders and youth in foster care through the Governor’s Success Academy informed by the framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia.

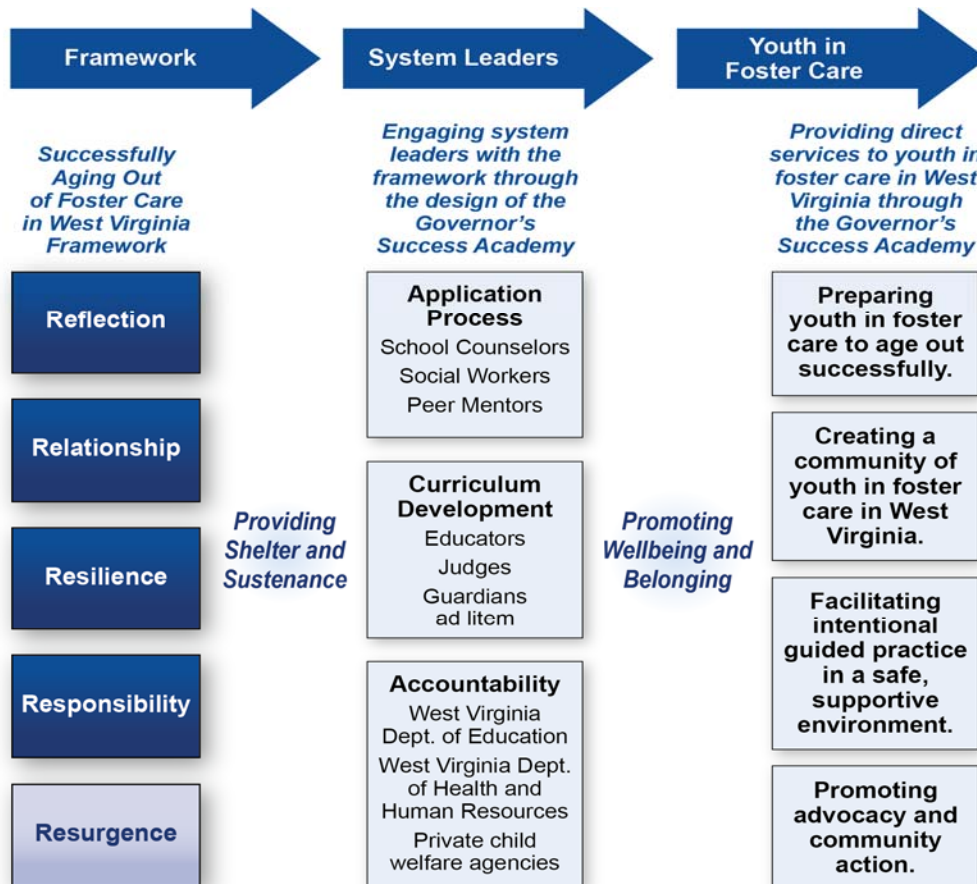


Figure 2. Connecting youth in foster care to the framework through system leaders.

### **The Governor's Success Academy**

As a first step in proposing The Governor's Success Academy as a summer session focused on addressing the articulated needs of youth in grades nine through 11 in the process of preparing to transition to adulthood from foster care, the researcher consulted with the coordinator at the West Virginia Department of Education responsible for the Governor's Schools of West Virginia. The Governor's Schools of West Virginia offer four three-week summer academies for students in middle and high school: (a) the Governor's Honors Academy for juniors, (b) the Governor's School for the Arts for sophomores, (c) the Governor's School for Entrepreneurship for students in grades nine through 11, and (d) the Governor's STEM Institute for students in grades seven and eight. Marshall University hosts the Governor's Honors Academy and the Governor's School for the Arts, while the flagship West Virginia University holds the Governor's School for Entrepreneurship and the Governor's STEM Institute. All four governor's schools are fully funded by the West Virginia legislature and administered by the West Virginia Department of Education at no cost to students or families (State of West Virginia, 2019).

The admissions process for the Governor's Schools of West Virginia is competitive. As the coordinator affirmed, "We seek the best and the brightest" (C. Keffer, personal communication, April 26, 2019). At the same time, the honors academy identified as a primary goal for students: "Giving voice to the voiceless through the lenses of art, media, science, and technology (State of West Virginia, 2019, para. 1). The proposed Governor's Success Academy focused on preparing West Virginians in foster care for adulthood, based on the emerging theoretical framework, would manifest a similar objective as a concurrent session of the Governor's Schools of West Virginia.

**Support for the Solution**

As proposed, the Governor's Success Academy would create the expectation of success for youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care while building capacity for the actions necessary among stakeholders, especially youth in placement, for the realization of improving outcomes for youth who age out of foster care in West Virginia. As revealed in the research literature, youth in foster care inhabit a liminal space when leaving placement in foster care for adulthood at the age of 18 (Lee & Morgan, 2016; Morton, 2017). The findings further substantiated this claim for foster youth in West Virginia. This temporal space requires preparation to counter potential negative outcomes. While the young adults in this study were often autodidacts by necessity with regard to the process of successfully aging out of foster care, youth presently in foster care would likely benefit from learning how to prepare for this major life transition through intentional guided practice in a safe, supportive environment.

The Governor's Success Academy would operationalize authentic opportunities for youth in foster care to explore the five theoretical categories of the framework in depth with appropriate support from adults and peers within what Vygotsky (1997) defined as the "zone of proximal development" (p. 33). The zone of proximal development honors learning in tandem with emotional development as a social project that values assistance in relationship with experienced educators for individual as well as collective achievement (Vygotsky, 1997). This approach to learning also incorporates increasing responsibility with resilience. As Youssef and Luthans (2007) posited in a study on the impact of hope and optimism, "Resilience allows for not only reactive recovery but also proactive learning and growth through conquering challenges" (p. 778).

As indicated by the evidence from interviews, participants repeatedly demonstrated resilience as a reaction to childhood trauma that further enabled their capacity to overcome obstacles over time and to age out of foster care successfully. The Governor's Success Academy, as a source of optimism amidst the crisis threatening the child welfare system in West Virginia, would likewise regularly feature reflection as a path toward understanding and reframing experience as well as catalyzing resurgence among youth in placement preparing for a productive adulthood after foster care.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Solution**

Youth in foster care, as the stakeholders most immediately affected by the problem of aging out of placement in West Virginia, would be the primary focus of the solution enacted by the design and implementation of the Governor's Success Academy. Other stakeholders would, however, be carefully considered within the proposed solution of an academy focused on preparing youth in foster care for the transition to adulthood. The overarching objective would be to establish and sustain individual and collective capacity for the successful transition to adulthood from foster care in West Virginia. Additional goals for the academy include raising awareness of the five theoretical categories of the emerging framework among system leaders and caregivers as a means to appreciate fully the experiences of youth who successfully age out of foster care while contributing to meaningful, positive change in the child welfare system of West Virginia.

**Stakeholder engagement.** Among the system leaders to be engaged in the proposed solution would be representatives of the educational community, including school counselors and psychologists, as well as child welfare advocates such as social workers from public and private agencies. The legal community would likewise



participate in cultivating the proposed solution with insights and assistance provided by circuit court judges and guardians ad litem. Finally, senators and delegates of the West Virginia legislature along with the governor would play critical roles in funding the Governor's Success Academy, as would members of the philanthropic community. Planning for the Governor's Success Academy as well as the dissemination of the theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia requires the cooperation of an interdisciplinary group of system leaders and other stakeholders.

**Policy and practice.** The Governor's Success Academy reframes the purpose of foster care during adolescence from providing shelter and sustenance to promoting wellbeing and belonging, which challenges the status quo toward social justice among youth for whom permanency through adoption or reunification was unattainable. The Governor's Schools of West Virginia respond to a perceived need among citizens to provide extension and enrichment for youth who are academically successful and possess leadership potential. Experiences afforded youth during the three weeks away from home on university campuses forecast continuing accomplishment into adulthood: "The Governor's Schools provide opportunity to prepare for the future" (State of West Virginia, 2019, para. 1). No such prestigious program currently provides similar high-quality learning opportunities with a future orientation for youth in foster care preparing to transition to adulthood in West Virginia. Yet youth in placement appear most in need of intentionally designed programming in preparation for adulthood that moves beyond rudimentary survival skills to embrace an equitable expectation of future achievement. While extending access, creation of the Governor's Success Academy represents a considerable shift in policy and practice within systems, including child welfare and

public education, most responsible for youth in foster care in West Virginia who are transitioning to adulthood. Policy and practice must reflect human dignity with all youth having equal worth in the eyes of policymakers and practitioners in West Virginia.

**Potential barriers.** Raising the profile of voiceless, relegated youth in foster care will no doubt be met with opposition, especially among citizens vying for resources in a climate of scarcity within the public sector. This stance may be reinforced by negative perceptions of youth in foster care as deeply damaged based on prejudice (Rymph, 2017). The proposed solution must be communicated as a means to increasing opportunity for all children and families in West Virginia by addressing specific unmet needs of youth in foster care who are transitioning to adulthood. The Governor's Success Academy provides a pathway for youth emerging from placement as adults to avoid the adverse consequences of traumatic experiences in foster care, which benefits society as a whole.

**Financial issues.** The Governor's Success Academy would initially be implemented on a pilot basis operating with a modest budget of \$125,000.00 for the first three-week session involving a projected participation of 25 West Virginia youth in foster care. The Governor's Schools of West Virginia are funded by a legislative appropriation administered by the West Virginia Department of Education. The Governor's Success Academy could be funded through a public-private partnership depending on available reserves and financial forecasts. The Governor's Success Academy would be established by executive order of the governor to permit public funding for the project to proceed with the imprimatur of the West Virginia executive. This deliberate approach toward funding the Governor's Success Academy allows time to build consensus within the legislative branch for sustained financial support as part of the overall spending package

for public education. Planning and preparation for the pilot would be completed at no cost on a voluntary basis by the researcher and members of a task force with affiliated working groups representing system leaders and other stakeholders. All monies would support actual implementation through direct services to youth in foster care participating in the Governor's Success Academy. Table 3 presents a preliminary budget for the proposed Governor's Success Academy pilot.

Table 3

*Preliminary Budget for the Proposed Governor's Success Academy Pilot*

Item	Projected Expense	Total
<b>Room and Board</b>		
Lodging (25 @ \$100 x 21 days)	\$52,500.00	
Catering (35 @ \$50 x 21 days)	\$36,750.00	
	Subtotal:	\$89,250.00
<b>Stipends</b>		
Mentors (5 @ \$100 x 21 days)	\$10,500.00	
Facilitators (5 @ \$125 x 21 days)	\$13,125.00	
	Subtotal:	\$23,625.00
<b>Transportation</b>		
To and from campus	\$2,500.00	
Excursions	\$2,500.00	
	Subtotal:	\$5,000.00
<b>Miscellaneous</b>		
Rentals		\$5,000.00
Supplies		\$1,500.00
Incidentals		\$125.00
Insurance		\$500.00
Grand Total for Proposed Budget:		\$125,000.00

**Implementation of the Proposed Solution**

Implementation of the Governor's Success Academy will require the collective effort of multiple stakeholders in a coordinated sequence of activities. The researcher will collaborate with system leaders to organize a task force to navigate implementation

of the academy. The task force will be divided into working groups to accomplish three essential tasks for the successful implementation of the Governor's Success Academy:

(a) the application process, (b) curriculum development, and (c) accountability.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution**

Stakeholders will be invited to participate in the task force and specific working groups based on expertise and experience related to each of the three essential tasks.

Further, participation in the task force and working groups will serve the dual purpose of enacting the necessary action steps to implement the Governor's Success Academy and diffusing understanding of the experiences of youth who successfully age out of foster care in West Virginia through the lens of the five theoretical categories of the framework.

**Application process.** A working group of school counselors and social workers will share responsibility for developing and executing an application process to identify and enroll participants for the Governor's Success Academy from a pool of youth in grades nine through 11 who are experiencing foster care in West Virginia. School counselors and social workers in the working group will establish criteria for a participant profile based on an applicant's potential to benefit from the academy as a conduit to build capacity for future success in adulthood after foster care. The working group will rely on recognized networks within schools and child welfare agencies to distribute the application and criteria for admission as well as information about the Governor's Success Academy and the five theoretical categories of the framework. The working group will coordinate identification and selection of successful candidates to participate in the Governor's Success Academy subject to approval of the full membership of the task force. The working group will communicate with school- and child welfare agency-

based stakeholders, including foster families, about acceptance and onboarding to the Governor's Success Academy in consultation with officials at the West Virginia Department of Education and the university hosting the pilot academy on campus.

*University campus host.* Shepherd University will be invited to host the inaugural Governor's Success Academy. The university is ideally situated to offer geographic distribution among the three campuses hosting the Governor's Schools of West Virginia. Marshall University is located at the western border of West Virginia with Kentucky, while West Virginia University is centrally located in Morgantown along the northern border with Pennsylvania. Shepherd University borders Maryland along the eastern edge of the state. In addition, the Shepherd University campus in Shepherdstown is an hour's drive from Washington, D. C., and Baltimore, which offers opportunities for field trips. The researcher has also served as adjunct faculty for Shepherd University and coordinated projects related to public education with the university and school district.

*Peer mentoring.* The working group of school counselors and social workers will extend the application process to include coordinating with the university in recruiting and employing five peer mentors among students currently enrolled in higher education who had been placed in foster care during childhood. Students majoring in either social work or school counseling may serve as peer mentors if an insufficient number of young adults who experienced foster care are available for the role. Peer mentors will be responsible for accompanying participants throughout the academy, including overnight on campus as well as field trips. The working group will devise a position description with selection criteria for peer mentors based on the emerging theoretical framework. The leadership role of peer mentors will optimally extend opportunities for these young

adults who experienced placement in foster care to develop further capacity for continued success in adulthood after college through positive interactions and exposure to precepts of the emerging theoretical framework.

***Social and emotional learning.*** The working group of school counselors and social workers will coordinate contracting a clinical social worker and school counselor to facilitate one-on-one and group activities associated with the theoretical categories of reflection, relationship, and resilience during the Governor's Success Academy. The clinical social worker and school counselor will share responsibility for social and emotional learning as well as resolving any disciplinary issues through restorative justice. The clinical social worker and school counselor will develop a common code of conduct for everyone engaged with the academy, including children and adults, to help ensure a safe and supportive environment in all venues for the duration of the three-week session.

**Curriculum development.** A working group of educators and legal professionals, including circuit court judges and guardians ad litem, will share responsibility for designing a learner-centered curriculum for the Governor's Success Academy in consultation with school counselors and social workers. Essential understandings include preparing for the successful transition to adulthood from foster care with particular emphasis on advocating for self and others. Evidence of learning will comprise creating an individual plan for successfully aging out of foster care as well as designing and carrying out a service learning project related to advocacy in action. All learning activities will be experiential and engaging to reflect high expectations for success during and after the Governor's Success Academy. Judges and guardians ad litem will focus on designing activities associated with advocacy, while educators will

design activities to engage participants in creating actionable individual plans for success in adulthood after foster care in consultation with social workers and school counselors.

***Facilitators of learning.*** The working group responsible for curriculum development will likewise create a position description with selection criteria for a facilitator of learning. Representatives of the working group will conduct interviews to select candidates for three facilitator positions subject to approval of the task force. The three facilitators will serve together with the clinical social worker and school counselor as instructors for the Governor's Success Academy. The facilitators of learning will also share primary responsibility for developing the schedule of activities for the Governor's Success Academy in consultation with the clinical social worker and school counselor. Judges and guardians ad litem may also choose to serve as voluntary instructors.

***Advocates.*** All participants will be assigned a designated facilitator of learning and either a clinical social worker or a school counselor as advocates during the academy and for follow up after leaving campus. The goal of these assignments is forging sustained meaningful relationships with caring adults. The assigned advocates will also assist participants with completion of their service learning projects in local communities.

***Accountability.*** The working group charged with the accountability function for the Governor's Success Academy will include stakeholders representing system leaders affiliated with the West Virginia Department of Education, Shepherd University, the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, and private child welfare agencies. The working group will establish criteria for the governance of the task force as well as administration of the Governor's Success Academy to ensure fiscal and programmatic responsibility as well as a substantial return on investment in public trust.

*Communicating.* A key responsibility of the accountability working group will be communicating with all stakeholders regarding the monitoring of all phases of the design, implementation, and evaluation of the Governor's Success Academy. The working group will prepare monthly progress reports for the West Virginia Department of Education as well as a final summative report on the Governor's Success Academy for broad distribution to system leaders, including state legislators and the governor.

### **Timeline for Implementation, Assessment, and Evaluation**

The timeline for implementation of the proposed Governor's Success Academy pilot spans 12 months. The planning phase would be initiated upon publication after a successful defense of this dissertation in practice. The first Governor's Success Academy at Shepherd University would take place during July 2020 to coincide with other academies of the Governor's Schools of West Virginia. The researcher would coordinate outreach for possible funding as soon as possible to allow ample time for the financial approval process with public and private funders. Planning and preparation could be coordinated as part of the introduction of a new department focused on social and emotional learning at the school district where the researcher serves as a member of the leadership team. The chair of the education committee of the West Virginia Senate represents the legislative district that includes Shepherd University and the community where the researcher lives and works providing for regular formal and informal contacts.

**Assessment and evaluation.** Participants would complete a brief survey developed by the researcher to assess their level of experience with each of the five theoretical categories as a pre-assessment of their readiness for the successful transition to adulthood from foster care. Upon completing the Governor's Success Academy,



participants would answer a similar survey as a post-assessment for comparison. The results of pre- and post- assessment surveys along with assessments of the individual plans for success and service learning projects would be included in the data collection along with data from other stakeholders, including members of the task force as well as mentors and facilitators, to evaluate the overall effect of the academy. The ultimate determination of whether the Governor's Success Academy benefited participants would be evaluated based on an increase in the number of youth in foster care who successfully aged out of foster care in West Virginia. This decidedly important determination requires a long-term commitment to participants upon conclusion of the academy in order to collect data after emancipation from foster care. Accordingly, evaluation of the proposed solution would incorporate short- and long-term assessments. The summative report of the Governor's Success Academy prepared by the accountability working group should be completed for distribution by January 1, 2021.

**Scholarly article.** The researcher commits to writing an article for publication in a scholarly journal reporting on the implementation of the Governor's Success Academy based on the five theoretical categories of the framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia. The article would build understanding among system leaders and other stakeholders of the experiences of youth who successfully transition to adulthood from foster care through the findings and application of the proposed solution.

**Presentations.** Further reporting on the implementation of the Governor's Success Academy could be incorporated into presentations by the researcher at national conferences sponsored by the Child Welfare League of America, the National Center for School Mental Health, and the National CASA/GAL Association for court appointed

special advocates and guardians ad litem. Members of the AASA association for school superintendents and the West Virginia Association of School Administrators may also be interested in learning about the Governor's Success Academy and the five theoretical categories of the emerging framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia. The National Association of Social Workers and the association's West Virginia Chapter may be receptive to a proposal from the researcher to present at their conferences as well.

### **Implications**

This constructivist grounded theory study of successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia presents implications across three domains: (a) professional practice in education and child welfare; (b) social research; and (c) leadership theory and practice.

### **Practical Implications**

The ebb and flow among the theoretical categories of the emerging framework—reflection, relationship, resilience, responsibility, and resurgence—generated by the study of the lived experience of youth who successfully aged out of foster care in West Virginia is somewhat counterintuitive in terms of practical application given the current emphasis on shelter and sustenance in child welfare. Employing the tentative theoretical framework as a guide, system leaders in child welfare and public education may benefit from reorienting their efforts to emphasize the human condition of youth in foster care as agents capable of deliberate intention and active participation in preparing for productive, self-directed adulthood after exiting placement. System leaders, according to findings from the intensive interviews, could better focus on supporting youth in foster care in identifying personal reasons for being in the world in order to experience better lives as

adults as opposed to mere survival skills. Advocacy for self and others among youth in foster care is essential to the successful transition to adulthood from foster care.

Giving voice to youth in foster in decisions affecting their present and future lives is critical (Forenza, 2018). Leaders of schools and child welfare agencies might question how the services provided incorporate opportunities for conversation led by cultural humility, given educators and social workers represent caring professions. As Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, and Ousman (2015) explained, “Cultural humility is a process of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique after willingly interacting with diverse individuals. The results of achieving cultural humility are mutual empowerment, respect, partnerships, optimal care, and lifelong learning” (p. 213). In essence, youth in foster care may know best how to contribute to their success. Youth in foster care who age out of placement not only have capacity to be beneficiaries of acts of social justice but also the power to enact social justice for themselves and other marginalized persons. From the perspective of the Jesuit charisms, youth in foster care have the potential to become men and women for and with others while exercising *cura personalis* through self-care and the compassionate caring for others as whole persons.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research might build upon the findings from this constructivist grounded theory study of successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia by exploring whether the findings apply to youth in foster care in other contexts. For example, the population for this study was limited to youth in foster care within the mainly rural Appalachian geographical context of West Virginia. Future researchers may investigate

how youth in foster care living in urban areas best transition to adulthood. In addition, given the importance of relationship to the process of successfully aging out of foster care, a study focusing on relationships among youth in foster care with caregivers, social workers, or other members of their social networks might amplify understanding of the experience through a sociological lens that the findings framed more psychologically. Similarly, a study could explore the role gender plays in the experience of transitioning successfully to adulthood from foster care, as only one male participated in this study.

Moreover, future researchers could examine how youth in foster care representing other ethnicities experience the transition to adulthood based on the five theoretical categories of the framework, as all participants in this study described themselves as Caucasian. Further, given the emphasis of this study on the experiences of youth in foster care, future research might consider how the emerging theoretical framework could apply to other marginalized populations such as immigrants or children and families experiencing homelessness. Future research related to application of the emerging theoretical framework might also explore the experiences of individuals in recovery from other adverse childhood experiences.

Finally, a future researcher could conceivably create an instrument with a scale based on the five theoretical categories to assess the readiness of youth for successful transition to adulthood from foster care. Development of such an assessment would, however, first require additional research to validate further the theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster care toward the creation of a valid, reliable instrument.

### **Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

The findings of this constructivist grounded theory study of the experiences of youth successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia may inform leadership theory and practice from the perspectives of Jesuit-informed leadership inspired by Saint Ignatius Loyola and servant leadership as promulgated by Robert K. Greenleaf. Jesuit-inspired leadership is rooted in the notion that, “We are *all* leaders and that our whole lives are filled with leadership opportunities” (Lowney, 2003, p. 5). Christ likewise exemplified the leadership of children: “And a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6, Revised Standard Version). The findings indicated that the youth in foster care who had successfully aged out of foster care were indeed leaders capable of reshaping their own destinies through thoughtful love-centered action. Greenleaf (2002) would have likely recognized youth who successfully age out of foster care as servant leaders, especially through their resurgence: “Among the legions of deprived and unsophisticated people are many true servants who will lead” (p. 28). System leaders may best serve the needs of youth in foster care who age out by honoring the reciprocal nature of servant leadership.

### **Summary of the Study**

Youth who age out of foster care confront considerable challenges (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). The research literature focuses overwhelmingly on negative outcomes derived from the experience of aging out of placement in foster care. This constructivist grounded theory study sought to contribute a theoretical framework explaining the process for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia. Findings based on a constant comparative analysis of data collected from intensive

qualitative interviews coalesced into five theoretical categories: (a) reflection, (b) relationship, (c) resilience, (d) responsibility, and (e) resurgence.

A proposed solution, based on the emerging theoretical framework, comprised the design and implementation of a Governor's Success Academy to provide youth in foster care in grades nine through 11 a three-week summer experience focused on preparation to age successfully out of foster care. The plan anticipated organizing a task force with working groups sharing responsibility for three essential tasks involved in planning and implementation of the Governor's Success Academy: (a) the application process, (b) curriculum development, and (c) accountability. The Governor's Success Academy would serve the dual purpose of meeting the needs of youth in foster care preparing for the transition to adulthood from placement while promoting awareness of the theoretical framework for successfully aging out of foster care in West Virginia among stakeholders, including system leaders, concerned with education, child welfare, and other fields.

A timeline for implementation, assessment, and evaluation of the Governor's Success Academy also included preparation of a scholarly article for publication and presentations based on findings and application. Assessment and evaluation of the effect of the academy would be supported by data collected from pre- and post-assessments as well as artifacts connected with individual plans for success and service learning projects. The first Governor's Success Academy for youth in foster care is expected to take place at Shepherd University in July 2020 as part of the Governor's Schools of West Virginia.

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## Appendix A

**IRB Approval Letter****Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza • Omaha, Nebraska 68178  
 phone: 402.280.2126 • fax: 402.280.4766 • email:  
 irb@creighton.edu

DATE: October 17, 2018

TO: Lee Ebersole  
 FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [1335435-1] Successfully Aging Out of Foster Care: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: October 17, 2018

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Application Form - 202 Application for Determination of Exempt Status Observation, Survey, Interview.doc (UPDATED: 10/15/2018)
- Creighton - IRB Application Form - Creighton - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 10/11/2018)
- Letter - Participant Information Letter.docx (UPDATED: 10/15/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Interview Questions.docx (UPDATED: 10/11/2018)
- Study Plan - Study Design.docx (UPDATED: 10/15/2018)

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact Kathleen Stibbs at (402) 280-2126 or [kathleenstibbs@creighton.edu](mailto:kathleenstibbs@creighton.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral's records.

## Appendix B

**Interview Questions**

1. What have been your life experiences as an adult since leaving foster care?
2. How did people help you prepare to succeed as an adult?
3. What experiences as a foster child prepared you to succeed as an adult?
4. How did you overcome challenges as a foster child to succeed as an adult?
5. How would you help a foster child prepare for adulthood?
6. If you were to advise the system on how to improve the transition to adulthood for foster children, what would you recommend?

## Appendix C

**Participant Demographic Data Questionnaire**

N.B. Participants may decline to respond to any category.

1. Participant Number	
2. Gender	
3. Age	
4. Race	
5. Educational Level	
6. Employment	
7. Marital Status	

## Appendix D

**Participant Information Letter**

Dear Participant,

Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in a research study exploring how youth successfully age out of foster care. The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study is to develop a theoretical framework to explain how foster youth transition to adulthood in West Virginia. Your participation is completely voluntary.

The interview will last approximately one hour. I will begin by asking you to complete a brief demographic questionnaire with information about your gender, age, race, educational level, employment, and marital status. With your permission, I will then record our interview for transcription. I will ask you a series of open-ended questions inviting you to share your experiences in foster care with a special focus on how you successfully transitioned to adulthood.

While there are no immediate benefits, such as compensation of any kind, for participating in the study, I am deeply grateful for your participation. The study has the possibility to help foster children and their allies better understand how to prepare youth in foster care for adulthood. Please remember that your participation in the interview is completely voluntary, and you may ask to end the interview at any time.

I respect your privacy and promise to keep all records in a secure place. I will actually destroy the records once my dissertation has been published. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in the study other than those encountered in daily life.

I would be happy to answer any questions you have about the study at any time. If you would like to know more about your rights as a participant in a research study, please contact the Creighton University Institutional Review Board at [IRB@creighton.edu](mailto:IRB@creighton.edu) or by phone at 402-280-2126.

I look forward to hearing your story. I have much to learn from you.

Kind regards,

Lee Ebersole  
Creighton University Doctoral Student

Attachment

/lee

### **Bill of Rights for Research Participants**

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research participant.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
  - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
  - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.