

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

**THE WAY TO WELL-BEING:
A YOUTH-DRIVEN FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD WELFARE**

Bridget Colacchio, PhD, LCSW

ICQI Conference

May 29, 2024



Gratitude and Acknowledgements

- Native dwellers of this land and enslaved people who built our country
- Loyola University Chicago's School of Social Work
- My family, teachers, mentors, classmates, students, clients, mentees, and inspirations in child welfare
- This study's brilliant co-researchers and participants

Significance & Literature Review

- Well-being is fundamental to human existence
 - Critical to human development
 - Foundational within child welfare system (along with safety and permanence)
 - The concept is not clearly defined in child welfare
- When youth leave foster care, they really struggle (in US, racism and individualism exacerbate this)
- Others have suggested ways to understand, define and measure well-being, however those studies are largely:
 - Outside US
 - Not in child welfare and/or
 - Don't center youth involvement in the process

Research Question

How do youth in US foster care understand, describe, and make meaning of their lived experience of well-being?

--> Participatory action, arts-based, phenomenological study

Co-Researchers

5 Young Adult co-Researchers (YARs)

- Current or former foster youth
- 3:2 (male: female)
- 4:1 (African-American: Latina)
- 21-24 years old
- 5 planning meetings
- Insights and suggestions informed all parts of design

Participant Sample

15 total individuals who grew up in foster care around the US

Gender Identity

Male (8)

Female (7)

Age

18-32 years old

Total Placements

1-20+ total placements

Racial Identity

African-American (9)

Latina/o (2)

White (3)

White/Latina (1)

Status in system

Emancipated (8)

Youth in care (3)

Returned home (2)

Adopted (2)

Data Collection & Analysis

1. Collection method: Open-ended Interviews via Zoom with art sharing

2. Data sources:

- Interview transcripts
- Creative artifacts
- Member-checking feedback

3. Analysis

- Adaptation of Groenewald's phenomenological analysis
- Extensive member-checking

A1	B	C	D	E	F	G
46 9. Giving back to others	empowerment	actions toward WB	future investment			
47 iv. Providing opportunities for future - Well-being WB	future investment	relational	effort (not transactional)	deserving/worthy		
48 m. Hope - Well-being WB	future investment	at ease	emotional	deserving/worthy		
49 16. Seeking healing	future investment	mental health	self-focus	self-sufficiency		
50 e. Mental health distress - Effect of foster experience	impact	mental health	emotional			
51 f. Scared - Effect of foster experience	impact	emotional	unsafe			
52 e. Disconnect from culture - Opposite of WB	loss	circumstance	connection (lack of)	effort (lack of)		
53 h. Grow up too fast - Opposite of WB	loss	unfair	self-sufficiency (lack of)	forced situation		
54 c. Loss - Effect of foster experience	loss	connection (lack of)				
55 c. Criminalized - Opposite of WB	misunderstood	being done to	positive regard (lack of)	unseen/unheard		
56 iv. Providing information - Well-being WB	needs met	(not) being done to	effort (not transactional)			
57 iii. Got materials need met - Well-being WB	needs met	at ease	effort (not transactional)			
58 resources	needs met					
59 a. Not getting needs met by system	needs not met	unsafe	effort (lack of)			
60 b. Not enough information - Systems working against me	needs not met	unsafe				
61 a. Bare minimum - Foster family	not enough	material needs	effort (lack of)			
62 n. Needs not being met - Opposite of WB	not enough	needs not met	effort (lack of)			
63 o. Neglect - lack of material items - Opposite of WB	not enough	needs not met	effort (lack of)			
64 f. Feeling unsafe - Opposite of WB	not safe	emotional	needs not met			
65 vi. Wanting the best for me - Well-being WB	relational	future investment	effort (not transactional)	positive regard	deserving/worthy	
66 j. Encouragement - Well-being WB	relational	care/love	(not) being done to			
67 h. Social life, hard to make friends - Effect of foster experience	relational	barrier	alone	connection (lack of)		
68 a. Able to trust - Well-being WB	relational	connection	at ease	(not) being done to	security	
69 a. Abandonment - Opposite of WB	relational	loss	being done to	alone		
70 k. Treated different than other kids - Foster family	relational	transactional	belonging (lack of)	care/love (lack of)	effort (lack of)	unworthy

*Systematic, color-coded phenomenological sorting of units of meaning

Findings

- Youth know what well-being is, whether they have experienced it or not
- Beyond a definition of well-being: There is a *process* to move from trauma – through relationships – to well-being, yet there are many detours away from it. That process is:

"The Way to Well-being"

The Way to Well-being Framework

Trauma Context

Abuse, neglect, youth are placed in foster care.

Then, adult activities and behaviors lead to this:

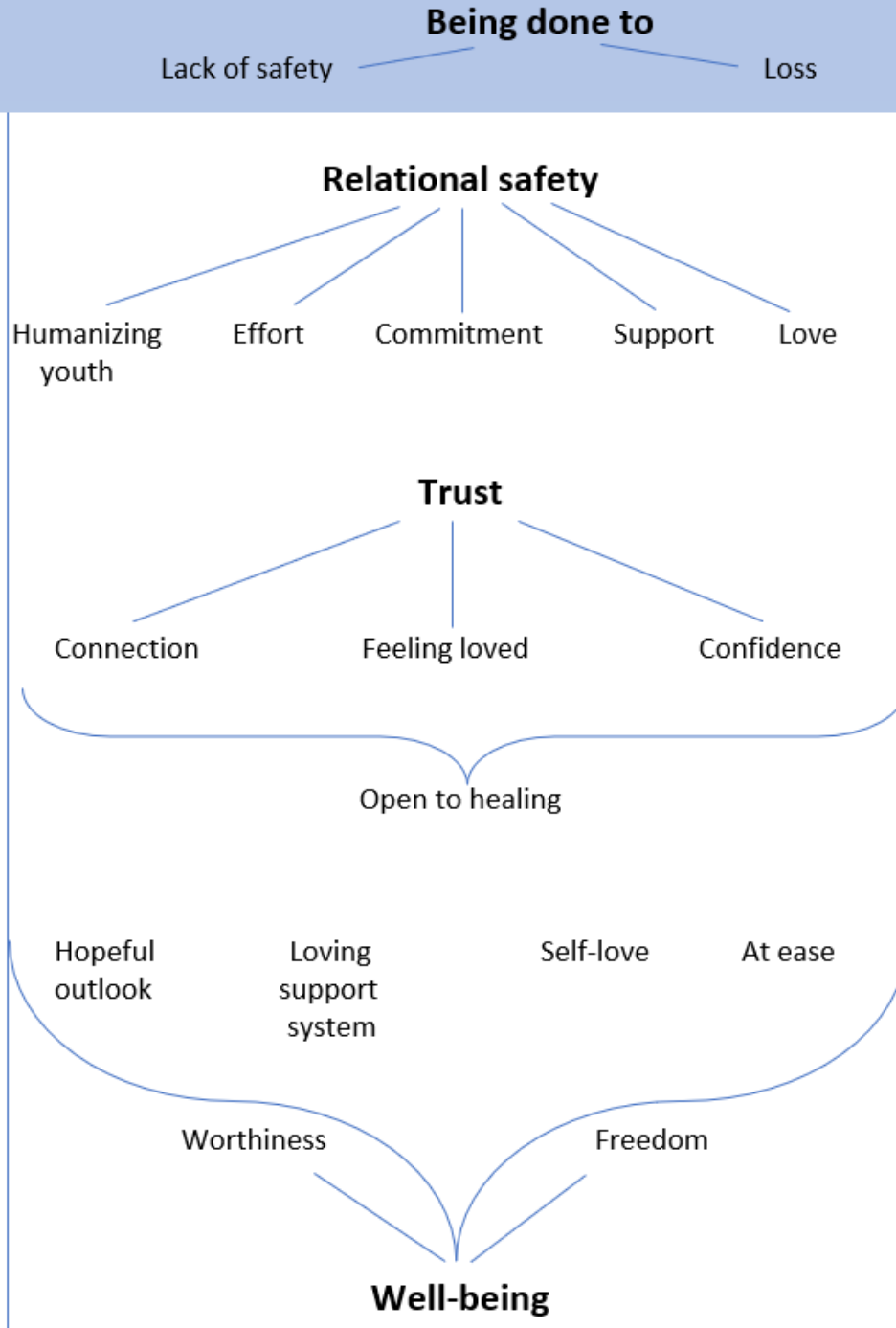
Which results in the youth developing these internal responses:

Until this key is achieved:

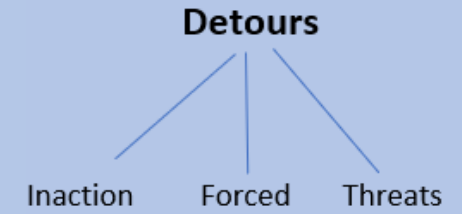
Which allows for:

Which amount to an internalized sense of:

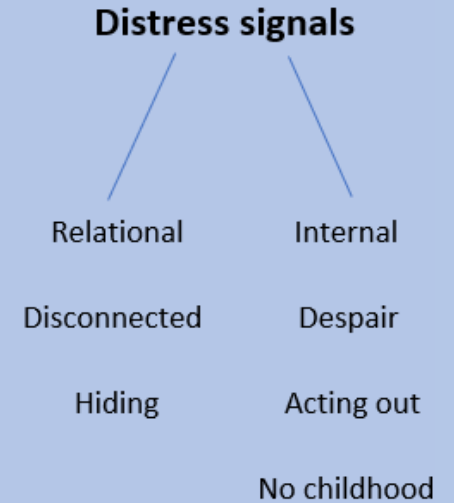
The prime characterizations of:



Or this:



Or these:



Surviving

The Way to Well-being Framework (*abbr.*)

Youth come from a

Trauma Context

then enter foster care.

What adults do creates:

Relational Safety

or

Detours

Then, youth feel:

Trust

or

Distress

Resulting in:

Well-being

or

Surviving

Trauma Context

"It represents the feeling about being swallowed alive. It's really hard to be in an abusive home and think that this stuff is normal....we thought getting hurt, abused, was normal." - Marie



The Way to Well-being Framework (*abbr.*)

Youth come from a
Trauma Context
then enter foster care.

What adults do creates:

Relational Safety

or

Detours

Then, youth feel:

Trust

or

Distress

Resulting in:

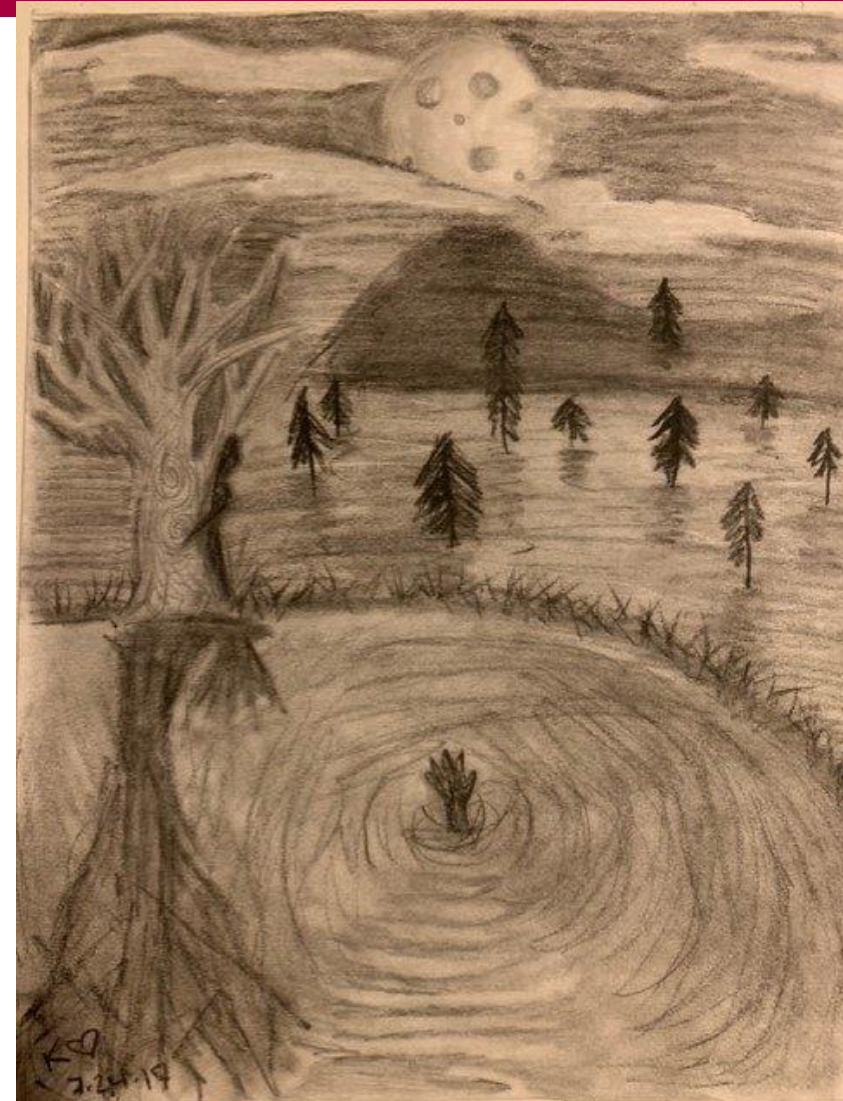
Well-being

or

Surviving

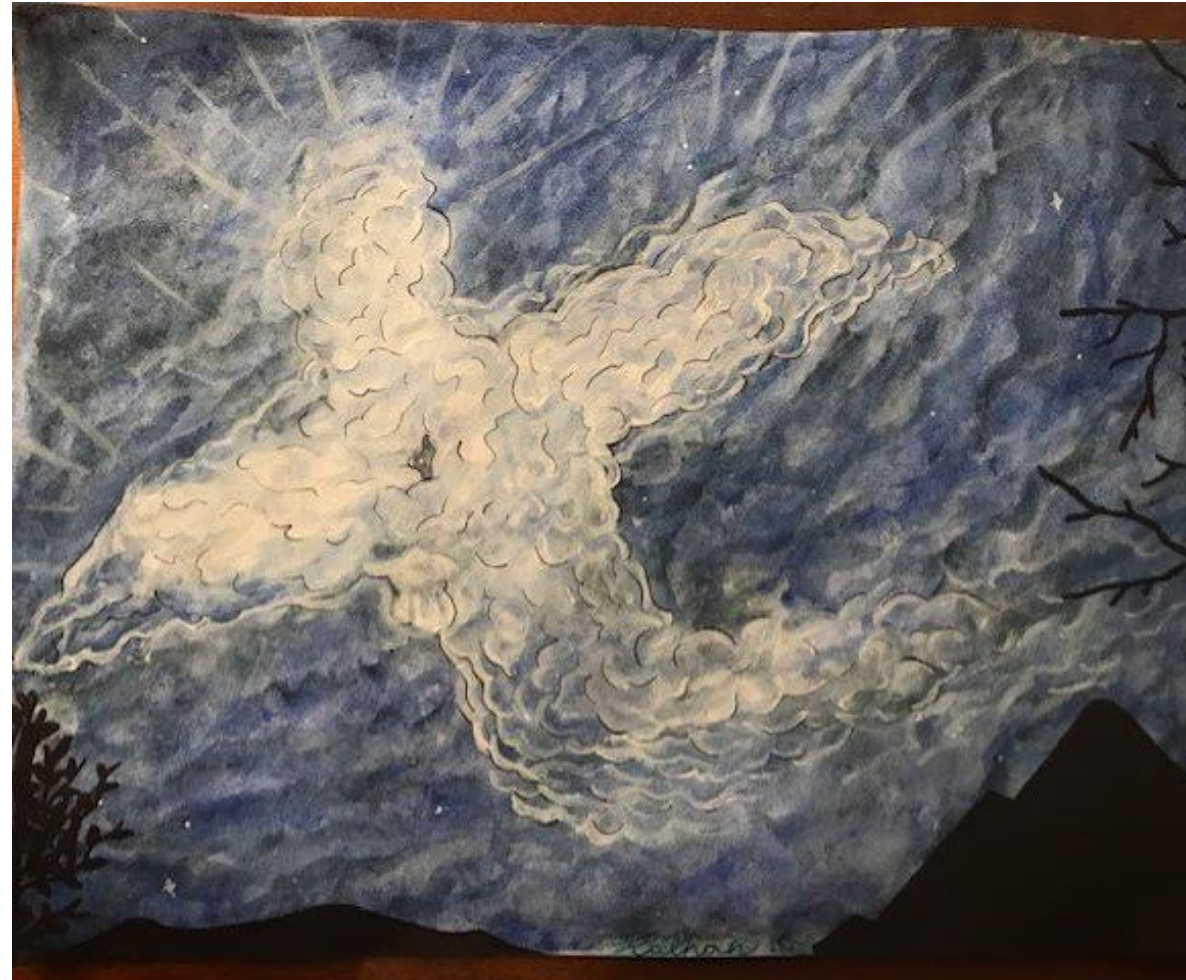
(Lack of) Relational Safety

"[Foster kids are] not really getting emotionally embraced, I feel like. They [are] humans. With emotions. Like, they still a human. You still a human at the end of the day." - Turbo



Relational Safety

"You can't have well-being if you're in a position where you don't even have any healthy bonds with the people that you live with...If you're in a position where you don't like who you live with, you don't want to be in that foster home, you can't have any type of well-being I would say." - William



Detours

"[When we were being abused,] DCFS never stood up. They never did anything. That group home people never did anything... It was like, "Nobody wants you guys, so where are you going to go? This is your only option.'" - Jaimie

I ain't have a choice to do nothing...Like, I had shackles on my hands, on my wrists and I was just going along with the flow...I have to go with the flow because what the fuck else do I have? They took me away from my family" - Turbo

"Because it was foster care, I felt like I was really disposable. -Marie

The Way to Well-being Framework (*abbr.*)

Youth come from a
Trauma Context
then enter foster care.

What adults do creates:

Relational Safety

or

Detours

Then, youth feel:

Trust

or

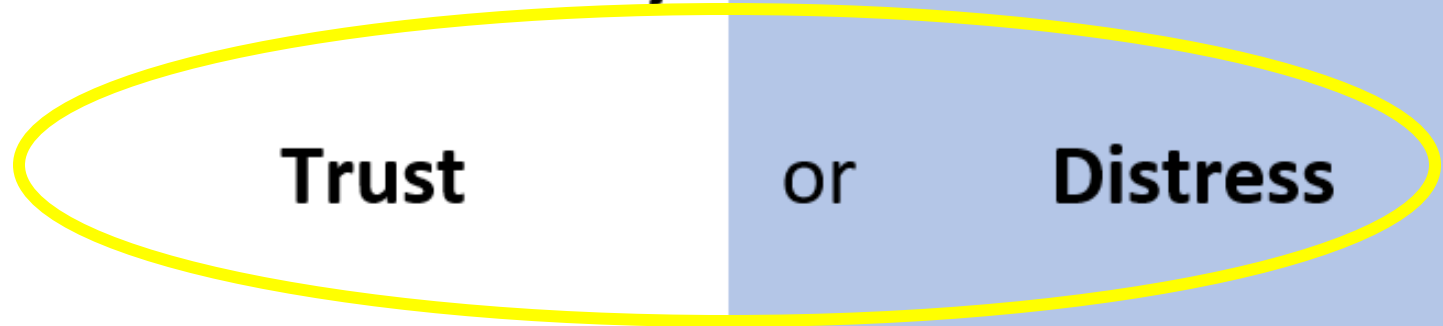
Distress

Resulting in:

Well-being

or

Surviving



(Lack of) Youth Trust

"[Some foster parents act like it's so easy to just give a kid a bed and food and send him to school.] "But it's just a different type of fucking abuse. You not getting beaten no more, but your emotions getting beat the fuck up because you not getting a family love...

Sometimes [new caregivers] seemed ok at first. But you don't know. What the fuck, that could be a façade! That could be a motha'fuckin' costume right there. They could just be givin' me anything. That's distrust. My trust be messed up. You're moving me away from my family and putting me [with strangers] and expecting a kid to trust?..." -Turbo

Youth Trust

"If I ever feel bummed and I feel like I don't have anybody in my life, I just go to the wall and look at it, and like all these people here on this wall, love you and care about you...*(Pointing)* That's my friend who took me in to her family. We have a very loving relationship. We're always there for each other, whether it's just like a happy day or a sad day." -Erika



Distress Signals

"Overall the worst parts of being in foster care were the times where I felt like I couldn't be myself. It's very draining when you have to constantly sit there and figure out, 'Well, how would someone that would actually fit in here act?'" -William

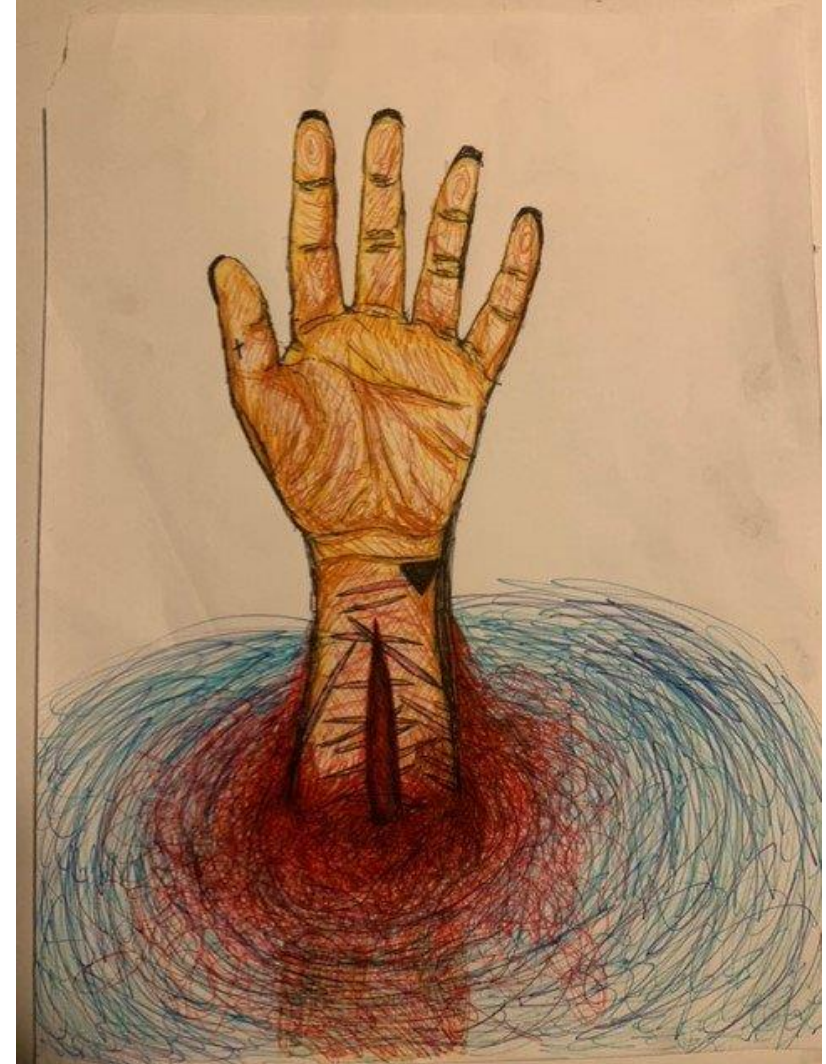
"It's the idea of someone washing away your colors...it was just becoming someone I wasn't, to fit someone else's image. So, I would just be trying to be someone that could fit the placement where they wanted me to be." -Marie



Distress Signals

"I mean, most of my life, I felt hopeless. There was just no hope in the world, like the most defeated. I would just pray as a child to just, like, not wake up in the morning. Like, God, just please, do not [wake me up], I can't deal with this. Like, it was just so awful...it was just the most hopeless feeling. There's just no joy in the world. There's no happiness, there's no nothing. There's just like misery." -Jaimie

"I didn't even get to have a childhood...It just made me grow up faster than I should." -Quincy



The Way to Well-being Framework

Trauma Context

Abuse, neglect, youth are placed in foster care.

Then, adult activities and behaviors lead to this:

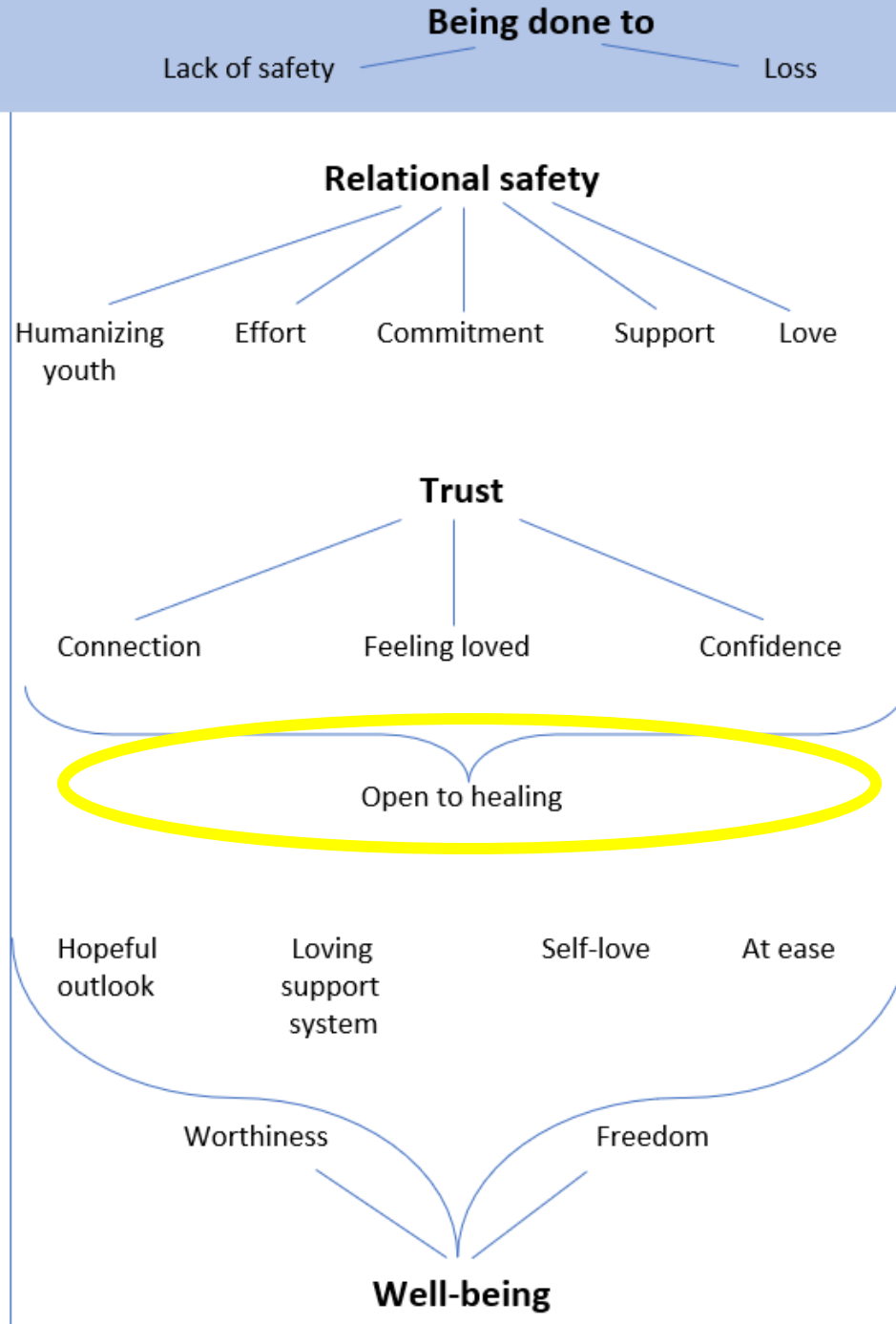
Which results in the youth developing these internal responses:

Until this key is achieved:

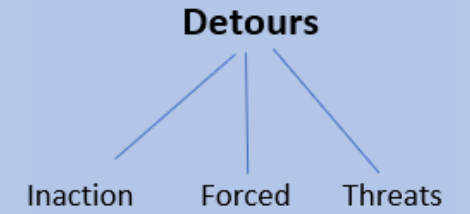
Which allows for:

Which amount to an internalized sense of:

The prime characterizations of:



Or this:



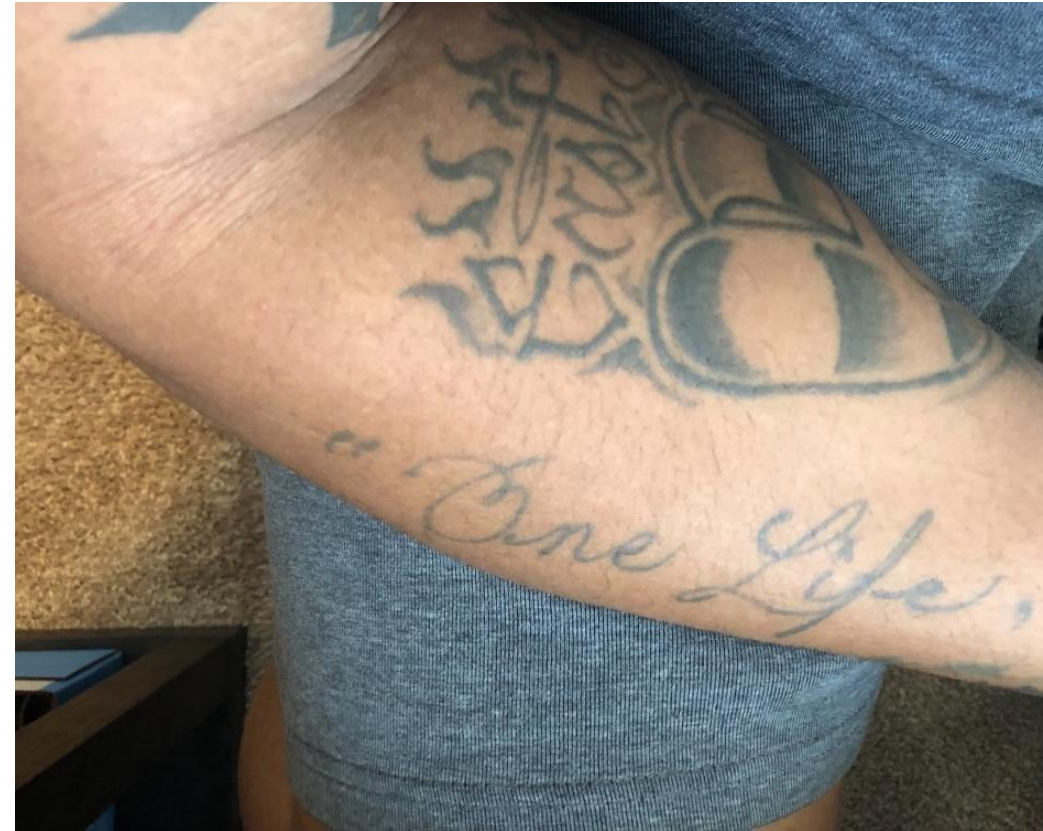
Or these:



Youth Trust: Open to healing

“I want to battle the triggers and I want to be okay with them and just be okay with just sitting in trauma...Not reliving it to a point where I'm in pain, but where I'm healing from it.” –Erika

“My One Life tattoo represents a time in my life when I really felt low and needed to look deep within... After a near death experience, I noticed God spared my life. I understood this to be a time in which I had one time to make a change in my life... and one life to make a change in the world around me.” – Dark Knight



The Way to Well-being Framework (*abbr.*)

Youth come from a
Trauma Context
then enter foster care.

What adults do creates:

Relational Safety

or

Detours

Then, youth feel:

Trust

or

Distress

Resulting in:

Well-being

or

Surviving

Well-being

Hopeful outlook, Loving support system

"A lot of the pictures I take remind me that there's always something to look forward to. You can always look forward to that next plane coming in to land. You can always look forward to catching that next flash of lightning...that next full moon...and you can remember too when you weren't in a position to look at all that." -William

"It's because [I had] that feeling of not being loved or not being wanted, and I think that's why I fight so hard to be a father. Because, like, my daughter, she's sassy and all of that. But I feel genuine love with her." -Dark Knight

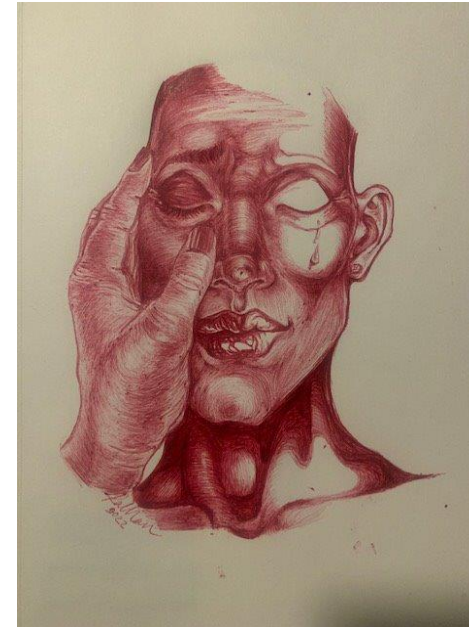


Well-being

Self-love, Worthiness, Freedom

"As an adult now, throughout all of these years, I see how nobody loved that child that I was. But / learned to love her. I've learned to love this little girl that nobody else loved...I had to learn to love myself as a child because nobody gave a damn about her. And I just feel like acceptance is a big part of that. Accepting that nobody loved you, but *you* can love you still." -Jaimie

"I just didn't feel judged. And I feel like that's when I feel the most happiest. I feel free. I don't feel judged and I feel supported. ...It's just in those moments when I was feeling good and free, as in relaxed, calm, at ease." -Jasmine



"I feel like you can still have value and be beautiful, even if you still have work to do in your life." - Kalhan



Butterflies on neck meaning: also freedom; butterflies were once trapped in a cocoon... so was I, over time I came out my shell into something beautiful... pushed my limits. 🦋

Implications (So what?)

- Trauma is always there, but there is hope: through relationships
- Safe, attuned, loving relationships are key for youth well-being
 - Avoid detours: Make the 1st placement the best placement
 - Training for professionals & caregivers
 - Shift policies to focus on relationships
- Opportunity: Open to healing *after* safety and trust are established
 - Physiological/emotional regulation first
 - Art for knowing, sharing and healing
- Well-being = worthiness and freedom

Next Steps for this Research

- Sharing findings with participants, DCFS, caregivers, caseworkers
- Exploring resonance with definition among different populations, in and out of child welfare (e.g. Casework staff; BIPOC faculty/staff at university)
- Utilize youth-driven definition to create a tool to measure the well-being of youth in care

Contact

- To collaborate on future research or discuss how the Way to Well-being framework can be useful in your work, please find me on LinkedIn, ResearchGate or contact me directly:

Bridget Colacchio, PhD, LCSW

bcolacchio@luc.edu

Selected References

- Arnett, J.J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American psychologist*, 55(5), 469.
- Bill of Rights for Foster Children. (1973). H.R. 180, 1973 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Pa. 1973). Pennsylvania: Congress Hall. Retrieved from: <https://www.dcfassociation.org/foster-child-bill-of-rights.html>
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment, vol. 1 of Attachment and loss*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Catalani, C., & Minkler, M. (2010). Photovoice: A review of the literature in health and public health. *Health education & behavior*, 37(3), 424-451.
- Children's Bureau. (2013). *Children's Bureau Timeline*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Child Welfare Information Gateway. Retrieved from: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/more-tools-resources/resources-from-childrens-bureau/timeline1/>
- Dworsky, A., & Gitlow, E. (2017). Employment outcomes of young parents who age out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 133-140.
- Courtney, M. E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care* (pp. 1–60). Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.
- Crivello G, Camfield L, Woodhead M. 2009. How can children tell us about their wellbeing? Exploring the potential of participatory research approaches within young lives. *Social Indicators Research* 90, 51–72.
- Finlay, L. (2014). Engaging phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(2), 121-141. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2013.807899.
- Fox, M., & Fine, M. (2013). Accountable to whom? A critical science counter-story about a city that stopped caring for its young. *Children & Society*, 27(4), 321-335.
- Freundlich, M., Avery, R. J., Munson, S., & Gerstenzang, S. (2006). The meaning of permanency in child welfare: Multiple stakeholder perspectives. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(7), 741-760.
- Gillespie, A., & Cornish, F. (2010). Intersubjectivity: Towards a dialogical analysis. *Journal for the theory of social behaviour*, 40(1), 19-46.
- Greene, S., Burke, K. J., & McKenna, M. K. (2018). A review of research connecting digital storytelling, photovoice, and civic engagement. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(6), 844-878.

Selected References

- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1).
- Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 7674-83.
- Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from Women's lives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hartsock, N. (1983). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In G. Harding and M. B. Hintikka (Eds.), *Discovery reality* (pp. 283–310). Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Honkanen, K., Poikolainen, J., & Karlsson, L. (2018). Children and young people as co-researchers – researching subjective well-being in residential area with visual and verbal methods. *Children's Geographies*, 16(2), 184–195.
- Husserl, E. (1913). *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy—First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982.
- Hycner, R. H. (1999). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. In A. Bryman & Burgess, R.G. (Eds.), *Qualitative Research, Volume 3*. London: Sage. 143-164.
- Jones, A. S., LaLiberte, T., & Piescher, K. N. (2015). Defining and strengthening child well-being in child protection. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 54, 57-70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.05.001>
- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). Introducing critical participatory action research. In *The action research planner* (pp. 1-31). Springer, Singapore.
- McIntyre, A. (2000). Constructing meaning about violence, school, and community: Participatory action research with urban youth. *The Urban Review*, 32(2), 123-154.
- McIntyre, A. (2007). *Participatory action research* (Vol. 52). Sage Publications.
- Mersky, J.P., & Janczewski, C. (2013). Adult well-being of foster care alumni: Comparisons to other child welfare recipients and a non-child welfare sample in a high-risk, urban setting. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 35(3), 367-376. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.11.016.

Selected References

- Ponciano, L. (2013). The voices of youth in foster care: A participant action research study. *Action Research*, 11(4), 322-336.
- Rice, K., Primak, S. & Girvin, H. (2013). Through their eyes: Using photography with youth who experienced trauma. *Qualitative Report*, 18(26), 1-14.
- Rose, G. (2007). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ryder, R., Edwards, A. & Clements, K., (2017). *Measuring the well-being of children in care: Views from the frontline and opportunities for change*. London, England: National Children's Bureau.
- Smith, D.E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Sage.
- Tandon, R. (1988). Social transformation and participatory research. *Convergence*, 21(2), 5.
- United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2012). *Information memorandum: Promoting social and emotional well-being for children and youth receiving child welfare services*. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1204.pdf>.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health education & behavior*, 24(3), 369-387.
- Wesley, B.C., Pryce, J. & Samuels, G. (2019). Meaning and essence of child well-being according to child welfare professionals. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 1-17.
- Zahavi, D. (2001). Beyond empathy. Phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity. *Journal of consciousness studies*, 8(5-6), 151-167.