

Three sides to a foster care story: An examination of the lived experiences of young adults, their foster care case record, and the space in between

Nancy Rolock

Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, USA

Alfred G Pérez

Department of Social Work, California State University, Stanislaus, USA

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Abstract

Between 2000 and 2013, the U.S. foster care caseload decreased while the number of children in adoptive homes doubled. These shifts were a result of federal policies prioritizing the moving of children from state custody into legal permanence (e.g., adoption and guardianship) with the presumption they will live “happily ever after.” This study used a mixed-methods multiphase, iterative process to illuminate the congruencies and incongruencies between the young adults’ accounts of their foster care experiences and the legalistic, system-focused view of their experiences. This study highlights the limitations of administrative data as the primary source for evaluating systems, assessing child well-being, and for understanding child welfare outcomes. An important consideration for assessing the success of the child welfare system in finding safe, stable, permanent placements for children involved with the child welfare system is including the perceptions of the young adults with foster care histories. There are often three sides to a foster care story: the lived experiences of the participant, the official case record, and the space in between. This study begins to illuminate this space, through an understanding of the quality and enduring nature of these relationships

Corresponding author:

Nancy Rolock, Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, 2400 E. Hartford Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53211, USA.

Email: rolock@uwm.edu

as reported by young adults whose lives were impacted by their foster care histories. Child welfare records indicate a legal permanency status, but the interviews address the enduring nature and quality of the relationships.

Keywords

Child welfare, adoption, foster care, well-being, youth perspectives, postpermanency

Introduction

In the United States, children who enter foster care exit through reunification with their biological parents, adoption, guardianship, exit with relatives, or emancipation. Policies and practices dictate a hierarchy for legal permanence for children in foster care, where reunification is the option of first choice. Once reunification has been ruled out, federal statutes and regulation explicitly state a preference for adoption over guardianship, requiring states to rule-out adoption, prior to considering subsidized guardianship (Cohen, 2004). However, these policies and the hierarchy embedded within may be incongruent with the lived experiences of the young adults with foster care histories.

Child welfare administrative data are considered the official foster care record. Key decision points are recorded in the administrative data (e.g., permanency goals, placement records, legal status), and child welfare agencies are assessed on performance based on these records. Child welfare practitioners rely on administrative data to track and report outcomes, and researchers use these data to determine risk and protective factors associated with foster care placements.

This study examines legal permanence as identified by two distinct methods: self-reported legal permanence as described by young adults with foster care histories and an examination of the young adults "official foster care record" as recorded in child welfare administrative data. Foster care outcomes do not typically involve asking participants about their foster care histories. Furthermore, when studies combine interview data and administrative data, interview data are often used to supplement the administrative data. With a deliberate focus on the achievement of permanence, this study uses interview data to interrogate administrative data and illuminate the congruencies and incongruencies between the two data sources, noting the black, white, and gray associated with the different views of the lives of participants with foster care histories. This study uses interview data and the official foster care record to answer the following questions:

1. Are young adults' perceptions of their permanency outcomes and post-permanency experiences congruent or incongruent with their administrative data records?
2. How do young adults' experiences and perceptions explain the congruencies and incongruencies of their administrative records?

This study used a mixed-methods multiphase, iterative process to illuminate the congruencies and incongruencies between the young adults' accounts of their foster care experiences and the legalistic, system-focused view of their experiences. Through this examination, we begin to make sense of the space between these two perspectives, through an understanding of the quality and enduring nature of these relationships, as reported by young adults whose lives were impacted by their foster care histories. Child welfare records indicate a legal permanency status, but the interviews address the enduring nature and quality of the relationships.

Background and rationale

The achievement of legal permanence is a hallmark of the current child welfare system in the United States. Current definitions of, and policies and practices related to, legal permanence can be traced back over 50 years. Seminal studies from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s brought attention to the fact that many children “languished” in foster care, and the foster care system had moved away from its original intention of being a temporary solution for children and families (Fanshel and Shinn, 1978; Maas and Engler, 1959). The influential work of Goldstein et al. (1973, 1979) contributed to a permanency planning movement that was focused on reducing the time children spent in state custody, and permanent placement with the child’s “psychological parent,” whether or not that was the child’s birth parent. At this time, permanence was defined as a placement that (1) was intended to last forever; (2) provided continuity, even if geographical moves were necessary; (3) provided the child a sense of belonging which was rooted in cultural norms and legal status; and (4) included a relationship that was built on mutual respect for the child and the family (Emlen et al., 1978).

These studies prompted the federal government to codify permanency planning as the principle mode of child welfare practice through a constellation of child welfare policies: The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) included judicial reviews of child welfare case. Permanence for foster children, as a national goal, was reinforced with the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89), which established safety, permanence, and well-being as national goals. The passage of Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) expanded permanency outcomes to include guardianship.

Changing demographics of the U.S. child welfare system

Between 2000 and 2013, the number of children in IV-E funded foster care fell by about half (290,000 vs. 159,000), while the number of children in IV-E funded adoptive homes nearly doubled (228,000 vs. 432,000) (Committee on Ways and Means of the U.S. House of Representatives, 2014).¹ This dramatic shift was a result of an effort to move children out of foster care and into permanent homes where they would live “happily ever after” (Hanna et al., 2011). Until recently,

it was assumed by many that the safe achievement of legal permanence was a sufficient outcome for children involved with the child welfare system. However, current research has highlighted lingering reservations about whether legal permanence endures (Pérez, 2014; Samuels, 2008; Scott et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a dearth of research regarding how young adults understand their permanency status, and if this understanding matches the official state records regarding permanence.

Additional research highlights the phenomenological dimension of “relational permanence” (Freundlich et al., 2006; Samuels, 2008). Cushing et al. (2014) define relational permanence as a “mutually committed, life-long, family connection to an adult–parental figure” (p. 74). This body of research focuses on youth’s perspectives of the quality and durability of their relationship with caregivers notwithstanding the legality of outcomes that are the current indicators of success. Although relational permanence is not legally binding, research that has sought the perspectives on permanence among youth involved with the foster care system demonstrates that these youth privilege relational permanence over legal permanence (Samuels, 2008; Sanchez, 2004).

Building on the prior studies, this study highlights an additional factor to consider when assessing the success of the child welfare system in finding safe, stable, permanent placements for children involved with the child welfare system: the perceptions of the young adults with foster care histories. The discrepancy between official records and the perceptions of those involved is a feature of historical claims regarding the standard of services received, and the basis for the “nothing about us without us” movement (e.g., www.calyouthconn.org, www.fosteryouthaction.org) that has impacted how services are delivered in many service arenas. What can we learn by examining the differences between how these young adults perceived their foster care experiences, and how the official record assesses their history?

Methods

Research design

This study used a mixed-methods multiphase, iterative, and non-linear approach. We began with qualitative data collected from a larger study, added quantitative data to compare young adults’ perceptions with child welfare administrative data, and then used qualitative methods to examine and explain congruence and incongruence between young adults’ reported permanency outcomes and post-permanence experiences compared to their official foster care records.

Interview data. We began with a subset of interview data originally conducted with 31 young adults originally from Chicago, IL, who exited foster care as adolescents through adoption, guardianship, or long-term foster care with relatives and participated in a larger qualitative study of post-permanency experiences

(see Pérez, 2014 for details). Young adults were recruited using a mix of purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Palys and Atchison, 2008). Fifty-eight percent ($n = 17$) of these young adults were identified and recruited from a prospective longitudinal study (see Courtney et al., 2011); to grow the study sample, 42% ($n = 11$) of study participants were referred by study participants who completed interviews and key informants familiar with the population.

Data were collected in a single in-person or phone interview conducted by the second author. Given the variability in sampling and the difficulty locating study participants, interviews were conducted over a nine-month period from August 2012 through April 2013. All interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule that included questions about young adults' perceptions of and experiences with biologically, socially, and legally constructed family systems before and during foster care and after experiencing the outcomes of adoption, guardianship, or long-term foster care. Questions about how participants perceived their reported permanency outcome and their post-permanency experiences are of particular importance to the current study. Informed consent was obtained, and all participants granted permission to digitally record their interviews, which were transcribed for analysis. To protect the identities of participants and their families, pseudonyms were assigned. Average interview length was 1.5 h, and participants were paid \$25 for participating.

Due to the current study's purpose of examining permanency outcomes of participants who reported exiting foster care through permanence and understanding their post-permanency experiences with their caregivers, we limited the current study sample to the 20 young adults who reported experiencing legal permanency outcomes of adoption ($n = 9$) or subsidized guardianship ($n = 11$).

Linking interview data to administrative data. After obtaining Institutional Review Board permission from the respective authors' institutions, young adults' interview data were linked to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (ILDCFS) administrative data, the Illinois Integrated Database (IDB). The IDB is a longitudinal relational database that relies on probabilistic record linkage to match child records across ILDCFS administrative data systems. Data in the ILDCFS are collected for all children involved with the Illinois child welfare system and compiled and maintained by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. These data serve as the official foster care records of children and youth in ILDCFS care. The IDB tracks individual-child level demographic information such as age, race, and sex. The system also includes case-level information such as placement types and movements within the foster care system. For children who were adopted through ILDCFS, their names and identifying information often change during the transition from state custody to adoption. For these children, ILDCFS maintains a file that links pre- and post-adoption case identification numbers; these data are not part of the IDB. For this study, the link file was cleaned and linked to the IDB. Data for children who exited through guardianship did not require this additional step as their IDs do not

typically change when they exit foster care (see Rolock, 2015 for additional information).

For 12 (60%) of these cases, the unique foster care identifier was provided. This identifier was used to link data and confirmed through the matching of demographic information (name, date of birth, gender, and race) that the unique identifier referred to the same person. The remaining study participants were identified using a combination of name, date of birth, gender, and race. Some of the participants were part of a sibling group, and information gathered during the interview was used to confirm participant identities in the administrative data. Once matching data were established, the administrative data record was analyzed to determine experiences in foster care, permanency outcomes, and post-permanency discontinuity. Post-permanency discontinuity is a relatively new term, and this study is one way to understand how well it captures the lived experiences of youth with foster care histories. This indicator was derived from the administrative data. If there was a record that the child either re-entered foster care or their adoption or guardianship subsidy ended prior to the age of majority, they were coded as having experienced post-permanency discontinuity; otherwise, they were coded as having not experienced discontinuity (see Rolock, 2015 for additional information). Descriptive analysis resulting from the matched data was conducted to provide information on congruence and incongruence of interview data and foster care records.

Examination of congruencies and incongruencies. To explain the congruence and incongruence between young adults' interview data and their foster care records, we used grounded theory analysis as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). This analytic approach privileges young adults' narrative, by excavating themes of their lived experiences, over their official foster care records, which omit their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Our aim of using a grounded theory analysis was to increase understanding of congruencies and incongruencies associated with young adults' perceptions of their permanency outcomes and post-permanency experiences.

The iterative nature of this study design resulted in several phases of coding interview and administrative data. We adhered to a grounded theory analysis starting with open coding. A priori codes were derived from the administrative data. These contained concepts of permanency outcomes (i.e., adoption and guardianship), post-permanency discontinuity, and demographic characteristics (e.g., age and race), and foster care experiences (e.g., caregiver relationship) (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). To do this, the second author read each transcript line-by-line multiple times to deductively identify, name, categorize, and describe the various ways young adults perceived their foster care experiences, permanency outcomes, and their post-permanency experiences with their caregivers. Axial coding was used to group open codes to reflect the congruencies and incongruencies between the young adult interview data and the administrative data. Throughout the analysis process, we engaged in the constant comparison process to identify similarities

and differences within and across data sources. The final stage of analysis included selective coding to organize data into categories that represented a logical configuration that allowed for the comparison between young adults' perceptions and experiences and their foster care records. Interview data were managed and analyzed using QRS International's NVivo 10 software.

The analytic process produced two sets of findings. The first set of findings report the congruencies and incongruencies of young adults' reported experiences compared to their foster care records. The second set of findings is organized by the two main categories and emergent subcategories resulting from the grounded theory analysis.

Perceptions of permanency outcomes, with the following subcategories:

- incongruent guardianship;
- incongruent adoption;
- congruent guardianship; and
- congruent adoption.

Post-permanency experiences, with the following subcategories:

- congruent discontinuity;
- congruent intact relationships; and
- incongruent discontinuity.

Findings

Findings are reported in two sections. The first set of findings is a result of the linking of the youth interviews with the administrative data. The second set of findings provides an explanation of the congruencies and incongruencies found between interview and administrative data based on the young adults' perceptions of their permanency outcome and their post-permanency experiences with their caregivers.

Young adults' reported experiences compared to their foster care records

Table 1 provides information on the congruence between young adults' interview data and their foster care records. The data are reported such that the self-report data are recorded in columns and the case records in rows. The percent congruent for each variable is recorded in the last column. There is relatively high congruence on many of the demographic characteristics. There was 100% congruence on gender. Reported race or ethnicity matched the foster care records for all except three cases (85%). Similar results were obtained for the location of the participants' home of origin (85%). The age at the time of initial foster care entry was congruent for 70% of participants. The number of spells, defined as the number of distinct

Table 1. Congruencies in young adults' self-reported versus case record data.

Self-report data	Case record data	Percent congruent
Sex	Female	
	9	20 of 20
	Male	100%
Race/ethnicity	Black/ African-American	
	16	White/Caucasian
	Mixed race	Not reported
Black/African-American		
	1	1
Mixed Race		
	1	17 of 20
White/Caucasian		
	1	85%
Place of origin	Chicago	
	17	Downstate Illinois
Chicago		
	1	Suburban Cook County
Suburban Cook County		
	1	17 of 20
Downstate Illinois		
	1	85%
Age placed in foster care	Birth-4	
	2	5-9
Birth-4		
	1	10 and over
5-9		
	8	Not reported
10 and over		
	2	14 of 20
Not reported		
	1	70%
Number of spells	1 spell	
	12	3 spells
1 spell		
	1	18 of 20
2 spells		
	5	90%
3 spells		
	1	

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Self-report data	Case record data					Percent congruent
	1 or 2	3 or 4	5 or 7	8 or more		
Number of siblings						
1 or 2	2	1				
3 or 4		7				
5 or 7		4	4	16 of 20		
8 or more	1	2	3	80%		
Relationship with last caregiver						
Relative	Relative	Non-relative				
Relative	5	5				14 of 20
Non-relative	1	9				70%
Age of last exit from foster care						
9 to 12	9 to 12	13 to 15	16 to 18	19 and older		
9 to 12	1	1	1	4		
13 to 15	1	1	6	6		7 of 20
16 to 18						35%
19 and older						
Last foster care outcome						
Adoption	Adoption	Emancipation	Guardianship	No Record		
Adoption	5	3	1			
Emancipation						8 of 20
Guardianship		8	3			40%
Discontinuity	Yes	No	N/A			
Yes	5	3	2			9 of 12
No		4	6			75% ^a

Note: Gray indicates information that is congruent in both data sources.

^aDiscontinuity percentage excludes the eight children reported as N/A in the administrative data.

foster care entries, was 90% congruent. The number of siblings reported by participants was 80% congruent with the number of siblings reported in the administrative data. In interviews, participants discussed the biological relationship with the caregiver with whom they most recently lived. This caregiver was coded as either a relative or not, based on the participants' definition of relative. When compared to the administrative records, there was 70% congruence on relative/non-relative caregiver. Exiting from foster care was more divergent in terms of the self-reported outcomes and the administrative data records. The age at the time of exit from foster care and type of foster care exit were 35% and 40% congruent, respectively. Finally, discontinuity, defined by participants as the dissolving of the caregiver–youth relationship subsequent to achieving legal permanence—initiated either by the participant themselves and/or their caregivers—and defined by administrative data as either a reentry into foster care or the premature ending of an adoption or guardianship subsidy (see Rolock, 2015 for additional information) was 75% congruent.

Understanding congruencies and incongruencies

The second set of findings is organized by the two main categories and emergent subcategories resulting from the grounded theory analysis. We first report on the perceptions of permanency outcomes and second on the post-permanency experiences. Subcategories, derived from the iterative analyses, are provided for each of these larger categories.

Perceptions of permanency outcomes

Incongruence and congruence of legal permanency outcomes were examined for all 20 participants. Findings reveal that for 60% ($n = 12$) of participants the self-reported permanency outcome was incongruent with administrative records. Eight participants reported exiting state custody through subsidized guardianship, whereas the administrative records indicate these participants exited foster care through emancipation (incongruent guardianship); four participants reported exiting foster care through adoption, whereas the administrative records for three indicate achievement of legal permanence through subsidized guardianship; and administrative data for one participant reported that he was adopted twice, yet there was no record of a second adoption and no record of a foster care exit (incongruent adoption). The remaining 40% ($n = 8$) of participants' self-reported permanency outcome was consistent with administrative records. Five of these participants were adopted (congruent adoption) and three exited state custody through subsidized guardianship (congruent guardianship). Below, we provide a further discussion of these groups.

Incongruent guardianship. Eight participants reported achieving permanence through subsidized guardianship, whereas their administrative records indicate they had

emancipated from state custody without achieving legal permanence. Five of these participants reported exiting foster care through guardianship with relative caregivers, whereas administrative data show the last placement for four of these participants was with a non-relative caregiver; one participant reported achieving guardianship with a non-relative caregiver, although her record shows her last foster care placement was with a relative caregiver. The remaining two participants reported exiting state custody with non-relatives, consistent with their final placement type, before emancipation, recorded in the administrative record.

Adam serves as an example of a variant where participants primarily lived with relative caregivers while in state custody. Adam, a 32-year-old African American male, reported being reunited with his birth father at age 12 and then placed with his guardians at age 16 when reunification failed. Adam recalls how he remembers exiting foster care at age 16 through subsidized guardianship,

I remember [my guardians] asked me if I wanted to be adopted into the family. I declined... what ended up happening with that was [my guardians] wanted to make this a legalized placement so they could start getting resources on my behalf... They [then] became, you know, a licensed foster home for me to stay in. And then, uh, I don't really know exactly what end up happening from that point, but it was a done deal. Um, and there was never any issue—actually, I don't even think, I don't even think I ever really saw a caseworker ever again, until I went to college. Um, honestly, I don't think I ever went to court for anything.

In contrast, Dawn, a 29-year-old African American female, reported exiting foster care at age 14 through subsidized guardianship with a non-relative: “I was placed in guardianship with an aunt, she really wasn't a biological aunt, she was actually my mother's best friend and I knew her as a godmother.” According to the administrative record, Dawn entered foster care at age 11 and exited state custody at the age of 23, an indication that she was either enrolled in college and receiving support from DCFS, which is consistent with her interview, or eligible for state support due to other circumstances (e.g., disability). Despite reporting achieving permanence with fictive-kin, Dawn's last recorded placement was with a relative whom she was placed with for four years prior to emancipation.

Incongruent adoption. Four participants reported achieving permanence through adoption. Although the administrative record shows subsidized guardianship for three participants, it lacks a recorded exit outcome for one participant. Phil, a 29-year-old African American, reported that his foster mother, with whom he was placed along with two siblings, adopted him at age 14. Phil recalls his foster mother saying, “I'm gonna officially adopt you guys.” However, Phil was apprehensive about adoption because he did not want to change his last name. He explains, “I told [foster mother] no. I was like no, I don't, I don't wanna do that...but to my knowledge, she still went through with the adoption.” Phil's

administrative record indicates that his foster parents entered into a subsidized guardianship arrangement when he was 17 years old.

In contrast, Andrea, a 29-year-old African American female, reported exiting foster care at the age of 15 through adoption by a maternal relative. In regards to her adoption, Andrea explains,

You know what, I kinda just went with the flow... believe it or not, we never sat down and talked about it, she didn't ask, "Hey is this what you want?" "Is this what you'd like" or, you know. It's pretty much like, "I'm gonna adopt you today, come on sign these papers," and that's that.

Andrea's administrative record tells a somewhat different story: she exited foster care at age 13 through guardianship and her subsidy ended when she was 16 years old.

Robert, a 25-year-old African American, reported a non-relative foster mother adopted him at age 10, which was confirmed in his record. He subsequently reentered foster care and was reunited with his adoptive mother, living with her until age 16 when the adoption dissolved and he reentered foster care. Robert reported a second adoption with his new foster caregivers. However, his record does not indicate achieving permanence, or a foster care exit; instead, the record shows his case was closed by the child welfare agency when he was 17. When asked to recall the events that marked his second adoption, Robert recounts,

I asked God, I said, "God if you please just will give me a family, if you will get me out of the situation, I will just, I will just do anything you want me to do." And he answered my prayers, um, like a couple months later I went to court, and I was adopted again.

Congruent guardianship. Three participants' administrative records were congruent with their reported permanency outcome of subsidized guardianship. All three participants reported guardianship with relatives, although the administrative record shows guardianship with a non-relative caregiver for one participant.

Congruent adoption. For five participants reporting being adopted by non-relative caregivers; outcome and caregiver relationship were congruent with the administrative data. Terry, a 28-year-old African American, reported being adopted at age 18 by the foster parents she believed to have adopted three of her siblings, including her brother, Phil, discussed above. Terry explains, "I asked [my foster mother] to adopt me, 'cause she had already adopted Phil, [younger brother] and [younger sister]." She further asserts, "I didn't—the DCFS offered me independent livin', and I guess I was scared of growin' up, you know, me bein' afraid of bein' a grown up." While Terry's permanency outcome is consistent with the administrative

record, her record also indicates that her adoption occurred at age 19, when she was legally an adult. We might speculate that Terry initiated the conversation about adoption with her foster mother when she was 18 years old, but the adoption was not finalized until age 19.

In contrast, Nathan, a 21-year-old who identifies as Biracial, reported being adopted by a non-relative caregiver whom he met through the agency facilitating his adoption. Nathan, adopted by a single father, recounts,

[The social worker] asked me, if I had a choice would I [want to be adopted by] a mother and a dad, or a mother or a father. It was a dream come true to me. It was what I asked for, and that's what I received.

Post-permanency experiences

Discontinuity, defined as administrative data showing a reentry into foster care, or an adoption or guardianship subsidy that terminated prior to the child's 18th birthday (Rolock, 2015), was examined for 12 respondents; the remaining 8 could not be categorized by the administrative data because they did not have a record of attaining legal permanence. For the 12 examined cases, three-quarters of the self-reported findings were congruent with the administrative data. Five participants reported discontinuity, as reflected in their case records (congruent discontinuity); four participants reported no discontinuity, matching their case records (congruent intact relationship), and three participants reported experiencing discontinuity that their case records do not reflect (incongruent discontinuity). Each of these groups is discussed below.

Congruent discontinuity. Five participants experienced discontinuity. When describing their relationships over time with their caregiver, three described negative feelings and two described mixed feelings. The three who used a negative feeling all reported achieving permanence with a relative who was no longer living and described their relationship as severed. Cindy, a 27-year-old African American female, serves as an example of this variant of discontinuity:

As I got older, my perception was that [my uncle's wife] didn't really want the responsibility on her own. And if my uncle wasn't gonna be there, then she didn't want us there. Well, after my uncle died, she moved to Iowa. After he died she just packed up and left.

Congruent intact relationship. Four respondents reported no discontinuity, all of whom stated that their relationship with their caregiver was intact at the time of the interview. Three respondents reported a positive relationship with their

caregivers over time, and one reported a more mixed view of the relationship. Nathan, discussed above, is an example of a participant who reported a close relationship with his adoptive father and expressed a positive tone:

I just talked to my [adopted] dad yesterday and you know, I told him I love him. I don't say that often to him, but he knows it. He's been there through thick and thin, and, no matter how hard-headed I've been or what the case has, you know, case is, like, he's always there.

Nathan's description is in contrast to Phil's, who held mixed feeling about exiting foster care through adoption but had an intact relationship with his reported adoptive parents, despite his record indicating his caregivers entered into a subsidized guardianship arrangement:

We never felt part of the family, even till this day. You know, no matter how much they tell you they love you, or how much they treat you, you know how good they treat you, the things they do for you, you always know that you don't belong. I knew that 'cause I was old enough to know that I was taken from my real family. So I knew that this wasn't my biological family. So I knew that I wasn't, I mean, she, she treated us, you know what, great. I felt like you know, she pro—she took us in, she fed us, she clothed us. You know, weren't gettin' beatings. You know, when we—but, at, by that time, we were scared to do anything.

Incongruent discontinuity. Three respondents reported discontinuity not captured in the administrative data. One of the contributions of the interview data is that it enabled us to understand permanency outcomes past the age of majority. The administrative data only tracks outcomes through the age of 18; information past the age of majority, by definition, is not captured in the administrative data. For instance, Roxy, a 27-year-old African American female, exemplifies that legal permanence does not always sustain for older adolescents and may happen outside of the purview of the child welfare system. Roxy, while in foster care became a parent at age 14 and was adopted by her foster mother at age 17. She reported her relationship with her adoptive mother became volatile and this created tension within the family, which caused Roxy to move out of the home at age 17. Roxy recounts:

We were always arguing. Um, it was unhealthy for my son because my son really loved her, and he really loved me, but he thought that grandma was my mama and I'm not supposed to be mean to my mama or talk bad to my mama because I tell him don't do that. It was very, very destructive for me to still remain there. So, I knew I had to go build a different foundation for myself.

Whitney, a 24-year-old African American differs from Roxy in that she reported discontinuity while a minor. However, this discontinuity was not reported to the

child welfare system. Whitney explains, “I lived with [adoptive mother] ‘till I was like 16. Then I ended up staying with different friends.” When asked if her adoption was terminated, Whitney responded, “No, she still legally my, my guardian. . . the last time I talked to her was like 16.”

Discussion

Extant research highlights reservations about whether legal permanence endures (Pérez, 2014; Samuels, 2008; Scott et al., 2013) and rarely addresses how young adults understand their permanency status, and whether this understanding matches the official state records regarding permanence. This mixed-method study is a first step in addressing this gap. Using data collected through interviews with young adults to illuminate differences between the participants’ accounts of their foster care experiences and their administrative data records, we found that self-reported permanency outcomes, and post-permanency experiences, do not always align with the official record. While extant research has found that legal permanence usually endures, when it does not, the child welfare systems are not always informed of the change in status. Sometimes, this occurs because the youth has reached the age of majority and the young adult is no longer under the purview of the agency, and at other times, it is a result of a post-permanency system that is not set up to receive this information or the family has misinformation about available services and supports. This study examined these congruencies and incongruencies.

The largest discrepancy reported was between the participant-reported permanency status and the official record. Many of the respondents indicated that they had exited foster care through guardianship, while their administrative data records state that they emancipated from care. Some of the study participants lived with relatives for several years, and they may have assumed that they were under the legal guardianship of their kin. For instance, Dawn, 29-year-old, self-reported guardianship with a non-relative caregiver, and her record indicates that she was living with a relative for four years prior to emancipating from care. However, other respondents made some assumptions based on discussions with their caregiver. Respondents stated that they were unclear about their permanency status. The process was not explained to them in a manner that was meaningful to them, or they misunderstood what was occurring during the court proceedings, and often they were not consulted in the process. An example of this situation is Andrea, 29-year-old, with self-reported adoption by a relative caregiver at age 15. Her record indicates a guardianship arrangement with a relative at age 13 and subsidy ending prematurely at age 16. When reflecting on her permanence, she reported that she “went with the flow” and was never explicitly asked her desires about being adopted, rather asked to sign some paperwork. Additionally, it seemed as if biological siblings may experience different permanency outcomes with the same caregiver, something that may be at the root of some of these incongruencies. An example of this is Terry, who stated that her caregiver adopted her siblings,

yet the administrative data states that her sibling Phil exited care through subsidized guardianship with the same caregiver, not adoption.

What is the meaning of permanence? As previously stated, there is a discussion in the literature of relational permanence. Should some definition of relational permanence be embedded in the definition of legal permanence? Should the legal status take precedence over relational permanence, as is currently the case? A hierarchy of permanence is currently written into federal legislation. Perhaps, the current adult-centric process should be replaced with one that gives voice to and consideration of the youth's perspective on this hierarchy, particularly for youth who enter foster care with strong attachment or ties to birth family members?

Another area of discrepancy is in the long-term stability of placements. While adoption and guardianship are intended to be "forever" homes, for some youth, this is not a reality. Caregiver intentions, while firm at the time of legal permanence, may change over time. Adoptive parents and guardians have reported that the needs of the children in their homes may be beyond their ability to address. An example of this is Roxy, who demonstrates that legal permanence does not always endure, and that discontinuity occurred outside of the child welfare systems purview. In these cases, eligibility for services may be unknown to youth, or they may interpret their legal status as making them ineligible for services. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge or misinterpretation of ineligibility for services may exacerbate the often perilous transition to adulthood. Adoptive parents do not always know where to turn for post-permanency services, and when they do seek services, the services are beyond their economic means, inadequate, or not sensitive to issues facing families formed through adoption or guardianship (Fuller et al., 2006; Houston and Kramer, 2008; Howard et al., 2006; Zosky et al., 2005). While the U.S. Children's Bureau has recently taken steps to try to address these issues (e.g., establishing the National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation, funding the development of an on-line adoption competency training), the availability, cost, and integrity of services vary widely by community. While some states allow families to make adjustments to their adoption or guardianship subsidy agreements that govern service availability in some jurisdictions, the process of amending the subsidy can be cumbersome. The lack of available services, or needs that exceed the capacity of the adoptive parent or legal guardian to address, may result in a decrease in caregiver commitment to their children over time. In these situations, every effort should be made to address the needs of the child and her or his family early on, at the earliest signs of difficulty, rather than waiting for a crisis to emerge. Services provided at the time of crisis may be provided too late, when the level of commitment may be strained beyond repair.

Defining discontinuity is new, an emerging concept, and one that should be explored not just through the examination of foster care records but also through the experiences of the children, youth, and parents or guardians involved. This study is the beginning of that exploration. This mixed-method study was designed

to help understand the longstanding phenomenon of permanence with a specific sample of young adults from a large, urban city, so findings may differ in other cities or rural areas. Although the small sample size limits the generalizability of these findings, they provide insight into some of the difficulties experienced by these young adults. Few child welfare agencies track children post-adoption or guardianship and child welfare administrative data records, by design, track children through the age of majority. As found in this study, the relationships between young adults and their adoptive parents or guardians continue to evolve through young adulthood. Efforts should be made to understand these relationships and to provide support to the young adults who need it. Furthermore, the importance of continuing to monitor progress is crucial and should take into account the individual needs of the young adults. Such support may include linkages and coordination with other public service agencies (e.g., department of mental or behavioral health, universities, colleges, and other educational institutes).

Although this study makes several contributions to our understanding of permanence, it is not without limitations. This study was conducted with a small sample that used purposive and snowball-sampling techniques (Palys and Atchison, 2008), with a limited age group and geographic region; therefore, this study is not generalizable. While this study provides a unique voice—that of young adults reflecting upon their adolescence and time in foster care—it is missing the perspective of the birth parents, and any subsequent caregivers, including foster parents, adoptive parents, and guardians, and caseworkers. Furthermore, this study does not address the unique challenges and opportunities associated with open adoption, and how that might impact one's sense of belonging and permanence (see, for instance Hesseling-Green, 2015). A comprehensive approach that includes these additional perspectives should be pursued in future research that aims to understand permanence for children involved with the child welfare system.

Finally, this study grew out of an original study with different aims (see Pérez, 2014) and was unable to incorporate the prior study's findings fully. Even though there is a relatively high rate of congruence for demographic characteristics, the incongruence provides some insights for practitioners and researchers alike to consider. For instance, one participant reported being of mixed race, declaring his mixed Italian and African American heritage, while his official record documented him as White. These findings show how the system for recording events is limited (binary, black or white). Data elements, often dictated by drop-down menus, do not allow for capturing the heterogeneity of race and ethnicity that the participants ascribed to themselves. Similarly, the relationship status between the caregiver and the participant may suggest that the definition of kin may not always be black or white. This is seen in the discussion of kinship in the extant literature and in practice, where definitions of fictive kin vary by state and are evolving to meet the needs of the population (Geen, 2004; Gleeson, 1999). In this study, two participants referred to their caregivers as both "aunt" and "foster mother," demonstrating the fluidity of how participants made sense of their legal and biological relationships with their caregivers.

Implications for practice

This study raises several implications for child welfare practice and policy. Key among them are: How are young people involved in, and informed of, key decisions about their lives? Does the incongruence observed in this study stem from a lack of information, or understanding, and what can be done to improve this? Should youth play a greater role in the key decisions surrounding their legal permanence? Furthermore, should child welfare systems include a discussion of relational permanence, and an assessment of commitment, on the part of the youth and the adult in the permanency decision? Moreover, should this commitment be reassessed after legal permanence has been achieved? Periodic check-ups post finalization may be one way to ensure that needs of the child and family are being addressed, to make linkages to supports and services as needed, and to ensure that the family designed to be the “forever family” has what it needs to maintain familial relationships, whether the transition is from child to teen, or from teenager to young adult. However, for this type of shift to occur, a consensus would need to be developed around how, and by whom, ongoing contact would occur.

These considerations may be at the crux of what is involved in the assessment of child well-being, an often-used term, but one that has no single definition. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, an effort of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and six other Federal agencies, compiles indicators depicting the condition of our Nation’s young people. In their most recent report (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015), they call for the development of an indicator to measure social connections and engagement. They state that although the formation of close attachments to family, peers, school, and community have been linked to healthy youth development, there is a lack of indicators that measure such things as relationships with parents and peers, connections to teachers and school engagement, resilience when confronted with difficulties, and civic or community involvement. With the shifting trends in the number of children living outside the formal foster care system, in adoptive or guardianship homes, child welfare agencies are in an ideal position to take up this charge, and to understand this vulnerable population’s social connections, and how it relates to their healthy development, beyond the child welfare system’s direct involvement.

Additional research should include an examination of the counterfactual for these young adults. Every effort should be made to ensure that children in foster care have families that will be with them throughout their lifetime; however, children with no foster care histories also have difficulty during these transitional periods, from adolescence through young adulthood (Courtney et al., 2011). Future work should explore how the experiences of these young adults are similar to the experiences of similar young adults without foster care histories.

Conclusion

There are often three sides to a foster care story: the lived experiences of the participant, the official case record, and the space in between. This study begins

to understand these various perspectives by examining the lived experiences of youth formerly in foster care compared to their foster care records. Given the growing number of children living in permanent homes after foster care, long-term, longitudinal outcomes for these children should be tracked. This information should include the voices and opinions of young adults, their caregivers, and their support systems. By incorporating these perspectives, the long-term well-being and outcomes of this vulnerable population and their families will be better understood.

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