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Exploring the path from foster care to stable and lasting adoption: Perceptions of foster care alumni

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored perceptions of youth with foster care experiences, regarding successful adoption. A purposive sample of 16 participants was recruited and convened in two groups. Semi-structured focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using theoretical thematic analysis. Emergent themes were organized within a theoretical framework consisting of child, family, and system facilitators and barriers to successful adoption. Themes that strongly emerged redounded to a more youth-centered adoption process and to significant changes in practices and policies regarding parent–child matching, adoptive parent preparation, youths' supports, service quality and effectiveness, and overall systems' understanding and response to trauma.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 51,000 children are adopted from the U.S. foster care every year (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services et al., 2014). Despite federal law and various initiatives to promote adoption from foster care, most states continue to struggle to achieve timely and stable adoptions (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services et al., 2013). The median rate of adoptions occurring in less than 24 months was 33.5% in 2011, while fewer than four percent were adopted in less than 12 months (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services et al., 2013). For the same time period, children spent a median of 29.4 months in foster care from entry to adoption finalization (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services et al., 2013). In addition to timeliness, outcomes for children adopted from foster care include a high rate of adoption disruption, ranging from 10% to 25% (Berry & Barth, 1990; Festinger, 2002; McDonald, Lieberman, Partridge, & Hornby, 1991; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006) and adoption dissolution, ranging from 1% to 7% (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). It is important to clarify these terms. The adoption literature often refers to adoption disruption when a child is removed from an adoptive placement before the adoption has been legally finalized and to adoption dissolution when a child returns to the custody of the child welfare system after the legal adoption has been finalized (Festinger, 2002; Smith & Howard, 1991). Given these indicators of the system's underperformance, further investigation is warranted to understand the critical factors for achieving timely, stable, and lasting adoptions.

Despite the centrality of adoption outcomes for the youth in foster care, the child welfare literature largely omits perceptions that youth have about the facilitators and barriers to successful adoption, particularly from an ecological perspective that considers child, family, and system level factors. More common are studies that described adoptive parents' perspectives (Groze, 1986; Rycus, Freundlich, Hughes, Keefer, & Oakes, 2006; Wood, 2012). While some studies have examined different facets of youths' adoption experience, they focus mainly on child and family topics such as adoptee identity, child adjustment to adoptive families, youths' adoption experiences, and the role of family communication (Chambers, Zielewski, & Malm, 2008; Dance & Rushton, 2005; Hanna, Tokarski, Matera, & Fong, 2011; Heath, 2012; Neil, 2012; Samuels, 2009; Smith, Howard, & Monroe, 2000). Few studies incorporate a multi-level perspective that considers the role of children, families, and systems.

This study explored the perceptions that foster care alumni had about facilitators and barriers to successful adoption. Facilitators and barriers were examined at child, family, and system levels, considering: (1) the needs of children pre- and post-adoption; (2) services and key supports for adoptive families; and (3) how the foster care system can help or hinder the adoption process. To inform this study, a literature review was conducted including studies which had a focus in each of these key areas. That review is presented below.

1.1. Child factors influencing adoption outcomes

A number of qualitative studies conducted with adoptees and foster care alumni identified age as a barrier to adoption (Chambers et al., 2008; Samuels, 2009; Wright & Flynn, 2006). For instance, focus groups with foster care alumni revealed that they viewed foster parents as unwilling to take or adopt adolescents due to stereotypes and stigma (e.g., teens will not listen) (Chambers et al., 2008). Other studies reported that adolescents appeared to be less adaptable than younger children as they enter foster care (Chapman & Christ, 2008; Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004). Key adolescent developmental tasks, such as identity formation and individuation, were found to be more complex for adoptees who needed to sort through misinformation and conflicted feelings about birth parents (Smith et al., 2000). Adoptees often reported feeling uncertainty and anxiety related to identity issues (Dance & Rushton, 2005). Yet, one study described the positive impact of foster care and adoption experiences on youths' overall sense of self-worth, including maturity levels, independence, and value system (Hanna et al., 2011). These researchers found that as youth reached adolescence, identity issues tended to resurface and intensify, eliciting verbal or behavioral responses (Hanna et al., 2011).

Behavioral health problems are commonly reported among youth in foster care as a precipitator of placement moves (Dance & Rushton, 2005; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996; Smith et al., 2000), negatively impacting both foster home integration and adoption (Leathers, Spielfogel, Gleeson, & Rolock, 2012). A study of 292 adopted children identified lying and manipulation, defiance, verbal aggression, violation of family norms, peer problems, and physical aggression as the most common forms of disruptive behaviors (Smith et al., 2000). Depression and PTSD symptoms were also frequently reported. Smith et al. (2000) asserted that depression was related to ongoing feelings of anger and rejection, failure to live up to adoptive parents' expectations, and past maltreatment, among others. These researchers concluded that problem behaviors were “outward signs of underlying emotional problems that have not yet been resolved,” (p. 558) including identity, depression, post-traumatic stress, separation/attachment, and grief.

In other studies, youth reported conflicted feelings toward attachment figures (e.g., anger, guilt, rejection, and loyalty to birth family), which made resolution of loss more difficult (Neil, 2012; Samuels, 2009; Smith et al., 2000). Youth who had long stays in foster care and adoption disruptions often experienced self-doubt (Chambers et al., 2008) and felt discouraged from pursuing adoption again (Samuels, 2009; Wright & Flynn, 2006). Some youth stated that foster care occasionally threatened key relationships in their lives, increasing mistrust and inhibiting family bonding (Dance & Rushton, 2005; Samuels, 2009). However, two studies reported a heterogeneity of youth experiences in out-of-home placement, including wanting to go back home, feeling happy in care but hopeful about reunification, and feeling content in care and hopeful about adoption (Chapman & Christ, 2008; Chapman et al., 2004). Adoption provided a sense of belonging for most adoptees (Dance & Rushton, 2005; Hanna et al., 2011; Neil, 2012; Wright & Flynn, 2006), represented a second chance in life (Dance & Rushton, 2005; Hanna et al., 2011) and an improvement in the youths' current and future quality of life, in terms of safety and stability (Gillum & O'Brien, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011; Wright & Flynn, 2006).

Chambers et al. (2008) described youths' concerns about adoption as: losing contact with friends and siblings, uncertainty about new

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