

**AGING OUT OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM:  
TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FROM THE SERVICE PROVIDER  
PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

The challenges associated with the transition to adulthood for former foster youth are well documented within the current literature, but there is limited knowledge available on service providers' perspective on this transition. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six service providers, and the transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Three master themes were discovered: Unprepared and underserviced transition to adulthood; Insecure attachment with the service system; and Ability of the interpersonal relationship with service providers to meet attachment needs. The results demonstrated the influence of past support experiences on present interactions with the service system and how addressing the interpersonal relationship between former foster youth and service providers is essential in increasing engagement with services. Service providers have a unique role in the lives of former foster youth, and this connection could support former foster youth to overcome past negative experiences and create healthier patterns of attachment.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a complicated process, and this is especially true for foster youth that make the transition to independence rapidly when they reach the age of majority and are no longer under guardianship of the child welfare system. Research on the outcomes for these former foster youth has shown they fare worse when compared to other young adults without foster care experience across multiple dimensions, such as education, employment, substance abuse and mental health issues, and early parenthood (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007). The child welfare system does have funding and services in place to support former foster youth after they age out of care (Alberta Human Services, 2016a), but many of them face issues with accessing the funding available or maintaining provision of eligible services (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2015). Former foster youth have also expressed the services and funding currently available are not enough to meet their needs and that more are required to help them build the skills necessary to make a successful transition to adulthood and independence (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007).

Former foster youth's need for further support after reaching the age of majority is not unreasonable given that young adults in general are delaying their transition to adulthood and continue to need support from external sources, such as parents, well into their mid-twenties (Arnett, 2000). This new developmental stage is defined as emerging adulthood, is seen as a stage that comes after adolescence and before adulthood (Arnett & Taber, 1994), and is influenced by previous and unique life events and experiences

(Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). The identification of this in-between stage developed from the shift of the transition to adulthood being signalled by the acquisition of individual characteristics, such as being held accountable for one's actions and establishing financial independence, rather than the milestone of reaching a particular age (Arnett, 2001). This gradual transition to adulthood contrasts with the rapid and sudden transition to independence that foster youth face when they age out of care because their transition is solely based on the milestone of reaching the age of majority (Arnett, 2007; Rutman et al., 2007). The barriers and negative outcomes former foster youth have to deal with are understandable given that they do not receive the extended support and gradual transition pace that is required by many young adults to make a successful transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2007).

Besides acknowledging former foster youth do not make a gradual transition (Arnett, 2007), there is little consensus on what else is involved in the transition to adulthood for former foster youth. One research study shows evidence that youth with foster experience do not entirely identify with emerging adulthood as they view themselves as being an adult and independent most of the time (Singer & Berzin, 2015). Another research study provides evidence that former foster youth do experience emerging adulthood but with unique adaptations (Berzin, Singer, & Hokanson, 2014). A third study adds a different view based on evidence showing that emerging adulthood is only one of four pathways that former foster youth take when they transition to adulthood (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012). This variability is further complicated by each individual occupying multiple social identity categories, such as race, social class, and gender, beyond that of having aged out of the child welfare system (E. R. Cole, 2009). Providing

more support for former foster youth is essential, but this is difficult to do given that there is not a clear picture around how they make the transition to adulthood, only the knowledge their transition is different than that of their peers.

The situation is further complicated by the finding that former foster youth are motivated to leave the child welfare system upon reaching the age of majority, even when staying connected to the system could offer further financial supports and services (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). Former foster youth reported being frustrated by their experiences in the child welfare system and stated their desire for an opportunity to be completely in control of their own lives (McCoy et al., 2008). They also experienced a lack of communication from their workers in the system about what options were available to them if they decided to stay connected to the child welfare system (Goodkind et al., 2011). Additional factors, such as experiencing a feeling of powerlessness, deeming issues to be unworthy of support, the perception of stigma, low emotional competency, and lack of culturally appropriate supports, may also be influential in the process of how former foster youth seek out help and support for the difficulties they face (Ciarrochi, Deane, Wilson, & Rickwood, 2002; King, Brown, Petch, & Wright, 2014; Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007; Williams & Mickelson, 2008). Former foster youth need further support to be successful in their transition to adulthood, but more research is necessary to determine how to provide appropriate services that address their unique circumstances while also taking into consideration their need for autonomy.

There exists empirical evidence that outlines the barriers and negative outcomes former foster youth face, the differences in their transition to adulthood when compared

to their peers, and their perspectives on leaving care and pursuing autonomy. The child welfare system is in charge of preparing youth for independence, but the rapid transition to adulthood former foster youth are faced with leaves them disconnected from support services and supportive relationships (Rutman et al., 2007). Further information is needed to understand how former foster youth's view of an adult identity influences their ability to transition to adulthood successfully.

The initial idea for this study was to explore the transition to adulthood, and the relationship with supports and services, from the former foster youth perspective. Over a period of 6 months, efforts were made to recruit youth aged 18-25 who would be willing to speak to this experience. Community organizations in the greater Edmonton area that provide services to young adults, ages 18 to 25, were contacted by email or in person to have research posters placed at their location to try to recruit former foster youth. Onsite visits at the community organizations were also carried out to try to recruit former foster youth participants by building a personal connection and then exploring their interest in participating in the research study. Connections with other researchers studying this population and age group were made to see if there were any strategies that could be implemented to boost participant recruitment, but the researchers could not offer any other ideas beyond the current strategies being used and validated the difficulties encountered when trying to recruit research participants from the former foster youth population.

Due to the difficulties with recruitment, the decision was made to instead explore the transition to adulthood and the relationship with supports and services from the service provider perspective, which is a perspective that is not well represented in the

existing literature. During former foster youth recruitment process, many connections were made with service providers working at various community organizations. These connections were then utilized to recruit service providers who were interested in participating in the research study and who had experience providing supports and services to former foster youth. The challenges and barriers former foster youth encounter in their transition to adulthood can also become challenges to participating in research and sharing their voices and their experiences. Exploring the nature of the transition, and the relationship with support services, from the service provider perspective offers an important alternative point of view.

### **Problem and Purpose of the Study**

The delivery of supports and services involves two sides: the individuals receiving the services and the organizations and individuals providing the services. The delivery of services from former foster youth's perspective and the outcomes related to the current services being provided are well represented within the existing literature. There is a lack of information on the delivery of supports and services from the perspective of those providing the services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood. A greater understanding can be gained by examining both sides of the service delivery relationship to determine the areas of change that may be most helpful in supporting former foster youth in a successful transition to adulthood.

The current study addresses this lack of knowledge and provides further information about the influence of past experiences on former foster youth's view of adulthood, how these past experiences influence the relationship between former foster youth and services providers, and what may be incorporated into current service delivery

to help engage former foster youth in utilizing services and supports. The purpose of the current study is to explore service providers' perspective on the transition to adulthood for former foster youth, the meaning they derive from their experiences, and how their observations and reflections may be used to improve the relationship between service providers and former foster youth.

### **Research Question**

The main research question of the current study is: How do service providers experience the delivery of supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood? Further questions that will help to explore this main question are: (a) What past experiences in foster care are significant to service providers in shaping former foster youth's understanding of adulthood?; (b) How do these experiences influence former foster youth's relationship with the child welfare system and service providers after the youth has left care?; (c) What is necessary to incorporate and to overcome from a service provider perspective to engage and sustain former foster youth in the utilization of external supports? Answering these questions is important in discovering where service providers believe there are opportunities to merge use of external supports into the independent identity of former foster youth.

### **Methodology**

The depth necessary to explore the experiences of service providers and answer the research questions is delivered through a qualitative research design, specifically Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA focuses on the meaning-making derived from major life experiences, gains an insider perspective through the researcher's interpretations of the data, and allows for an in-depth

study to be carried out on the experiences of each participant. Analyzing data using this method provides superordinate themes that are related to all the participants while acknowledging the similarities and differences that also exist within the participants. The implications of the researcher and measures used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness have been addressed to provide context on how the perspective of the researcher and the best interests of the participants are integrated into the research study.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Key Terms

The growing body of research on the foster youth population has created multiple terms that refer to this population during different stages of relations with the child welfare system. The review of the literature and current study will be framed around the term *former foster youth*, first presented in the research study by Courtney and Dworsky (2006). The term former foster youth is used for individuals that have spent time in foster care with the associated child welfare system as their official legal guardian and that have aged out of care, which refers to reaching the age of majority and having the child welfare system sever its legal guardianship upon reaching this age (Rutman et al., 2007). The age of majority depends on the policies particular to each jurisdiction but is usually regarded as age 18 unless stated otherwise, such as being age 19 in British Columbia, Canada (Rutman et al., 2007).

Former foster youth encompasses the terms “youth aged out of care” and “former youth in care”, and former foster youth will be used in place of these terms for continuity and clarity. Former foster youth does not apply to the terms “youth transitioning out of care”, “youth aging out of care”, or “young adults with foster care experience” as these populations are either still under the legal guardianship of the child welfare system or did not reach the age of majority while under legal guardianship of the child welfare system. These terms are presented separately from the former foster youth term as they do not meet the inclusion criteria and have separate characteristics that are not shared by the former foster youth population. Also, the term “youth” will be applied to those under the

age of 18, and the term “young adults” will be applied to those age 18 to 26, unless the term former foster youth is being applied.

## **Overview**

Problematic outcomes for youth that have aged out of the child welfare system have been documented in research studies and reports throughout Canada and the United States (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Jones, 2011; Rutman et al., 2007). These outcomes are further complicated by the unique attributes and experiences that exist within former foster youth in Alberta (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016). When youth reach the age of majority in Canada, they can experience a sudden cut off of services and funding from the provincial government body that was responsible for supporting them throughout their time in foster care (Rutman et al., 2007). In addition, the economic landscape that youth face has shifted, requiring further postsecondary education and training to find jobs that provide financial security and career stability (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2012). This shift has contributed to a delay in the age at which individuals get married and have children, which has also attributed to a delay in the transition to adulthood and to an increased dependence on external supports (Arnett, 2000). Without the funding, resources, and relationships provided by the government, former foster youth are expected to enter the adult world without the support that many young adults without foster care experience rely on into their early to mid-twenties (Rutman et al., 2007). Former foster youth face considerable barriers when trying to create a life for themselves apart from the child welfare system.

The following review of the literature will outline the current situation that former foster youth face upon aging out of care, the conditions that are contributing to this

problem, the circumstances of former foster youth's transition to adulthood, how youth view the process of aging out of the child welfare system, and the barriers that hinder the ability to seek out help and support. The complexity and variability that is characteristic of the former foster youth population and how it confounds the child welfare system's ability to support former foster youth in their transition to adulthood and independence will be highlighted throughout the literature. The literature review will show that a gap of knowledge exists between the supports and services that former foster youth require to aid them in a successful transition to adulthood and their reluctance to engage with the child welfare system in order to maintain their autonomy and ability to be self-reliant. The literature review will also explore factors that may be influencing former foster youth's ability to access services for help and support. More research is needed to increase the understanding of the meaning within and experience of transitioning into adulthood for former foster youth and how this shapes their ability to integrate support from services into their adult identity.

### **Present Situation of Foster Care in Alberta**

There is a great amount of variability in how children and youth enter into, are placed within, and exit out of the child welfare system and how they are supported by the system after they have aged out of care. They may be placed with other family members or individuals they do not have a previous relationship with when they are unable to be cared for by their parents or primary caregivers. The amount of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system is also of importance given the history of residential schools and the resulting intergenerational trauma in Indigenous families (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016). This may result in a unique transition out of care with

special considerations for Indigenous youth as compared to those from other cultures.

Upon aging out of the child welfare system, there is funding in place former foster youth can utilize to support their career and educational goals, but concerns have been brought to light about the amount provided and the ease of access to these types of funding (Alberta Human Services, 2016a; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2015). The diverse placements, cultures, and experiences in the child welfare system will all have different effects on the transition to adulthood for former foster youth.

When children and youth are not able to remain in the care of their families, there are two main options for the type of placement they can enter. Kinship care is when children and youth are placed with a close family member, a family relative, or another individual they have a significant relationships with, and foster care is when children and youth are placed with a nonrelated individual they may or may not have known prior to the placement (Alberta Human Services, 2016b). The review of the literature will focus on youth that are aging out of foster care and not out of kinship care as kinship care placements enable youth to remain connected to and supported by their family members and members of their community while they are in care (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016). For the most part kinship placements provide greater stability and more desirable outcomes for youth because they are more likely to last longer, more likely to end with a return to the biological parents, and less likely to end with the youth moving to a different kin or foster home placement (Perry, Daly, & Kotler, 2012). Youth from foster placements are not connected and supported in the same way as those from kinship care as they cannot access the same networks of care once placed away from their families (Quinless, 2013). Most of these youth need a greater level of support, connections, and

resources to make a successful transition to adulthood upon aging out of care (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013). The outcomes and difficulties former foster youth encounter will be addressed throughout the literature review.

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) (2016) produced a special report addressing the number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system in Alberta. The report stated 69% of children in the child welfare system are of Indigenous heritage although they make up only 10% of the population of children in Alberta. The report also acknowledged the number of children of Indigenous heritage in the child welfare system has decreased over the last three years but that this overrepresentation remains one of the highest in Canada. The OCYA outlines how the overrepresentation began with the removal and placement of Indigenous children in residential schools, grew substantially in the 1960s when children were apprehended from the reserves due to the unsuitable living conditions, and has continued to be an unresolved issue ever since. Research carried out on data collected from Aboriginally governed child welfare agencies across Canada show this overrepresentation stems from gaps in service provision and a lack of access to alternative and culturally appropriate services (Sinha, Trocme, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2013). The report from the OCYA recognizes how these events and a lack of services have led to issues with mental health, employment, and the ability to form healthy relationships.

This trauma has been passed down through the generations and has impacted the current generation of Indigenous youth. These circumstances will have a considerable impact on how former foster youth of Indigenous heritage transition into adulthood. Apprehending Indigenous youth and placing them in the care of the child welfare system

continues the cycle of trauma and serves as a constant reminder of past injustices carried out on Indigenous people and their communities (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada produced a report outlining Calls to Action to address the history of residential schools and further the process of reconciliation in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Child welfare was addressed specifically within the report, and five Calls to Action were made to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care, to provide proper education and training about the history and impact of residential schools to child welfare professionals, and to provide more culturally appropriate supports to children and families within the child welfare system. These Calls to Action also apply to the former foster youth population in Canada. They highlight the need for culturally appropriate services for the young adult population and the need for cultural competency training for service providers in order to continue supporting Indigenous former foster youth after they age out of care.

Financial funding has been made available to support former foster youth, but the challenges that exist for this population are more complex than those that can be solved with a monthly cheque. Upon aging out of care, there are three types of supports former foster youth in Alberta can access to help support them financially: the Support and Financial Assistance agreement, the Advancing Futures Bursary Program, and the Registered Education Savings Plan (Alberta Human Services, 2016a). The Support and Financial Assistance agreements provide funding associated with the youth in care's Transition to Independence Plan with agreements signed for a maximum of nine months at a time until the youth reaches age 22. The Advancing Futures Bursary program

provides funding for education and training opportunities, up to a maximum of \$40,000. Youth must apply for the funding between ages 18 to 24, and the funding can last for up to 60 months. These two options are arranged by the youth through social workers associated with Child and Family Services. The Registered Education Savings Plan is created for the youth through grant funding from several sources and is available to the youth between ages 18 to 26. The funding for these financial supports is subject to change with new budgets and newly elected provincial governments, as demonstrated by the lowering of the age limit from 24 to 22 for the Advancing Futures Bursary by the United Conservative Party in November 2019 (Bellefontaine, 2019). With these three opportunities, the government has provided funding options for former foster youth, but finances are only one part of the overall struggle former foster youth face when they age out of care.

There are persistent issues for former foster youth in accessing financial support and maintaining service access after they age out of care, as indicated in a service report on Systemic Issues covering the period from October 2014 to March 2015 (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2015). The report noted former foster youth in Edmonton and the surrounding area were struggling to connect with counselling services in the community or unable to connect with counselling services that had the expertise to address their specific concerns. The report also noted former foster youth in Calgary and the surrounding area continued to have trouble accessing and maintaining financial support and other services, as this issue had also been brought up in the last four service reports. The positive finding here was that service access and maintenance had improved in this area to a point that the OCYA concluded that reporting on this issue was no longer

necessary. When given concrete and specific information, the Child and Family Services system showed it was able to respond to the needs of former foster youth. Accurate identification and focused attention on the issue resulted in tangible improvements to transition service access for former foster youth.

Many differences exist within the former foster youth population in Alberta that will have a unique impact on how they transition into adulthood. Placement in foster care rather than kinship care, cultural heritage, and access to support services and funding all need to be taken into consideration when contrasting the transition to adulthood for former foster youth with that of young adults without experience in the child welfare system. Research on the challenges former foster youth face as a whole provides a greater perspective to the unique circumstances that influence the former foster youth population in Alberta.

### **Outcomes and Barriers for Former Foster Youth**

Although reports are generated on the issues faced by former foster youth by provincial child and youth advocate offices, little formal research has been done in Canada specifically on the outcomes of former foster youth. One formal research study has been conducted and reported findings on the outcomes of 37 former foster youth in British Columbia, where the age of majority is 19, over a 2.5-year period (Rutman et al., 2007). The purpose of the research was to explore the outcomes for former foster youth in British Columbia and to address the large knowledge gap in this area that had been identified by practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. The youth were interviewed four times at intervals of 6 to 9 months to determine how they were faring in multiple areas during their transition to independence. The results from the study revealed the

youth were dealing with considerable housing instability, a growing reliance on Income Assistance as the main source of financial support by the fourth interview, early parenthood (with 61% of the youth becoming a parent by the end of the study), increased self-reporting of mental health issues, and decreased self-rated physical health.

Another significant finding from the study was that leaving care was reported as being both a positive and a negative experience for the former foster youth (Rutman et al., 2007). The former foster youth valued the freedom they received when they left care as they were able to make rules and decisions for themselves. Valuing their ability to be autonomous was reported in each interview period. Leaving care also brought financial hardship and a loss of relationships with supportive adults for the youth. Former foster youth felt unprepared in navigating adult service systems and isolated in doing so on their own without any guidance. The results from this study show former foster youth do not fare well in their transition to adulthood when they are expected to be fully independent when they reach the age of majority. The study also outlined a push/pull relationship with the child welfare system where former foster youth value the control they have over their lives when they are no longer in care but face decreased financial assistance and a loss of supportive relationships at the same time. The small sample size and substantial participant attrition, from 37 to 21, during the study does not lend well to the generalizability of the results, but it is a meaningful starting place for studying the long-term results of former foster youth through empirical research.

The results from this study were also reiterated in a report from Ontario based on a literature review of the best practices for youth as they transition out of care (Dewar & Goodman, 2014), which found four barriers that impeded a successful transition. The

four barriers were a lack of supportive relationships, challenges with education, housing instability, and economic challenges, such as unemployment. This report helps to demonstrate that youth aging out of care in Canada run into the same obstacles despite their location and the varying provincial governments in charge of the child welfare system. Again, although this is only a review of the current research on this topic, it shows the transition to adulthood that former foster youth face is commonly very challenging and has its own set of obstacles that need to be overcome in order to be considered successful. Former foster youth need further support to help them navigate this turbulent developmental period.

**Youth homelessness in Canada.** While the outcomes for former foster youth have not been studied at a national level, the transition from care and involvement in the child welfare system and child protection services have been addressed in a study on youth homelessness conducted across Canada. The study surveyed 1103 young people experiencing homelessness from 47 different communities in 10 provinces and territories. The findings from the study were discussed in a report, *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey* (Gaetz, O'Grady, Kidd, & Schwan, 2016) and a policy brief, *Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action* (Nichols et al., 2017).

*Without a Home* identified involvement in child protection services as one of the four pathways into homelessness for youth from the results of the surveys (Gaetz et al., 2016). Leaving the child welfare system was viewed as having a direct impact on the current experience of homelessness by 30% of youth that had been in care. A connection was outlined between the event of leaving care and experiencing subsequent

homelessness by 38% of the youth that had aged out of care. More than half of the youth that had aged out (57.4%) stated that continued support after aging out would have been valuable for them. The reasons given for being unsuccessful at living independently were being inadequately prepared, having a low level of physical and mental health, having inadequate education, and lacking the necessary resources, supports, and life skills. The results from this report show former foster youth across Canada experience similar barriers in the transition to living on their own and connect these difficulties with their experience of being in and leaving the child welfare system.

*Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada* explored the relationship between youth homelessness and child welfare involvement in greater depth (Nichols et al., 2017). One of the main connections made in the report was between the multiple placement changes experienced by foster youth while in care and the continued occurrence of housing instability after the youth had left care. When former foster youth leave care, they may be doing so without a secure living situation or with the notion that unreliable housing is common and to be expected. Lack of stable housing adds another disadvantage to an already difficult transition to adulthood, which former foster youth often go through without the resources and supports available to other young adults. This is an important factor to address in supporting former foster youth in avoiding youth homelessness and in attaining a successful transition to adulthood.

The policy brief also compiled a list of recommendations on the prevention of youth homelessness and how to support better transitions from care through the multiple levels of the Canadian government (Nichols et al., 2017). To achieve this the brief outlined a shift in practice that would involve more participation and feedback from

foster youth. The aim of this shift would be to reduce the disconnect between foster youth and the policies, services, and programs that directly affect their wellbeing. By collaborating with foster youth, changes to program and policy structures can be made that are more informed and supportive to the outcomes foster youth are striving to achieve. Understanding the current challenges and barriers former foster youth face is crucial in implementing change and working towards preventing these disadvantages from occurring.

**Outcomes outside of Canada.** In addition to the research and reports from Canada, research has also been conducted to gather data on the outcomes of former foster youth in the United States of America. The findings from these studies help decrease the major knowledge gap and provide specific information on the situation former foster youth encounter upon leaving care. One such study was a causal-comparative research study by Courtney and Dworsky (2006) that analyzed data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), which followed 732 youth after they had left foster care in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The analysis was conducted on data collected at the time of the second interview, which was completed when youth had been out of care for one year, around age 19. The second interview was completed by 603 youth of the original 732 youth that participated in the first interview. Results from the analysis showed former foster youth are faring worse on multiple dimensions when compared to the youth still in care (in Illinois) and to peers from a nationally representative sample. Some of the most significant findings for the youth discharged from care were the high prevalence of alcohol/substance dependence and abuse, the low rate of employment (47%), the lack of a high school diploma or its

equivalent (37.1%), the high rate of pregnancy (nearly 50%), and the reliance on government assistance for financial support, with 48.5% of females and 24.5% of males accessing one or more benefits (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

The results gain significance from the large sample size that was used in the Midwest Study for the second interview (n=603) and also from the sample being drawn from three different states with different child welfare policies. This shows the issues found are again pervasive across multiple populations with similar child welfare policies but can be alleviated through remaining in care past age 18, such as those youth still in care in Illinois. There is a decrease in the validity of the results from the study because the data collection and analysis were not carried out through an empirical research study as the variables were measured rather than manipulated. The Midwest Study provides a large amount of data on numerous dimensions for former foster youth but using it as a data source for this study limits the conclusions that can be made around the cause of the outcomes as the independent variables cannot be manipulated. The study and its results add knowledge to the conversation around the policies that discharge foster youth from care at the age of majority and the implications it has for their future.

The low rate of employment for former foster youth was studied further by Hook and Courtney (2011) upon completion of all four interview intervals in the Midwest Study. The purpose of the study was to examine how human, personal, and social capital influenced former foster youth's wages and hours worked per week. The analysis revealed that human capital, specifically educational attainment, was strongly associated with employment outcomes (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Youth with a high school diploma or a GED were employed at twice the rate than those without high school completion. It

was also revealed there was a positive association between employment and wages and the number of years the youth stayed in foster care from age 18 to 21. Former foster youth face unique barriers when trying to secure stable and financially adequate employment. These barriers were able to be mitigated by staying involved in the child welfare system, perhaps through access to employment or education services or job search and training programs.

Working with secondary data in this study limited its findings as only correlational inferences could be made from the results. The data is a measurement of the youth's outcomes in the areas of human, personal, and social capital, which is then compared to their employment hours and wages. There may be other factors or a combination of factors that are influencing this relationship that cannot be accounted for in strictly comparing measurement outcomes. This does prevent the study from reporting a causal relationship between education attainment and employment outcomes, but as it is not possible to manipulate variables in the lives of former foster youth, the conclusions that are drawn provide valuable insight into how former foster youth are faring after they age out of care. Implications from this research around policy in focusing on educational attainment to improve employment outcomes need to be mindful of these limitations and that there is not a direct link between the two outcome measurements. The findings from the study inform the current understanding of what former foster youth's participation in the labour market looks like and how their life circumstances develop into barriers in finding secure and adequate employment.

It is not just the barriers former foster youth face that influence their outcomes but how those barriers are offset by the established supports in the youth's lives. Jones (2011)

sorted the barriers and supports youth faced upon aging out of care into the classifications of connectedness and risks in a longitudinal study that followed 16 youth for three years after aging out of care. The purpose of study was to track youth's transitions to independence over a period of time and see what factors promoted or prohibited a successful transition. Through analysis of the results, the role connectedness and risks played in the youth's transition were grouped into four categories: multiple connections with no concerns, connected with no risks, multiple connections with risks, and connected but with risks (Jones, 2011). This shows youth are not either connected or at-risk during their transition and that being connected to the adult world does not prevent them from experiencing risks, as seen in 10 out of the 16 youth that had at least one connection but also experienced risks that put their future in question. No matter what category the youth was placed, a need for further preparation and follow-up before and after the transition to independence was stated by all of the participants.

The longitudinal design of this study is advantageous as it shows the barriers and supports that youth deal with are persistent even after being on their own for three years. It also indicates that there are multiple pathways former foster youth follow once leaving care. The connections to the adult world, such as through work or school, are not enough to prevent former foster youth from facing problems, such as with finances, substance abuse, and mental health. The study design does not allow for the determination of the impact the number of connections or risks has on making a successful transition to adulthood but rather presents the finding that former foster youth have lasting needs, which require support at an individual and group population level.

Former foster youth have access to supports and financial services when they age out of care, but the funds and services that exist do not completely mitigate the barriers these youth face. The findings from the research studies and reports in this section show that former foster youth fare worse than their peers on multiple dimensions, which are consistent throughout multiple provinces and states. The relationship between outcomes for former foster youth and service access needs to be studied further to determine the changes that are essential in improving the support and wellness of this population. Each youth will have a unique set of needs and necessary supports based on the individual events and experiences that have been accumulating since birth, and a mismatch between these needs and access to services can be debilitating on the path forward into adulthood (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004).

### **Life Span Development**

The transition to adulthood is not a contained life event separate from the other stages, events, and transitions that make up the life course of every person. The development of an individual is a life-long process, and the changes that take place during transitional life periods can be understood to a greater degree if viewed within the context of the events that happened before and the events that are still to come (Baltes et al., 1980). Former foster youth were infants, children, and adolescents before they aged out of care and will become adults and grow into old age after completing the transition to adulthood. Each age period within the individual's life span has its own set of developmental tasks or processes to be completed, and the manner in which these occur influence the overall organization and development of the individual (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). Exploring the transition to adulthood through the

lens of life span development provides an opportunity for this singular life event to be framed within the context of the entire human life course and for awareness to be gained about how the influence of the past, present, and future affects the transition between stages (Baltes et al., 1980).

Experiences and development in early life stages are viewed as being contributors to or determinants of subsequent developmental behaviour and as being influential in preparing an individual for conditions encountered in later periods of development (Baltes et al., 1980). The transition between adolescence and adulthood is a significant occasion where the life course can be redirected, creating a pervasive change in how life is experienced (Schwartz, 2016). The transition represents a stage where established patterns can be continued from adolescence into adulthood or where they can be discontinued and new social roles and behavioural patterns can be formed and implemented (Schulenberg et al., 2004). In order to create a complete understanding of the individual up to the present stage of development, the implications of and the patterns and roles within previous life stages must be acknowledged to determine their convergence or divergence from current functioning (Baltes et al., 1980).

Former foster youth's transition to adulthood does not begin the day of their eighteenth birthday when they age out of the child welfare system. It encompasses everything that has occurred since they were born and the developmental trajectories that will be followed in the future. Taking a closer look at a significant transitional event is crucial in gaining concentrated information, but it also must be placed within the context of the individual's entire life course. As explained by Hendry and Kloep (2007),

Contemporary developmental scientists should consider human interaction within cultural, historical, and psychosocial shifts and the peculiarities of time and place and embrace dynamic, systemic, interactive models as a way of charting and understanding development across the adolescent-adult transition, and, indeed, across the whole life span. (p. 78)

The transition from adolescence to adulthood does not stand apart from previous experiences or societal influences, and a comprehensive analysis of this transition must take the impact of these forces into consideration.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Young adults in the general population have been prolonging the age at which they get married and have children, allowing for a greater period of exploration to exist before reaching the stability of adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This period of exploration is culturally constructed and influenced greatly by the shift in young adults to pursue postsecondary education (Arnett, 2000). A delay between adolescence and adulthood has emerged, making way for new developmental stage to be theorized that accurately reflects the unique characteristics associated with this period of exploration. The identification of this new stage began with the analysis by Arnett and Taber (1994) of cultures shaped either by broad or narrow socialization. The authors state cultures with broad socialization include many different developmental routes taken by its members while also encouraging self-expression, independence, and individualism. Narrow socialization, on the other hand, was defined by conformity and having a small amount of variability in the developmental routes of its members (Arnett & Taber, 1994). Broad

socialization is seen in “the contemporary West” where the cultural norms are mainly defined by the middle class, Caucasian population (Arnett & Taber, 1994).

The broad socialization customs of “the contemporary West” influence the transition to adulthood at a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural level. Individuals create a new view of the world through the beliefs and values they learn in postsecondary education, develop intimacy and autonomy in relationships of their choosing, and begin to practice impulse control and avoid acting recklessly (Arnett & Taber, 1994). The nature of broad socialization means the transition to adulthood on these levels all happen in different ways and at different times according to the characteristics of each individual. There is not one defining moment when an individual reaches adulthood but rather a gradual transition of including more and more adult-like qualities into everyday thinking, feeling, and acting. The economic climate also influences this role transition as individuals delay establishing a career, getting married, and having kids to pursue further education that will allow them to participate fully in the complex labour market. This has led to Arnett and Taber (1994) defining the new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood as *emerging adulthood*, where the transition to adulthood takes many years and is reached only when the individual has decided so.

Arnett (2000) theorizes emerging adulthood, encompassing ages 18 to 25, is different from adolescence and adulthood in three ways: demographically, subjectively, and in identity exploration. During emerging adulthood, there is a large amount of variance in an individual’s educational pursuit, marriage status, and housing situation compared to the stability that is found in these areas during adolescence and adulthood. This stage is also characterized by the identification of being neither an adolescent nor an

adult and so being left somewhere in the middle, which contrasts with adolescents and adults identifying with belonging to their particular developmental stage. Identity exploration is different in emerging adulthood as the individual has the means to explore different jobs, relationships, and views to see which ones fit the best without being held back by obligations. Adolescents are exploring their identity as well but usually do not have the means to pursue it very far, and adults are immersed in commitments that solidify their identity and curb their ability to engage in further exploration. Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that is accessible to individuals that have the opportunity to transition to adulthood gradually and does not extend to all members in an industrialized or post-industrial country.

The transition to adulthood in cultures with broad socialization is based more on individual characteristics rather than life events or age milestones. Arnett (2001) looked further into what characteristics signaled the reaching of adulthood by examining questionnaire responses from 519 adolescents, emerging adults, and young-to-midlife adults. The responses indicated becoming an adult involved the characteristics of taking responsibility for your actions, creating values and beliefs based on personal experiences rather than the experiences of others, establishing financial independence without parental support, and having a relationship with parents based on being an equal adult (Arnett, 2001). The results demonstrate becoming an adult is no longer specifically associated with turning 18 or getting married or having children. Adulthood is viewed more as becoming self-reliant, accountable, and equal to those viewed as already having adult status. The transition is marked by a gradual acquisition of these traits and does not involve an all or nothing crossover from one stage to the next.

Emerging adulthood presents a different perspective to compare the transition to adulthood that takes place in the general population to the transition that is undergone by those aging out of the child welfare system. Arnett (2007) discusses how the features that define the stage of emerging adulthood (identity exploration; instability; individual focus; neither adolescent nor adult; period of opportunity) are applicable to former foster youth. Arnett theorizes former foster youth experience a greater amount of instability, self-focus, and freedom to pursue opportunities (rather than being controlled by the system as in the past) and experience a decreased ability to explore their identity and have a gradual transition to adulthood. These conclusions are not evidence-based but rather focused on providing a framework to further explore how emerging adulthood applies to former foster youth and what impact it may have on their ability to make a successful transition to adulthood. The variety of attributes and experiences within the former foster youth population will influence whether the transition into adulthood is gradual or rapid or somewhere in between.

### **Variability within the Transition to Adulthood**

The following studies demonstrate there is a lack of consensus as to whether or not former foster youth meet the characteristics associated with emerging adulthood. Some of the research demonstrates the developmental stage of emerging adulthood does not fit at all while others demonstrate the stage does fit but with distinct exceptions or that emerging adulthood is only one of several paths former foster youth follow in transitioning to adulthood. This speaks to how complex the transition to adulthood is for former foster youth and how dependent it is upon the unique circumstances particular to each youth. More research is needed at greater depth to understand how former foster

youth transition to adulthood and how the transition may or may not align with the characteristics found in emerging adulthood.

Former foster youth are raised within a child welfare system that promotes independence as an indicator of a successful transition to adulthood, which can influence the pace of the role transition between adolescence and adulthood. Singer and Berzin (2015) analyzed data from Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health with the purpose of exploring how adult identity differed between young adults that had and had not been involved in the child welfare system for participants aged 18 to 26. The results showed young adults with foster care experience do not entirely identify with the gradual transition to adulthood that is involved in emerging adulthood when compared to non-foster youth. Young adults with foster care experience viewed themselves as being an adult all the time significantly more and had higher ratings of feeling independent than young adults with no foster care experience. Young adults with foster care experience are also less likely to transition to an adult identity gradually and may miss out on the benefits that come with moving slowly towards independence. An accelerated path to adulthood could lead to young adults with foster care experience facing disadvantages during ages 18 to 25 that are difficult to compensate for later in life.

The comparison between those with and without foster care experience is helpful to show that young adults with foster care experience do not follow the same developmental trajectory that young adults in the general population undergo. Young adults with foster care experience do not have the same opportunity to extend their transition to adulthood because their departure from the child welfare system can result in

an accelerated transition to adulthood. Although this comparison is helpful, the study does not define what foster care experience means or if it involves aging out of the foster care system. Separating young adults into those with and without foster care experience allows the between group comparison to be made but does not address the diversity within the foster care population itself. Young adults with foster care experience may not participate in emerging adulthood at the same rate as the general population but that does not mean they are all on a path to a rapid transition to adulthood.

The large amount of variability within the former foster youth population can lead to many different paths being taken to reach adulthood. Courtney, Hook, and Lee (2012) identified four different groups of transition types by analyzing data collected from the Midwest Study at the time when former foster youth were either 23 or 24 years old. Results showed that only 21.1% of the former foster youth in the study were categorized as belonging to the Emerging Adulthood group. Most of the former foster youth were categorized as either Accelerated Adults (36.3%) or as Struggling Parents (25.2%) with the least amount of youth being categorized as Troubled and Troubling (17.5%). Many foster youth are unable to delay their transition to adulthood when they age out of care as by then they are mostly or completely responsible for taking care of themselves or taking care of themselves plus their child or children.

Former foster youth follow different paths in transitioning to adulthood and creating an independent identity (Courtney et al., 2012). They each face obstacles unique to their situation, which influences the route they take to transition to adulthood. Some are able to take more time to transition gradually while others are forced into adulthood abruptly once leaving care. These conclusions are drawn from secondary data analysis

and only analyze the information collected from former foster youth at the time of their fourth and last interview (Courtney et al., 2012). It remains unknown what the distribution of youth would be in each group at ages 17/18, 19, and 21 (first, second, and third interviews) and how those distributions would change as the youth aged. There is also a lack of exploration around how youth's service access has influenced their category classification. These questions are important to answer in order to gain a greater understanding of what impacts former foster youth's transition to adulthood.

In contrast to the previous findings, Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014) found former foster youth participated in the stage of emerging adulthood but in a way that was influenced by their time spent in foster care. In interviews with 20 former foster youth, the theme emerged that the characteristics of emerging adulthood (feeling in-between; instability; identity exploration; self-focus; age of opportunity) could be applied to this population, albeit in a unique and specific way. The child welfare system played a large role in how the characteristics developed as former foster youth reported feeling in-between the child welfare system and the adult welfare system. Instability, identity exploration, and self-focus were not viewed as opportunities for growth but were reported as being riddled with obstacles that former foster youth had to overcome in order to reach stability. Former foster youth were optimistic about their outcomes as although they knew the transition would be tough, they trusted their resilience to help them succeed. The application of the emerging adulthood development stage to former foster youth was limited in this study by their use of a population that was accessing services to support the transition process. This population does not represent former foster youth that have no supports or services to assist in the transition and that may display different

characteristics in their transition to adulthood that do not fit into the emerging adulthood categories.

Another interesting finding that was highlighted through the interview analysis was that former foster youth presented very black and white ideas about receiving support and the transition to adulthood (Berzin et al., 2014). Being an adult meant that no services or supports from the system could be utilized because adulthood was associated with being self-sufficient and adolescence was associated with receiving support from other sources. This view was ingrained to the point that even the act of asking for help was not associated with adult behaviour. Remaining in care after the age of majority to access services and supports stalled the former foster youth's transition to adulthood and held them in the frame of mind of being an adolescent that relied upon others, mainly the child welfare system, to get by. The former foster youth were unable to reconcile an interdependent relationship with the child welfare system with behaving like an adult.

Results from the study show how youth's conception of adulthood puts them at odds with staying connected to the child welfare system after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (Berzin et al., 2014). These findings open the door to further questions about how this idea of adulthood is developed, such as whether it comes from the child welfare system's push for independence or the youth's need to have control over their lives. The study specifies that it is the system's responsibility to promote and support interdependence for former foster youth, but would further dictation from the system about how they are supposed to live their lives be accepted? Is it the system that needs to change, the former foster youth's concrete views about not receiving support to be an adult, or some combination of both? Answering these questions would provide further information about how to

support former foster youth as independent adults while encouraging connection to and utilization of supports and services. The role of the child welfare system and larger systems, institutions, social group membership, and power dynamics must be explored to form a more complete picture of the significant influences during the transition to adulthood.

**Intersectionality.** Previous research has outlined how former foster youth compare to young adults without foster care experience and how diversity within the former foster youth population influences the developmental trajectory that unfolds during the transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012; Singer & Berzin, 2015). The variability within former foster youth is discussed in terms of meeting the criteria necessary to be included in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood and assumes a certain level of within-group homogeneity beyond the impact of individual life experiences. For example, the study by Courtney, Hook, and Lee (2012) found four transition types (Emerging Adult, Accelerated Adult, Struggling Parent, and Troubled and Troubling) that were identified within the former foster youth participants but did not explore the diversity within each transition type or its implications for the transition type membership. What the previous research does not address in a clear manner is how membership in socially constructed categories, such as race, gender, social class, sexuality, and ethnicity, influences former foster youth's transition to adulthood (E. R. Cole, 2009). The focus of the research is shifted towards comparing former foster youth to norms in the general population without considering membership within these other categories. Bringing these categories into the discussion on the variability within the

transition to adulthood will expand the understanding for all members of the former foster youth population.

One way of exploring the diversity within the former foster youth population is to view it through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality is defined as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Clark, 2013, p. 475). Intersectionality does not view these social categories as being separate from each other but instead explores how the categories are connected, how they engage with one another, and how they impact the everyday experiences of group members (Clark, 2013). The focus is to reveal the privilege or oppression that exists as a result of the economic, social, and political practices associated with being a member of one or multiple social categories (Clark, 2013). The interactions between gender, class, race, and other categories are the key to understanding the multiple layers of oppression and discrimination that can be experienced by an individual.

Intersectionality can expand the understanding of the transition to adulthood because it views individuals as being members of many categories and not just primarily one category. It is able to take into consideration how being a former foster youth interacts with gender, race, social class, ethnicity, sexuality, and aspects of social identity (Gopaldas, 2013) and that all of these statuses are experienced simultaneously and must be addressed in combination rather than separately (E. R. Cole, 2009). This perspective accounts for the uniqueness of the individual members of the former foster youth population and each of their social locations and how this influences the advantages and

disadvantages they will encounter during their transition (Gopaldas, 2013).

Intersectionality has the ability to expand the discussion beyond the connection between transitioning to adulthood and being a former foster youth and include other social identities, instances of inequality, and power relations that are encountered in real-life experiences (Clark, 2013). Intersectionality can connect the experiences of marginalization, privilege, and discrimination that former foster youth face to a greater conversation that goes beyond the foster youth population and into the world of oppression of social identities on a systematic and institutional level (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). A more complete and informed conceptualization of the transition to adulthood for former foster youth can be formed if it is viewed through multiple perspectives, including the thoughts and beliefs of the youth themselves, rather than only a comparison of how they differ from the norm.

### **Youth Perspectives on Aging Out**

As described previously, there is ample research showing that former foster youth face many barriers in their transition to independence and fall behind their peers on measured outcomes, such as employment and education (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Hook & Courtney, 2011). What about looking at the transition to adulthood and independence from the perspectives of the former foster youth? What do former foster youth have to say about the process they are going through and how it affects them? The perspectives of former foster youth are not well represented in the literature and need to be engaged in order to help support the development of appropriate policies for this population (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). The purpose of the study by Cunningham and Diversi (2013) was to create a space where former foster youth could tell their story

about the process of aging out and moving towards independence. This was carried out by examining narratives collected from six youth in an Independent Living Services (ILS) program that were in the middle of transitioning out of care. The main themes that were highlighted in the analysis of the narratives were concerns about housing and financial insecurity, the loss of social support from biological and foster families, and the need to become completely self-sufficient. The focus on self-reliance prior to aging out of care was significant because it shows the pressure for independence from the system and also the pressure youth placed on themselves to become independent (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). Youth transitioning out of care are faced with independence abruptly, having been taught that it is their responsibility to take care of themselves.

The emphasis on self-sufficiency from the child welfare system is in contrast to the findings that former foster youth develop a learned helplessness while in care and that they carry the belief that they do not have control over their own lives into their transition out of care (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015). On one hand, the child welfare system advocates for youth in care to become independent by the time they reach the age of majority, but on the other hand, the system does not provide the means for youth to achieve this goal. The study by Gomez et al. (2015) sought to explore how learned helplessness develops by analyzing interviews and focus groups with 134 emerging adult participants (age 18-25). The participants in the interviews and focus groups were recruited from agencies that offer services to homeless emerging adults and included 61 emerging adults that had aged out of foster care. The research revealed perceptions of learned helplessness developed from the former foster youth experiencing events out of their control, such as abuse and being removed from their families, and

from situations where there was separation between their actions and the consequences of their behaviours. The perception of learned helplessness former foster youth developed was more prevalent when compared to the participants in the study that had not been in foster care. Former foster youth report feeling pressured to become self-reliant as they face an abrupt exit from the system yet they are not provided with the necessary tools to help them build independence and a sense of self-efficacy while in care.

There is a discrepancy between what the system is offering to former foster youth and what the youth need in order to feel supported on their transition to independence. Identification of the challenges associated with aging out of foster care and the necessary changes to address the challenges were the main focus of the research carried out by Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, and Painter (2007). Data was collected from six focus groups with 72 participants, which included youth transitioning out of care, foster parents, and social workers. The results revealed the youth wanted to be more involved in determining how their lives proceeded while in care. Youth in these focus groups wanted to be part of the decision-making process, to have more control over their future, and to be presented with more opportunities to build independence skills. Implications for policy and practice would require a shift toward youth-centred practice that viewed youth in care in terms of their resources and their strengths and saw youth as being an active participant in the process (Scannapieco et al., 2007).

These results were similar to those found by the OCYA (2013) in conducting focus groups with former foster youth and professionals in the field with experience in working with these youth. The focus groups were formed to respond to the number of former foster youth that had gone to their advocates to ask for help with getting their

transition needs met under the Child, Youth, and Family Enhancement Act. Three themes emerged from the focus groups that outline what exactly youth need and want after having transitioned out of care. The first theme was access to supports and programs, especially those related to mental health. The second theme that emerged was finding connections to adults in the community that would continue to be supportive after the youth aged out of care. The last theme that came up was the need for more resources to prepare the youth to live independently after they aged out. The professionals mirrored these expressed sentiments and voiced their concerns around not being able to support youth effectively due to the restrictions in the system, their caseload management, and in consistent policy application.

Although the focus groups conducted by the OCYA were not done through an empirical research study, the findings are important and acknowledge how former foster youth need support beyond the financial level and beyond their transition out of care (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013). Former foster youth and professionals expressed their frustration with the inability of the youth to be prepared to be independent upon aging out of care. Resources and funding are crucial parts of the process, but former foster youth also need to feel supported on an emotional level and not feel abandoned by the child welfare system once they reach the age of 18. This report on aging out of care highlights the complexity around transitioning youth successfully and the supports youth require on a multitude of levels both while in care and after aging out of care.

**Decision to leave care.** The implications of many research studies concerning former foster youth suggest more funding for supports and services is needed in order to keep youth connected to the system and improve the outcomes of their transition to adulthood

(Gomez et al., 2015; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013; Scannapieco et al., 2007). This implies there is a positive correlation between the services available and youth's access of services, but this does not coincide with present situation. Many youth choose to leave care upon their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday even though they are able (whether or not they are aware) to remain in the system and continue receiving supports and services. It is important to explore and find out what makes youth want to leave the foster care system when they have the option of staying.

McCoy, McMillen, and Spitznagel (2008) examined the influences involved in former foster youth's departure from the Missouri child welfare system to determine what was pushing youth to separate themselves from the system. Youth transitioning out of care were interviewed nine times between ages 17 to 19 (with their transition out of care by age 19 placing them in the former foster youth category). This resulted in mixed-methods data being collected from 404 participants about the factors that were influential in their decision to exit the foster care system. The findings revealed the top two reasons that former foster youth wanted to leave care was because they were fed up or frustrated with the system (39%) and because they wanted to establish independence with control over their own lives (28.2%). Providing more services to former foster youth is not going to appeal to the majority of youth that have decided they are done dealing with the system and want to make it on their own. These former foster youth will not be accessing services whether they do or do not exist, as they have made the decision to enter into the adult world unsupported. Additional services certainly will not affect the situation negatively, but it is not the sole answer to keeping former foster youth connected to the system during their transition to adulthood.

Even though they are able to stay involved with the foster care system, such as with the Support and Financial Assistance agreement and the Advancing Futures Bursary Program in Alberta, many youth choose to leave care entirely when they reach the age of majority (McCoy et al., 2008). To add to the understanding of why former foster youth left care and their views about this transition, Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011) interviewed 45 youth transitioning out of care in both individual and group settings. It was discovered the two main reasons youth left care were a lack of clear communication around the option of staying in care past age 18 and a desire to separate themselves from the system and have control over their own lives. Wanting independence is developmentally appropriate at this age as youth want to make decisions for themselves and build their self-reliance. The issue with this path towards independence, for the population of former foster youth, is it limits their ability to rely on external financial and social supports. These supports have become commonplace for young adults in the general population to rely on to sustain themselves through this transition. Once youth age of out of care, they gain the autonomy they have always desired, but then realize they have no supports to fall back on and are not able to return to the child welfare system once this realization is made. Conceptualizing the goal of independence as one that involves both interdependence with the system and autonomy may increase the likelihood the individual will stay in care and utilize system supports past age 18 (Goodkind et al., 2011).

Youth's need for self-determination and pride about their ability to be self-reliant are main motivators among the decision to leave care (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Realizing service access would help support their success in the

transition to adulthood does not diminish the importance or influence of the two traits that made the former foster youth leave care in the first place. Former foster youth make the transition to adulthood differently than young adults without foster care experience, and it may involve some characteristics of emerging adulthood or none at all. What is significant is the shift for most young adults to rely on more support during their transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Former foster youth are limited in their support access because of the push/pull relationship with the child welfare system and their specific beliefs about adulthood and independence.

Two transitions are happening at the same time, which are the transition out of the child welfare system and the transition to independence and adulthood. For some, aging out of the child welfare system is the single event that propels them into adulthood where there is no turning back and no one else to rely on for support (Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelcu, 2013). For others, aging out of the child welfare system does not necessarily result in self-reliance and independence and involves a period time where adult behaviours are able to be gradually incorporated into their lives. There is no definite answer as to whether or not former foster youth fit into the developmental pattern of emerging adulthood. The question remains if a rapid or gradual transition influences their conception of adulthood and makes them less likely to engage in services and supports once emancipated from the system. The motivation to access services and support could also be dependent upon factors that do not pertain to the pace of transition but rather to competencies in other domains.

### **Capacity to Seek Help and Support**

The perception of learned helplessness that was found in former foster youth by Gomez et al. (2015) mirrored the results of research by King, Brown, Petch, and Wright (2014) on young offenders' view on seeking support for the challenges they were having. Six males between the ages of 13 to 18 that were attending a young offenders program were interviewed to determine their perceptions of support-seeking. Participants expressed feeling powerless to do anything to solve the issues in their lives because there were no choices they could make or options that existed that would be able to improve their situation. The findings from the study also showed the participants expressed the belief that their problems were not legitimate enough to warrant support, they would face discrimination or stigmatization because of being a young offender, and it was hard for them to seek support due to difficulties in trusting others and opening up about the difficulties they were experiencing. These youth did not have foster care experience but may have experienced similar circumstances that contributed to their perceived inability to seek out support for their issues. These perceptions may also be held by former foster youth about their ability to seek out support for the difficulties they are facing in their transition to adulthood.

What young people define as being a problem that warrants the seeking of support is constantly changing and being shaped by members of society that hold more power (Murray, 2005). The capacity to seek help is not only influenced by the individual seeking help, but it is also shaped by the experience of what happens when help is sought out (Murray, 2005). If an individual seeks support for an issue that is not deemed to be a

valid problem by society, this can further ingrain a sense a powerlessness and decrease the inclination to seek support in the future (Murray, 2005).

Individuals that have faced rejection from seeking support from services directly or have witnessed or heard about other individuals facing rejection may look for alternative ways to gain support for their issues (Williams & Mickelson, 2008). Two studies were conducted to analyze how a perception of being stigmatized influenced support-seeking behaviours and how it influenced the view of the response from the network providing the support (Williams & Mickelson, 2008). The first study interviewed 116 women recruited from government and social services agencies providing support for low-income individuals, and the second study interviewed 177 low-income women that had also experienced abuse from a partner in the past 6 months. The results from both studies showed the perception of being stigmatized is related to an increase in the amount of indirect support seeking, an increased fear of rejection from support networks, and an increased view of unresponsiveness from the support network. This may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where a perception of being stigmatized leads to the decision to pursue support indirectly, which leads to an unsupportive response from the network providing services. Former foster youth may hold the same stigma perceptions as they often deal with living in poverty (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006) or have a history of facing abuse (Gomez et al., 2015). These perceptions may influence former foster youth's willingness to seek out support services directly, which will affect the service provider's ability to respond with appropriate and effective support.

The emotional turmoil that comes with transitioning to adulthood (Arnett & Taber, 1994) and aging out of foster care (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013)

can become a barrier to seeking support if emotional competency and awareness is not developed (Ciarrochi et al., 2002). Two studies examined the association between emotional competency and intention to seek support in different adolescent age groups (Ciarrochi et al., 2002; Ciarrochi, Wilson, Deane, & Rickwood, 2003). The first study analyzed responses on the Beck Hopelessness Scale, General Help-seeking Questionnaire, Self-report emotional competence, Toronto Alexithymia Scale, and the Social Support Questionnaire from 137 high school students, aged 16 to 18 (Ciarrochi et al., 2002). Results showed an overall low emotional competence was related to a low intention to seek help. One possible explanation for the results given by the authors was the ability to perceive and recognize emotions may be necessary for adolescents to understand when they need to seek support. Emotional competency that is not developed in adolescence may continue to influence an individual's intent and awareness of when to seek help.

The second study used the same measures to analyze responses from 217 high school students, aged 13 to 16 (Ciarrochi et al., 2003). The results showed the same relationship between an overall low emotional competence and a low intention to seek support in this age group that was found in the older adolescents. The novel finding from this study was a difficulty in describing and identifying emotions, which was gauged by scores on the Toronto Alexithymia Scale, was related to a greater intention to seek support at age 13, but as the adolescents got older, the difficulty became associated with a lower intention to seek support. The change continued to be stable until age 18, as shown by the results in the previous study (Ciarrochi et al., 2002). Former foster youth may experience the same low intent to seek support if they do not develop an awareness of

and an ability to manage emotions either as an adolescent or during their transition to adulthood.

There are also cultural norms that need to be taken into consideration when examining the factors that contribute to a diminished capacity to seek out help and support. Explicit or direct support may be more beneficial to individualistic cultures that view the individual as independent and personally responsible, and implicit or indirect support may be more beneficial to interdependent cultures that view the individual through their connections to other people and value consensus and harmony among those connections (Taylor et al., 2007). This concept was examined in the study by Taylor et al. (2007) by looking at the how the stress responses of 81 Asian, Asian American, and European American university students were affected by receiving either implicit or explicit social support. The results showed the stress response of Asian and Asian American students improved with implicit social support and was aggravated by explicit social support, and the stress response of European Americans was improved with explicit social support and aggravated by implicit social support. Although this study examined social support and not support service access, the findings are still important as they highlight the need to provide support in a form that is culturally appropriate to the individual as forms of support that are culturally inappropriate run the risk of exacerbating the individual's stress level. The acknowledged gap in culturally appropriate services for the Indigenous population may continue to have harmful influences on former foster youth of Indigenous heritage if they cannot access supports that are appropriate to their cultural needs (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016; Sinha et al., 2013).

The process of seeking support is not straightforward and can be influenced by factors within and outside of the control of former foster youth. Feeling powerless, not viewing problems as being legitimate enough to warrant support, having a perceived stigma, lacking emotional competency, and not having access to culturally appropriate supports can all influence an individual's capacity to seek out help and support for the difficulties that are being faced (Ciarrochi et al., 2002; King et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2007; Williams & Mickelson, 2008). Greater exploration is needed to understand the views that former foster youth hold about seeking support in their transition into adulthood and examine what barriers may be inhibiting their capacity to seek help and support.

### **Service Use from the Provider Perspective**

The relationship between former foster youth and service use is complex and made more so by the precarious transition to adulthood that also takes place as former foster youth age out of care. Does service use change after former foster youth leave care? Are the service use needs of former foster youth different once they leave care? Does remaining in care have an impact on the services former foster youth are able to access? These research questions were explored in the analyses completed on data sets from the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth conducted by Brown, Courtney, and McMillen (2015). The findings showed the need for behaviour health services, defined as counselling, psychiatric medication, and substance use treatment, remained at a high level both while in care and after leaving care. The analyses also showed as former foster youth got older, behaviour health service use declined even though there was still a high need for it. The relationship between the need for services

and use of services shifts over time for former foster youth, and more knowledge is needed to understand what the contributing factors may be in this decline.

The research conducted by Collins, Jimenez, and Thomas (2018) explored this relationship by looking into former foster youth's experience of engaging with healthcare services after they had aged out of foster care. The study interviewed 13 former foster youth, between 18 and 26 years old, about their lived experience of seeking out healthcare services. The significant themes from the interviews were when accessing healthcare service, former foster youth lacked social support, had little to no knowledge of their family's or their own medical history, were used to having their healthcare needs managed for them, and avoided disclosing sensitive information about their past. The lack of information, awareness, and social resources that former foster youth face when engaging with the healthcare system may provide an opportunity for service providers to make a difference and positively influence healthcare seeking behaviours.

The challenges that former foster youth face when seeking healthcare services not only come from their own personal circumstances but can also arise from the systems they engage with and from their own personal beliefs (Pryce, Napolitano, & Samuels, 2017). This was explored in a research study that examined the qualitative interviews from Wave II of the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Outcomes of Former Foster Youth. There were 28 former foster youth participants in this sample, and they were 22 years old at the time of the Wave II interview. The results found former foster youth faced challenges from their personal perspectives, their relational experiences, and continued interactions with unsupportive systems. Obtaining help from systems was viewed by former foster youth as being inconsistent with their view of independence, unreliable in

providing supportive services, and unable to offer choice or control in the help seeking process. Former foster youth identified barriers at multiple levels when engaging with services, but service provision is a two-way relationship. There may be barriers faced by service providers that have not been accounted for in the outcomes of engaging with and providing services to the former foster youth population.

There is limited understanding about the service provider perspective on providing supports to the former foster youth population as engagement with the service system has mainly been studied through the thoughts and experiences of former foster youth. The service provider perspective on the transition to adulthood was included in the research study carried out by Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman (2018), where 25 caseworkers were interviewed as well as 25 former foster youth. The results showed that although there were areas of agreement between former foster youth and caseworkers about the main challenges and important assets during the transition to adulthood, there were also areas where former foster youth and caseworkers differed in their perspectives. Caseworkers identified low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, and low awareness of their rights as additional challenges to the transition, and former foster youth identified their self-reliance as an asset and a source of motivation, rather than a hindrance. One limitation of this study is it was conducted in Israel, which reduces the generalizability of its results to the foster care system and the transition to adulthood of former foster youth in Canada. It is crucial to acknowledge both sides of this relationship, those accessing services and those providing services, to minimize the gaps of information and provide a complete picture of the successes and challenges when it comes to the experience of accessing and providing services during the transition to adulthood.

## Research Study Rationale

Previous research has established former foster youth face more obstacles in their transition to independence, transition differently than young adults not in care, and remove themselves from care due to a desire to be in control of their own lives. There remains a gap in knowledge regarding the provision of services and supports for former foster youth, how the transition to adulthood influences former foster youth's stance on receiving further systemic supports, and if there are any barriers that exist in former foster youth's ability to seek out help and support. The transition out of the child welfare system is framed within the developmental lens of emerging adulthood and how exclusion from or a rapid transition through this stage amplifies the disparities that former foster youth encounter. Increasing service access alone will not meet the needs of this population without a greater understanding of how former foster youth's adult identity comes to exclude the dependence on any external supports. Where this rigid belief comes from and how it influences the transition to adulthood will add further knowledge to how to best support the utilization of services in former foster youth.

Missing even more so in the literature are the perspectives of service providers in delivering supports and services to the former foster youth population. Service delivery involves an interaction between those who are accessing services and those that are providing services, with many interactions taking place on an interpersonal level. Focusing mainly on the former foster youth perspective leaves out a wealth of information that could be obtained from exploring service providers' perspectives on the significant influences in former foster youth's transition to adulthood and what is helpful or challenging in providing services to them during this time. Incorporating an alternate

view would help build a more complete understanding of how former foster youth's view of independence and transition to adulthood impacts their interactions with community services and supports. This additional perspective could also uncover areas to be improved in providing services that have not been highlighted in the research based on former foster youth's beliefs and experiences.

The current study addresses this gap in the knowledge base by interviewing professionals working in organizations and agencies that provide services to young adults within the ages associated with the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25). The focus is on gaining more in-depth information on the service provider perspective of former foster youth's view of independence, how it is influenced by their experiences within the child welfare system, and what impact it has on their capacity to access services and supports. The findings add further knowledge about what service providers view as necessary for former foster youth to maintain their autonomy while also receiving support from system services. Increasing access to and use of services and programs by former foster youth is crucial in mirroring the support that young adults in the general population receive during the period of emerging adulthood. The greater understanding supplied by the current study brings to light the potential areas where adjustments can be made to improve former foster youth's ability to incorporate receiving external support in the creation of an independent adult identity.

**Study purpose and research questions.** The aim of this research study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of the transition to adulthood and independence for former foster youth and how the experience influences the connection to support services after aging out of care from the point of view of the professional providing services to

this population. Therefore, the main research question is: How do service providers experience the delivery of supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood? In accordance with this main research question, the following research questions will also be explored:

1. What past experiences in foster care are significant to service providers in shaping former foster youth's understanding of adulthood?
2. How do these experiences influence former foster youth's relationship with the child welfare system and service providers after the youth has left care?
3. What is necessary to incorporate and to overcome from a service provider perspective to engage and sustain former foster youth in the utilization of external supports?

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen to be most appropriate to address the research questions as many quantitative studies have reported on the outcomes for former foster youth and have been able to effectively display results for the population on a broad level (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Singer & Berzin, 2015). These results are crucial in showing the current situation former foster youth are in and their perspective on the barriers and challenges they face in transitioning out of care and into adulthood. Former foster youth are only one part of the interaction when it comes to accessing supports as the professionals providing the services are also an integral part of the relationship. What is needed to expand the current knowledge base are in-depth and personalized accounts of the experience service providers have when delivering supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood. Using a qualitative research design provides an opportunity for detailed and descriptive accounts to be gathered that will add further information about the unique experience services providers have in supporting youth during their access of services.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the qualitative methodology as it fits with the aims of the study to explore the lived experiences of service providers and the meaning they draw from their experience of providing supports and services to former foster youth as the youth transition into adulthood (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, IPA is focused on the details that are personally significant and derived from the lived experience and how those details transform into the meaning the

individual gathers from their experience. IPA was useful in showing what experiences in the transition to adulthood are important from a service provider perspective and in showing how service providers make sense of the successes and challenges in providing support to the former foster youth population during this time. Major life experiences contain multidimensional aspects in their responses, and each of these must be explored, described, interpreted, and contextualized in order to capture the greater meaning that continues to endure once the event has passed (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is phenomenological as it tries to gain an insider perspective on individual's lived experiences, and it is interpretative as it acknowledges that gaining this perspective involves an understanding that is filtered through the researcher's opinions and beliefs (Fade, 2004). IPA has two stages in its interpretation process, which is labelled as a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A double hermeneutic involves the participants making sense of their lived experiences in the first stage and involves the researcher making sense of how the participants make sense of their lived experience in the second stage of the process. This applies to the current study as the service providers will be trying to make sense of their experience of providing supports to former foster youth during the transition to adulthood, and the researcher will be trying to make sense of the service providers' sense making and where the commonalities and variances exist among those experiences. The beliefs of the researcher are not viewed as biases that need to be excluded in IPA research but viewed more as a sense making system that is required in order to make sense of other individuals' experiences (Fade, 2004). The researcher acknowledges the existence of any beliefs or assumptions that may exist for this topic but does not engage in bracketing them off from the research process.

The idiographic approach of IPA is essential to this study as it involves an in-depth examination of each participant's perspective in their own unique context (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The aim focuses on moving towards particular interpretations rather than general explanations. This makes it possible to produce specific statements about the participants that can be incorporated later on to highlight the similarities and differences that exist. Incorporating this aspect of IPA maintains the unique experiences of each service provider throughout the identification of themes that are relevant to all of the participants. IPA explores individuals' lived experiences and inherent meaning, involves meaning making on the part of the participant and the researcher, and preserves the uniqueness of each case within the greater group. All of these aspects will be crucial in coming to an understanding of how service providers construct an understanding of their role in providing supports to former foster youth during their transition into adulthood.

### **Participants**

The number of participants included in a study using IPA varies, but there is a focus on keeping the group small to allow in-depth analysis and the extraction of themes significant to the participants. Smith and Osborn (2007) suggest student researchers conducting a study using IPA should have three participants total as this allows the researcher to engage deeply with the material while also providing enough cases so similarities and differences in experiences can be analyzed. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) later suggest having three to six participants is ideal for sample size as anything larger than six will run the risk of the researcher being overwhelmed with data and missing significant themes in the analysis. Research utilizing IPA that looked at the

support-seeking perceptions of young male offenders, between ages 13 to 18, had six participants in their sample (King et al., 2014). This number was chosen in order to provide variation within individual perspectives while still keeping the sample small enough to preserve the in-depth exploration of each case. Given the previous recommendations and the research example, six participants were chosen for the study's sample to keep the focus on in-depth case exploration while also providing enough data for similarities and differences to emerge, given the variety of experiences within the identified population.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals that have had the experiences necessary to meet the criterion of the research question. The sample is homogenous in terms of all participants having experience providing supports and services to former foster youth transitioning into adulthood but contains variety in the type of service provided, the formality or informality of the service provided, and the amount of experience the participant has providing services to former foster youth. Participants in the study were willing to share their experiences engaging with former foster youth and their ideas about the relationship between former foster youth, the view of independence and adulthood, and the interactions with service providers.

**Background of the Participants.** The participants or co-researchers for this study are professionals working as service providers in community organizations and agencies that provide supports to young adults in the age range necessary to be considered an emerging adult. This focused on professionals working in organizations and agencies providing services to young adults between the ages of 18, age of emancipation from the Alberta foster care system, and 25, end of the age range for an emerging adult (Arnett, 2000).

Participants provided their consent to participate in the research study by reading and signing the participant consent form (see Appendix A). The participants also each chose an alias used for identification for the verbatim extracts from their interviews that are included in the Results section. The aliases chosen by the six participants were Kyla, Alex, Joe, Inara, Jenelle, and Clare.

The first participant, Kyla, was completing a practicum at a drop-in centre with a non-profit organization, which provides service information and referrals for youth ages 16-24. Kyla also had previous experience volunteering at events with other non-profit organizations where she provided service information and education to the community. The second participant, Alex, was working as a service provider in the same drop-in centre as Kyla for just under a year, and he had previous experience providing private care and supports in a one-to-one capacity to former foster youth that had left on their own or aged out of the child welfare system. The third participant, Joe, worked as a service provider with the child welfare system and had many years of experience providing support to youth while they were in foster care. Joe also provided and connected youth with transition supports and resources, such as financial and housing, from when youth were 18 up until they turned 24.

The fourth participant, Inara, worked as a service provider for a non-profit organization providing a variety of supports and services to youth from the ages of 15 to 24. Inara worked specifically at a drop-in centre that provides daytime programs and support with housing resources, education, medical care, and addiction and mental health counselling. Most of the youth Inara worked with were homeless or experiencing housing instability. Jenelle worked as a service provider for a non-profit organization (different

from Inara's) that provides a variety of supports and services to youth from the ages of 15 to 24 and to adults as well. Jenelle worked specifically in a community program that assists youth in developing skills, knowledge, and support systems during their transition to adulthood. Clare worked as a service provider for the same non-profit organization as Jenelle and started her career with a practicum in the same program as Jenelle. At the time of the interview, Clare worked in a program that provides housing and support services for adult males (18 and up) to help facilitate the transition from the prison system to living in the community.

### **Research Site**

Recruitment of research participants was completed by compiling a list of agencies and organizations in the Greater Edmonton Area that met the criteria of providing services and supports to young adults in the age range of 18 to 25. Each agency or organization was contacted directly via email or by an onsite visit to outline the parameters of the research study and discuss participation interest and suitability. Based on the agencies and organizations willing to engage in previous recruitment strategies, further contact was established with specific individual service providers that stated their interest in participating in an interview for the research study (see Appendix B). The individual service providers were presented with an overview of the background and aims of the research study to ensure they had enough experience with the former foster youth population to feel well-informed in answering questions on the topic. Service providers with various professional education and roles in the agencies and organizations were included as participants to encompass a multidisciplinary perspective on providing supports and service to former foster youth.

The research site for conducting the interview was decided by each individual service provider. The participants were able to choose to have the interview conducted in a location convenient for them and would meet the necessary safety, anonymity, and confidentiality requirements. Participants either chose to have the interview conducted in their office at their place of work or in a meeting room in a public space. This was done to create a formal yet comfortable interview environment where the participant would feel safe in sharing their thoughts and experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews, which is considered to be the most effective way to collect data for IPA research and is the method used by the majority of IPA research studies (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix C) was used flexibly to provide participants with the opportunity to give more details in specific areas and was also used to allow the researcher to dive deeper into unexpected themes that arose. Each interview was scheduled for approximately 60 minutes, and it took place in a location chosen by the service provider. An introductory or warm-up period was included at the beginning of the interview to reduce any apprehension or worry felt by the participant and to provide a gradual shift to the discussion of topics more sensitive in nature (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). All participants completed the interview and answered all the questions on the interview schedule. Once the interview was completed, participants received an honorarium in the form of a \$40.00 gift card. The interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The interview was transcribed at the

semantic level and also included significant verbal behaviour, such as periods of silence, laughing, false starts, and other similar elements.

Consultation from an Indigenous Elder was sought out to inform the data collection in this study. This was carried out to strengthen the cultural awareness of the methods used for data collection and heighten the researcher's own cultural awareness as this is the frame of reference through which the data will be analyzed. Oral traditional teachings are passed down from Indigenous Elders to younger generations to communicate teachings from the past and the values, relationships, and connections that are central to the teachings and any challenges faced within them (Christensen & Poupart, 2012). Connection to, understanding of, and learning from Elder teachings is based on the individual's needs and the time and place in which these teachings were heard (Christensen & Poupart, 2012). Disconnection from this tradition and knowledge base could also be influential in how the individual makes sense of his or her experiences. It is crucial to be aware of the significance behind this Indigenous oral tradition and way of knowing to accurately inform the themes and inherent meaning that are drawn from each participant's experience. This need for awareness and connection to the past is of great importance given the history of colonization in Alberta and the impact this may have on the experiences of Indigenous youth in care and their transition into adulthood (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016).

### **Data Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the approach that was used to analyze the data. The analysis procedure followed the steps laid out by Smith and Osborn (2007) on how to conduct IPA on interview data.

1. The first step in the analysis procedure was to become immersed in the data through the reading and re-reading of the transcript, which can include replaying the audio recording of the interview.
2. The second step was to read through the transcript and make note of any comments that appear to be significant or interesting.
  - 2.1. These comments were written down in the left-hand margin of the transcript and included summaries, associations, and interpretations of the important data points.
3. The third step was to read through the transcript and transform the initial comments into emerging themes, which were written down in the right-hand margin.
  - 3.1. The emerging theme captures the essence of what is being described in the text and involves a higher level of abstraction, which may include the use of psychological terminology in theme identification.
  - 3.2. This process was continued throughout the whole transcript and did not involve omitting any data or selecting particular areas for further investigation.

The next part of the analysis focused on organizing and making sense out of all the themes that were initially recognized (Smith & Osborn, 2007).
4. After identification, the fourth step was to make a list of the themes and then look for any connections existed between the emerging themes.
  - 4.1. The themes were listed as they appear in the transcript and then clustered together based on similarities.

- 4.2. It was important at this point to check the clustered themes against the words of the participant to make sure that the extracted concepts captured the essence of what was said.
  - 4.3. A table of themes was then ordered coherently based on which clustered themes most successfully illustrated the participant's views.
  - 4.4. The strongest clusters were then named, and they represent the superordinate themes for the transcript data, which were then organized in a table.
5. The fifth and final step was to expand the superordinate themes into a final statement explaining the overall interrelatedness of the themes and capturing the inherent meaning of the participant's experience.

Each transcript was analyzed individually to preserve the uniqueness of each case and not let the analysis of one transcript influence the next transcript. Once all the individual cases were analyzed, the cross-case analysis was completed by creating a master table of themes for the group, which was based off the superordinate themes from all six of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). The master table of themes is shown in Table 1 in the Results section. Convergence and divergence within the superordinate themes were looked at to highlight repeating patterns while also recognizing the variations and complexities that exist. Any unique experiences, inconsistencies, or uncertainties are elaborated upon in the Results section.

### **Implications of the Researcher**

**Role, biases, and assumptions.** Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis involves the researcher taking an active role in the analysis process as the researcher is the primary tool for analyzing the data (Fade, 2004). The researcher is also active in

creating the interpretations gathered from the transcript data, which can be influenced by the researcher's prior experiences and beliefs (Smith & Osborn, 2007). These prior conceptualizations about the topic of study form part of the lens through which the researcher views and understands the data provided by the participants. The researcher cannot be completely separate from his or her previous beliefs and needs to engage in reflection to understand how this lens may colour the understanding and explanation of the participant's experience.

My past experiences with the foster care system, through my immediate family and work history, have influenced my perception of how the system runs and its impact on the lives of the youth it provides with services. I see a system that blames the individual for his or her circumstances and behaviours and that expects youth to have the same knowledge and actions that an adult would have. I understand youth must take some responsibility for their actions and future outcomes, but I believe they are limited in this ability by the mandates of the system. It is not fair to expect a youth aging out of care to be fully independent as of his or her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and to be able to handle the expectations and stresses involved in the adult world. It is unfair to require this when their peers continue to rely on their parents' support and guidance well into their early twenties (Arnett, 2000). It is my belief the need for a rapid transition to independence implemented by the system negatively impacts a former foster youth's ability to function successfully in the adult world.

This drive for independence and the lack of control a youth in care has over his or her life creates a push-pull relationship between the youth and the foster care system. The youth knows the system can still provide support and services after aging out, but the

need to make his or her own decisions motivates the youth to completely sever all ties and go it alone. I have heard from the youth in care I have worked with that relying on someone else or something else for support makes the youth feel vulnerable because he or she has been let down so many times before and expects it to happen again. It is only once the youth is out in the real world by him or herself that a realization is made that severing ties completely may not have been the best decision. I enter into this research study with the assumption that aging out of foster care does not allow for a gradual transition into adulthood and that a former foster youth's view of independence will be unique to his or her situation.

It is essential I state these biases and assumptions so I may form them clearly with words, take notice of what they mean, and consistently check in with them throughout the research process to limit their influence upon my interpretations of the participants' experiences.

**Ethical considerations.** Along with addressing assumptions and biases, potential ethical issues must also be considered. There will be a risk in the study that a power dynamic between the researcher and participant will come into play with the participant perhaps placing the researcher into the expert role and wanting to give the right answer to the researcher's questions. This was addressed by providing as much choice in the study as possible for the participant and by being transparent about the research process and what is involved in each step. The interviews were as relaxed as possible with an effort to facilitate rapport between the researcher and the participants. Ethical approval for the study was granted through the University of Lethbridge, which follows the national

standards outlined by the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (University of Lethbridge, 2016).

To address issues around an obligation to take part in the study, the participant was reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and that he or she only agrees to be involved by signing the informed consent form (see Appendix A). It was also emphasized to the participant that not participating in the study or withdrawing from the study at any time will not affect them receiving the honorarium for participating. Issues regarding confidentiality were also discussed with participants prior to the interview so that they would be made aware that quotes from their transcript may be used in a thesis or journal article but that all identifying information will be removed from the transcripts and any written documents. A debrief period followed each of the interviews, in which participant understanding regarding these issues was addressed again to ensure full comprehension and consent.

The risk of potential distress for the participants in taking part in the interview was addressed through providing information to the participant about what taking part in the interview would involve and the general topics the interview questions would cover. Participants were also made aware that they could take a break or stop the interview at any time and that it is within their right not to give answers to certain questions if they do not want to. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without having to state a reason for their withdrawal. The debrief period at the end of the interview was used to check with the participants about how the interview process went for them.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the credibility of the study's understandings and explanations, member checking was used with the service provider participants (Creswell, 2015). This involved the researcher presenting the findings to the participants and checking if what is reported is descriptive and encompassing of their experiences. Multiple aspects of the study were addressed through the member checking process, such as the accuracy of the data interpretation and the representativeness of the superordinate themes. Rich and transparent accounts of the participants that make connections to the context of the study were sought out to expand the transferability of the results to individuals in similar situations (Smith et al., 2009). Credibility was also ensured by acknowledging the previous assumptions and biases of the researcher, which were addressed in the previous section, and by explaining the limitations of the study, which is addressed in the Discussion section.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the six participant interviews resulted in three master group themes arising from the superordinate themes of the group. The three master themes that emerged were: unprepared and underserved transition to adulthood; insecure attachment with the service system; and ability of the interpersonal relationship with service providers to meet attachment needs. The emergent master themes and the superordinate themes that they are composed of (see Table 1) will be explored further in this chapter. While the three master themes were common among the participant interviews, there were areas of difference and divergence within the master themes, with those of significance being examined in greater depth in this chapter. It is recognized the master themes are a subjective interpretation of the participants' experiences by this researcher and were created through the exploration of the participants' accounts with a focus on their relevance to the research questions.

**Table 1: Master Themes with associated Superordinate Themes**

<b>Master Themes</b>	<b>Superordinate Themes</b>
Unprepared and underserved transition to adulthood	Surviving the transition to independence
	System barriers to supporting successful transitions
Insecure attachment with the service system	Support cynicism from unmet attachment needs
	Importance of choice, control, and autonomy in service implementation
Ability of the interpersonal relationship with service providers to meet attachment needs	Service providers' implied role as an attachment figure
	Healing experience through engaged connections with service providers

Greater detail and additional context of the three master themes will be provided by verbatim extracts taken from the participant interviews. Pauses in speech, word repetition, or other expressions like “umm”, have been edited out to improve the presentation and readability of the extracts. Participants are identified and referred to by the pseudonym they chose upon signing the participant consent form in order to protect their anonymity, as outlined in the Research Methodology chapter. Any identifying information of the participant or references to the service provider organization has been removed to further enhance the anonymity of the participant and the associated community service provider.

### **Unprepared and Underserviced Transition to Adulthood**

The aim of this master theme was to capture the service providers’ perspective of how difficult the transition from adolescence to adulthood is for former foster youth and that the transition is based more around survival than success due to a lack services and adequate preparation. The aim was to also capture that challenges were identified on both sides of the service relationship, with service providers facing obstacles in providing the services necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.

**Surviving the transition to independence.** This group superordinate theme addressed the participants’ views about how the former foster youth they had supported during their transition to adulthood did not have a practical representation of what independence looked like and the responsibilities it entailed. Joe captured this notion succinctly in an extract from his interview:

*And so, dependent on the youth that you speak to, I think a lot of them don't understand fully the responsibilities of becoming an adult or becoming independent. So, most of them kind of have an idea but aren't fully prepared once they become an adult.*

Clare also spoke about all the tasks former foster youth must accomplish when they transition into adulthood and how the ownership of completing those tasks falls completely on their shoulders:

*So, there's a lot of things that you learn like budgeting, planning, and how to pay your rent on time, how to do things like that. Learning how to be responsible. It's like a real testimonial that like when you have to start doing stuff like that for yourself is a huge thing.*

The transition can be a time of opportunity and practicing autonomy, but it can also lead to former foster youth feeling overwhelmed with taking on everything at once, as described by Kyla:

*But ultimately, it's up to them for a lot of stuff and for the most part, they just... I think it's too much for them. It's too confusing a lot of the time.*

This duality of independence was expanded upon by Inara, who talks about it as being both a positive and negative experience for former foster youth:

*... the independence piece is, can be a doubled edged sword. I think that with all youth you know you want independence until you understand how much of a burden it is.*

This excerpt shows how independence is this concept former foster youth have been striving for during their time spent as an adolescent in foster care, but when they achieve independence and leave care, they are faced with another set of challenges they must deal with and overcome. Not only are they facing a new set of adult challenges, but

they are doing so without the strategies and past experiences to teach them how to solve the problems they encounter. Jenelle described how the lessons that are learned while in care are not beneficial for former foster youth once they leave care and become responsible for themselves:

*... it would almost kind of be like having... being under that system like "Okay, now I just ask for all these things, and I kind of get all these things." It kind of misses that whole how to do that part on your own aspect.*

The lack of skills taught while in care and how this does not set up former foster youth for a successful transition to adulthood was also captured in Alex's interview when he stated:

*When you start to age out of those, there's more of... that freedom, that adulting becomes very scary. Because again, that's a skill that they haven't really learned from often living in these homes or in care. And then going out at 18 and getting into whatever trouble you can get in to.*

The participants illuminated how although the transition to adulthood can be a time of opportunity and excitement at first, the initial euphoria quickly gives way to feelings of being scared and overwhelmed with all of the tasks former foster youth are now responsible for. This in then exacerbated by not being taught the necessary skills while in care that would be most useful for them in facing these challenges. The transition shifts from being focused on finding success in achieving goals and becomes one based more on surviving the challenges ahead.

**System barriers to supporting successful transitions.** This group superordinate theme aims to show how every participant identified there were barriers on the professional side

to providing the most helpful services in addition to the challenges former foster youth face themselves in accessing and utilizing services. Some of the participants identified barriers that exist in the overall service system while other participants identified the barriers in their professional role that prohibited service providers from being as effective as possible in their job. Alex described the systemic barriers he faced when trying to provide supports to former foster youth:

*Like when you think of these youth who are accessing emergency health care or going through the police system, like all of the resources that we spend doing that. But then we just... Cause we're spending all that money there, we're not putting it into mental health or addictions or you know, youth workers or social workers. Like we're not putting it in the proper place. It's just a lack of resources in the proper place.*

Clare also highlighted the lack of system resources available to former foster youth once having left care:

*But I think that after you turn 18 that there's not a lot of resources that you can access and support wise from transitioning from like 18 and on.*

Inara described how even though the resources or services may be available in the community, there can be other barriers for former foster youth and for the professionals trying to help the youth in accessing the services:

*"So, we end up in these kind of weird standstills because the social worker isn't helping. And so, we can't utilize the services we know are available."*

The first three participants described how a lack of support service resources or a breakdown in communication between service providers can negatively impact former foster youth's ability to access services successfully. The three other participants all

highlighted the challenges within their specific roles or jobs that prevented them from providing the most effective services to former foster youth. Joe pointed out how being required by his job to provide services to a high number of youth limited his ability to provide the same quality of care to all his clients:

*Because sometimes our caseloads are to a point where we can only deal with crisis situations. And some of our files take a majority of our time, and then we're left with not a lot of time to deal with our lower key files that may need our help but aren't quite as in crisis mode.*

Jenelle and Kyla focused more on the interpersonal factors that can be a barrier in supporting and working with former foster youth. Jenelle described how former foster youth's views towards service providers can negatively impact the relationship:

*I think a lot of really good professionals, I don't know, just kind of have a pretty hard time because youth can be pretty jaded, and they just paint everyone with the same stick. And they can sometimes give people, like their supports, a really hard time.*

Kyla also talked about how the former foster youth's behaviour when interacting with service providers can put a strain on the relationship:

*Everybody else, like they like coming here, but they will challenge the staff a lot. They'll challenge the students and the volunteers. So yah, I think it does make it harder for them to have those kind of [positive] relationships with service providers.*

The excerpts from all the participants show the complexity that exists when it comes to addressing the system barriers that hinder former foster youth from making a successful transition to adulthood. Issues are present at both the macro and micro levels,

whether it's a lack of community resources or a continued strain in the relationship between former foster youth and service providers.

### **Insecure Attachment with the Service System**

The purpose of this second master theme is to capture the push and pull relationship between former foster youth and service providers, which is in constant flux due to the continuous integration of new support experiences. This theme includes how former foster youth can have a negative perception of service providers and accessing services due to past interactions that have ended with their needs gone unfulfilled. The theme also includes how important control, choice, and autonomy become within the service relationship and how these ideals can have a positive or negative impact on the relationship based on how or if they are incorporated.

The label of this group master theme developed from the application of a developmental and counselling lens to the interactions between former foster youth and service providers as described by the service providers participants in their interviews. Attachment is a broad term that refers to the quality and characteristics of an individual's bond to attachment figures, such as parents or caregivers, and can be divided into the categories of secure and insecure attachment styles (Holmes, 1993). An individual's attachment style emerges from their attachment behaviour, which Bowlby (1988) defines as "any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world" (pp. 26-27). Secure attachment supports the individual in feeling safe and secure in their relationships with attachment figures while insecure attachment can lead to the individual developing a mix of positive and negative feelings with attachment figures,

such as love, dependency, annoyance, rejection, caution, and watchfulness (Holmes, 1993).

There are three types of adult insecure attachment patterns: ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized (Wallin, 2007). Ambivalent attachment is characterized by a strong fear of abandonment, an intense desire to be close with others, and difficulty managing emotional reactions (Wallin, 2007; Weiten & McCann, 2010). Avoidant attachment is characterized by fear and/or avoidance of intimacy, difficulty trusting and relying on other people, and an over-reliance on self-sufficiency (Wallin, 2007; Weiten & McCann, 2010). Disorganized attachment is characterized by the lack of any clear or organized way of dealing with experienced stress or regulating emotions (Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2005)

While attachment behaviour is most evident during the stage of early childhood, it can be observed across an individual's life span, especially in times of crisis (Bowlby, 1988). Former foster youth have a history of interactions with service providers while in care, which may be negative or positive, and these interactions may influence how they interact with service providers after leaving care and during their transition to adulthood. Past experiences of unfulfilled needs, lack of trust, and feeling unsupported may develop into the characteristics of insecure attachment that the service provider participants identified in their interactions with former foster youth. It is important to take these past experiences into consideration as a service provider when providing and catering support to former foster youth in the present moment.

**Support cynicism from unmet attachment needs.** This first group superordinate theme focuses on showing how the participants identified in their interviews that former foster

youth can be left in a disconnected state once they have exited care because they know they need to access services to gain essential supports but are reluctant or slow to engage in this process because of past experiences. Many participants identified how the experiences that have led up to this disconnected state also leads to former foster youth having no trust in their relationships with service providers. Alex described how this process can occur for a former foster youth:

*You then were in a system where there was nobody you could trust. You've gone through various services where nobody really, kind of, fully committed to giving you the support that you need. So, when you're given a lot of promise, and you're always given a lot of promises in those situations or in those... when you're trying to access. There's always a lot of promises, and so. I think when you don't follow through with that, that makes it pretty hard, pretty hard to come back from.*

Clare also spoke about this firmly held view by former foster youth that they cannot trust service providers to meet their needs:

*So, their view with social workers is that they feel that a lot of times that their social workers weren't there for them. They weren't able to help them as much as they could have.*

Inara explained how former foster youth can get stuck in their assumptions that they cannot trust service providers now because they have not been able to trust them to fulfill their needs in the past:

*And they end up in these kind of cycles of like well, "If this foster home was bad, then all foster homes are bad. If this social worker was bad, then all social workers are*

*bad. If this, you know...". So, it can definitely have a negative... negative experience can create more barriers.*

Kyla highlighted how this negatively reinforcing cycle can lead to youth disengaging from services altogether:

*A lot of the youth I've seen are in their twenties, and they seem less likely to want to access services. Cause they feel like it won't make... it won't matter. It won't make a difference. They'll try and do something on their own.*

Joe also spoke about how former foster youth run into challenges when they leave the services they are connected to because they then become completely responsible for themselves:

*Because they at times have to fend for themselves a lot more. Those kids are not quite as stable so they might AWOL, take off from the group home, and then they have to take care of themselves, learn how to take care of themselves.*

Jenelle summed up how the disconnected state that the former foster youth are in when they leave care adds another level of difficulty for the services and programs providing support to this population:

*And so, I can just imagine the shorter programs that are trying to support youth and trying to do that don't have the time. How could you do that? Like they would just assume this young person doesn't want to connect. They're not interested. But that's not totally true.*

Former foster youth have a whole history of interactions with service providers that continue to influence their thoughts and behaviours once they leave the child welfare system. Negative interactions in the past can lead to former foster youth not trusting

service providers, which may encourage them to disconnect further from services and make the transition to adulthood on their own. This pattern makes it difficult for service providers to intervene and provide former foster youth with an alternative, positive experiences of engaging with services and service providers.

**Importance of choice, control, and autonomy in service implementation.** This group superordinate theme was spoken about by four of the six participants, rather than by every participant, but was still strongly represented in the interviews. Inara and Clare were the two participants whose participant superordinate themes did not relate to this group superordinate theme. Inara did speak about this topic in her interview but just missed the necessary frequency to be considered a participant superordinate theme, and so, a verbatim extract will be included in this section to incorporate her experience. Clare was the only participant that did not identify this theme in her account, and so, a verbatim extract will not be included.

The theme addresses the reoccurring accounts by participants of how important it is when engaging with former foster youth as a service provider to be mindful of the youth's past experiences and focus on integrating choice, control, and autonomy into the service experience. Alex highlights how providing services to former foster youth without them having to meet any prior requirements helps strengthen the service relationship:

*I think because we meet them where they're at, without kind of setting these conditions they need to meet before we provide service, really makes a difference in developing that trust.*

Kyla talked about how letting the former foster youth decide how the conversation will proceed allows the youth to open up more as compared to when they need to talk about specific topics or answer specific questions:

*... we have a place where we can sit down and we can talk with the youth and hang out with them. But having more of that conversation, kind of like a check-in, is kind of nice. Gives you a lot more information and gives them a lot more opportunity than just being like "Okay, what's going on? Alright, cool let's get this done. Okay, bye."*

Jenelle also addressed the importance of letting former foster youth decide what they need rather than having the service provider decide for them:

*Having pretty much like no expectations and not giving them really any expectations. Just kind of meeting with them. Just figuring out... our program is so youth-directed. Just figuring out what they need, how do they need it.*

Inara highlighted the importance of focusing on the former foster youth's autonomy so they can decide what direction they want to move forward in:

*And never... there's just never that pressure, and it really... it lets them actually move, right. Cause the second that you put a "You must do this" on somebody's path, they're going to beeline like the other direction, right. So, if you keep doing that, they end up directionless because they're trying to avoid the control.*

Joe explained how important it is for former foster youth to have a voice in how services are provided to them because the bottom line is that it is completely their decision whether or not they engage in services after they leave care:

*... we try to give them some input in terms of the level of their care. Because really once they hit 18, it's totally up to them. It's voluntary, and whether they want to have continue services or not.*

By acknowledging former foster youth's autonomy and allowing them to have choice and control, service providers are treating former foster youth like equals and like the adults they are transitioning into. This can build trust in the service relationship and can provide an opportunity for former foster youth and service providers to connect on a more significant level.

### **Ability of the Interpersonal Relationship with Service Providers to Meet**

#### **Attachment Needs**

The aim of this master theme is to capture how the connection between former foster youth and service providers is comparable to an attachment relationship, where former foster youth have an opportunity to have their needs met by the service providers. This includes the attachment figure role service providers are implicitly placed into when interacting with former foster youth, which can negatively or positively influence the relationship. It also includes how a positive and strong relationship between a former foster youth and a service provider may offer a source of healing for the former foster youth and may enable them to let go of some of their previous assumptions about the quality of their relationships with service providers.

**Service providers' implied role as an attachment figure.** This group superordinate theme was spoken about by five of the six participants but was strongly represented in the interviews with Clare being the one participant that did not identify this theme in her account. This first group superordinate theme aims to show how the participants

identified that in their interactions with former foster youth or in hearing about former foster youth's interactions with other service providers, service providers were implicitly classified as an attachment figure by former foster youth. A failure of the service or service provider to meet their needs was viewed as a failure or a rupture in the relationship, as described by Kyla:

*But mainly, they have these resources that they could reach out to, but they're... they've had bad experiences with so many others so why go and spend time trying to do with another service when they're just going to let them down in their eyes.*

Ruptures in the attachment relationships could have happened during past interactions, and those past ruptures could be influencing the present relationship with different service providers, as identified by Inara:

*But they can still see us as like just looking for a paycheck. And it's like well, you know, you're... you don't really care about us. You're just here for, cause it's your job and that is by far more prevalent in people that are coming out of the foster care system than anything else that I've noticed.*

This notion of past relationships influencing present connections was also highlighted by Alex:

*Having just somebody who is genuinely interested in their success as a... as a person, and doesn't... I mean we hear often a lot of youth, that they're kind of a paycheck. They're... they don't... that family, kind of that parental guidance and supportive relationship often doesn't seem to exist even in these foster home situations.*

Although those ruptures may have happened in the past, service providers and service programs can respond in a way that start to rebuild the connection reconcile the

past relationship ruptures. Joe describes how he uses a professional approach of creating a strong connection with former foster youth to encourage them to come to him when they need support:

*So, they still... they come to me when they're in trouble. They call me when they still need things, when they need support and those sorts of things. I think it depends on the connection that you've made with them.*

Jenelle describes how the support service she works for has tailored its program to allow for the time that is needed to create connection with former foster youth and rebuild those attachment relationships:

*And it's... it's pretty hard to build relationships with youth anyways, but I think specifically youth, I mean, in foster care or children's services at all. I mean, struggle with that for sure. And I think that's one of the reasons why we kind of created our program the way that it is so that we can support youth over the long-term. So, like, it's 16 to 24. It's not like one year. They can access the program that whole time. Just to try to kind of, I don't know, be a little bit more constant, I think.*

Former foster youth can come into relationships with service providers with preconceived notions about what the relationship is going to entail based on past interactions where harm was done or where a need was not met. Although this can make it difficult to create a connection with former foster youth in the present, the support service program and the service provider have an opportunity to respond in a way that may change preconceived notions and start to repair the relationship.

**Healing experience through engaged connections with service providers.** This second group superordinate theme aims to capture participants' accounts about using the

interpersonal relationship to build trust with former foster youth and to heal past service ruptures. This was a strong theme throughout all the participant's interviews, with each participant contributing their unique experience of using connection to enhance service provision. Jenelle discussed how creating the connection starts with the basics and can be integrated into the relationship from the very beginning:

*I think it's just always like being welcoming and just open, no matter what. No matter what space you're in. Like, you're welcome here. Let's figure it out.*

Kyla also mirrored this sentiment when she talked about how creating the connection starts small and is then built up from that foundation:

*But just having that like casual conversation and being able to sit down and hang out with them, I find it really nice. Because it does bring a small relationship.*

Inara explained how important it is to be transparent and honest with former foster youth when trying to create a connection in order to dispel some of those prior assumptions that former foster youth have about service providers:

*And normally when we make it very, very black and white and honest and explain that our own personal journeys to them, they will... like it does start to break down that bias that they have that everybody's here for the paycheck. And it can start to get... like past that first hurdle. And then start to build meaningful relationships after that.*

Alex described how his behaviour when working through problems with a former foster youth can produce an opportunity for the youth to resolve the conflict and heal the rupture that may have been created in the relationship:

*But if you keep that kind of calm, collected kind of approach to things, there's an opportunity for them to come back and for you to engage them. See where that may have come from. Help support them with what may be causing that anger or frustration.*

Joe discussed how important it is to create a bond and build a relationship with former foster youth in order to continue to encourage them to remain engaged with services after turning 18:

*And I want to be able to make a connection with them and to be able to keep them on my caseload. I think that makes quite a big difference in terms of helping these kids. Letting them know that you're there to help them and that they can come to you when they need help or just to talk to you.*

Clare also talked about how providing consistency as a service provider helps communicate to the former foster youth this is someone that they can start to trust to support them:

*They kind of get antsy, and sometimes, for your follow-up appointments, they don't show up or they're not consistent in that way. But I just feel that if you're consistent with them, then eventually they get on a routine that like "Ok, this person actually wants to help me."*

The accounts from the participants all demonstrate how crucial the interpersonal interactions between former foster youth and service providers are in creating short-term connections and in building long-term relationships. Consistent and empathetic contact with service providers may assist former foster youth in breaking down previous misconceptions based on past experiences and help them create new perceptions about the level of support they can receive through their relationships with service providers.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Overview

The goal of this research study was to gain a greater understanding of service providers' experience in delivering supports and services to former foster youth during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This perspective was explored by analyzing semi-structured interviews through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). There remains a lack of knowledge on former foster youth's transition to adulthood from the service provider point of view, and the aim of this study was to provide additional insight into this perspective to diversify the existing knowledge base. The main research question of the study is:

How do service providers experience the delivery of supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood?

The following questions were explored to expand upon the main research question:

- 1) What past experiences in foster care are significant to service providers in shaping former foster youth's understanding of adulthood?
- 2) How do these experiences influence former foster youth's relationship with the child welfare system and service providers after the youth has left care?
- 3) What is necessary to incorporate and to overcome from a service provider perspective to engage and sustain former foster youth in the utilization of external supports?

In this chapter the findings from the research study are explored through the group master themes and discussed using the existing literature and theoretical knowledge base.

The significance of the research study, methodological considerations, clinical

implications, suggestions for future research, and study reflections are then examined later in the chapter.

### **Unprepared and Underserviced Transition to Adulthood**

This section discusses the first group master theme: the underprepared and underserviced transition to adulthood for former foster youth. This master theme includes the two group superordinate themes: surviving the transition to independence and system barriers to supporting successful transitions. These themes reflect previous findings about the transition to adulthood for former foster youth discussed in the literature review of this research study. The findings demonstrate that former foster youth face similar challenges and barriers when transitioning to adulthood and that these obstacles are visible not only to the former foster youth but also to the service providers that provide support during the transition.

**Surviving the transition to independence.** The disconnected and survival focused mindset that was seen by service providers when former foster youth were transitioning to independence was also found in the studies by Rutman et al. (2007), Nichols et al. (2017), Cunningham and Diversi (2013), Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (2016), McCoy et al. (2008), Goodkind et al. (2011), Geenen and Powers (2007), and Samuels and Pryce (2008). The theme of disconnection that was common among these research studies centred around the loss and subsequent absence of healthy, supportive relationships with adults during the transition to independence. This disconnection contributed to former foster youth feeling lost and having to navigate adulthood and service systems completely on their own. This heightened level of self-sufficiency was an

influential factor in former foster youth's outlook evolving into one of survival management and relying solely upon themselves to meet their basic needs.

Wanting control, becoming self-reliant, and a desire for self-determination are natural developmental tasks associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The barrier former foster youth face is that they do not receive the same level of support from adult relationships, whether they are service providers or other supports, while they engage in this process (Arnett, 2007). Once they turn 18, former foster youth may believe it is more beneficial for them to leave the child welfare system and become completely independent or they may be forced to become self-sufficient because of the lack of healthy adult relationships and a disconnection from supports and services. The survival management strategy they have built based on past experiences can influence their reluctance to engage with services to obtain support because it contrasts with the identity they have for themselves as being self-sufficient. Feeling disconnected and unsupported then develops into a normal and expected part of independence and sets former foster youth up to fend for themselves on a daily basis.

**System barriers to supporting successful transitions.** Service providers highlighted many of the same barriers in service delivery that were found in the results of previous studies by Rutman et al. (2007), Gaetz et al. (2016), Courtney and Dworsky (2006), Scannapieco et al. (2007), and the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (2016). The main system barriers identified in the current study that were also reflected in the literature included lack of opportunities for developing life skills, the limited services available after leaving care, and the diminished control former foster youth felt they had over decisions about their lives. There is consistency in the challenges former foster

youth face when leaving care and transitioning into adulthood, regardless of the location or child welfare organization from which they are doing so. Working towards independence without supports and services, life skills, and the practice of making healthy decisions leaves former foster youth at a disadvantage that is difficult to overcome as they continue to grow into adults.

Successful transition to adulthood is dependent on the opportunities and skills that were or were not developed during adolescence. The transition to independence can be a time where previous experiences and skills can be nurtured or where the gap between what has been learned and what is necessary to be successful grows larger. Being able to gradually build upon a foundation, if it exists, is also a luxury that is not afforded to many former foster youth, as leaving care often results in an abrupt shift to independence, where the responsibility for their lives shifts to their control all at once (Singer & Berzin, 2015). Feeling ill-prepared in adolescence and underserved in adulthood can further reinforce the belief for former foster youth that their needs will continue to go unmet by system supports. This can create even more distance and disconnection between former foster youth and the services designed to support them. As outlined by both service providers and by former foster youth, the challenges faced during the transition to adulthood can begin to compound and provide additional obstacles to overcome on both sides of the service provision relationship.

An interesting finding from the results is that none of the service provider participants spoke about the system barriers specifically faced by Indigenous former foster youth in their interviews. They spoke about the challenges and barriers the former foster youth population faced as a whole but did not address issues unique to Indigenous

former foster youth. Although questions about the transition to adulthood specifically for Indigenous former foster youth were not asked during the interview, it is odd this topic did not arise at all given the statistic that 69% of children in care are of Indigenous descent (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2016). This non-finding highlights the need for the Calls to Action developed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to be integrated into community organizations providing supports and services to Indigenous former foster youth and for further cultural competency training to be available for service providers working in the organizations serving this population (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

It is not a gradual transition to adulthood that former foster youth undertake but rather one that is rapid, unsupported, ill-informed, and creates further challenges. The findings of the current study highlight service providers' awareness of and concern regarding the challenges former foster youth face. Past experiences and opportunities shape the path the transition to independence takes and influence whether former foster youth learn to thrive or learn to survive.

### **Insecure Attachment with the Service System**

This section discusses the second group master theme: the insecure attachment that exists between former foster youth and the service system. This master theme includes the two group superordinate themes: support cynicism from unmet attachment needs and importance of choice, control, and autonomy in service implementation. The findings from the current study show the interpersonal relationship between the individual former foster youth and service provider is important to consider. Former foster youth have a history of interactions that influence their current view of service

providers' ability to meet their needs and their willingness to access and engage with supports and services (Pryce et al., 2017). Distrust of services and service providers adds another barrier that is not easily overcome as it is influenced by former foster youth's underlying beliefs about their relationships and attachment with service providers.

**Support cynicism from unmet attachment needs.** The attachment patterns individuals have when they enter adulthood are developed throughout their childhood during interactions with their caregivers, or service providers who may also serve as caregivers (Holmes, 1993). When there is a lack of a secure base and attachment needs go unmet, the individual can develop an insecure attachment style where defensive behaviours are used to minimize the pain of separation, neglect, or abuse from the caregiver and to gain nurturance based on what has been effective during previous interactions (Holmes, 1993). The set of beliefs developed in this attachment style views caregivers as being inconsistent, unsafe, and unsupportive and can lead to difficulties in forming new relationships and maintaining existing relationships (Prather & Golden, 2009). These beliefs and behaviours can persist into adulthood and can impact an individual's relational styles and their ability to seek out support when needed (Bennett & Nelson, 2010).

The support cynicism that can develop from a history of unmet attachment needs, as described by service providers, has similar characteristics to those found in an insecure adult attachment style (Holmes, 1993). Former foster youth have a history of interactions with the child welfare system and service providers by the time they enter adulthood, and those experiences continue to influence their beliefs about services and the providers they encounter after they leave care (Bennett & Nelson, 2010). The service providers in this

study described how former foster youth become distrustful of supports and those providing them because of past negative experiences and how they generalize a negative experience with one service or service provider to all services and all service providers. The service providers also explained how former foster youth distance and detach themselves from service providers as a means of protection, to build resiliency, and avoid further attachment harm. Although these strategies serve short-term needs, the service providers identified it can hinder former foster youth's future success because it limits their ability to engage with the system designed to provide support during this time of transition.

One specific type of adult attachment insecurity, avoidant attachment, has been linked to negative outcomes for former foster youth more so than other types of attachment insecurity (Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Zinn, Palmer, & Nam, 2017). The research study carried out by Okpych and Courtney (2018) found former foster youth that scored higher in avoidant attachment were less likely to continue on with their college education and were less likely to earn a degree than former foster youth with an anxious attachment style. The results showed former foster youth in college maintain avoidant attachment behaviours even when doing so causes problems for them and even when acknowledging the need for support and being open to receive it would be beneficial in their situation. Lower levels of perceived social support by former foster youth in college explained some of the relationship between college persistence and completion and avoidant attachment. Whether former foster youth do not view the available supports as being helpful or they are unaware of the availability of appropriate supports, not seeking

out help from services can reinforce and further entrench avoidant behaviours and beliefs about what it means to be independent.

Zinn, Palmer, and Nam (2017) found that former foster youth with an avoidant attachment style were less likely to seek out support and viewed their supportive relationships as being less close than those with a secure or anxious attachment style. Former foster youth with an avoidant attachment style may struggle to establish or maintain their social connections once they leave care and may find that having a job or going to school is not enough on its own to increase community integration and social connections. The results from Zinn et al. (2017) also found that having established connections with individuals or communities was associated with the perception of increased social support and that there was an additive effect in the increase in social support with each connection that was established.

Cultivating multiple connections across various types of relationships could be the way former foster youth start to shift their beliefs about and behaviours towards seeking out services and accepting support. Having established services is only one part of the equation. Creating meaningful connections between former foster youth and service providers within these services, and providing opportunities for more social connections to be made as well as relationship building skills to be developed, might be the avenue that allows former foster youth to increase their social connections and to intervene in the reinforcing cycle between avoidant attachment and a lack of perceived social support (Zinn et al., 2017).

**Importance of choice, control, and autonomy in service implementation.** In working directly with former foster youth, service providers hear their grievances about the way

services are delivered and their wishes about how these services may be delivered more effectively. Service providers in this study identified it is important for youth to have more control and input in determining how supports and services are delivered, to prioritize the needs of the youth, and to reduce the stress and confusion for youth in accessing services. These results are consistent with findings from the literature that former foster youth, who may have not had much control over their lives while in care, want to be more involved in making decisions and determining their life paths as they transition into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Salazar, Noell, Cole, Haggerty, & Roe, 2018; Scannapieco et al., 2007). Incorporating former foster youth's voice into supports and services is a complex process, but this approach is valuable in helping support the youth in developing their autonomy.

The research study by Salazar et al. (2018) examined what concepts in self-determination should be incorporated into service provision from the perspective of former foster youth and community service providers. Three crucial factors to incorporate were identified; autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Former foster youth and service providers both recognize the need for former foster youth to be able to take initiative and make their own decisions in a manner where they believe they are informed, supported, and capable. One of the standout findings from this study is that working towards self-determination, with the help of services and providers, depends on both autonomy and relatedness and not one or the other. Being connected and having meaningful relationships is just as important for success as taking control and responsibility for one's own life.

Former foster youth can be at a disadvantage when it comes to their ability to reach out to services and service providers because of their relationship history and attachment style (Bennett & Nelson, 2010; Salazar et al., 2018). Service providers and former foster youth have identified a gap in incorporating relationship building and connectedness into services as working towards autonomy and self-reliance often take precedence over relatedness (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). This research study and findings from the literature suggest that services and service providers may not be as successful in supporting former foster youth during the transition to adulthood without focusing on creating both independence and interpersonal connectedness. Former foster youth may even need an increased focus on building relatedness and relationship skills to combat their past negative support experiences and to encourage them to open up enough to receive help and support from service providers (Salazar et al., 2018). Acknowledging and incorporating the challenging area of attachment creation in service delivery, rather than overlooking its importance, may be the intervention that breaks the cycle between unmet needs and distrust of services.

### **Ability of the Interpersonal Relationship with Service Providers to Meet Attachment Needs**

This section discusses the third group master theme: meeting the attachment needs of former foster youth through the interpersonal relationship with service providers. This master theme includes the two group superordinate themes: service providers' implied role as an attachment figure and healing experience through engaged connections with service providers. The findings demonstrate service providers are aware of the importance of the attachment relationship in service delivery. It also shows how

the connection between the individual former foster youth and service provider could be used as the means through which to shift negative beliefs about supports and build relationship and interpersonal skills. A continued effort from service providers to engage and maintain a connection with former foster youth throughout the service delivery process can go a long way in offering comfort, safety, and trust building opportunities over the long-term for former foster youth.

**Service providers' implied role as an attachment figure.** Service providers in this research study identified they were often viewed and treated as attachment figures by former foster youth while delivering services. The service providers saw themselves as being connected, as a source of long-term attachment building, and as being able to find opportunities to create attachment experiences that are helpful to former foster youth. Child welfare service providers can often become a substitute caregiver while foster youth are in care, and, depending on the absence of or level of involvement from parents or kin, service providers may come to be a continued source of attachment in the lives of foster youth (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012; Pryce et al., 2017). As attachment styles remain relatively stable from adolescence to adulthood (Holmes, 1993; Okpych & Courtney, 2018), previous attachment relationships with service providers while in care may contribute to service providers identifying that former foster youth interact with them as an attachment figure after leaving care. Having service providers take on the role of an attachment figure could be beneficial for those former foster youth with limited social connections and supportive adult relationships. Their relationship with service providers may only function as a protective factor during their transition to adulthood, or

it may become a way to reconcile past negative experiences and practice different attachment behaviours (Cusick et al., 2012; Prather & Golden, 2009; Zinn et al., 2017)

Attachment styles that develop during adolescence are viewed as being generally consistent and stable during the transition to adulthood but not as a fixed trait that persists throughout development (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Mikulincer, Shaver, and Solomon (2015) explain that attachment styles “can be altered by powerful experiences that affect a person's beliefs about the value of seeking help from attachment figures and the feasibility of attaining safety, protection, and comfort” (p.85). Service providers in the current study saw themselves as being able to offer these powerful experiences to former foster youth by creating a shared bond, being informed and supportive, fully engaging with the youth’s experiences, and using the relationship to provide learning and rebuild trust. The service providers also recognized providing these powerful experiences requires a high level of willingness, therapeutic openness, and engagement on their part. The service providers in this study also shared in their interviews how these attachment experiences were essential to keeping former foster youth connected and involved with services. They shared this required a high level of professional and personal commitment to providing the best service relationship possible to former foster youth.

**Healing experience through engaged connections with service providers.** Having service providers committed to providing supportive, relational experiences can create opportunities for former foster youth to incorporate more securely attached beliefs and behaviours (Hughes, 2004; Prather & Golden, 2009). There has been little to no research carried out to see if former foster youth’s attachment styles change when they become young adults. A research study was carried out to determine if past negative support

relationships with caregivers influence the ability of adolescents in foster care to form new, securely attached relationships to caregivers (Joseph, O'Connor, Briskman, Maughan, & Scott, 2014). The results found that 38% of former foster youth who were insecurely attached to their birth mothers were rated as having a secure attachment with their foster mother. This shows adolescents in foster care may have new attachment experiences even when they have experienced maltreatment from caregivers in the past. It remains to be seen if a substantial change in attachment style could also occur in adulthood for former foster youth, but further research could explore this area and add valuable information about the prospect of shifting attachment styles in adulthood.

The findings from the current study and from the existing literature show that although attachment styles for former foster youth are relatively stable by the time they transition into adulthood, they may change through supportive attachment experiences (Joseph et al., 2014; Mikulincer et al., 2015). In the absence of biological family, kin, and other healthy adult relationships, service providers may be able to meet the attachment needs of former foster youth (Zinn et al., 2017). Service providers in this study recognized they themselves are part of the intervention and the support being delivered, and they can use this opportunity to meet former foster youth's basic needs at the same time as helping them to meet their relational needs.

### **Significance of the Research Study**

This research study provides additional knowledge in understanding the phenomena of providing supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood from the service provider perspective. Most of the research on former foster youth's engagement with the service system has been conducted from the

perspective of former foster youth. Other research studies include both service providers and former foster youth as participants and focus on highlighting the commonalities and differences between the two perspectives. A search of the current literature showed there have been no studies using this methodological approach published on the delivery of services to former foster youth during the transition to adulthood solely from the service provider perspective. There are two sides to the service provision relationship, and the findings from this research study show analyzing service delivery from the service provider point of view adds further knowledge that has not been adequately explored. This study allowed the voices of individual service providers to be heard and to be given as much attention as those of former foster youth.

### **Methodological Considerations**

A strength in using IPA in this research study was that it provided an in-depth account of the lived experience of service providers in delivering supports and services to the former foster youth population not previously captured in the literature. Analyzing the detailed accounts of each participant's experience enabled new themes to be shown that had not been previously identified as being significant in the literature review. Having a small sample size allowed for a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts and supported each participant's interview being analyzed without influence from the results of the analysis of the other participant's transcripts. This process allowed the unique voice of each service provider participant to be represented and reflected in the results, which also upholds the idiographic tradition of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Being new to conducting qualitative research and to the use of IPA as a methodology, I did my best to maintain quality and accuracy in the research by

increasing my understanding of IPA through reading, using research articles with IPA as the methodology as examples, and conducting the analysis in a thorough and thoughtful manner. Although using a small sample size may be seen as a criticism, it was beneficial for this research study because it allowed an in-depth analysis to be conducted on each of the participant's interview transcripts and the quality of analysis to be maintained.

Having between three to six participants in conducting IPA research for the first time is recommended as it allows the researcher to capture the experience of each participant without being overwhelmed by the variability between cases and leaving out important themes (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). The data from six participants was enough to draw on to answer the research questions and highlight significant themes while still ensuring the quality of the results as a first-time qualitative researcher. Having a small number of participants was crucial to this qualitative research as it ensured the rigor and quality of the data analysis and theme identification was reliable for all six participants (Creswell, 2015).

The process for recruiting participants was a substantial hurdle as the study had initially been designed to interview former foster youth about their experience in accessing supports and services. After six months of trying various strategies to recruit former foster youth participants with no uptake, the decision was made to switch to interviewing service providers to assist in completing the research in a timely manner. The service providers were recruited from the same community organizations that were originally contacted to have posters placed to recruit former foster youth. The previously established relationships with community organizations were essential to the research process as they revealed how important this issue was to service providers themselves

and how willing they were to support research that sought to explore and gain understanding in this area. When it came time to shift away from former foster youth participants, it was a natural progression to focus on service providers and their experience of being on the other side of the service delivery relationship.

The research questions and interview schedule in the current study were initially developed for former foster youth participants and were then adapted later when the change was made to interview service providers instead. Different research questions and interview schedule questions may have been developed had service providers been the target population from the beginning. As it stands, the adaptations made were able to gather the data necessary to capture and analyze service providers' lived experience of providing supports and services and answer the research questions.

A limitation of this study is that providing supports and services specifically to Indigenous former foster youth was not probed during the interviews with the service provider participants. The expectation was that the significant themes would be brought up naturally by the participants during their interview, and Indigenous-focused questions or probes were not included in the interview schedule. As the participants spoke about the former foster youth population in general terms without referencing ethnicity, no themes around providing supports and services to Indigenous former foster youth were discovered in the data analysis. Had this topic been probed during the interviews, it could have led to an enrichment of the data as it may have expanded on the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care, as well as what service providers believe is necessary to incorporate in service delivery in order to support Indigenous former foster youth in a successful transition to adulthood.

Another limitation of the research study is that member-checking was only carried out with three out of the six research participants. Member checking was carried out to ensure the results were based on an accurate representation of participants' experience of providing supports and services to former foster youth. The three participants that did not initially respond to follow-up requests were each contacted several more times before moving on to the next step of the analysis due to time constraints. All three participants that completed the member checking process agreed the analysis of their interview was an accurate representation of their experiences and did not have anything to add to further deepen the understanding of their experience. Having all six participants complete member checking would have been beneficial but not absolutely necessary as IPA includes the use of a double hermeneutic, which involves participants making sense of their experience and the researcher then making sense of how the participants made sense of their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

An area for improvement in this research study would have been to include a demographic survey for the service provider participants. A demographic survey was originally drafted for the former foster youth but was not included in the change to focusing on service providers' perspectives. Demographics were discussed informally during recruitment and during the unrecorded, rapport building section of the interview, and background and experience in providing services was discussed formally in answering the first question of the interview schedule. Completing a demographic survey could have provided more context by which to analyze the participants' results and another lens to use to examine their understanding of the lived experience of providing support and services to former foster youth.

## **Clinical Implications**

**Attachment in counselling.** The relationship between service providers and former foster youth is a crucial part of engagement in services, especially when it comes to the relationship between a former foster youth and a counsellor or therapist. In counselling, part of the relationship between client and counsellor is described as the working alliance and is defined by three features: mutually agreed upon goals, agreement on the tasks necessary to achieve treatment goals, and a shared bond based on trust and mutual acceptance between the counsellor and client (Kietai, 2012; Taylor, Rietzschel, Danquah, & Berry, 2015). Attachment can be a significant factor in counselling because of its ability to impact the working alliance between client and counsellor. Taylor et al. (2015) found the client's attachment to the counsellor is an important predictor of the strength of the working alliance and may even be more important for counselling outcomes than the client's adult attachment style. Results from the study showed a secure attachment between client and counsellor contributed to a stronger working alliance and a greater improvement in symptoms of concern reported by the client (Taylor et al., 2015).

The results from Taylor et al. (2015) were also similar to the results found in the research done by Kivlighan, Patton, and Foote (1998). The authors found clients formed a stronger working alliance with their counsellor when they displayed signs of having a secure adult attachment style. The authors also concluded when a client had an insecure adult attachment style, the experience level of the counsellor became influential on the strength of the working alliance. Experienced counsellors may have had more familiarity in working with and more knowledge on how to engage and establish a working alliance with clients with insecure attachment styles.

When working with former foster youth or clients with insecure attachment styles, counsellors have an opportunity to provide a safe and supportive relationship and to help clients change their insecure attachment patterns to secure attachment patterns (Kietaibl, 2012). This process involves the counsellor meeting the client where they are at with their present insecure attachment style, meeting the attachment needs of their specific style of insecure attachment (anxious-ambivalent or avoidant), and then working with the client to shift towards integrating more securely attached thoughts and interpersonal interactions (Kietaibl, 2012). This relationship management strategy relies on altering the *therapeutic distance* between client and counsellor, where *therapeutic distance*, as defined Daly and Mallinckrodt (2009), is “the level of transparency and disclosure in the psychotherapy relationship from both client and therapist, together with the immediacy, intimacy, and emotional intensity of a session” (p. 559). Skilled use of this strategy can help clients feel comfortable initially in session, build a strong working alliance, and engage with others outside of session in a more securely attached and less distressing way (Kietaibl, 2012). Service providers outside of the counselling profession may also be able to apply the use of *therapeutic distance* to help engage, sustain, and provide attachment shifting experiences to former foster use during their use of supports and services.

Another important aspect of the role of attachment in service delivery is the service providers own attachment style and how it affects the helping relationship with the client. Hiles Howard et al. (2013) found an avoidant adult attachment style was overrepresented in child welfare service providers. The results also suggested child welfare case managers with an avoidant attachment style intervened at a less intense level

with their clients than those with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style. This shows service providers' own attachment styles may impact how they interact with clients and that this may also apply to how counsellors interact with their clients in a counselling session. Petrowski, Pokorny, Nowacki, and Buchheim (2013) found counsellors with higher ratings in avoidant attachment had clients that rated their attachment to the counsellor as higher in avoidant attachment. They also found counsellors with higher ratings in anxious-ambivalent attachment had clients that rated their attachment to the counsellor as higher in anxious-ambivalent attachment.

A healthy, secure attachment between counsellor and client can have a positive impact on the strength of the working alliance and outcomes of therapy (Taylor et al., 2015). When counsellors are working with clients with insecure attachment, their expertise and experience may be relied upon more to engage and help clients feel comfortable in the counselling session (Kivlighan et al., 1998). The skill level of the counsellor may also come into play when using *therapeutic distance* as a tool to help the client transition toward healthier attachment (Daly & Mallinckrodt, 2009). A counsellor's own adult attachment style can also have an impact on how they interact with clients and on the client's attachment relationship with the counsellor (Hiles Howard et al., 2013; Petrowski et al., 2013). Awareness and understanding about attachment styles on behalf of both the service provider or counsellor and the client can be beneficial in service delivery and may lead to healing opportunities for both sides of the relationship.

**Training on attachment in service provision.** More training is needed to support community organizations, counsellors, and service providers in recognizing different attachment styles in clients and in using the relationship to help deliver services more

effectively. Service providers come from a variety of educational backgrounds and may not have had a suitable amount of formal instruction or training on attachment and how past experiences can impact present interpersonal interactions. Providing support to clients with an insecure attachment style can be emotionally demanding and mentally draining as these clients are often difficult to engage and may depend on self-reliance and control to establish safety and protect themselves from further harm in their interactions with others (Hughes, 2004). The results from Avery, Matthews, Hoffman, Powell, and Cooper (2008) showed that a two-session training intervention on complex attachment issues was enough to make a significant difference in how service providers conceptualized and spoke about the attachment issues in the case studies that were presented to them. Support from supervisors and managers within community organizations could also assist service providers in implementing the use of attachment theory with their clients and processing any challenges they encounter. Training does not have to be extensive in order to increase the awareness and understanding of attachment and to be beneficial to both service providers and former foster youth.

Increasing awareness about attachment and individual attachment styles for service providers has parallels with a trauma-informed approaches that are already being implemented within many service systems, such as within the Alberta provincial health authority, Alberta Health Services (Alberta Health Services, 2020). The four main principles of a trauma-informed approach are trauma awareness, emphasis on safety and trustworthiness, opportunity for choice, collaboration, and connection, and strengths based and skill building (Arthur et al., 2013). These principles align with the findings

from this research study on what is essential to incorporate in service delivery to promote continued engagement with the former foster youth population.

One way to increase awareness and training on attachment for service providers on the systemic level would be to include information about attachment and the impact of different attachment styles within the trauma-informed approach framework, building on training systems already in place. Many systems, such as the child welfare system, provide trauma-informed training, and this has been shown to be successful in improving the understanding and increased implementation of trauma-informed care in professional practice (Conners-Burrow et al., 2013). Including information on the impact of attachment experiences and attachment styles within already established trauma-informed training practices may also lead to service providers having a greater understanding of attachment and how to incorporate it into their professional practice.

Another way to increase service provider's awareness and use of attachment principles would be to utilize supervisors within community organizations as the vehicles for knowledge transmission and implementation. Supervisors could be engaged in training service providers in attachment during one-to-one supervision sessions with individual service providers or during case conferences that often take place with the team of service providers working at an organization. A study by Berger and Quiros (2016) examined supervision on trauma-informed practices with service providers in agencies that serve clients with a history of trauma. Such training was effective when the supervision was viewed by the supervisee as being empowering, considerate of the interpersonal relationship, promoting emotional and physical support and safety, focusing on knowledge acquisition, and encouraging self-care. The research also highlighted how

continuing education for licensing-related requirements could be another training opportunity for trauma-informed practice and supervising those involved in trauma-informed care. Continuing education requirements could also be a potential source of training on awareness and implementation of attachment within service delivery.

The last source of information transmission on attachment comes as part of the final steps of the research process. The results of this research study will be shared with the service provider participants directly in hopes of creating opportunities where the findings can then also be shared with the community organizations that the service providers are associated with. This would start to build a network of service providers with awareness and understanding of the importance of attachment and the impact of attachment styles in service delivery, and hopefully, this network could continue to be expanded on over time. Also, as a part of this research process, I as a researcher-practitioner have expanded my own understanding of attachment and its importance in counselling and can continue to advocate for further training on attachment within the organization that I am associated with. Increasing the awareness and understanding of the impact of attachment in service delivery is no easy feat, but training opportunities already exist that can be utilized to support the inclusion attachment theory in trauma-informed care.

**Indigenous counselling education.** This research study has highlighted how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action need to be integrated more directly into the supports and service being delivered to former foster youth, which also applies to the field of counselling and counsellor education. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Call to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) calls on "those who can

effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients” (p. 3). The 23<sup>rd</sup> Call to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) also calls on “all levels of government to provide cultural competency training for all healthcare professionals” (p. 3). There is also an increased awareness in the field that the impact of colonization and the consequences of past government policies on Indigenous health and wellness must be recognized when working with Indigenous people (Trenholm, Rowett, & Brooks, 2019).

The integration of a Western worldview with Indigenous’ knowledge and practices is referred to as *Two-Eyed Seeing*, which is defined by Bartlett, Marshall, and Marshall (2012) as “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing” (p. 335). This approach does not value one way of knowing or understanding above any other but is based on being open to learning about and from different perspectives and seeing the value in having awareness about multiple ways of knowing (Rowett, 2018). *Two-Eyed Seeing* supports becoming familiar with both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems and using the unique combination of the two to understand and solve existing tasks or challenges (Bartlett et al., 2012). Integrating the principles of *Two-Eyed Seeing* into counselling services can help provide culturally appropriate services to Indigenous people, increase the incorporation of Indigenous treatment practices in mainstream counselling services, and build on Western treatment

approaches to become more all-inclusive than either approach could achieve on their own.

Another way to address these Calls to Action are through graduate level counsellor education programs. The Western worldview of counselling is the main approach that is taught in these programs, which does not usually incorporate the holistic approach to health, wellness, and spirituality found in Indigenous communities (Trenholm et al., 2019). Very little research has been completed on how or if Indigenous' knowledge and practices are being integrated into counsellor education programs in Canada although the benefits of Indigenous treatment approaches are being recognized within the field of counselling (Trenholm et al., 2019). Conducting further research on the current state of Indigenous treatment approaches in counsellor education programs, the integration of Indigenous-knowledge, practices, and traditions into the approaches taught in these programs are necessary ways of answering the Calls to Action set forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

As the service provider perspective is not well represented in the literature and given the small sample size of this research study, an area of further research could be to explore the theme of attachment found in this study with more service providers in the Greater Edmonton area and outside of it to see if similar results are discovered. This would be beneficial as it could provide greater understanding about the initial findings and show whether attachment is a significant part of the service delivery relationship across a multitude of services and supports rather than within the specific organizations linked to the participants in this study. Even if the attachment theme was not replicated

further, it would be valuable to explore why attachment is prominent in some service delivery relationships and then absent within others.

Another area of future research would be to explore the attachment relationship between service providers and former foster youth from the perspective of former foster youth. This would provide an opportunity to gain greater understanding about how former foster youth interpret this specific relationship and to see if they identify attachment or themes of attachment as being a significant factor in engaging with services and service providers. Additional learning could also be gained from including a measurement within future research to assess the attachment style of both former foster youth and service providers and explore how different attachment styles affect engagement from both perspectives. Measuring adult attachment styles, the attachment relationship, and the changes that may occur throughout service delivery could provide insight into how adjustable former foster youth's attachment styles are once they transition into adulthood and what may be most supportive in helping them work towards a secure attachment pattern when engaging with services.

The last important area of future research would be to explore the transition to adulthood and access and engagement of supports and services for Indigenous former foster youth from both the service provider and Indigenous former foster youth perspective. Research on this topic may bring to light significant themes, challenges, or barriers that were not addressed in this research study. This research may also provide insight into how or if the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action are being implemented in service delivery and where adjustments and

improvements may be made to further integrate the Calls to Action in supporting Indigenous former foster youth through their transition to adulthood.

### **Researcher Reflections**

Conducting this research study presented many learning opportunities as it was my first time creating and conducting qualitative research on my own. The process involved a lot of backwards and forwards movement as I learned from my mistakes, worked through previous assumptions, and gained a better understanding of research using IPA. The process of trying to recruit former foster youth as participants was the largest area of growth for me. I had to deal with my frustration that all the work I was putting into recruitment was not yielding any former foster youth wanting to participate. Reaching out to other researchers studying the same population and hearing they encountered similar setbacks was helpful because it made me feel less personally responsible for my inability to recruit participants. While analyzing the results of the service provider interviews, it dawned on me that the main reason I had difficulty recruiting former foster youth was the same theme of attachment that came up repeatedly in the interviews. It took this firsthand experience for me to make the connection between what I had read in the literature and how it manifested in real life. It may take years to build the relationship and level of trust necessary for former foster youth to feel comfortable enough to open up and share their story as a research participant.

The main area of reflection for me during this research study was thinking about my own attachment experiences and adult attachment style and how they impact my counselling practice, especially working with youth. It made me reevaluate the influence that my personal attachment style had on relationships with clients and how I included

their supports, such as family, as being a significant part of their treatment. I previously thought that because I was aware of identifying more with an insecure avoidant attachment style, this would enable me to compartmentalize my own attachment experiences and not have them affect my counselling practice with clients or their supports. The increased focus I had on attachment through my research allowed me to see that my avoidant attachment style was impacting how much importance I placed on the client strengthening their relationship with themselves and how little importance I often placed on the client strengthening their relationships with their family or close supports. Time, reflection, and a greater understanding of attachment provided me with the opportunity to see where I needed to improve as a counsellor and where I needed to find healing as an individual.

The experience of conducting this research study allowed me to grow academically, personally, and professionally. I am grateful for all that I have learned during this process and in realizing that the person and the professional are not as far apart as they once seemed. I believe that I have just taken my first steps in my pursuit to gain a greater understanding of attachment and the part it plays in service delivery and the counselling relationship, and I am excited about what I may discover as I dive into it further. The journey has been difficult, full of obstacles, and stressful at times, but the payoff in the end is beyond compare.

## **Conclusion**

The master themes in the analysis revealed how service providers experience the delivery of supports and services and the meaning that they have drawn from these experiences. The challenges and barriers that former foster youth face during their

transition are also apparent to service providers, who are working to overcome these obstacles from the other side of the service delivery relationship. Past negative support experiences and the attachment styles they influence are important to address when supporting the unique needs of former foster youth during their transition to independence. The relationship with service providers is a crucial element in creating healthy and supportive connections with former foster youth and promoting their continued engagement with the service system. The attachment bond can be used to integrate more securely attached behaviours into the interpersonal relationship and into the individual's own personal attachment style. Future research could explore the multitude of ways that the attachment relationship could be used to increase the effectiveness of the delivery of and engagement with services. The unique role that service providers play in the lives of former foster youth has just begun to be explored but demonstrates that exploring this connection further could help support former foster youth in attaining a transition to adulthood that is filled with healthy supports and positive outcomes.

## CHAPTER SIX: FINAL CONCLUSION

The aim of the current study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the how service providers experience the delivery of supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood. Further areas explored within the main research question were: service providers' perspective on significant past experiences in foster care that shape former foster youth's understanding of adulthood; service providers' understanding of how past experiences influence the relationship with the child welfare system and service providers after the youth has left care; and service providers' view on what is necessary to incorporate and to overcome in order to engage and sustain former foster youth in the utilization of external supports. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to delve into the lived experience of service providers and the meaning they made from providing supports and service to former foster youth during the transition to adulthood.

Three group master themes emerged through the analysis of the participant interviews: unprepared and underserviced transition to adulthood; insecure attachment with the service system; and ability of the interpersonal relationship with service providers to meet attachment needs. The results were consistent with findings from the current literature and discussed using attachment theory to highlight how past experiences influence present relationships between former foster youth and service providers and how this relationship could be a potential source of attachment healing and increased service engagement. Future research could further explore the impact that the attachment relationship has on service delivery and how service delivery can be more

supportive of the formation of a secure attachment between former foster youth and service providers.

The purpose of the current study was to provide descriptive and in-depth accounts of the experience that service providers have when delivering supports and services to former foster youth during their transition to adulthood. Additional information has been gathered to increase the understanding of the relationship between former foster youth and services providers and how the relationship can be used to enhance the effectiveness of service delivery. Improving the delivery of and engagement with services and supports is just one of the many areas that need to be addressed when it comes to making the transition to adulthood more successful for former foster youth.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Consent Form

#### Aging Out of the Child Welfare System: The Transition to Adulthood for Former Foster Youth

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Aging out of the child welfare system: The transition to adulthood for former foster youth that is being conducted by Sarah Nixon. Sarah Nixon is a Graduate Student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by phone (778-678-1704) and/or by email (s.nixon@uleth.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Hudson Breen. You may contact my supervisor by phone (780-492-1154) and/or by email (hudsonbr@ualberta.ca).

The purpose of this research project is to gain a greater understanding of the how the experiences that former foster youth go through when they age out of care and transition into adulthood influence their views around connecting to support services after aging out of care. The purpose is also to explore the perspective of the service providers that support former foster youth through this transition and the barriers and challenges they face in providing support to this population.

Research of this type is important because there is a gap in the knowledge base about providing services and supports for foster youth after they age out of care and how their time spent in care and experience of leaving care influences their views on accessing systemic supports once out of care. More information is needed to explore the relationship between former foster youth and the services and supports that are currently being provided.

You are being asked to participate in this study because the service provider you are connected to is located in the Edmonton Capital Region (Edmonton, Fort Saskatchewan, Leduc, St. Albert, and Spruce Grove), provides services to youth between the ages of 18 and 25, and are experienced in providing services to the former foster youth population.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an interview, which will require about 1 - 1.5 hours of your time. During the interview, you will be asked about your perspective as a service provider on former foster youth's view of independence and adulthood, how this view influences interactions with service providers, and the successes and challenges in providing services to this population. The interview will be conducted in a convenient, semi-private space (e.g. meeting room in a public library) or at the workplace of your agency or organization. Interviews will be audio recorded, and these recordings will be deleted as soon as they have been analyzed. If you do not wish to be recorded, you may decline to participate. Your interview will be

transcribed by the researcher (Sarah Nixon). You will be contacted about an opportunity to go over the results of your interview, which will take around 30 minutes.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including requiring 1 – 1.5 hours of your time to complete the interview and an additional 30 minutes of your time if you choose to participate in reviewing the accuracy of the analysis of your interview. You will be given a \$40 gift card for participating.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research, and they include the possibility that during the interview, you may be reminded of past experiences that were stressful or upsetting. This may cause you to experience distress, discomfort, or anxiety beyond what you might expect in day to day social interactions

To prevent or to deal with these risks, you will be informed that the questions in the interview will ask about your experiences providing services to former foster youth and the successes and challenges you have had in providing services to this population. You, as a participant, have the right stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. The person interviewing you can give you the name and telephone number of some counselling services, if you wish this information.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include providing information that will help people, professionals, and other service providers to better understand the transition into adulthood for former foster youth and the barriers that service providers face in connecting with this unique population and providing supports that are targeted to their needs.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, your data will not be used, and you will keep the \$40 gift card.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will inform you of your right to withdraw from the study without explanation when I contact you to review the analysis of your interview.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, you will be asked to select a pseudonym, a name chosen by you that is not a real name. While the interviews will be recorded, the recordings will be destroyed once they have been analyzed. The typed interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information from the interview will be removed. The consent forms and master list will be in a lock box safe and will only be accessible to me.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by securing the information collected on password protected devices and in a lock box safe that will only be accessible to me.

Data from this study will be disposed of by printing off the data and storing it in a lock box safe and by permanently deleting the electronic copy at the end of data analysis. The printed documents will be shredded five years after the completion of the study.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in my thesis project and in articles published in journals. The results from your interview will only be shared with you if you agree to review them and will not be shared with any of the other participants.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Lethbridge (research.services@uleth.ca or 403-329-2747).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Chosen Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Information (Phone/Email):  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Printed Name of Participant*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*    \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Printed Name of Researcher*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*    \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix B

## Email Script

Hello,

My name is Sarah Nixon, and I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge conducting qualitative research on the transition to adulthood for former foster youth. I am looking for agencies that provide services for young adults in the age range of 18-25 that would be willing to participate in an interview about providing supports and services to foster youth that have left care upon turning 18 and about how an independent foster youth identity interacts with service providers. The research study has received ethics approval from the University of Lethbridge Human Subject Research Committee.

The purpose of the research is to gain an in-depth experience of how the previous experiences of former foster youth influence the connection to and interaction with support services after leaving care and to capture the service provider perspective about providing targeted supports to this population. The objective of the project is to provide a platform at a research level where the challenges, barriers, and successes in accessing and providing supports to this population can be explored and also to advocate for changes that would be more supportive for young adults and service providers in the transition process.

I will be offering participants a \$40.00 honorarium in the form of a gift card for participating. If you have any questions about the project, would like further information, or would be willing to participate, please feel free to email me back at [s.nixon@uleth.ca](mailto:s.nixon@uleth.ca) or call me at (778) 678-1704.

Thank you for your time,

Sarah Nixon

## Appendix C

## Interview Schedule

1. What are your past experiences in providing supports and services to former foster youth in their transition to adulthood?
  - a. *Prompt: Types of services provided such as housing, financial, counselling, food, employment or referrals, nature of the relationship such as drop-in, case management, or via phone or email*
2. From your perspective as a service provider, what does independence and adulthood mean to the former foster youth population?
  - a. *Prompt: Being in control of their lives, being responsible for their own bills, rent, food, employment etc., or making their own day to day decisions*
3. From your perspective as a service provider, what experiences during the time spent in foster care significantly impact former foster youth's view of independence and adulthood?
  - a. *Prompt: Relationships with foster parents or social workers, number of housing placements, level of input in the direction of their care, or past interactions with service providers while in care*
4. How do previous foster care experiences and the view of independence influence former foster youth's interaction with service providers?
  - a. *Prompt: View of relying on external supports for assistance, view of following advice or taking steps planned out by service providers, view of*

*creating a relationship with a service provider, or the experience of being self-reliant in adulthood*

5. What has been most helpful or successful in connecting to and providing supports and services for the former foster youth population?
  - a. *Prompt: What has been helpful to engage the youth, helpful in accessing services initially, helpful in building the relationship with the youth, and helpful in encouraging the youth to continue accessing services*
  
6. In your experience as a service provider, what are the barriers and challenges that are faced while providing supports and services to the former foster youth population?
  - a. *Prompt: What makes it difficult to connect to this population, what are the barriers to providing appropriate or targeted services, or what other struggles or limitations arise when encouraging this population to stay engaged with services*