



EXPERIENCES OF AGING OUT OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN CAPE TOWN

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The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project.

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Abstract

The foster care system within South Africa, and foster care systems around the world take care of some of the most vulnerable members of society, yet the transition out of these systems into adulthood is often overlooked. Therefore this study aimed to understand the specific challenges faced by youth currently aging out of the foster system in South Africa in order to deepen the understanding of how to assist youth age out of care successfully. The research was situated in an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). Within this approach semi-structured interviews with 9 youth in foster care were conducted as well as a semi-structured focus group with 6 foster mothers. Thematic data analysis according to IPA guidelines was used. The themes identified pertained to the importance of independence, the central focus being on ensuring that material and physical needs were met particularly in a time of transition; the continuity of emotional care within the transition; the transactional nature of relationships and support; and finally the struggle to be seen as 'normal' especially at this time. Research was conducted in collaboration with a non-governmental organization, Home from Home, which is currently facing the challenges of assisting youth age out of care.

Keywords: Foster care, youth, cluster foster care, aging out of care, IPA, South Africa

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Table of Contents

Plagiarism Declaration.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Significance of the study.....	8
Aims and Objectives.....	9
Main Research question.....	9
Sub-Questions.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Methods.....	10
Home from Home.....	10
Research Design.....	11
Participants.....	12
Materials.....	12
Data Analysis.....	13
Ethics.....	14
Harm to Subjects.....	14
Informed Consent.....	14
Violation of privacy and confidentiality.....	15
Debriefing of participants.....	15
Limitations.....	15
Reflexivity.....	16
Analysis and Discussion.....	17
Summary and Conclusion.....	28
Acknowledgements.....	30
References.....	31
<i>Appendix A</i>	36
<i>Appendix B</i>	37
<i>Appendix C</i>	38
<i>Appendix D</i>	39
<i>Appendix E</i>	40
<i>Appendix F</i>	42

Introduction

The foster care system within South Africa, and foster care systems around the world take care of some of the most vulnerable members of society, yet the transition out of these systems into adulthood is often overlooked. The need for adequate foster care in South Africa is substantial and children in foster care face numerous challenges in different areas of their lives before, during foster care, and as they age out of it. Global research on aging out of care has identified several key factors that are associated with youth who have transitioned successfully into adulthood despite the many challenges (Avery, 2010; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Hong et al., 2014; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). These key factors have been used in different interventions aimed at assisting youth successfully age out of care (Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; Salazar, Noell, Cole, Haggerty, & Roe, 2017; Tanur, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016; Van Breda, 2015; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017; Woodgate, Morakinyo, & Martin, 2017; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). However, there remains a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by foster youth in South Africa and a paucity of interventions to assist youth in successfully aging out of care. This research therefore seeks to understand the challenges faced by foster youth as they age out of care and the way in which these challenges are currently being addressed.

The current system of foster care within South Africa is underfunded and under-resourced; reaching 40,288 children in 2017 which is estimated to be only about a third of those who require it (Hall, 2017; Jamieson, 2015). Children in the foster care system have been removed from their biological family by the state due to abuse or neglect and placed in alternative care. The majority of those in need of foster care come from historically marginalised areas, due to the impact of historical, political, social and economic factors (Hall, 2017 ; Nyasani, Sterberg, & Smith, 2009; Thomas, & Mabusela, 1991). However, the significant need for foster care is not unique to South Africa, as both developed and

developing countries struggle to fulfil the needs of children in the foster care system (Boyle, 2017; Hampshire et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2014; Kang-Yi & Adams, 2017; Nduwimana et al., 2017; Woodgate et al., 2017).

Those placed in foster care often face challenges prior to their placement due to the circumstances that lead to them requiring foster care as well as challenges during their stay in foster care due to the impermanent nature of foster care and the scarce resources, both human and financial (Tanur, 2012). With state care ending at age 18 or when the youth has finished schooling, the challenges faced by all youth in foster care extend beyond their stay in the system, and thus the task of helping youth successfully age out of care has received increasing attention in recent years. There is very little South African literature on the topic, however, the challenges faced by South African foster youth as they age out of care are by no means unique and similar challenges are faced by youth in foster care around the world (Hampshire et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2014; Nduwimana et al., 2017; Tanur, 2012). These challenges range from homelessness to a lack of a supportive social system.

Although homelessness is a challenge faced by previously fostered youth throughout the USA, England, and elsewhere in the world, South African youth aging out of the foster care system are particularly vulnerable due to the critical nationwide lack of adequate housing (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015; Tanur, 2012). Additionally, from USA and South African studies, these youth are more likely than their peers to have lower education levels, lower salaries and higher rates of unemployment (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Kang-Yi & Adams, 2017; Tanur, 2012; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). From studies around the world including Belgrade, Serbia, Montenegro, the USA, and South Africa there are arguments that the adversity faced by these youth put them at an additional risk of psychological difficulties such as depression, anxiety, identity issues and self-medication through substance abuse

(Backović, Marinković, Grujličić-Šipetić, & Maksimović, 2006; Kang-Yi & Adams, 2017; Nduwimana et al., 2017; Rebbe, Nurius, Ahrens, & Courtney, 2017; Tanur, 2012). Youth aging out of foster care, in England, the USA, South Africa and potentially other places around the world, are additionally more at risk of not having an adequate social support system to rely on and face the risk of affiliation with peer groups that demonstrate risky behaviours (Boyle, 2017; Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski, & Schelbe, 2009; Tanur, 2012). These challenges from various parts of the world all need to be realised and addressed in some way, in order that they may be overcome.

With these challenges in mind, the definition and characteristics of a successful transition from foster care to independence need to be identified. The standards set for self-reliance and self-sufficiency can at times be unattainable even for those who have not had to deal with the challenges that come with being in foster care, and yet it is somehow expected of this vulnerable group (Avery, 2010; Curry & Abrams, 2015). A successful transition out of care can therefore be characterized by interdependence rather than independence, and be complemented by assisting youths to become resilient, self-determined individuals who are able to take their place in their community (Kang-Yi & Adams, 2017; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007; Tanur, 2012).

When looking at the many youth who have successfully navigated the transition out of care the following common characteristics can be identified. Resilience in the face of adversity, especially in the ability to adapt to changes and challenges, is a predictive factor for positive psychological, physical and social outcomes (Miller, Paschall, & Azar, 2017; Tanur, 2012; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). The presence of a mentor, a positive role model, is often found to play an important role and quoted anecdotally by many foster care youth (Thompson et al., 2016; Woodgate et al., 2017). Psychological and emotional maturity, seen in decision making skills (Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017), self-sufficiency, self-

determination (Salazar et al., 2017) and healthy attachment patterns (Boyle, 2017) are further characteristics. On a more practical level, those who have successfully aged out of care have typically had a social support network that assisted them in meeting their financial needs, finding accommodation and helping with employment through institutions and networks (Lee et al., 2014; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Shook et al., 2009; Tanur, 2012; Van Breda, 2015; Woodgate et al., 2017; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). There is huge variability amongst those who age out of care, as there are so many factors that are at play in each youth's life (Miller et al., 2017). The question then arises, what specific challenges are faced by South African youth in foster care and how can they be best supported as they age out of care.

Significance of the study

The lack of support for youth as they age out of foster care is troubling, as they face a myriad of challenges transitioning out of the care system. Although global research has identified many challenges faced by foster youth, there is limited research that focuses on the South African context. Additionally, those caring for youth in foster care are faced with the lack of support from government and lack of knowledge on how best to prepare these youth to leave foster care. This research contributes to a small, but growing, body of evidence on the challenges faced by youth aging out of foster care and will hopefully assist Home from Home (HfH) as they continue to develop their aging out program. Additionally, this study gave youth in foster care and foster mothers a voice, a chance to express their hopes and concerns as they, or those in their care, age out of care. Information on the challenges faced by youth aging out of foster care may have potential to inform how youth in foster care are supported not only in this Non-Governmental Organisation but in the broader context of South Africa.

Aims and Objectives

Through the experiences and expectations of youth currently aging out of foster care and the insight of their foster mothers this project seeks to identify and understand the challenges facing youth aging out of foster care. Additionally, this research aims to deepen the understanding of how to assist youth age out of foster care successfully.

Main Research question

What are the challenges facing youth as they age out of foster care and what are the concerns and expectations surrounding this transition?

Sub-Questions

How do youth in foster care experience aging out of the foster care system?

How do foster mothers experience this transition and how do they describe their role in this transition?

What do youth transitioning out of care and foster mothers perceive as specific challenges relating to this transition?

How do youth transitioning out of care and foster mothers describe a 'successful' transition?

Theoretical Framework

In investigating the challenges faced by foster youth an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) framework was used. IPA focuses on examining the personal lived experience of individuals which allows the phenomenon in question to be studied without imposing a certain theory or understanding, which is particularly important for this under researched area. In essence IPA results in research that is descriptive, concerned with the reality of the experiences of participants, and interpretive, recognising that interpretation is inevitable. (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014)

The phenomenological aspect of IPA is particularly pertinent to the particular context of growing up in foster care, as many of the challenges faced by youth aging out of foster

care are related to experiences of independence and social support. Understanding that experience occurs within a concrete and meaningful world, IPA argues that experience and reality are irrevocably intertwined. Experiences and their interpretation is not something static but is shaped by the past, the current experiences and expectations of the future. (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014)

In addition to the phenomenological stance of IPA, there is an idiographic commitment to ensure that the individual cases are explored in depth before moving toward general statements. For youth in foster care, whose situations are all vastly different, this approach is particularly valuable as through first acknowledging the individual it is possible to then situate that individual's experience within the broader context by comparing and contrasting various cases, enabling a fuller understanding. (Eatough & Smith, 2008)

In investigating how different individuals make sense of their experiences there is a double hermeneutic, or interpretation, acknowledged. The researcher tries to understand the participants' experience from their point of view while also asking critical questions about the experiences, in this case the experience of aging out of foster care.

Although there is much international literature on aging out of foster care, there is limited South African literature and the challenges faced may be different and have different meanings attributed to them which have implications for interventions. Thus a research approach like IPA allows for new meanings and understandings to emerge while still taking into account previous research.

Methods

Home from Home

Throughout the course of this research, I worked with Home from Home (HfH), a Non-Profit Organisation and Public Benefit Organisation. HfH is made up of social workers, foster mothers and support staff who work together to provide safe, loving environments for

children in foster care. HfH uses a cluster foster care system where up to six children are placed in a home with a foster mother, forming a family. In this way, HfH seeks to insure that children are able to remain in their community, speak their home language and attend their local school. Supporting children as they grow up, this organisation takes into account each individual situation in order to provide what is best for each and every child in their care. HfH is currently assisting their first cohort of youth age out of care.

Research Design

This study used semi-structured interviews and a focus group, as these methods enabled me, as the researcher, and the participants to engage in conversation in order to obtain in-depth data and explore the challenges facing youth as they age out of foster care. These methods enabled the collection of first person accounts, with space and flexibility to explore unexpected avenues as they came up in conversation.

Interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 9 youth in foster care who are currently participating in an aging out program. These interviews were crucial to IPA research as it is these individuals who are currently aging out of care. They enabled an open discussion in which the perspective and interpretation of the youth in foster care's experiences was explored. The nine interviews ranged in length from 10-20 minutes. Although shorter than initially planned, the length of the interviews was impacted by practicality as well as the age and willingness of the participants to engage with the topic.

Focus Group. A semi-structured focus group with six foster mothers was used to add depth and breadth to the study. Foster mothers are perhaps the most crucial auxiliary individuals to the experience of aging out of care, as it is from their care that youth in foster care transition into the wider world thus their accounts helped me as the researcher to understand the youth in foster care's experiences. This focus group allowed the foster mothers to compare experiences, expectations and work in collaboration to form a more

comprehensive understanding (Liamputtong, 2011; May, 2001). The focus group occurred at a monthly metro meeting of the Khayelitsha foster mothers, and took just over an hour.

Participants

This study used purposive sampling, which enabled the researcher and HfH to work together to select participants who were intimately involved in aging out of care within the organisation. For this reason 9 youth currently aging out of foster care (see Table 1), 5 from the Khayelitsha area and 4 from the Goodwood area, were interviewed. An invitation letter (Appendix A) was sent to the youth in foster care eligible for this study and interviews were set up.

Table 1
Youth participant demographics

Area	Gender	Age (years)	Time in foster care
Khayelitsha	Male	16	13 years in foster care, with multiple transitions
	Female	16	13 years, with the same family
	Female	17	Since young, with multiple transitions
	Female	16	Since young, with same family
	Female	16	14 years, with same family
Goodwood	Female	17	12/13 years, same siblings but not same foster mother
	Female	17	Since young, moved to current family 4 years ago
	Female	16	10 years, moved into current family 2 years ago
	Female	16	Since young, with multiple transitions

*The information in this table is based on what participants were willing to share regarding their time in foster care

In addition to the youth, the foster mothers from Khayelitsha were invited to take part in a focus group as this is the area with the highest concentration of youth aging out of foster care. An invitation letter (Appendix B) was sent and I was invited to incorporate the focus group into their monthly meeting in Khayelitsha which six foster mothers attended.

Materials

In order to collect data appropriate for an IPA study on aging out of foster care, the primary research tool is the researcher. The skills of the researcher determine to a large extent

the quality of data collected (Eatough & Smith, 2008). I prepared an interview and focus group guide with open ended questions (Appendix C and D) and used this in conjunction with researcher sensitivity which allowed for the various experiences to be explored in conjunction with the various participants.

Data Analysis

For IPA research, a thematic structure for data analysis is recommended as this allows for the philosophy of IPA to be explored and incorporated in every aspect of the research. Idiography is found in the in-depth analysis of each case before looking at the data as a whole, forming an overarching thematic structure while remaining true to each individual's accounts. In addition, the interpretive nature of research is acknowledged throughout as the interpretation of the participants and the researcher is made clear at every stage.

The steps taken in the analysis of the data follow the framework given by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014).

The first stage consisted of an immersion in the data by multiple readings of each transcript and listening to the audio files making notes on the content, context, language use and penning down initial questions to explore the data more deeply.

The second stage involved working with the notes in conjunction with the raw data to transform these notes into emergent themes, creating concise phrases that reflected the essence of the participants' accounts.

The third stage consisted of compiling the themes from the entire transcript before looking for connections and grouping the emergent themes in accordance to their conceptual similarities, dropping any without a strong evidential base.

The final stage involved writing a narrative account of the data, taking and expanding the themes using quotes from the interviews and focus group. This incorporated different

levels of interpretation, while ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the individual contexts and accounts.

Ethics

Ethical considerations need to be examined for all research, and for this study ethical approval was granted by the University of Cape Town's Psychology Department (Wassenaar, 2006). In researching those who are considered to be part of a vulnerable group, as is the case for foster youth, these ethical considerations require additional care (Horn, Sleem, & Ndebele, 2014).

Harm to Subjects

Harm can take several forms, physical, violation of respect or psychological harm. No physical harm occurred as the interviews and focus groups were conducted in the homes of the participants. The participants were respected through insuring privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy which was ensured at all stages (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). A third component was consideration of any potential emotional or psychological distress, which was mitigated through the format and style of the semi-structured interviews and focus group with participants able to shape the tone and the content of the interview along with the researcher and end the interview at any stage should they wish.

Informed Consent

Informed consent requires that the participants of the study, after being informed about the nature, extent and consequences of participating in the research, give their written consent (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). To achieve informed consent the youth and foster mothers were given a consent form (Appendix E and F) which outlined all factors that could influence their decision to take part in the study, which in addition to the factors listed above included all potential harms and benefits that could result from taking part in the study. For youth under the age of 18, dual consent from the legal guardian and the youth was obtained

(Wilson & MacLean, 2011). The consent form was explained verbally to the participants and all questions about the research were answered. It was ensured that the participants understood what they were signing and that they were free to refuse or to withdraw their consent at any stage without negative consequences.

Violation of privacy and confidentiality

As all participants in this study come from the same organisation, others within the organisation may have known of individuals' participation. However, the confidentiality was maintained as the interviews occurred in a private room, pseudonyms were used, identifying information was removed from the final report to protect identities, and data was kept on a password protected computer (Wassenaar, 2006).

Debriefing of participants

Immediately after the interview, the participants were verbally debriefed, and in the one case where a participant became distressed I referred them to the social worker and support structures in place in HfH. The youth and the foster mothers have a very effective support structure as they have social workers constantly involved and the organisation confirmed that this is the avenue of support most accessible and most appropriate.

Limitations

Language barriers were a known limitation at the outset of the research; however, in collaboration with HfH the participants selected were all fluent in English. This may have limited the interviews by creating an additional barrier as English is not the participants' home language. In addition, although the focus group was supposed to be in English, many of the foster mothers chose to speak in isiXhosa. This posed difficulties for me during the focus group as I had to rely on others in the room to translate, which prevented me from asking follow up questions that could have added depth to the research.

A further limitation was the short time frame, as it meant that it was only possible to include a few participants, and all participants were interviewed once. As this study looks into the experiences and challenges of foster youth aging out of care, it would have been beneficial to go more in depth and follow the whole process; however this was beyond the scope of the project.

This study is not necessarily generalizable as there are several unique factors within this group of youth in foster care. The majority of the youth in foster care were young women, and had all been in foster care since they were young. Additionally, HfH uses cluster foster care, a very particular type of foster care. Due to the diversity of South Africa, this research may not be generalizable to other cultures within South Africa or the world.

With these limitations taken into account this research still provides insight into the challenges faced by youth in foster care as they age out of care by adding to the literature and connecting the individual, very personal, challenges with the broader context of South African and international literature.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, the process through which researchers are mindful of their role in shaping the research in all its stages, is crucial for all qualitative research (Willig, 2001). Reflexivity is therefore a call to honesty, and an attempt to be aware of all subjective understandings of the researcher, the power imbalances inherent in the society in which research takes place, and the biases that the researcher may hold due to their worldview and experiences (Willig, 2001). Within IPA, these are seen to be inevitable, and are used within the interpretive framework to deepen the analysis by developing an awareness of how participants are interpreting their experiences and how the researcher is interpreting the data.

Reflexivity extends to being aware of the relationships between the researcher and the participants and the various dynamics during the interviews and focus group. While preparing

the interview and focus guide, and during data collection, I tried to be aware of my own assumptions and biases in how I framed questions as this directly impacts the answers that were given. My positionality as a white, female university student speaking to black and coloured youth in foster care creates a dynamic of power especially as interviews were organised through the foster mothers and I felt as though some youth felt pressured to take part in the study. Additionally, interacting with foster mothers with varying levels of education created a different dynamic of power. In order to mitigate these power imbalances; the interviews and the focus group were conducted in the homes of the participants and I did my best to ensure that consent was fully free and informed.

Analysis and Discussion

The themes occurring within the data were developed using both the research questions and allowing themes to emerge from the data. The themes identified pertained to the importance and various elements of independence, the central focus on ensuring that material and physical needs were met particularly in a time of transition, the continuity of emotional care, the contextualized responsiveness of the youth in relation to relationships and support, and finally the struggle to be seen as ‘normal’ especially at this time. These themes were evident in the accounts of both the youth in foster care and the foster mothers, albeit sometimes in conflicting and contrasting ways.

Independence. Although not explicitly asked, the importance of independence came across strongly in various ways from several youth in foster care. The desire for independence as she grew up was expressed by one of the participants in the following way:

I think wanting more independence, because here like in foster care they make you so dependent on other people, it gets really irritating. Like you want a bit of your own freedom, you understand what I'm saying?

When asked what this independence would entail, this same participant gave the following answer:

I think like letting us do things man, like normal children do, you know like go with your friends out or, I don't know, go to the movies or something. We do go but like... with our sisters or with other adults, it's weird. (Leah, youth)

Expressing a desire for independence in this overt way shows a level of engagement with developing into adulthood, while still clinging to childhood. This participant wanted an increase in, but possibly not ultimate, independence. Another participant expressed her desire for independence in a more subtle way, through wanting to be able to go exploring. Still another youth expressed the desire for independence through the desire for her “own things” when speaking about the future:

To have my own house, own car, everything on me. To not rent. To have my own. No kids. Because no time for kids and no dogs because I don't like pets eh just to have my own house, car, yah. (Anathi, youth)

The idea of a growth in independence, of independence as something to be worked towards comes across strongly in this, and other accounts. For Anathi, it seems as if the reliance on others was something to move away from as she grew up. Independence was seen by Anathi and others as an ultimate goal, and was expressed through desires for own future.

Independence as an important goal and something that needed to be learnt was emphasized by both youth and foster mothers.

You need to learn. If you're fifteen and above you need to start learning to be independent because not always you will have a support from other people. So I think it's a good thing. (Lindelwa, youth)

Seeing the current support as something that would ultimately end, independence was seen by Lindelwa as something essential. But more than that, it was something to learn while still

supported by others. Foster mothers held similar views with regards to independence being something important but also something that needed to be learnt:

I would like to see the children be able to stay alone when they leave this place because I have taught them everything they need to know to protect them. (Mama Fezeka, Foster mother, translated from isiXhosa)

Mama Fezeka saw her role as a mother as completely essential in imparting independence. This independence seems to be very much rooted in being able to look after oneself physically, being able to provide for oneself. Gaining this independence seemed to be a heartfelt desire of the mothers for the youth in their care.

The importance of independence is stressed in South African and international literature on foster care (Curry & Abrams, 2015). The pressure to be financially independent, something expressed in literature on aging out of foster care, is felt even at this stage where many of the youth who I spoke to expressed concern about the future particularly with regards to employment despite it not being an immediate reality. Although there was some mention of being prepared to be independent, the independence seemed ultimate and no comment was made on interdependence which is possibly less idealistic and more attainable goal (Tanur, 2012). Interdependence, in terms of building social networks and helping youth access available resources, is something stressed by HfH but it seems as if this has not fully trickled down to the lived realities and experiences of the youth. The importance of support during and after transition is necessary for youth to attain the goals that they and those who care for them have set (Tanur, 2012; van Breda, 2015).

Centrality of physical care and material resources. Independence can be seen in two lights, financial independence and psycho-social independence. The necessity of financial independence, namely providing for the material needs of the youth, was raised in relation to coming into foster care, what foster care provides, and particularly with regards to

concerns for the future. For many of the youth, when asked what would change as they grew older, these were the things that came up first and most forcibly. When asked how those in her life supported her, one participant replied:

Help us with everything... school, shoes, school uniform. Everything, clothes, food.

Everything we get from [foster mother]

When asked how this would change, and how she would be supported as she aged out of foster care, she continued:

She won't help me, because I'm going to leave here. To, to stay another home.

(Anathi, youth).

Taking care of the physical needs in terms of nutrition, education and clothing was seen by youth in foster care as a main component of foster care and one that would end.

This emphasis on material support was not mentioned by the foster mothers in terms of their role as foster mothers, and yet it was the discontinuation of this particular type of support that caused the most anxiety among the participants. This was reflected through silence when I asked what would change, cautious responses of “I don't know”, and outright statements that reflected the belief of many of the foster youth that after leaving care support would be ended. It was expressed in this and similar ways:

They don't do like that. When you are out of here, you are out of here. I don't, they don't provide for. They don't give – um - money or anything, they don't even go and see you. You are out. (Buhle, youth)

For youth currently in foster care, these are real concerns and this is reflected in their account of how things will change. Despite HfH putting an aging out program in place, and building the resources for a “half-way house”, these fears remain very real, at least for the youth included in the study. For some, there are family members that they may be able to move to

and efforts are being made to help them find employment and further education opportunities which will assist with financial and material resources.

The differences between the accounts of the youth give a little glimpse into the complexity and variety of both individual attitudes toward transition, but also the various ways in which support is continued after aging out of care. As extended care has been shown in international literature to be a good indicator of positive outcomes, the fear and possibly the reality of an abrupt change and sudden lack of material resources could be harmful (Lee et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2017). The pressure for self-reliance and self-sufficiency in terms of providing for themselves, and sometimes family members, can be overwhelming for these youth (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Many interventions focus on assisting youth with material resources in the form of housing, grants and employment and many of these interventions have been successful to a degree (Woodgate et al., 2017). There is some evidence that preventing instability and insecurity with regards to physical resources is protective, and for these youth it seems to be a great cause of concern.

The continuity of emotional care. Not all expressions were of an ultimate cut off of support, there was some understanding of continued support in various ways but particularly with regard to emotional support, thus perhaps separating financial independence from psycho-social independence. For the youth in foster care, the security of trusting the continuity of emotional care was not strong but when prompted or asked directly if their foster mothers would continue to be an emotional support they generally agreed. Asked what would change in terms of her relationships with those that supported her, Layla said:

We won't see each other that much, that often, yah, yah, that's it. (Layla, youth)

She, and others, saw the relationships with her foster mother and others as stable, and something that would continue, however she was aware that logistically things would change.

In addition, there seemed to be a desire for family which was expressed in different ways from desires for their own children to characterizing their foster mothers and social workers in their lives along familial terms as this participant did.

*Aunty (name) was like a mother....aunty (name) was like an aunt that I never had...
aunty (name) also was like a mother. (Chloe, youth)*

It is necessary to take into account the cultural aspect of calling people aunty, however the additional part of saying someone was like an aunt or like a mother speaks to a desire for family particularly when framed as something they never had before. Into this fits the understanding that family is something you can depend on to always be there for you.

The continuity of emotional care was expressed most strongly by the foster mothers. They seemed to have a clear sense of identity that came from being a foster mother to the youth. This was shown particularly through their connection to the children in their care, and the way that they stressed that these children had become their own.

But when I give the children to growing up, I know that now the children –the children I am taking with me is my children now, is not taking for another people, is my children. (Mama Celiwe, Foster Mother)

There was a huge emphasis on motherhood, and much like biological motherhood this is something that will continue even after the youth leave their care. This was especially felt for those who had parented the same children for many years.

The different roles that the mothers and social workers played, and will continue to play, in the lives of youth in foster care form part of the broader framework of a social support network. Research has shown the importance of a social support network, of having role models to look up to and rely on and these familial bonds will hopefully provide that as these youth age out of care (Thompson et al., 2016; Woodgate et al., 2017). Having older adults in their lives to assist them with their difficulties, both emotional and practical, is

therefore incredibly important (Lee et al., 2014; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Shook et al., 2009; Tanur, 2012; Van Breda, 2015; Woodgate et al., 2017; Zinn & Courtney, 2017). The interdependence that is the result of being part of a community is achieved through these foster mothers and social workers.

For young people whose childhoods have been characterised by the instability that brings them into foster care, healthy attachments to parents or parent figures is difficult. This is important as previous experiences and attachments pave the way for attachments and relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Many of the youth did seem to have a good relationship with their foster mothers; however, this was not the case for all youth who were interviewed. One participant answered with silence when asked about her foster mother, and another struggled to understand her foster mother's parenting and expressed her frustration by saying "*Our mothers are so uptight, like we can't do nothing*" (Leah, youth). While it is natural for adolescence to be a time where independence is slowly developed, and relationships with peers grow in importance while relationships with parents diminish, a strong relationship will aid an adolescent as they mature into adulthood (Boyle, 2017; Thompson et al., 2016).

Contextualized responsiveness within foster care. In describing what will happen in the future, as they transition out of care, almost all of the youth in foster care spoke about how the opportunities and support were offered but how it required them to take an active role in their future. This reflects an environment where youths need to respond to their environment and the opportunities in a positive and constructive manner. "If...then" statements came up frequently, emphasizing how it was perceived to be important for the youth to take their futures into their own hands.

So they said they will not um get that out of from home from home but they will take us to another place so that we can be taken care of... [...] ...But when we ... are

tough and don't do what um what is right with our lives so we can't do with it so we need to be um serious about our lives so that we can be what we need to be when we grow up. (Lethabo, youth)

When speaking about the future this youth spoke about how it was necessary for him to take an active role in the opportunities that were given, and adhere to a specific code of behaviour. Another participant expanded on what was expected of them, and the direct relationship between the amount of support offered and their behaviour or engagement with the opportunities offered.

If you have discipline and respect and still are listening to what our mothers are saying then that's when they will start like supporting us more and more ...[...]...it is like that for everyone but some of the others they just don't care about anything that is been given here, like opportunities they don't take it so. (Lindelwa, youth)

For the youth there was a clear distinction between them and other youth who didn't take the opportunities given. This ownership of their future and the contextualised responsiveness that was necessary seems to be particularly important for the youth. The responsibility for their future was placed squarely on their shoulders, without much engagement with the social context or how this may make it more difficult for them to succeed.

The foster mothers expressed this same connection between the support given by the foster mothers, and more broadly HfH, and the child's behaviour or engagement with these opportunities.

Like they must make sure- like school. They must go to school. They must be- they must be- they must do-they must be focused. Like if they go to school, they don't focus. Always they take everything easy, neh. I try to – to say to them “If you do something, you must be focus neh”. (Mama Fezeka, foster mother)

Sometimes when they are big forget what you taught them. But I am free because I know I have done everything I must do. It is not easy. (Mama Phumeza, foster mother, translated from isiXhosa)

For the foster mothers, this was expressed as a challenge in parenting youth as they grow through adolescence into adulthood. They can put opportunities and support in place, but it is the responsibility of the youth to take those opportunities and make the most of them. This view of the mothers is contradictory to what seems to be the belief of the youth in terms of support ending when they transition out of care. The degree to which they take responsibility for the behaviour of the youth in their care is understandable, as is how they rationalize that once they have done their best the rest is up to the youth.

This decision to engage with the opportunities offered, and the growth in self-determinism that is seen in these youth is promising. Both are elements that have been shown to be important to successfully aging out of care, however they are difficult to develop directly (Olson et al., 2017; Salazar et al., 2017). What is encouraging then is that both these elements are coming across through the family setting provided by HfH, and through the programs that HfH is running.

The flip side of self-determinism, of putting the emphasis of responsibility on themselves rather than the social context adds an additional pressure to succeed. Although expressed in relation to the opportunities and support offered, this pressure could become overwhelming. Recognising that success is not only due to the individual, but due to the complex interactions between person, environment and social environment could help these youth to develop a healthy sense of self-determinism and responsibility (Tanur, 2012; van Breda, 2015).

The pressure of ‘normalcy’. A strong desire to be ‘normal’ and to be seen as ‘normal’ emerged through the various accounts, and increased in importance as the youth

grew older. The stigma of being in foster care is complex, and the desire not to disclose their foster care status to peers was strongly expressed by one youth in the following way.

The teachers see me that I stayed here in foster care so they see'd me but they didn't tell anyone that I am staying here but they've supported me ...

When asked what the differences were, he continued:

No I don't see any difference. It's like my foster mother take me as... here in Home from Home we take as ... the... normal kid like other houses so we don't look like we are foster children from... you see? So I take myself as normal kid. Like other kids are my friends. All my friends so I don't see anything wrong. (Lethabo, youth)

This participant did not want to look like, or be taken as a foster child. The immediate association of 'different' was a negative connotation. Other participants really stressed that there were no differences between their family and other families, and these similarities were very much based on going to the same school, eating the same food, living in the same area as peers. The differences, where they emerged, were based on getting material things from parents. But as these two participants state strongly, it seems to be the negative attitudes of others that influence the stereotypes as they stress the normality of their lives and homes.

it... okay, it's not like nice nice but it's fine you know like... cause we hear negative things about our from other kids from our side. (Buhle, youth)

For those in foster care, they saw themselves as 'normal' and felt as though it was their peers around them that created negative images of what it meant to be in foster care. What these negative images or stereotypes consisted of, was unclear.

The pressure to be 'normal', to fit in, was also expressed by the mothers. This mother expressed it in terms of peer pressure.

They also have peer pressure. They want to look like other children. They want to do everything the other children are doing. (Mama Nceba, foster mother, translated from isiXhosa)

Aside from this limited expression of the pressure that the youth feel to fit in, the mothers took this further. They, themselves, feel the judgement of their communities in their parenting.

But now there are some people on streets who are watching me to see how I handle these children. There is a question about what is happening because the children are changing. (Mama Vuyokazi, foster mother, translated from isiXhosa)

Perhaps this is also an expression of the pressure to be a good parent, to be a ‘normal’ parent to these children who are not their own biologically but whom are in their care.

This desire to be seen as ‘normal’ fits into the struggle for identity generally felt by adolescents at this age (Tanur, 2012). For youth in foster care who may struggle with a dual identity due to having both a biological and foster family, this may express itself in a desire to be seen as ‘normal’ (Boyle, 2017). Not wanting to be seen as a ‘child in foster care’ reveals that there is some sort of stigma attached to being in foster care and perhaps exacerbates the desire to be ‘normal’. Although unstudied in South Africa, the stigma attached to being in foster care seems to be very much focused on being ‘different’ or ‘devalued’ by others and could be linked to the ‘irresponsibility’ of parents who cannot look after their children (Rogers, 2016). Growing up with stigma of this kind, which attacks the very identity of youth, poses additional challenges for those aging out of foster care.

Summary and Conclusion

The following themes were identified in the youth in foster care and the foster mother's experiences of aging out of foster care: 1) the importance of independence, 2) the centrality of providing for material needs, 3) the continuity of emotional care, 4) the contextualised responsiveness within foster care, and 5) the struggle against stigma in the desire to be seen as 'normal'. Analysis of the accounts of youth and mothers allowed an understanding of the subjective and objective reality of youth aging out of foster care. These findings suggest that the experiences of aging out of foster care in South Africa presents challenges that are not dissimilar to those experienced by youth in foster care throughout the world.

Independence is stressed over and over again in national and international literature on aging out of care and seems to be the ultimate goal. Not surprisingly, this was reflected in the experiences and attitudes of youth in foster care and foster mothers in this study. There needs to be a focus on interdependence as a more realistic and attainable goal, and this understanding needs to impact the youth in foster care for successful transitions out of care. Interdependence seems more culturally appropriate in communal communities, like many found in South Africa.

Interventions throughout the world focus on assisting youth aging out of care with employment, housing, finances and other practical needs and have been shown to make a difference. Unless there is some stability in terms of meeting basic needs, youth will be unable to succeed. Going into adulthood not knowing what support is available was a very real fear for many of the participants in this study. In order to then assist youth age out of care successfully practical support needs to be offered, and the youth need to be made aware of the different supports that are available.

Providing emotional support to children and youth in foster care is one of the most important aspects of care. Building up support networks that will persist into adulthood is

essential for aging out of care, and the importance that the foster mothers attach to loving the youth in their care is testament to this. Having a positive role model and older adults has been shown to be a factor that positively influences resilience and thus it is an important factor to focus on in preparation for aging out of care.

Responsibility expressed through the contextual responsiveness of youth in care came through strongly from both youth in foster care and foster mothers. While it is important that youth in foster care take advantage of the support and opportunities offered, the participants in this study saw the support and opportunities as conditional on their engagement. Taking ownership of their future through growing in self-determinism and self-efficacy is important; however it is just as important to temper this with an understanding of the social context so as to insure that the pressure to succeed does not become overwhelming.

Finally, the stigma attached to being in foster care seems to create an additional barrier to success. Seen in this study as the desire to be seen as 'normal', this stigma has consequences for self-identity and confidence. Actively engaging with this stigma and addressing it both at the individual and community level is an area identified for further research.

Overall, the findings from this study provided some insight into the experience of aging out of care as the participants are actively engaging with this experience despite the many challenges they face. The findings of this study reflect findings in international literature, and further research in this area is needed to determine effective ways of engaging with the challenge of aging out of foster care.

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Appendix A

Invitation letter for Foster Youth

I, as an honours student from the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town, would like to invite you to take part in a study that will be looking at the experience and challenges of aging out of care. Your participation will be greatly appreciated in broadening our knowledge about aging out of foster care in South Africa. As someone who is currently in the aging out program, I believe that your opinion is valuable and important.

Part of the study will take the form of an interview which will take about an hour, and will be based on a few questions about aging out of care. What is spoken about in the interview will be kept confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let Tatenda or myself know and we will try find a day and time that suits you. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions that you may have.

Thank-you

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Psychology Honours student

University of Cape Town

Appendix B

Invitation letter for Foster Mothers

I, as an honours student from the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town, would like to invite you to take part in a study that will be looking at the experience and challenges of aging out of care. Your participation will be greatly appreciated in broadening our knowledge about aging out of foster care in South Africa. As a foster mother who is currently assisting youth in aging out program or who will have children aging out of care in the future, I believe that your opinion is valuable and important.

Part of the study will take the form of a focus group with several foster mothers, which will take 60-90 minutes. In this focus group, I hope to discuss the challenges that you and the youth in your care are facing, how you understand your role in the aging out process, and what you see as a successful transition out of foster care. I am also interested in the support structures that are in place to help you and the youth overcome these challenges, and how you perceive them. Through this focus group I hope to understand the challenges that you and the foster youth face during the aging out process.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let Tatenda or myself know and we will try find a day and time that suits you and the other foster mothers who are interested in taking part. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions that you may have.

Thank-you

Monica Goemans

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Psychology Honours student

University of Cape Town

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

- Tell me a bit about yourself and how you ended up in foster care?
 - What has it been like being in foster care?
 - Do you remember first coming into foster care? How old were you when you came into foster care? What was movement into foster care like? Do you know anything about your biological family?
 - Have there been any changes in your time in foster care?
- What relationships have you formed within foster care or due to being in foster care?
 - Who is important to you?
 - How do these people support you? What roles do they play in your life?
 - How will they continue to support you as you age out of foster care? Will this change as you grow up? How do you think it will change?
- What do you think of the foster care system?
 - What has your experience of foster care been like? What has been difficult?
 - When you turn 18, relationship ends according to government, what does this mean for you? What will happen at this point?
 - What do you think is different about foster care?
 - Can you tell me about your experience of the aging out program?
- How do you imagine your life as ideal/happy?
 - What would it look like for you?
 - What do you want when you grow up?
- Is there anything else that you feel is important that we haven't spoken about?

Appendix D

Focus group schedule

- Could everyone please introduce themselves and if you could tell me briefly why you became a foster mother?
- How do you see your role as foster mothers as the youth grow up?
- How would you describe a successful transition out of care?
- What are the difficulties and challenges as they grow up?

Appendix E
Informed Consent Form for Youth
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Experiences of Aging out of the Foster Care System in Cape Town

1. Invitation and Purpose

You are invited to take part in this study which is looking to understand the experiences of youth as they age out of the foster care system in Cape Town, and in particular is interested in the challenges facing youth as they age out of foster care and how these challenges are perceived by the youth and their caregivers.

2. Procedures

If you decide to take part in this study I will interview you about your experiences of foster care, with different questions asking you what challenges you are facing or think you will face as you age out of care. I am also interested in the support structures that you have to help you overcome these challenges, and how you perceive them. By interviewing I hope to understand the challenges that you and other foster youth face as you prepare to leave the foster care system.

The interview should take about an hour.

Taking part in this study is completely up to you, and you may end the interview at any time with no consequences.

3. Risks, Discomforts and Inconveniences

This study poses a low risk of harm to you.

Speaking about your experience of aging out of foster care and the challenges you are facing or expect to face may potentially be emotionally stressful. Please note that you can decide what to talk about in the interview and whether or not to answer particular questions, and may refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

If you would like to talk to someone about the challenges you are facing, you can speak to your foster mother and social workers.

You may be inconvenienced by giving up an hour of your time.

4. Benefits

This project gives you the opportunity to voice your experiences and opinions on aging out of foster care, and this will be used to broaden the understanding of the challenges faced by young people in foster care.

5. Privacy and Confidentiality

Interviews will take place in a private room.

Any information you share is confidential. You will remain anonymous throughout the research process, and pseudonyms (fake names) will be used instead of your real name in the data. No identifying information will be present in the final write up of

Appendix F
Informed Consent Form for Foster Mothers
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Experiences of Aging out of the Foster Care System in Cape Town

1. Invitation and Purpose

You are invited to take part in this study which is looking to understand the experiences of youth as they age out of the foster care system in Cape Town, and in particular is interested in the challenges facing youth as they age out of foster care and how these challenges are perceived by the youth and their caregivers.

2. Procedures

If you decide to take part in this study I will conduct a focus group with you and other foster mothers from Home from Home about your experiences of foster care. I will be asking different questions about the challenges that you and the youth in your care are facing, how you understand your role in the aging out process, and what you see as a successful transition out of foster care. I am also interested in the support structures that are in place to help you and the youth overcome these challenges, and how you perceive them. Through this focus group I hope to understand the challenges that you and the foster youth face during the aging out process.

The focus group should take about an hour; however, this is only a rough guide and the focus group may take longer or shorter depending on you and the other participants.

Taking part in this study is completely up to you, and you may leave the focus group at any time with no consequences.

3. Risks, Discomforts and Inconveniences

This study poses a low risk of harm to you.

Speaking about the challenges and experience of the youth in your care aging out of foster care may potentially be emotionally stressful. Please note that you can decide what to talk about in the focus group and whether or not to answer particular questions, and may refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

If you would like to talk to someone about the challenges you are facing, Home from Home has a support system in place.

You may be inconvenienced by giving up an hour of your time.

4. Benefits

This project gives you the opportunity to voice your experiences and opinions on aging out of foster care and share these experiences and opinions with other foster mothers, and this will hopefully be used to broaden the understanding of the challenges faced in foster care.

