

# Storytelling as Empowerment for Young Adults of Color with Foster Care Experience

Presented by:

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# Agenda

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- Background and Significance
- Importance of Storytelling for Young Adults Impacted by the Foster Care System
- Theoretical Underpinnings
- "Storytelling as Empowerment"
- Future Research Directions
- Q & A



# Acknowledgement Statement

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- This study is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$498,000 with 100 percent financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

# Foster Care in the United States

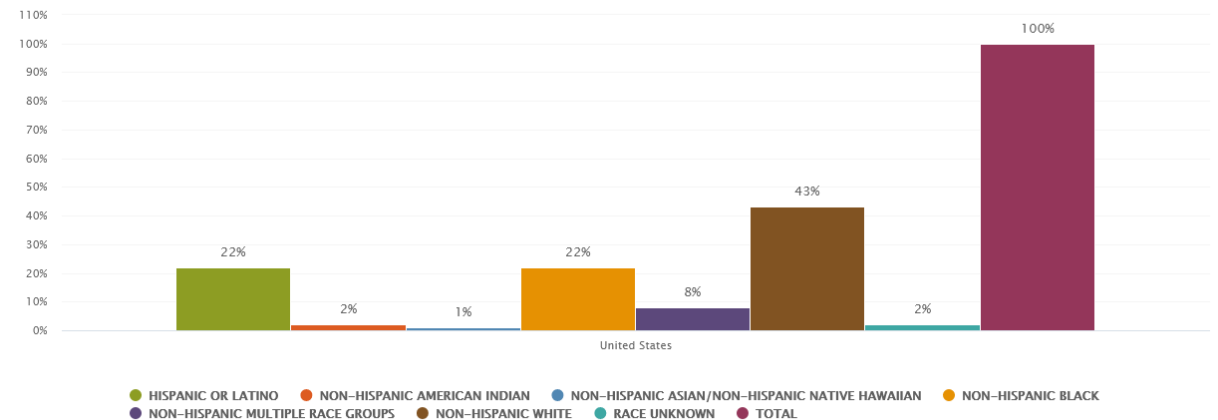
About 21,000 youth age out of foster care each year in the US (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

In 2021, Black youth represented 14% of the total population of children in the US, but 22% of all other children in foster care.

Latino/a/Hispanic children represent 26% of children nationwide, but 22% of children in the foster care system (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Racial disproportionality exists regarding foster care placement, length of out-of-home placement, and pathways to reunification or permanency.

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN (PERCENT) - 2021



# Foster Care Trauma

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- **Entering foster care is a traumatic experience for many young people.**
- Youth experience loss of familial support, loss of safety, loss of trust in adults, loss of control, and sometimes experience survivor's guilt in cases where they become separated from siblings.
- For youth of color in foster care, these experiences are heightened due to perceived racial stigma and discrimination in attempting to receive mental health services (Ludeke, 2022).



# Theoretical Underpinnings

## Mental health equity/behavioral health

- Social and **Moral** Determinants of Health
- Emerging Adulthood Theory
- Social Cognitive Theory
- Social Capital Theory
- Critical Race Theory
- Trauma-Informed Care



# Healthy Outcomes From Positive Experiences (HOPE) Framework



Burstein et al., 2021

# Storytelling as Empowerment for Young Adults with Foster Care Experience

Funding: Jefferson Mental Illness, Addiction, and Primary Care  
Fellowship (HRSA T32)



# Study Aims

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**Aim 1:** To explain quantitatively temporal patterns of help seeking behaviors of youth formerly in foster care seeking employment through social network development, function, and membership of network actors.

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**Aim 2:** To qualitatively describe personal support systems in terms of role selection, delegation, and decision-making in terms of why these actors provide support to youth of color formerly in foster care.

# Project HOME

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- **Project HOME** stands for Housing, Opportunities for Employment, Medical Care, and Education.
- The program empowers people **to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty.**
- Currently they provide supportive housing in **22 locations** across Philadelphia.



# Study Overview

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## Phase I

- Quantitative Survey (Qualtrics)
- $N=13$

## Phase 2

- Qualitative Interviews
- $N=6$

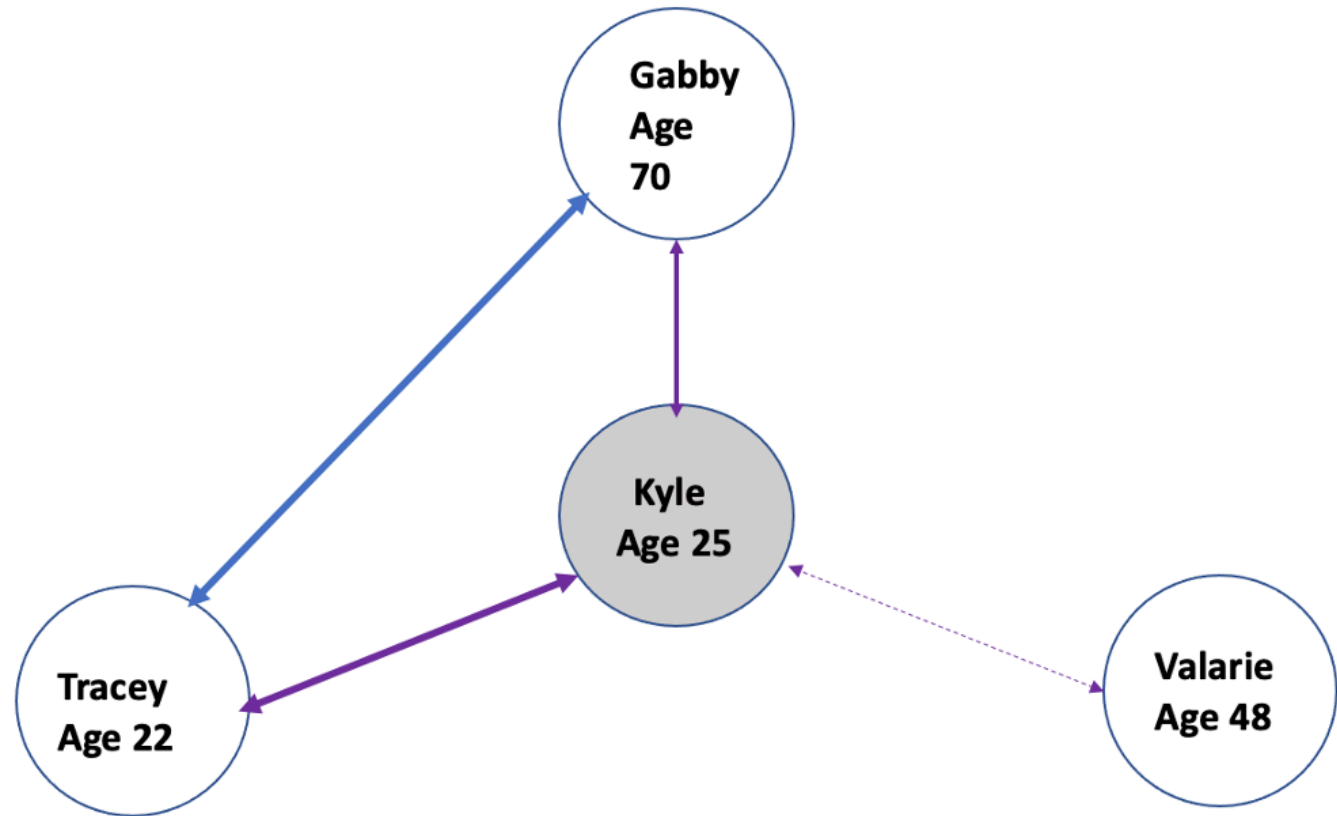
## Phase 3

- Follow-Up Surveys and Qualitative Interviews (Six Month Follow Up)
- Ongoing

# Egocentric Social Network Analysis: A Novel Approach

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- Egocentric networks focus on a single actor or person and their supports or alters.
- Focus on the interconnectedness of individuals to others within the network (Perry et al., 2018).



# Select Egocentric Social Network Indicators

**Average Time Spent at  
Project HOME:**

3.3 years

**Average Network Size:**

6.1 persons

**Distribution of Network  
Support:**

36 people nominated from  
6 interviews

# Young Adult Participants

## Camilla, Age 27

- Aged out of foster care at 21 and immediately experienced homelessness

## Valerie, Age 27

- Aged out of foster care at age 19 but was not told about discharge until after she was dropped off at a homeless shelter

## Lenny, Age 29

- Aged out of foster care at 20 and became homeless after mother's heroin use caused an overdose and she later passed away from cancer

# Main Qualitative Themes

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- Theme 1: Stuck in the In-Between
- Theme 2: Moving Forward While Staying Behind
- Theme 3: Unresolved Trauma



# Theme 1: Stuck in the In-Between

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People ask me why not just find an apartment right now? And then you'll have the voucher for the rest of your life and everything else like that. And then later on you can find a home and everything. **I was like, why would I move from an apartment to another apartment when that's not my next step?** Like, that makes no sense to me. **But like, and then why would I move from somewhere that has all these services to another place that doesn't have any of these services if I'm gonna go to another apartment?** That makes no sense.

Camilla, Age 27



# Theme 2: Moving Forward While Staying Behind

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Like they have a lot of stuff that they have here, like, um, programs and opportunities and stuff that'll help you with moving on to your next steps. **But they don't help us.** Like we have to go to them. Mm-Hmm. and like ask them, Hey, is there a way I could get back in school? And they'll be like, oh, well yeah, I have this number you can call and they'll get you enrolled for free. **And then I'm like, why didn't you just tell us that y'all have these, um, resources available to us? We actually have to pay to live here, like functioning, working adults. So please respect my money and my hard work for the job that I work for to pay my rent and treat me like an adult.**

Valerie, Age 27

# Theme 3: Unresolved Trauma

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**My mom told me she was dying....**She told me she had cancer and only had a few months to live. **She didn't want me with her no more.** Said it was too painful....I tried to contact my dad on Facebook, Instagram, all of that was impossible. **When she died, I found out about it on Facebook from her landlord.** She took pictures of my mom's body and posted them there. I had no one. My mother OD'd once before she died. **And that picture on Facebook...the way she looked, that look was frozen on her face. I got so sick after her death, man. When I told my doctor that my mom had passed, he looked like he didn't give a damn**

Lenny, Age 29

# Conclusion

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- Participants recommended that mental health and other health providers make a genuine effort to get to know the person behind the case file by engaging in authentic conversations to learn more about their history prior to out-of-home placement.
- Telling one's story created an unbiased opportunity for young people to share their experiences without fear of judgement from others.
- Future research and intervention efforts should consider the lived experiences of youth with foster care experience and the effects of personal support networks during times of increased mental stressors and community change.

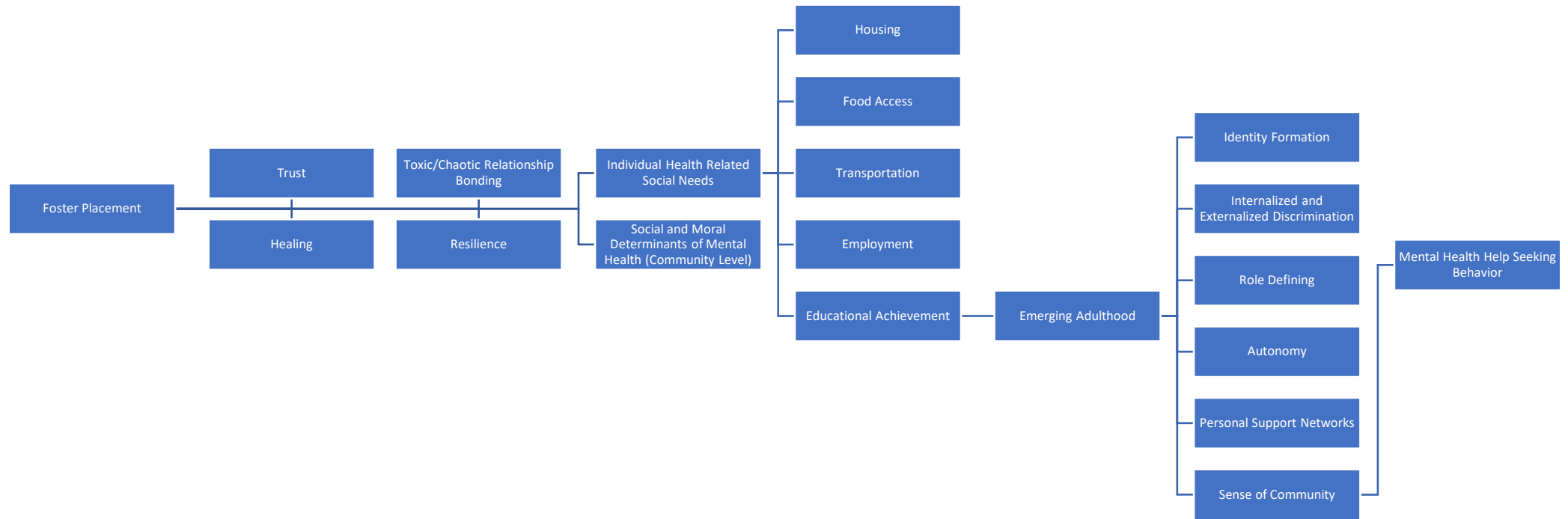
# Future Research Directions

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- Caught in systems: transitioning from foster care to public housing
- Mental health disparities and the built environment
- Toxic bonding and chaotic relationship attachment



# My Research Program



RESEARCH ARTICLE



## “Why is my skin so intimidating to you?”: Exploring social connectivity and racial identity of youth of color with foster care experience

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### ABSTRACT

Social support, racial/ethnic identity, and foster care exposure are concepts largely understudied in child welfare research. With the rise of racialized violence against persons of color and the COVID-19 pandemic, these intersecting identities are of great importance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 youth of color with current or past foster care exposure. Three themes were identified: 1) feeling uncomfortably me, 2) not equal in opportunity, and 3) skin as a threat. Increased mental health support by caseworkers and under-

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Foster care; racial trauma; mental health; social support; qualitative research

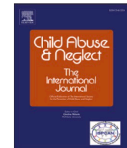
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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg)



## “We are not our case files”: A qualitative analysis of child welfare professionals' relationships with young adults with foster care experience

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Child welfare  
Foster care  
Emerging adulthood  
Social capital  
Social support  
Youth engagement

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Young adults of color with foster care experience are disproportionately represented in foster care in the United States. Developing meaningful connections with child welfare professionals can help young adults develop healthy relationships in emerging adulthood.

**Objective:** This exploratory qualitative study addressed how young adults with foster care experience described their relationships with child welfare professionals and the impact of these relationships on their overall mental health and well-being in young adulthood.

**Participants and setting:** A sample of young adults of color, (ages 18–29) with lived experience in foster care from a performing arts program in New York City.

**Methods:** Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on 14 semi-structured interviews with young adults of color with prior or ongoing foster care experience.

**Results:** The following themes were identified: safe space to be myself, listen to more than words, and understand my trauma. Child welfare professionals were dropped from support networks if they were disingenuous or did not attend to their own self-care needs.

**Conclusions:** The study underscores the importance of promoting positive mental health outcomes for young adults through building stronger connections with child welfare professionals. Future research should explore the incorporation of individualized approaches to better serve this population of young adults.

# Questions?

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