Educational and Employment Pathways of BIPOC Youth with Foster Care Experience: A Mixed Methods Study

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from New York University Silver School of Social Work

Rachel D. Ludeke, LMSW

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December 2, 2021

Date

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, both biological and to those that became my family along the way. My siblings helped to mold and shape me into the person that I am today. I additionally dedicate this dissertation to the Anchor House program, especially the Anchorage Independent Living Program. This program took me in, provided me with a home, and a safe space to grow and heal from a troubled childhood. The Anchorage is also where I met my future husband, who has been extremely supportive during this journey. I'd like to also thank Becky Ludeke for always supporting me through difficult times. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation in the memory of Phillip Ludeke, who was the greatest father-in-law that one could hope for.

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Abstract

Background:

Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) are overrepresented in the child welfare system in the United States but are underrepresented in outcomes related to post-secondary degree attainment and employment after their transition from the system into adulthood. This traditional format mixed methods dissertation study explored how current and former BIPOC foster youth navigate the early stages of emerging adulthood while utilizing their social networks to explore education and employment decision-making.

Methods:

A two-phase, convergent parallel research design was employed. In the quantitative phase of data collection, the researcher utilized a survey instrument to collect data on current and former BIPOC foster youth in the following domains: education, employment, and perceived support and their relationships with peers and adults via a name generator. In the qualitative phase, youth turning points, educational aspirations, and shared connections were explored. Merging of the two data sets occurred after the data was analyzed separately using egocentric social network analysis (quantitative) and thematic analysis (qualitative) to ensure a better understanding of the study's key research questions.

Results:

Network actors provided social and emotional support above other types of supports such as financial support, career development support, and extracurricular support. Youth in the survey reported that their networks were largely unchanged during COVID-19 quarantine, but

they experienced significant hardships such as loss of employment, loss of loved ones to the novel coronavirus, and the stress of aging out of care at the beginning of the pandemic without ongoing support. In integrating the datasets, it was discovered that while youth often boasted having integrated support networks of friends, families, and others who provided support, there was a disconnect in their stated social networks and how these networks were activated in times of education or employment decision making.

Conclusion:

Researchers must consider the role of social capital and social network development when considering the educational and employment pathways of BIPOC youth with foster care experience. Future research and intervention efforts should consider the effect of personal support networks and race/ethnicity identity formation when exploring education and employment decision making in emerging adulthood.

Keywords: aging out, child welfare, education, egocentric social networks, employment, foster care

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the dissertation study. First, I discuss foster youth in transition and the challenges they face as they enter emerging adulthood. Second, I discuss the guiding research questions for this mixed methods dissertation. Then, I discuss the significance and innovation of the research inquiry, provide key delimitations, and address limitations of the study design. Finally, I provide a roadmap of the remaining chapters in this dissertation.

Problem Statement

Foster Youth in Transition Overview

In the United States, over 670,000 youth are served by the child welfare system each year, with Black and Latino children disproportionately represented amongst those who age out of the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Out of home placements are often sought when youth cannot safely remain in their biological homes due to ongoing trauma, increased risk for continued maltreatment, or substance abuse by caregivers, amid other potential risks to child wellbeing and safety (Administration for Children's Services, 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). The transition from adolescence to adulthood marks a significant developmental period in a young person's life where they can gain autonomy and extended legal privileges can that help to create identities outside of their families (Settersten, 2003). This period may be marked by misinformation about future educational opportunities, uncertainty about housing, and lack of stable employment (Berzin, et al., 2014). Aging out of the foster care system typically occurs between ages 18 and 21, with some states offering extended participation to eligible youth until age 22.

Aging out of care is an emotionally delicate period because it is marked by age-graded transitions into adulthood such as such as finding employment, attending post-secondary or other educational programming, and finding stable housing (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Bass et al., 2004; Collins, 2004; Courtney et al., 2012; Courtney, et al., 2001; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Davis, 2006; Emrey-Arras, 2016; Hines et al., 2005; Pecora et al, 2006a; 2006b). When youth age out of the child welfare system, they lose access to system supports such as caseworkers, foster parents (in cases where the youth is not adopted or where the relationship did not evolve beyond a strict caregiver relationship), mandated therapy and even access to financial supports through independent living stipends or Chafee Wraparound funding (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Of particular concern are older foster youth as youth from these at-risk populations often face greater risks of public assistance usage (Salazar, 2013), cross-over participation in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Baskin & Sommers, 2011; Boyd et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2001; Gallegos & White, 2013), and chronic under and unemployment (Courtney et al., 2012; Pecora et al., 2006a) when they transition to adulthood. Youth with foster care experience are often called upon to make important decisions regarding how they will become self-sufficient when care ends, but not many are afforded all the information necessary to make informed decisions regarding educational opportunities, potential participation in job readiness programs, or the availability of independent living programs to help with the transition process (Goodkind et al., 2010).

It is known in the research literature that foster youth in transition are increasingly at risk of having trouble becoming self-sufficient, independent adults outside of the child welfare system while establishing a stable supportive network (Negriff et al., 2015). Supportive networks often consist of friends, family members, and trusted adults with whom the connected youth can

rely on for financial, emotional, social, and/or career support. Familial support, for instance, may not be possible for some youth in the foster care system depending on the nature of their entrance into the foster care system or their ability to reconnect with biological family members upon leaving care (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005). Although foster youth often leave care and return to their biological families in some capacity, youth are not always prepared for recapturing this portion of their supportive network outside of the child welfare system.

There is also an additional complication in support network building due to some foster feeling that they reached an age of maturity much earlier than expected while in the public care system, leading to inflated sense of independence rather than interdependence (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The experience of growing up in foster care but also relying on institutional formal support actors can create difficulty for foster youth in their ability to develop strong and consistent relationships with peers and other informal supports outside of the child welfare system in adulthood. This can lead to fewer instances of youth asking for help in times of need, which paradoxically threatens foster alumni and their pursuit of autonomy in emerging adulthood (Goodkind et al., 2011). For instance, Morton (2017) conducted a qualitative study of 21 foster youth alumni currently enrolled in post-secondary education who were also participating in an independent living program. The study found an emerging theme of self-reliance, which hindered their ability to ask for help when needed and further resulted in lower self-esteem, lack of motivation, and academic failure for some participants. The survivalist worldview adopted by foster youth, then, clashes with the real world in terms of lowering one's guard to ask for help in times of need.

Why are Personal Social Networks Important in Emerging Adulthood?

This dissertation focuses on the personal social networks of youth with foster care experience as exploration in this area represents an opportunity to view how an individual's life becomes embedded in the lives and actions of others in their social circle. Personal support networks of foster youth can include their siblings, parents, friends, coworkers, significant others, classmates, and others. Choices made within the life course are interconnected as one choice can affect future opportunities that arise in the life course (Settersen 2003). The transition from foster care to adulthood, for instance, can be thought of as the end of one's connection to an institutional social network of resources and restrictions and the beginning of foster youth's incorporation into new social networks with differing levels of available resources. It is important to remember that no two exits from care are alike. All youth have individual characteristics, stories, and hardships that must be considered as they transition into a life of independence and self-sufficiency outside of the child welfare system. The life course perspective and specifically, the focus on linked lives, reminds us that individuals do not live and experience their environments without human interaction. Researchers often study human relationships in a way that leaves out how complex relationships can truly influence a person's life course. Thus, every story of an individual inevitably becomes enmeshed and entangled with the stories of others.

There is also scant research studying chance encounters within the life course, or key turning points that completely changed a person's trajectory and created a whole new set of possibilities (Settersten, 2018). The trend in child welfare is to encourage and train youth to become self-sufficient, however, some youth express trepidation when it comes to transitioning to adulthood and struggle to adjust to adulthood (Morton, 2017). Without a safety net to rely on

after leaving care, youth in transition are responsible for all aspects of adult decision-making regarding employment, housing, and education unlike youth entering adulthood from traditional family settings. Often cited measurements by researchers related to successful transition are often associated with youth who are "living on their own, holding down a job, paying their own bills, finishing school, not receiving economic assistance, and staying out of jail" (Propp et al., 2003, p.263). But these so-called indicators of success may not be attainable for some youth who transition to adulthood and may not be considered successes per se by the youth. In essence, the life course perspective can offer more to researchers who wish to understand and explore how human interactions through relationships can yield social networks. (Lin, 1999, 2008). It can also explain how people utilize social resources through social capital to experience upward (or sometimes downward) mobility within society. It is for these reasons that the life course framework, social capital, and social network development were chosen to guide the dissertation with the goal of exploring and understanding this momentous transition from one developmental phase of life to the next. Each of these concepts will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Purpose of Dissertation Study

The dissertation study utilizes a convergent parallel mixed methods design to explore how minority youth with child welfare experience (current and former) utilize their personal support networks in navigating educational and employment decision making in emerging adulthood. Personal support networks hold the key to understanding how these youth utilize social capital in accessing network resources to help them achieve their employment and/or educational goals while also affording an opportunity to explore racial and ethnic identity formation in adulthood. The convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) involves the collection of quantitative and qualitative data that were collected and

analyzed separately and finally merged to help aid in the interpretation of research findings. In this study, a survey instrument was utilized to obtain information from youth with child welfare experience regarding their social network connections, types of support received and perceived level of overall support and how these factors impact their perceived education and employment outcomes as enter emerging adulthood. The qualitative strand of data collection explored the interplay of supportive networks, role formation, areas of concern, and decision-making regarding education and employment.

Research Questions

This dissertation used the following research questions to guide the exploration of the social networks of BIPOC youth with child welfare experience:

1. What role does youth social origins and environment, individual characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, foster care status, gender identity, neighborhood factors and lived experiences) play in the development and utilization of social capital?
2. What role does social capital (e.g., individual, and collective factors) and development of bonding social capital play in the development of BIPOC foster youth's social networks?
3. How do BIPOC youth with foster care experience utilize their personal social networks as they age out of care or after they've transitioned from care?
4. How do social origins and environment, and perceived social support impact social pathways related to perceptions of education and employment after BIPOC youth transition from foster care and into emerging adulthood?
5. How do these factors relate to the principle of linked lives through BIPOC youth's shared relationships with other personal network actors?

Some hypotheses are provided; however, this mixed methods research study was largely experimental in nature.

Significance and Innovation

In the study of foster youth in transition, the literature has largely discussed the process of aging out of care and subsequent participation in higher education programming and employment through the usage of quantitative or qualitative methodology. These methodologies

respectively measure employment and education or provide youth-driven context into their experiences before and after aging out of foster care. One issue that arises is the overreliance on singular research paradigms that often fail to elucidate the experiences of youth with foster care experience because each method (quantitative or qualitative) provides only a cursory view of the aging out experience and its effect on the life course trajectory of youth leaving institutionalized care and entering emerging adulthood. The current dissertation addresses these issues by analyzing emerging adulthood of youth with foster care experience through the usage of mixed methods study design and focus on egocentric support networks of current and former foster youth who participated in the study. The goal is to create a more complete picture of emerging adulthood for youth with child welfare experience between the ages of 18 and 29.

Additionally, few research studies have explored the intersectionality of race and ethnicity when discussing foster youth outcomes in emerging adulthood. Identity formation in young adulthood is a multifaceted process whereby all elements of one's identity is being forged in the adult realm. This dissertation aimed to explore how race and ethnicity played a direct or indirect role in the development and maintenance of supportive networks and in how these youth navigated education and employment in an increasingly racialized society marred by discriminating and racial disparity.

Delimitations

A key delimitation was inability of the researcher to foresee the sample size for both phases of the research study since the full pool of eligible BIPOC foster youth are not yet known. Although it is ideal for the strands to contain the same sample size, it may be possible that the youth could elect not to participate in both phases of the study.

Limitations

There were key challenges for the dissertation due to the experimental nature of the research design and conceptual framework. Firstly, the sample was limited to BIPOC youth who participated in the Possibility Project program, which will limit the generalizability of the results. Secondly, the conceptual framework and accompanying survey instrument have not been validated with this population of youth. Thirdly, the dissertation, while it incorporates a mixed-methods approach, is cross-sectional in nature due to constraints related to accessing the study sample over a long period. Lastly, the use of a prospective sample of youth participating in The Possibility Project while receiving services from ACS differs in size to the retrospective sample of youth who have already exited care. Additionally, this study will not have wide generalizability to other areas of the country because of the nature and geography of the child welfare system in New York City as compared to national data on child welfare participation.

While the use of survey methodology to generate information on social networks is widely accepted as an effective practice (Lin 1998; Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Yang, 2007), there are limitations to the use of this network to generate youth social networks. Namely, the dissertation relied on youth self-report of their relationships to better understand their network connections and perceived support. Some youth with foster experience may be reluctant to report that they still have contact with a biological parent that may be the cause of their eventual foster care placement and might choose to underreport their connectedness to that individual (Blakeslee, 2011). Other considerations when using self-report is that youth may not remember or fully report all known actors with whom they have interactions. There may also be concerns that confidentiality may be breached if youth report connections to unsavory or illegal relationships with certain network actors. However, the use of a systematic and sophisticated

approach to examining youth relationships of youth with foster care experience in emerging adulthood may help child welfare research overcome accusation of lack of theory-driven studies and interventions (Berridge, 2007; Stein, 2006).

Organization of the Dissertation

Following this introductory chapter, the review of the literature will be addressed in Chapter Two, with some overlap in terms of methodological procedures utilized regarding youth with foster care experience in Chapter Three. Chapter Two will provide background and overview of the child welfare system and out of home placement, potential threats to youth decision-making, racial disproportionality, and factors related to educational performance for youth involved with the child welfare system. It will additionally provide context for the conceptual framework used to guide this study by exploring the interplay of the life course perspective, emerging adulthood, social network development, and social and environmental origins of foster youth. The study's research questions, hypotheses, and definition of concepts utilized throughout the study are introduced.

Chapter Three details the usage of convergent parallel mixed methods design for this dissertation study. The chapter begins by exploring the nature of mixed methods studies and the usage of convergent mixed methods designs. Critical realism and its usage in mixed methods research will be discussed. The chapter also outlines the recruitment, participants, human subjects' approvals, data collection procedures, measures, data analysis procedures and sample demographics. Additionally, the research problem, study questions, and hypotheses are discussed.

Chapter Four is split into two sections. In the first section, the quantitative results of the survey are discussed. This section includes summary statistical information about the egos, ego-

alter attributes, and alter-alter connections as well as select hierarchical logistic regressions. The second section provides the qualitative results of the study, which include discussion of the semi-structured interview, reflexive thematic analysis, and key themes within the qualitative inquiry. Additionally, this chapter discusses validity and transferability as it relates to critical realism and reflexive thematic analysis approaches. Finally, Chapter Five provides a discussion of the study including the integration of the datasets and analysis, connection of the study to prior research, implications, limitations, areas of future study and recommendations and a brief conclusion.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide background and overview of the child welfare system and out of home placement, potential threats to youth decision-making, racial disproportionality, and factors related to educational performance for youth involved with the child welfare system. I also discuss the conceptual framework utilized to guide the dissertation study, including a discussion on theoretical underpinnings of the life course perspective, emerging adulthood, and social capital. Finally, I examine the role of social network analysis and investigating educational and employment outcomes of youth in transition.

Child Welfare Overview

Brief Overview of National Trends

As of June 2020, there were over 430,000 youth in foster care in the United States, with over 248,000 youth exiting the child welfare system that year (US Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2020). Youth are removed from their homes and placed into alternative placements when a substantiated case of maltreatment (child abuse and/or neglect) dictates that the safety of children cannot be guaranteed in their current living environments. Out of home placements include pre-adoptive homes, relative foster care homes (also known as kinship care placement), group homes, supervised independent living placements, or non-relative foster care placements. Overwhelmingly, Black or African American and youth are disproportionally represented in youths aging out of the foster care system each year (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Some identified risk factors for child abuse and neglect include experiencing poverty, large family size, lack of residential stability, and exposure to inconsistent and often harsh parenting practices (Azar et al., 1984; Fong, 2016; Trickett & Schellenback, 1998).

Neglect is currently the most common reason for a child to be removed from their homes, with and 60.8% of victims reporting that they were neglected (USDHHS, 2020.). Neglect can be viewed as the failure or inability of caregivers or parents to provide supervision, medical care, access to education services, emotional neglect, and/or physical neglect of a child (Gonzalez et al. 2020). Data from 2018 indicates that 84.5% of youth with an open child welfare case suffered from a singular type of child maltreatment (USDHHS, 2020), although poly-victimization, or youth who experience more than one type of child maltreatment, is a relatively neglected research component of what is known about youth in the child welfare system (Finklehor et al., 2007). Finally, substantiation of abuse and neglect cases can be influenced by implicit bias of child welfare workers, race, neighborhood factors, lack of access to quality childcare, and parental income (Ha et al., 2015; Detlaff et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015).

Child Maltreatment and Critical Periods of Development

Regardless of type of maltreatment experienced, there is a heightened risk of poor adjustment, lack of secure attachment, and behavioral concerns in youth with child maltreatment experiences (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Greeson et al., 2011). The effect of maltreatment can increase the likelihood that maltreated youth will experience cognitive delays (Cowell et al., 2015). Child maltreatment represents a threat to the development of strong affect regulation, secure attachment, self-efficacy, and working memory (DeBellis, 2005; Scarborough et al., 2009). Thus, child maltreatment represents a public health crisis that can hinder positive biological and neurological development throughout the life course.

Out of home placement is typically expected to be a temporary placement to provide for the safety and security of child-maltreated youth but has metamorphosed into a robust system plagued by racial inequality, caseworker biases, and inconsistent interpretation of national and

state-level policies by social workers in the field, the judicial system, foster parents, and other stakeholders (Hill, 2004; Roberts, 2008). As a result, youth in foster care often face multiple placements, long wait times to reunification (if this is considered a case-appropriate goal,) or inconsistent relationships with foster caregivers. When removal occurs, some foster youth experience feelings of guilt and loss and these emotions may create attachment-related problems in their new homes (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Kufeldt et al., 1995; Lee & Whiting, 2007; Mitchell, 2016). In some situations, it becomes likely that they will not be able to return to their biological homes and other options such as group homes, residential care, or independent living may be deemed more appropriate (Propp et al., 2003). The friction between system-related decision-making when it comes to out of home placement and feelings of instability can unfortunately lead foster youth to experience negative external and internal behaviors (Courtney & Hughes-Herring, 2005; Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2016). These behaviors can impact their ability to remain in a single placement for long periods of time and can ultimately lead to placement disruption or instability.

Placement Instability and Youth Relationship Building

When youth are consistently mobile in their housing, they often struggle to make meaningful relationships with peers, adults, and others within their community for fear that they could be made to move again without notice. Placement instability is detrimental to the healthy development of attachment and feelings of belonging within foster youth. According to data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW), placement disruption can occur within the first 18 months of placement, with 18.9% of youth placed in out of home settings reporting two placements and 8.5% reporting three or more placements (USDHHS, 2018). In a study of inner-city children recently removed from their biological home, Folman

(1998) notes that children often felt that they had done something wrong and that child protective services were there to apprehend them. Children also expressed fear and panic that they would not see their family members, including their siblings again after they were removed from the home. Although the process of removing a child from their biological home is meant to ensure the child's safety and well-being, the method may cause undue stress and apprehension in children who are fearful of being placed in a situation where they no longer have the comfort of familiar faces and environment and can have lasting negative effects on wellbeing (Mitchell, 2018; Mitchell, 2016).

Placement Instability and Academic Performance

Child maltreatment has negative consequences for youth academic performance in childhood and throughout adolescence. Cognitive dysregulation due to trauma experienced in childhood can hinder school readiness for youth, especially in the areas of critical thinking and a child's ability to remember key events (Berthelot et al., 2015; Toth et al., 2011). Prior research has suggested a negative association between child maltreatment and overall deficits in academic achievement, school engagement, peer relations, and overall school readiness (Bell et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). If child maltreatment continues into adolescence, cognitive concerns experienced in childhood can be exacerbated, with youth experiencing additional difficulties in the healthy development of executive functioning. These factors can affect how youth manage to achieve a particular goal or learn new skills (Davis et al., 2014; Vasilevski & Tucker, 2016; Zima et al. 2000) and can also cause difficulty in maintaining or developing lasting relationships with peers and adults.

Not surprisingly, foster children often have significantly more discipline referrals than children without a history of child maltreatment (Kothari et al., 2018) and children with histories

of child neglect have some of the weakest performances on standardized testing, likely due to the complex trauma they experienced prior to entering the child welfare system (Cicchitti & Toth, 2005; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Eckenrode et al., 1993; Greeson et al., 2011). They are often unable to participate in extracurricular and school activities that would help to increase their social networks because of placement moves and having to adjust to new social norms (Barton & Vacca, 2010; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Pears et al., 2015). Placement moves may affect foster youth ability to be self-sufficient as they enter adulthood since they come from disadvantaged neighborhoods and have few supports and resources outside of their communities (Roy, 2008; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

Racial Disparity, Bias, and Disproportionality in Child Welfare

As discussed in the introduction chapter, racial disproportionality in the child welfare system further impact's one's ability to gain self-sufficiency while transitioning from the foster care system into adulthood. There are disproportionally high numbers of maltreated Black and Latino/a youth represented in the system, despite their minority status (Ards et al., 2003; Fluke et al., 2003; Needell et al, 2003; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Black and Latino/a families experience child welfare investigations at a much higher rate than other races and ethnicities represented in the entirety of the foster care system in the US (Crampton & Coulton, 2018). Caseworkers and other mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect may have some racial biases that cause them to report minority families to child protective services at extremely high rates (Ryan, 2018). And Black families are also more likely to have repeat incidents of child abuse or neglect, resulting in additional open cases with the child welfare system (Dakil et al, 2011).

Race is tangentially shown by some research studies to be intimately related to how caseworkers respond in terms of investigating child welfare claims, and inevitably, in how Black children and other minorities are treated once they are involved in the system (Edwards, 2016; Hill, 2004). When a child is removed from their home and placed into an alternative care arrangement, it is a result of many decisions made by child welfare officials. While many may disagree about whether the child welfare system is racist towards persons of color, there is widespread agreement that being Black or a person of color and being involved in the child welfare system may result in lack of access to resources and overall poor outcomes in comparison to white children (Hill, 2006; Hill, 2007; Roberts, 2014).

Furthermore, researchers have demonstrated that child welfare system is potentially systematically racist towards persons of color over and above simply focusing on poverty and neighborhood factors. Hill (2004) provided a brilliant critical analysis of the historical underpinnings of the child welfare system. Institutional racism is the systematic oppression, domination, and control of one racial group by another more powerful and socially connected group in society (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Hill, 2004). From this viewpoint, institutional racism exists in the child welfare system and emanates from all aspects of the decision-making process used to remove Black children from their homes, to deny parents the ability to regain custody of their children, and finally, to how Black children in care are treated while in the child welfare system.

Methodologically speaking, prior studies argue that the child welfare system is not inherently racist, and that poverty and socioeconomic status may be the cause of perceived racial bias (Bartholet, 2009; Maloney et al., 2017). Flaws may exist in this conclusion due to the methods employed to examine race differentials when it comes to the substantiation of child

maltreatment since a unified system of measuring racial disparity in child welfare is not widely used by child welfare researchers. Considering this, some research teams have suggested a formulized disparity index (Shaw et al., 2008). No matter how researchers measure and make meaning between racial disparity, racial disproportionality, or racial bias, the evidence still shows that Black children are more likely than White children to be removed from their homes and that they often endure long wait periods for the cases to resolve in the court system (Kokaliari et al., 2019; Needell et al., 2003; Roberts, 2008; Roberts, 2014). These are likely amongst the reasons why BIPOC youth are more likely to age out of the child welfare system without a permanency plan in place when compared to White children.

Child Welfare in New York City

The current climate in New York City represents a microcosm where racial disadvantage is accelerated due to inconsistent and oftentimes ineffective system response. New York is one of nine state-supervised and locally administered child welfare states in the US. The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) provides oversight, technical assistance, and monitoring to 58 local departments of social services, the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, and over 100 voluntary child welfare agencies (OFCS, 2016). New York City's locally administered child welfare agency or LDSS is the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). ACS is a public agency that provides programming for children and youth though public and private partnerships related to child welfare, early care and education services, and juvenile justice. Under state oversight and various partnerships, ACS strives to provider support for youth experiencing child abuse or neglect, provide families with preventative services if needed to reduce the likelihood of future child maltreatment, increase educational access for foster youth to ensure that youth can meet

their full developmental potential, and ensure that caseworkers and private providers can provide high quality support to all families under oversight (ACS, 2020).

As noted earlier, poverty is considered a cause of child maltreatment or serves to worsen parent-child relationships in the context of substantiated child welfare cases in New York City and poverty is pervasive amongst families living in the city. According to a policy analysis conducted by the Schuler Center for Analysis and Advocacy (2018), it is estimated that 13 million children live in poverty, with black children representing 29% and Latino/a children representing 32% of all children that live below the federal poverty level, often defined as making an income of less than $24,000 a year for a family of four (p. 2). New York City's five boroughs (Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island) represents the most densely populated area in New York State, with population estimates of over 8,330,000 people as of 2019 (US Census, 2019).

ACS has managed to reduce the number of children receiving out of home services in 10 years from 16,000 to 8,300 youth (ACS, 2020), but some of the highest child protection activity occurs in 10 community districts with the highest rates of child poverty and overall concentration of Black and Latinx families (Butel, 2019). More specifically, these districts include Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, Kew Gardens and Ozone Park in Queens, and the middle third of Staten Island. As noted by Butel (2020), three community districts (the Rockaways, Kingsbridge and Riverdale, and West Harlem) with at least 60% Black and Latino/a residents have a higher rate of poverty coupled with higher rates of investigation. One community, West Harlem had a high child poverty rate at 39% and a higher investigation rate of 41 investigations per 1000 children in comparison to other areas of New York City (p. 19). Despite systemic changes in service availability and delivery to youth and their families under ACS oversight, BIPOC youth are still

disproportionally represented in the child welfare system in New York City. In the next section, I provide discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework that was used to guide this dissertation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Thus far, this literature review has focused largely on providing a brief overview of the racial and socioeconomic issues that plague the child welfare system nationally and locally. In the next section, I provide an overview of the conceptual framework used to guide the research study. This conceptual framework incorporates aspects of the life course perspective, emerging adulthood, social capital, and social network theory to explain how minority foster youth's social environments, including lived experiences and neighborhood, can affect how they develop and utilize social capital in the creation and maintenance of their social networks and may influence their future social pathways of education and employment decision-making.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective refers to the "age-graded, socially-embedded sequence of roles that connect the phases of life" and refers to "an imaginative framework comprised of a set of interrelated presuppositions, concepts and methods" that researchers use to study socially constructed, embedded roles (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003, p. xi). Historically, proponents of the life course perspective often aligned their studies to include intense focus on age-graded stages of life, which included the family life cycle and the career cycle. Both are focused on the role histories of individuals when it comes to trying to start a family or beginning a new career even though some individuals did not participate in so-called traditional trajectories of family or career planning (Elder et al., 2003).

There are several key concepts to understanding how people's lives are socially organized. These key concepts include social pathways, transitions, trajectories and turning

points (Elder et al, 2003). Social pathways are specifically concerned with the trajectories of education and work experiences as well as their families and living environments for individuals and groups. The concept of a social pathway is shaped by and structured by social institutions. Trajectories are made up of transitions between life stages or roles and the length of time between transitions is called duration. Finally, turning points can be positive or negative experiences. It is with these concepts in mind that life events and lived experiences of foster youth in transition were explored in this dissertation study.

Transition From Adolescence to Adulthood

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked by what is considered the normative timeline for the completion of tasks related to education, employment, and independence from one's birth parents. In the United States, the typical trajectory from adolescence to adulthood for more than 50 years was concerned with completing high school education, finding full-time employment, and starting a family (Elder et al., 2003; Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Settersten, 2003). Moreover, the path to independence in adulthood is said to be marked by several transitions related to leaving home, gaining employment and/or attending a course of education, and possibly returning home many times before true independence is reached (Heinz & Kruger, 2001).

These transitions are guided by the social meanings of age and timing within the life course (Settersten, 2003). For instance, age and timing are important concepts in education because so many activities related to academic achievement are also related to how long and at which age a youth actively completes milestones in educational curriculum. The life course perspective recognizes the interconnectedness of age and timing within society and focuses on the importance of five key principles: life span development, human agency, historical time and

place, developmental timing, and the principle of linked lives (Settersen, 2006). Elder (1998) provides an overview of each principle in detail, however, the proposed dissertation will focus on the principle of linked lives for exploring the life course decision-making of youth aging out of foster care and their employment and education decisions.

All life choices are dependent on the inherent restraints of social structure and culture and the choices that one makes in their lives is governed by opportunities available (Elder, 1998). The principle of linked lives posits that people live their lives interdependently and that socio-historical influences can be expressed through a network of shared relationships (Elder et al., 2003). This concept is important because it highlights the interconnection of individual lives through their families, their education and work, and is marked by events, exposures, and transitions in concert with others within a given society. As Settersen (2018) eloquently suggests, there likely is no such concept as an individual life course (p. 27). Every major life change or shift in trajectory can be said to be embedded in other changes whether it be graduation from high school, the birth of a child, leaving home or becoming employed.

The Life Course and Emerging Adulthood

The study of the life course perspective spurred many researchers to seek new ways of conceptualizing the period of early adulthood as a key period in an individual's life course. Emerging adulthood attempts to classify the difficulties and risks to autonomy and identity formation that youth experience as they transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This period occurs between age 18-29 years old, but exact time frame will differ according to culture, race, and other socioeconomic factors (Syed & Mitchell, 2015). Emerging adulthood is thought to serve as a time of endless possibility where the future directions of an individual's life is not yet permanently determined. This period is marked by transitions from the dependency of one's

parents to a new sense of personal and professional autonomy in work, education, and in intimate relationships. Quite simply, emerging adulthood as a developmental stage is a time of exploration for young adults. Youth have a wider scope of possibility, Arnett notes, than persons in other developmental stages of life because "they are less likely to be constrained by role requirements, and this makes their demographic status unpredictable" (p. 417). In most cases, youth in emerging adulthood do not have established careers, are not generally married, and do not have children and other responsibilities that would limit their ability to explore new identities in young adulthood. Emerging adulthood, then, is a time of change and exploration of roles coupled with a high degree of diversity in role expectations for young adults.

Criticism of Emerging Adulthood and the Life Course Perspective

While emerging adulthood was heralded as a groundbreaking developmental theory that allowed the life course perspective to be applied to young adults, Arnett's theory was met with heavy opposition from critics who argued against adding another stage-focused theory to an already crowded developmental arena. Hendry and colleagues (2007) noted that Arnett's theory presents an illusion of smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood. Arnett's terminology of emerging adulthood might not be necessary since other theories of development incorporate focused study of young adulthood as a developmental period. Emerging adulthood also suggests that youth are just entering this phase at a predetermined time, which may not be the case. Furthermore, they argued that the theory of emerging adulthood should be applied in the same regard throughout the life course since "the theory of emerging adulthood is merely a description limited to a certain age cohort in certain societies at a certain historical time with particular socioeconomic conditions" (p. 76). Arnett's theory, thus, represents a cohort approach to aging and young adulthood because of the emphasis of youth reaching a certain age to be considered as

part of emerging adulthood. Finally, they argue that theorists and researchers should work more broadly to understand the interactive processes and mechanisms of change that can explain human behavior without relying heavily on age-graded stages of development.

Arnett (2007) published a response to Hendry and Kloep's criticisms by taking issue with their belief that social class positioning made an enormous difference when considering well-being in emerging adulthood and further argued that the term emerging adulthood provides researchers with a common language using developmental stages. This approach can be helpful in conceptualization of hallmarks of young adulthood in ways that even the life course perspective (Elder, 1978) fails to recognize in a more heightened focus. While he acknowledges that there should be further research on the path diversity of emerging adulthood in terms of cultural and historical contexts, he rejects the idea that emerging adulthood occurs in a linear, predetermined fashion. He hopes that his focus on emerging adulthood would provide an explanation of normative periods of development in industrialized societies like the United States, since economic and educational challenges faced by youth often make it difficult to find one's way in adulthood without assistance. Middle class families, he admits, have it much easier than families of lower income and that "educational attainment makes an enormous difference in what takes place in emerging adulthood and in future income and occupational opportunities." (p. 81). He ends his defense of emerging adulthood by challenging researchers to continue to contribute to the knowledgebase of what is known about young adulthood so that we can be better understand the diversity of emerging adulthood across different cultural milieus.

Emerging Adulthood and Foster Youth

In the case of foster youth, the child welfare system is one that is primarily adult-driven; most decisions regarding care and exit from institutional custody revolves around the needs of

adults. Youth in the transition to adulthood from foster care often express a conflict between wanting to be viewed as an adult, but not quite feeling ready to take on adult responsibilities (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Goodkind and colleagues (2011) found in their study of youth who exited the child welfare system prior to expiration of eligibility that foster youth desire autonomy from the child welfare system because they often feel that their adult status is not validated by caregivers or caseworkers. In addition, the youth reported that the lack of supportive relationships outside of care-related connections to be an obstacle preventing many from feeling truly independent. Thus, the desire to be free from system-related constraints may force more foster youth from the system before they are truly capable of establishing themselves as independent young adults.

Furthermore, foster youth in the period of emerging adulthood are dually influenced by the links that they share with foster parents, caseworkers, legal guardians, foster siblings, and others that they meet while in care and experience a sense of loss because of the links that may be missing in their lives. Foster youth are often unprepared for the transition from state care to adulthood because they often experience multiple transitions at the same time. They enter the system, become defined by the system, and then exit the system. The time, duration, and chronicity of maltreatment has already shown that this can have a detrimental effect on how youth develop (Cowell et al, 2015). The life course is structured as three distinct periods as they relate to work: an early period devoted to building skills through education and training, a middle period devoted to continuous work activity, and a segment related to leisure and retirement after a full career or work (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). For foster youth, this process is not always linear because of disruptions in placement, which includes homelessness and unsafe living conditions.

The transition from foster care to adulthood is often discussed in terms of whether youth gained the basic life skills necessary to live independently in adulthood. Yet, foster youth in transition often lack the protective safety net of returning home if things do not go well in the adult world and more researchers are arguing against focusing on markers of independence. Instead, interdependence or the "degree that one relies on external resources" challenges the trend of making youth independent as they age from foster care by rationalizing that self-sufficiency or immediate independency after care is a myth that often causes more harm than good (Propp et al., 2003). When stakeholders promote self-sufficiency over the benefits of making connections with individuals outside of the child welfare system, this view can lead transitioning foster youth to believe that asking for help is a sign of vulnerability. As noted by Antle and colleagues (2009), foster youth in transition often lack the protective safety net of returning home if things do not go well in the adult world. The primary focus when it comes to understanding foster youth transition to adulthood has been with measurement of hard skills (e.g., basic life skills, employment, education, etc.) rather than on so called soft skills such as emotional regulation and the development of supportive networks (Antle, et al., 2009, p. 310).

Jones (2011) investigated the distal outcomes of 16 former foster youth three years after their transition to adulthood in a longitudinal study. The study found that although all youth reported having at least one adult connection, 50% of youth reported having very little in savings, no health insurance, and an alcohol or substance abuse problem. Jones further noted that youth with a commitment to a course of post-secondary or vocational training and evidence of a supportive network were among those with better transition outcomes (e.g., employment, stable housing, and healthy relationships). More emphasis is needed in understanding foster youth transition not only by examining the development of educational and employment related skills

but also by exploring the way in which social relationships and networks shape the period of emerging adulthood for transitioning foster youth.

In summary, the study of the life course perspective and emerging adulthood demonstrates the precarious nature of young adulthood in terms of stability, feeling heard, and gaining autonomy outside of parents or other social institutions. For foster youth in transition, emerging adulthood is often made difficult due to the lack of supportive relationships, uncertainty regarding when and why to leave the foster care system, and realistic opportunities for self-sufficiency upon aging out of care. For foster youth, success in emerging adulthood can be defined by gaining responsibility for one's actions and developing a strong, adult voice. Social capital, or the ability of individuals to utilize persons to gain access to resources, is an important factor to consider when viewing the social pathways of foster youth in transition. In the next section, an overview of social capital is provided from the worldviews of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam and is discussed via its importance to youth involved in the child welfare system. These theoretical considerations are also contextualized in terms of race, ethnicity, and social status through the extensions of social capital to incorporate the cultural needs of Black and Latinx current and former foster youth.

Role of Social Capital in Emerging Adulthood

Key Theorists

Social capital as a concept is most attributed to the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988). Although there are many variations in how the concept is defined, social capital is often defined as an "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace" (Lin, 2001). The marketplace consists of economic, political, labor, and community resources available for public good. Capital development is often described as a two-

phase process. In the first phase, capital is gained for an individual through the development of goods and services while the second phase dictates that capital is exchanged through the exchange of goods and services to generate a profit (Coleman, 1988).

Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital by way of accessibility and utilization of resources within one's social network through the "aggregate of the actual resources or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network more or less of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" which more clearly relates to an individual's benefit from association with a particular group within society (p. 88). Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital emphasizes that group membership should produce some return on investment or some indication that individuals are benefitting from their relationships with others in the group in terms of sociability. This conceptualization of social capital is grounded in the notion of social reproduction, or the belief that children inherit their social status and position in life from the economic and cultural capital passed down to them from their parents.

For Bourdieu, social capital is needed for the social reproduction to occur within familial groups to preserve the position and status of the dominant class in society (Dika & Singh, 2002). In other words, social capital through social reproduction serves as a form of social control where the dominant class maintains control of their position in society through their established social norms and access to institutional resources such as employment and education. Bourdieu's theory attempted to highlight unequal opportunities in poorer communities that might explain why poor children were often unable to perform at the same level as children from wealthier, more resource connected families. His theory additionally attempted to discuss the limitations imposed on children because of race, class, and gender (Bourdieu 1986/2016). Social capital,

therefore, can become an investment of the dominant class to maintain their status and to reproduce offspring that uphold group solidarity by aiding in the preservation of dominant class position in society.

Coleman (1988) also views social capital as an investment in social control for the dominant class, but his social capital definition essentially has three forms: level of trust through obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and sanctions that "promote the common good over self-interest" through the enforcement of intergenerational closure within one's social network (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 34). For Coleman, social capital can be defined by its function within society where "they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure." (Coleman, 1988/2016, p. 99). In Coleman's social capital, the role of the family is important in helping children adapt to cultural rules and expectations that may aid in the development of human capital, or an individual's ability to gain the skills and capabilities necessary to participate and compete within a given community. Without social capital, according to Coleman, individuals struggle to develop the skills necessary to interface positively with others in their communities.

There are other considerations to understanding the classical conceptualization of social capital. Bourdieu and Coleman attribute both individual and group level predictors to understanding whether an individual possesses or lacks social capital. Coleman's definition and study of social capital leads to two conceptual problems: a focus on sources of relationships that is confused with the benefits of those relationships and opportunities that exist for an individual because of those relationships (Dika & Singh, 2002; Lin 1999, Lin, 2008). Putnam (1993) also views social capital on this continuum because he believes that the possession of social capital

can have a positive impact on communities. But Coleman's conceptualization places more emphasis on the responsibility of the family to indoctrinate their children in the knowledge of certain norms to advance their families social status (Lin, 2008).

Lin (1999) sought to unify the themes surrounding social capital in his conceptualization of social capital as an investment in social relationships where actors can expect returns in the marketplace. He posited that the marketplace consisted of economic, political, labor, and community capital where capital is developed through a two-step reciprocal process. In step one, capital is created through resources that may be produced or altered. In step two, capital is exchanged through production to generate a profit. Thus, production leads to an exchange of goods and services within a social capital framework (p. 30). He further argued that social capital can be viewed as the ability of an individual to benefit from their social ties through investment and usage of their capital. Unlike Coleman, Lin believes that closed social networks can inhibit the development of social capital because social mobility is no longer a factor in how individuals seek out and maintain relationships with others in their network. Everything and everyone within their social circle are interconnected, but because the network of relationships is closed, no new actors or roles can emerge. Therefore, he argued, a better conceptualization of social capital focuses not only on goods and resources that are inherent within one's social network, but in how embedded the resources are within one's social network. Thus, social capital is defined by the availability of resources in a social structure that can be accessed for purposive actions namely through embeddedness (structure), opportunity (accessibility of resources) and action-oriented (how individuals use their capital) aspects (p. 35).

Measurement of Social Capital

Of course, the measurement of social capital has largely focused on individual as well as collective actions that point to a conceptualized definition of social capital (i.e., Coleman, Bourdieu, or Lin). Social capital is characterized by learned social norms within the family unit, investment in one's community, and the development of trust. Measurement of social capital is rife with controversy, most notably due to the vague nature of measurement of the concept in Bourdieu and Coleman's conceptualization of the concept. The prevailing measurement scheme for examining whether an individual or group possesses social capital has largely been based on Coleman's conceptualization of social capital, which is likely a factor in the vagueness of predictors used to examine the construct. Coleman does not specify a timeline for social capital development nor does his model take into consideration whether interaction between variables would change a person's social capital attainment (Coleman, 1988; Dika & Singh, 2002). Coleman's conceptualization of social capital depends entirely on a closed, intergenerational network of connections between parents, children, and other relatives within a social network structure. Studies that depend wholly on Coleman's definition of social capital often do not take into consideration whether there can be interaction between predictors of social capital or fail to consider the timeline for social capital development in children. Additionally, Coleman's concept assumes the presence of the family unit as a mediator of social capital, which can ignore the development of personal autonomy in adolescents (Dika & Singh, 2002).

It is important to remember that social capital is often viewed as a public good, one that is renewable, and is infinite in its supply (Jack & Gordon, 1999). The idea of social capital is that it is available to everyone to use to create lasting relational ties or bonds with a broader community outside of the familial unit. It is, in essence, something that can only be strengthened (according

to traditional definitions) through interactions with other human beings. Therefore, social capital is often viewed as a collective public good within communities. But, for foster youth in care, their access and ability to utilize social capital may not be through collective means alone, but through their individual ability to create and maintain systems of social support through their supportive networks. As noted by Yang (2007) when social capital is studied, it is often done so by utilizing family-level factors to discuss how individuals are best able to utilize their social capital to gain access to goods and services. Yet, for foster youth transitioning into adulthood, researchers often find that youth with strong supportive networks, consistent access to natural and formal mentoring relationships, and participation in mental health interventions are among those considered to be well-adjusted in emerging adulthood (Chaney & Spell, 2015; Harris Rome & Raskin, 2019; Kirk et al., 2011; Loring, 2011). Therefore, this dissertation will focus on the transmission and receipt of social capital by focusing on the personal support networks of foster youth. The connection between social capital and social networks is further explored in the next section.

Social Capital and Social Networks

Building on the principle of linked lives discussed earlier, social capital can also help elucidate the availability and access to resources for foster youth in transition. Social capital can be viewed in the structure and analysis of a person's networks since networks can create access to social capital by connecting people to resources. Lin (1998) and Borgotti and colleagues (1998) view social capital through the lens of resource allocation and exchange of social support through an individual's social network by examining the structural measures via social network analysis of one's personal network. These measurements include the size of the person's network, strong versus weak ties, and heterogeneity of actors within a network. Collectively, the

focus is on the structural nature of social networks through the ability to attach or ascribe meaning to individual indicators of social capital (Hoenig et al., 2016).

Three major forms of social capital within social networks have emerged through research activities: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding refers to the connections in a network based on intimacy and trust among members of a given network that have similarities (Putnam, 2000). Bridging refers to the relationships among actors where there is clear dissimilarity, such as in differences in socioeconomic status, age, race, or income (Lee et al., 2018; Szreter, 2002; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). And finally, linking social capital describes the extent to which people create and maintain relationships with institutions and individuals within their network that have power over them in some way, such as those who might have access to employment opportunities, educational opportunities, or other resources (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Linking is believed to be the result of the weakest relationship but has the most valuable outcome within a social network because of the potential of connecting actors to much needed resources (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010).

Putnam (2000) made a distinction between bonding and bridging social capital by defining bonding social capital as a function of an individual's network that incorporates strong informal social connections accompanied by strong loyalty within a group. In contrast, bridging social capital is readily found in outward-looking social networks and heterogeneity when it comes to the inclusion of peoples across race, ethnicity, gender, and class. The presence of this type of social network can bring people together from outside of their familial bonds and close networks and can help individuals achieve common goals. Bonding social capital allows for the creation of a closed network of ties, which aligns to Coleman's (1988) definition of social capital. But a social network with ties defined largely by closed and close familial connections

lacks the diversity of connecting with others outside of the family social circle. Thus, a strong social network, according to Putnam, is one in which there exists evidence of connection to multiple networks using bridging and presence of close relationships with trusted individuals. In this way, new information and resources can be said to flow within and outside of a group, which would be less likely in a completely closed social network and highlights the importance of social mobility.

Conceptually, Lin's (1999) model of social capital is one of few that addresses social mobility, individual versus group social capital, and the problem of measurement that form the hyper focus on group collective action within the study of social capital. Social capital for youth with experience in out of home placement does not necessarily come from their parents as posited by Coleman, and, to a certain extent, by Bourdieu due to a disruption in the family home that may necessitates a complete change in family structure. Social capital, when understood in terms of an individual's social network, is not a depletable, deficit focused phenomena (Lin, 1999). Rather, one can increase their social capital through enhancement of their social networks by way of support from friends, trusted adults, caseworkers, and other stakeholders that they may meet throughout their experience in child welfare (Negriff et al., 2015). Social capital can also be increased by participating in post-secondary educational experiences or by entering the workforce because one's network is enhanced through the interconnections made with individuals with common goals. Therefore, individual usage of social capital should be studied by examining how individuals use or develop their connections of support outside of their familial bonds. The next section discusses the influence social capital has on education and employment and is followed by a discussion of social capital and its influence on social network development.

Social Capital, Education and Employment

The quality of one's social network has an influential effect on the probability that youth will invest in a course of education, since some youth from disadvantaged and lower socioeconomic environments tend to choose employment over pursuing additional education (Zuluga, 2013). A recent systematic review on the relationship between social networks, social capital, social support and academic success between social capital and educational attainment for underrepresented minority students in post-secondary settings noted that student's personal and institutional networks contributed to their higher education success (Mishra, 2020). The study also found that social support extended to on-campus support groups, participation in extracurricular activities, and through meaningful interactions with faculty members of the same race/ethnicity.

Furthermore, social capital has been linked to educational decision-making for underprivileged youth. Walther and colleagues (2014) conducted qualitative interviews of students from disadvantaged areas in the UK (n=106) to explore educational trajectories and noted that three dimensions were key for the identification of different patterns of educational trajectories: ruptures during educational trajectories (changes or deviations from completion of a prescribed course of post-secondary education), destinations after lower secondary education (does the educational opportunity lead to the job or career that the youth envisioned), and the degree of choice that the youth experienced during the transition from lower levels of education to upper post-secondary education (linking past experiences and the imagined future with their present experiences and current assessment of their skillset). The interplay between structure, agency, and available capital further demonstrated that institutional structures of educational systems and socioeconomic status had a profound effect on youth's educational trajectories.

Youth from underprivileged backgrounds are also affected by their environments when it comes to decision-making regarding their educational trajectories. Kim and Nunez (2013) noted that for first-generation Latinx students attempting to complete a course of education at 2- or 4-year institutions, their decision to attend college was largely influenced by the quality of the high school they attended and the communities where they resided. The youth interviewed collectively viewed higher education as an opportunity for social mobility. Other studies contend (Ball et al., 2000; duDois-Reymond & Stauber, 2005) that social mobility through education is often made difficult when youth are from lower-income socioeconomic backgrounds because they often lack the motivation for completing a course of education. It is clear, then, that social mobility and social capital have a profound effect on whether youth pursue higher education opportunities, but more research is needed to understand how individual social capital outside of familial bonds directly affects educational choice.

The institution of school serves to hold to age-graded transitions that will influence their ability to enter the workforce depending on the age and the quality of the education that they receive (Kerkhoff, 2003). Schools serve as a microcosm of the real world. How well young people can make and maintain connections in school can be an indicator of how they react once they become adults. Additionally, the climate of a school, dominant peer culture, and how adolescents are integrated within the social structure of schools are key to understanding how schooling shapes the future especially at the high school level. Stratification in educational settings often refers to how schools are differentiated based on the perception of higher or lower quality education and academic demand (Collins, 1971).

Furthermore, the decision to attend a course of higher education after the completion of high school often occurs in a nonlinear fashion where attempts to receive additional educational

training is often combined with working full or part-time for many young people (Arnett, 2000; Keller et al., 2007). In a comparison of the educational systems of Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, Kerckhoff (2003) notes that the American pattern of employment and educational attainment after youth reach the age of majority is largely disorganized and unstructured. Youth are told of the benefits of obtaining a high school diploma and eventually obtaining a bachelor's degree, but other forms of education via two-year program, vocational programs, trade schools, or other certification programs may not hold the same level of respect as participation in a four-year college or university when students transfer (Shaw et al., 2019). In a nutshell, even without being in the child welfare system, youth transition into adulthood in the United States is often made difficult by the uncertainty of employment and educational opportunities after K-12 education comes to an end. Since the school system in the US does not necessarily prepare youth for entry into the workforce, youth are often encouraged to obtain more education but not much emphasis is placed on the type of education that is needed to become successful in the labor market.

In terms of searching for employment, individuals often obtain jobs based on informal means through connections within their established social networks. This involves the usage of social capital to receive benefits from the labor market (i.e., obtain employment). However, when people from disadvantaged backgrounds look for employment, they often look first to individuals and resources within their social networks first, then to opportunities through more formal processes such as applying for jobs using job websites and other work force opportunities (Settersten, 2003). Unfortunately, even if disadvantaged populations are interested in obtaining employment, they are least likely to benefit from their personal contacts because of the lack of prestige inherent in their social networks. This is likely due to lack of heterogeneity in one's

network with regards to employment; if everyone in each social network has the same level of income, then an individual looking for employment might not have people in their network that has access to others with higher incomes, especially in closed networks (Reingold, 1999). This phenomenon becomes more apparent in individuals seeking employment in early and mid-career positions as individuals with highly connected and resource-rich support networks to secure employment instead of through traditional job searching methods (Gayen et al., 2019). Individuals who can create a strong social network with individuals of high prestige and connections are more readily able to find employment through non-searching than those with closed social networks with mostly low-wage actors. Thus, for foster youth, the ability to develop and utilize social capital throughout the lifespan is enhanced if youth have access to individuals of higher prestige as they enter adulthood (McDonald & Elder, 2006).

In short, there is a misconception regarding youth transition to adulthood that champions self-sufficiency and survivalist techniques over valuing the interconnected relationships of foster youth in transition (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Researchers in child welfare are beginning to understand the importance of social networks to understand how foster youth gain access to material and intangible resources necessary for a successful transition into adulthood (Best & Blakeslee, 2020). Thus, viewing the interconnections of emerging adulthood, social capital, and social relationships requires a sophisticated method that can not only look at individual level factors related to adulthood while understanding the importance of interdependence versus independence.

Additionally, while current research has attempted to identify barriers to educational attainment and positive outcomes for foster youth, few programs are culturally relevant and incorporate youth perspectives in the development of important life skills such as

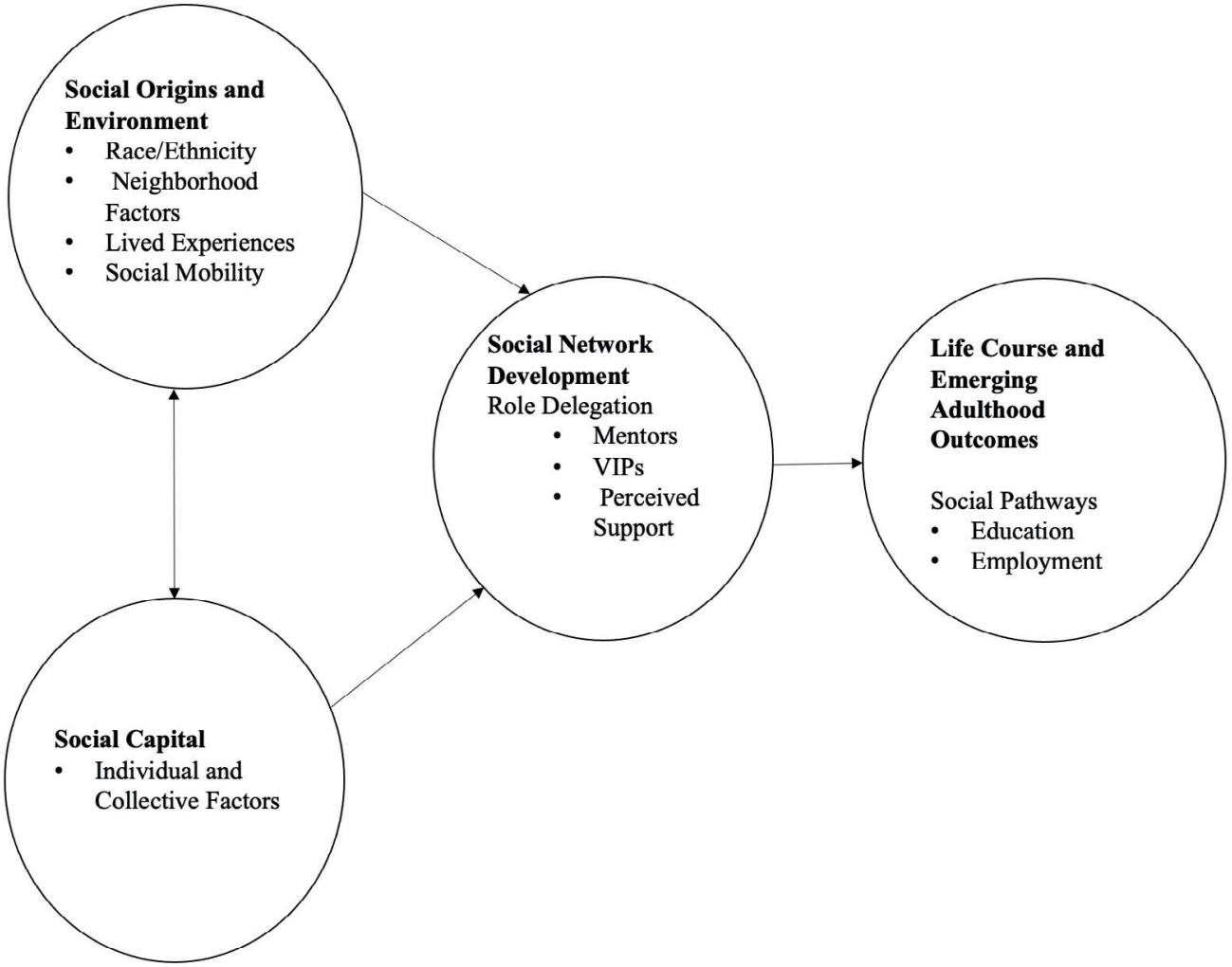
communication, collaboration with adults, and the development of positive peer relationships. Therefore, it is important for stakeholders to understand how BIPOC youth build attachments and social supports while they are in care to develop culturally relevant, youth-driven interventions designed to increase post-secondary education and employment opportunities**.** Additionally, this dissertation will attempt to measure social capital at the individual and collective levels since this will provide more understanding into how youth utilize their relationships to engage in education decision-making. Few studies have examined the quality of supportive networks for transitioning foster youth and relational closeness from a youth perspective. Understanding closeness of relationships within foster youth social networks can help guide stronger interventions that target strengthening relationships between youth and those designated as very important persons (VIPs) within their networks (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018).

As demonstrated, the life course perspective offers an integrated and multi-faceted exploration into how individuals are impacted by their families, their communities, and their social status. The transition from foster youth is an age-graded to independence that is often marked by deleterious outcomes that can derail self-sufficiency (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The proposed conceptual framework incorporates elements of social capital, social network theory, and the life course perspective to understand foster youth transition as it relates to social pathways and social mobility. Social pathways are defined by the trajectories of education and employment that are followed by individuals in society while social mobility in this study will be guided by the principle of linked lives through shared relationships, or the periods of residential stability that extend beyond the familial unit in the development of social networks (Elder, 2003). Broadly, the conceptual model illustrates the interconnectedness of factors related to

educational and employment choices of foster youth in transition. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual framework that will guide the dissertation study. Each component of the conceptual framework will be discussed in the forthcoming sections.

Figure 1

Guiding Conceptual Framework



In this conceptual model, I theorize that youth with child welfare experience are dually affected by social origins and their environments and social capital when considering who to incorporate in their social networks. This occurs for youth who are aging out of the child welfare system and with youth who have already aged out of the system and into adulthood. I designate social origins and environment as impacted by biological factors such as race, gender, and ethnicity; neighborhood factors such as geographic location; lived experiences in foster care, and the level of social mobility that the youth possess. Social origins in this conceptual model are directly tied to the development of individual and collective social capital or, how youth use their own resources to develop and maintain relationships with others.

The presence of bonding social capital, or one's ability to connect with others in a meaningful way, is also important to the development and usage of social capital during transition to adulthood. Social network development in this framework is largely determined by the role delegation performed by youth to gain and maintain their social networks. In this conceptualization, youth serve as role delegators and actively work to identify individuals who can serve singular or multiple positions in their network, such as becoming a trusted mentor, or a broker in their relationship-building with new connections. Additionally, youth utilize role delegation to determine the types of support they need in their networks to transition away from the public child welfare system. Role delegation is also useful for youths who have already left the child welfare system and are seeking to validate their interdependence in adulthood. Ultimately, the conceptual framework helps to elucidate connections between social origins and environment, social capital, and the development of social networks to explore foster youth decision-making and thoughts on educational and employment pathways as they transition from foster care to adulthood. The next sections discuss the life course perspective, emerging

adulthood, and individual and collective social capital development as they relate to current and former foster youth.

Summary

The current dissertation represents an exploratory research effort designed to assess the social network and social capital development of BIPOC as it relates to their educational and employment decision-making. Young adulthood represents a time of transition, identity confirmation, and creating lasting relational bonds to help navigate through an increasingly difficult period.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, I focus on the issues related to integration of qualitative and quantitative data into a singular source of information and provide examples of how mixed methods integration has typically occurred within the field of child welfare. I discuss the broader application of social network analysis and the usage of egocentric social network analysis, which forms the basis of the data analysis for this convergent parallel mixed methods dissertation. I also provide rationale for the using a convergent parallel design, and provide information on the population, sampling, data collection, and principal research questions used to guide this study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a detailed look at the data analysis plan utilized in the study.

Dissertation Methods and Methodology

Convergent Parallel Mixed Method

This dissertation utilized a two-phase, convergent parallel mixed methods design which was selected to broadly explore and understand the interplay of supportive networks and educational choice of foster care youth in transition to adulthood. In choosing to use a mixed methods research design, I am not making the assertion that a mixed methodology inherently better than a mono-method study that uses qualitative or quantitative data. Rather, my usage of mixed methods stems from a desire to offer completeness, context, and improved understanding of the process of foster youth social network development and how those social networks affect educational and employment decision-making. The mixed methods convergent parallel design consists of two distinct phases of research with equal priority (QUANT + QUAL, Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Priority in mixed methods research refers to "the relative importance of weighting of the quantitative and qualitative methods for answering a study's questions" (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). In the current study, equal priority was granted to each strand of

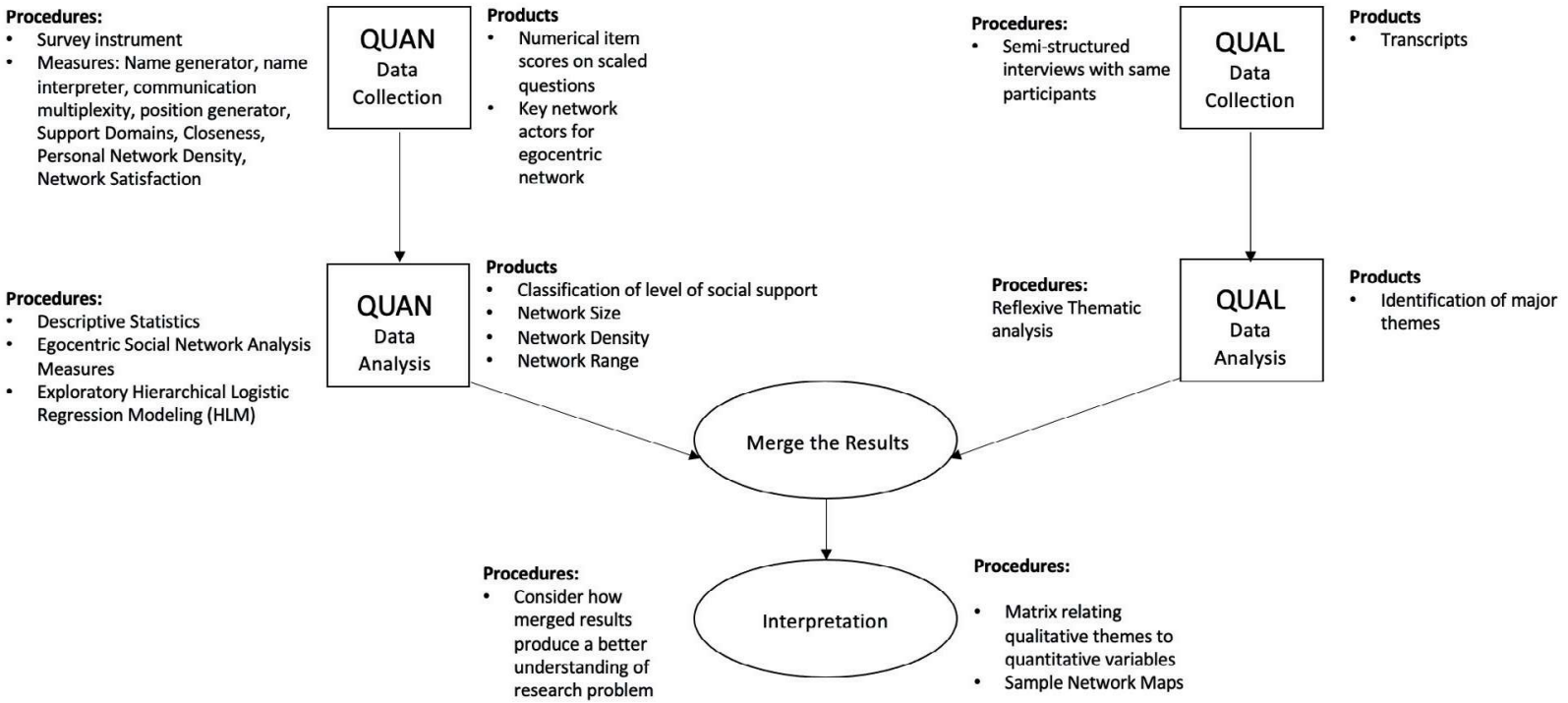
the research process to ensure that both methods are involved in the understanding of social network development of foster youth. The methodology was selected to allow the researcher the ability to understand how social interactions of foster youth may be affected by inequality, lack of stable adult and peer relations, and marginalization without resorting to a deficit-leaning explanation of educational and employment outcomes. In this design, a researcher collects quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously to help bring together the strengths and inherent weaknesses in each methodology to best understand the research problem at hand (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The convergent parallel design enables understanding about how foster youth in transition create strong supportive networks outside of connections they make while in care (e.g., through caseworkers, legal guardians, case managers, etc.). Because this dissertation proposed interviewing foster youth known to be highly transitory, the researcher collected all study data in a single meeting with foster youth and collected both quantitative and qualitative data in her visit to the Possibility Project. Furthermore, the results of the quantitative portion of the dissertation project are not dependent on the results of the qualitative phase since each phase will be analyzed separately and then merged for the final step of interpreting the results (Doyle et al., 2016). This enabled the ability to interpret and analyze the ways in which each phase of the project converges, diverges, or combines to instill a better elucidation of the study's overall purpose (Creswell & Plano, 2011).

Figure 2 (on the next page) demonstrates the basic procedures that was used in the implementation of the convergent parallel design in the dissertation.

Figure 2

Flowchart of the Convergent Parallel Design



Each stage of the research process involves carefully thought-out procedures designed to triangulate the research methods to integrate the strengths and weaknesses of a purely quantitative method with the in-depth, detailed methodology underlying qualitative research methods. In addition to comparing the results of quantitative and qualitative methods, other purposes include "illustrating quantitative results with qualitative findings, synthesizing quantitative and qualitative results to develop a more complete understanding of a phenomenon, and comparing multiple levels within a system." (Creswell et al., p. 96). This dissertation additionally merges the convergent mixed methods design with egocentric social network analysis of foster youth support systems. The following section provides an overview egocentric social network analysis, a sophisticated method for looking at the network content, strength of relationships, function of alters and overall structure within personal networks. I will discuss each section of what forms the quantitative and qualitative research inquires in this study in detail below.

Survey Data Collection and Egocentric Social Networks

Social network analysis is an interdisciplinary field that is concerned with relational data and is a paradigm concerned with the patterns, linkages, and relationships between people, communities, organizations, etc. Inherent in the study of networks is the outage of graphical elements and mathematical/computational models that demonstrate relationships between actors in each network (Luke & Harris, 2007). At its core, social network analysis is primarily the social relationships that are achieved or attributed among individuals, families, communities, countries, and other objects (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2011; Kadushin, 2012).

Traditional SNA methods are comprised of elements of graph theory, matrix algebra, and geometry but can also include narrative approaches as viewed in recent studies on the structure of transitioning foster care youth social networks (Blakeslee, 2015). While quantitative approaches focus on identifying and exploring the structure, composition, function, and overall size of social networks using computational measures, qualitative approaches to social network analysis tends to focus on the relational nature of network actors' identities and their interaction with a specific person (Bellotti, 2015). In this dissertation, quantitative methods focused on the structural relationships of the egos and their reported network actors in addition to their overall network size. The qualitative social network analysis was primarily concerned with the relationships of egos to their named actors, how they activated network actors in times of educational and/or employment decision-making, and how their networks provided overall support. Regardless of analytical method chosen, within social networks people create norms, roles, and relational ties that defines group membership and can communicate utilizing language, symbols, and behaviors that may be meaningful to insiders of the group (Burt et al., 2013). Connections within social networks are useful in helping individuals secure employment (Granovetter, 1973), improve health outcomes through social relationships (Cohen, 2004), explain class mobility on college campuses (Sullenburger et al., 2015), and has been used to explain how recent immigrants to the United States gain access to adult education (Gray, 2019).

Egocentric social networks are of value to social science researchers because of the focus on how each person lives within their personal community of supports. As noted by Perry and collaborators (2018), egocentric social network analysis can be utilized by researchers to predict "ego outcomes from variables that describe how ego is connected to alters, characteristics of the alters, and characteristics of the pattern in which the alters are connected to each other" (p. 26).

In short order, egocentric network analysis seeks to operationalize the content of social networks, the strength of the relational ties between network members and the respondent, function of exchanges, services or supports provided by network members to the ego, and the structure of the network by way of the presence and patterns of links between actors within social network (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). Egocentric social networks can help to uncover why egos have the types of networks that they belong to, and they can help researchers understand how and why relationships form for some egos and not for others. Table 1 provides basic terminology used in social network analysis.

Table 1

Basic Concepts in Egocentric Network Analysis

Term	Definition
Ego	The ego is the focal actor of an egocentric network that may send or receive ties.
Alter	An alter represents an individual within a network that can maintain informal or formal ties with an ego
Ties	Ties are the network connections between egos and alters. Ties are also referred to as links or edges and can be directed or undirected.
Ego Network	The ego network consists of all alters that are connected to the focal ego and ties that can exist between other alters within the network.

Fundamental to the understanding of egocentric social network and analysis of structure and behavior in relationships is understanding the basic elements of a social network. The building blocks of all social networks start at the dyad, or a pair of actors in a network and the possible relationships between them. Triads focus on the possible relationships between three actors and their connections (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Subgroups in social networks may consist of dyads and triads and the interconnections between actors within this grouping while analysis of a whole group is focused on the relationships between systems of actors within a

bounded group (Borgatti et al., 2018). Below is a brief overview of how networks are analyzed through distributional concepts.

Table 2

Key Concepts for Social Network Analysis

Term	Definition
Size	Refers to the number of actors or people within a given network
Directionality	Are relationships reciprocal, asymmetric, or is there no connection between named alters?
Homophily	The tendencies of people with the same characteristics to form relational bonds. Can be individual level or group level.
Multiplexity	Relationship between two people that involves more than one relational type. For example, a person can provide multiple types of support within a given egocentric network
Weak Ties	Refers to alters that can control flow of information from distant parts of a network.

Egocentric Social Network Analysis and Child Welfare Outcomes

For youth transitioning from care into adulthood, the social environment and available avenues of support can provide a rich framework for researchers to explore successful or unsuccessful outcomes. Social network analysis provides a framework to examine the social connections of youth in a systematic and sophisticated and refined manner. ESNA provides a way to explore the structural relationships of individuals within a youth's network of support while also highlighting areas where obstacles or barriers may prevent access to resources. ESNA can also provide researchers with the ability to explore patterns within networks of support.

As discussed in Chapter 2, when foster youth face instability in their networks of support, they can also have difficulty obtaining much needed information to help them navigate life after care. For instance, foster youth with multiple out of home placement moves may have experienced multiple caseworkers, multiple school placements, and differing home environments with very little consistency in traditions, norms, and cultural environment. It is important to note

that not all youth experience discontinuity in placement nor experience challenges to pursuing a course of higher education, as evidenced by post-secondary attendance of some foster youth (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Geenen et al., 2015; Salazar, 2013). Despite positive outcomes, however, there are a subset of transitioning foster youth reduced educational capacity and outcomes because of their lack of strong and stable social supports (Courtney et al, 2012). Youth considered to be higher risk (i.e., those with marked behavioral problems, prior or current experience in the juvenile justice system, or those that engage in substance use and abuse) often have reduced access to positive and supportive adults and peers that can help support them through this often difficult and life-changing period. For these reasons, it is important that researchers do not become mired in only discussing the 'deficits' that exist for youth in transition, but that they broaden their research to explore the social environments of youth in transition when exploring academic achievement and access. Additionally, when discussing the importance of social capital as a catalyst for building strong support networks, the focus should expand to include positive and negative aspects of social support indicators of so called positive social capital.

Foster care researchers have begun to explore the consequences of network disruption in youth in out of home placements and has helped explore the structure of youth networks as they age out of the foster care system (Leathers, 2005; Negriff et al., 2015; Perry, 2006). Increasingly, researchers are conducting more targeted research utilizing a network support to elucidate why foster youth may benefit from multiple domains of support when it comes to transition-related outcomes (Blakeslee, 2015; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Ahrens, et al., 2008). The analysis of support networks utilizing egocentric social network analysis serves to strengthen the social work profession as a tradition that is rooted in high-quality, systematic, and rigorous

understanding of the social structures that are inherent in the social environment. As noted by Rice et al., (2015) the power of social network analysis lies within its ability to analyze the patterns of relationships and how these relationships may influence given outcomes.

Social networks can show the patterns of relational ties through direct and indirect relationships and are beneficial in showing where system-related constraints influence youth choices in adulthood. The composition of foster youth social networks can show the variety of roles and positions of service providers, connected adults, and trusted peers. Blakeslee and colleagues (2019) that support network capacity was a function of both a network member's capacity to provide support to youth in transition and network stability or whether there was cohesion within and across relationships over time. They conducted semi-structured interviews and used network-mapping with youth aged 16-20 (n=22) and used thematic analysis to explore potential barriers to support to foster youth in addition to examining support capacity and network stability. The study found that support capacity was limited by interpersonal difficulties of actors within the network while network stability created multidimensional support thorough the strength of strong and interconnected caregivers and service providers. The study design was limited, however, by the recruitment of youth through service providers who acted as gatekeepers in determining who participated in the study and the sample was generated using convenience samples. Also, the study did not account for conduct a mixed method or quantitative analysis of network supports to explore nuances in indicators of stable network supports. The current study aims to incorporate a mixed methods approach to additionally include data analysis by age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity, which may be important in understanding educational choice and trajectories of youth transitioning into adulthood. The current study aims to extend

the usage of egocentric social network analysis to explore outcomes in relation to the effect of race and ethnicity in educational and employment decision-making in adulthood.

Dissertation Study Design

Participants, Data Collection and Location

The researcher collected primary data collection through partnership with The Possibility Project, a nonprofit organization that provides at-risk youth an opportunity to tell their stories via original stage performance in New York, NY. The program utilizes social/emotional learning to help youth examine and address social and personal forces that shape their lives and identities. The program has four main areas: an after-school program (youth ages 13-19 years), Saturday program (youth ages 13-19), youth justice program (youth ages 15-20 years), and a foster care program (youth ages 15-20). Each program recruited youth from each borough of New York City (e.g., Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx). The foster care program was added in 2009 when the program's president noted a need for specialized programming for youth in foster care settings.

The foster care program, which is the focus of the proposed research, engages 20-25 foster youth from foster care agencies throughout the city each year who meet twice a week to work on their stage play. Auditions for the program occurs each year in March with rehearsals commencing from the end of March through the end of November. In December of each year, the youth-led production takes stage and allows all youth participating to actively engage in the process, from stage direction, acting, to hair and makeup. In addition, the youth participate in a community action project in October where the youth work together to design and execute a project on an issue that is of importance to them. Past projects have focused on teen suicide, educational inequality, and domestic violence (The Possibility Project, 2019). Due to COVID-19

and the pandemic, in-person operations have ceased, but the agency continues to provide ongoing support to current and former foster youth through virtual programming designed to increase their digital media skillset through the production of podcasts, audiovisual projects, and training on digital media software.

The Possibility Project was selected as a location for data collection because of their commitment to foster youth and increasing educational access, employment, and equity for transition-aged youth. The program is strengths-based and focuses on transforming youth negative experiences into positive action that in turn benefits the community while providing youth with an environment to build relationships, resolve conflicts in a nonviolent manner and to lead. The program also has a vast foster alumni network that still regularly engages with ongoing projects with the agency. Originally, the research plan called for the inclusion of only youth currently participating in the Possibility Project while in foster care. As such, the sample consisted of foster youth currently participating and past participants of the program will offer a rich opportunity to examine how the program helped to shape their social network, individual social capital and influence their educational and career choices.

Recruitment and Informed Consent

In accordance with the New York University Institutional Review Board, I completed an IRB application for expedited review. A copy of the approved informed consent, study questions, and related materials can be found in Appendix A. The IRB application included a letter of support from The Possibility Project, complete survey instrument, in-person semi-structured interview questions, and an informed consent form. Each potential respondent received a paper letter of informed consent prior to participating in either phase of the research study. The survey protocol included skip logic that allowed participants to skip questions and/or withdraw their

informed consent at any time. Each participant received $70 compensation for completing both the survey and semi-structured interview. Participants that completed the quantitative interview but not the qualitative interview received $35 for their participation.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria are as follows: 1) youth must identify as African American or Latinx, 2) youth must be between the ages of 18 and 30, and 3) speak and read English well enough to participate in both phases of the study process. The researcher relied on the president of the Possibility Project to send out an email containing information about the project and a brief bio about the researcher (Appendix B) to all current and former foster youth. The president then screened participants who responded based on the criteria noted above and granted access to the quantitative survey via Qualtrics. If youth indicated in the survey that they wish to participate in the qualitative phase of the study, the researcher contacted those participants via email to schedule a time for the qualitative interview. As much as possible, the researcher attempted to schedule the qualitative emails within 1 week of completion of the survey. However, there were a few respondents who were interviewed up to two weeks after completion of the survey.

Research Questions

As noted in Chapter 2, here are the key research questions that guided the dissertation study:

1. What role does youth social origins and environment, individual characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, foster care status, gender identity, neighborhood factors and lived experiences) play in the development and utilization of social capital?
2. What role does social capital (i.e., individual and collective factors) and development of bonding social capital play in the development of BIPOC foster youth's social networks?
3. How do BIPOC youth with foster care experience utilize their personal social networks as they age out of care or after they've transitioned from care?
4. How do social origins and environment, and perceived social support impact social pathways related to perceptions of education and employment after BIPOC youth transition from foster care and into emerging adulthood?

5. How do these factors relate to the principle of linked lives through BIPOC youth's shared relationships with other personal network actors?

This dissertation is largely experimental, but there were a few hypotheses about the nature of the research inquiry. It was hypothesized that foster youth may exhibit gaps in their social networks if they are from impoverished or underserved environments, fewer connections, fewer designations of Very Important Persons (VIPs), reduced or inhibited social capital, and reduced perceptions of support will express difficulty in obtaining information related to transitioning from foster care. Additionally, it was believed that foster youth with reduced social network connections may have uncertain plans regarding education, employment, and social mobility after transition from the foster care system. Youth with closed social networks are likely to have fewer connections and reduced ability to utilize their social capital through linking, bridging, and bonding activities with others.

As a researcher I feel it is important to stress that while the quantitative and qualitative data collected may suggest that there are gaps in foster youth development of social networks, this was not intended as a judgement on the individual's sense of worth or capability. Finally, it was hypothesized that how youth express their sense of self-worth and capability will be mutually exclusive from their supportive networks. The study also will uncover stories of resilience, perseverance, and empowerment through the combination of numerical data and a closer examination of the principle of linked lives through qualitative inquiry as they explore their educational and employment pathways after care.

The Analysis Plan

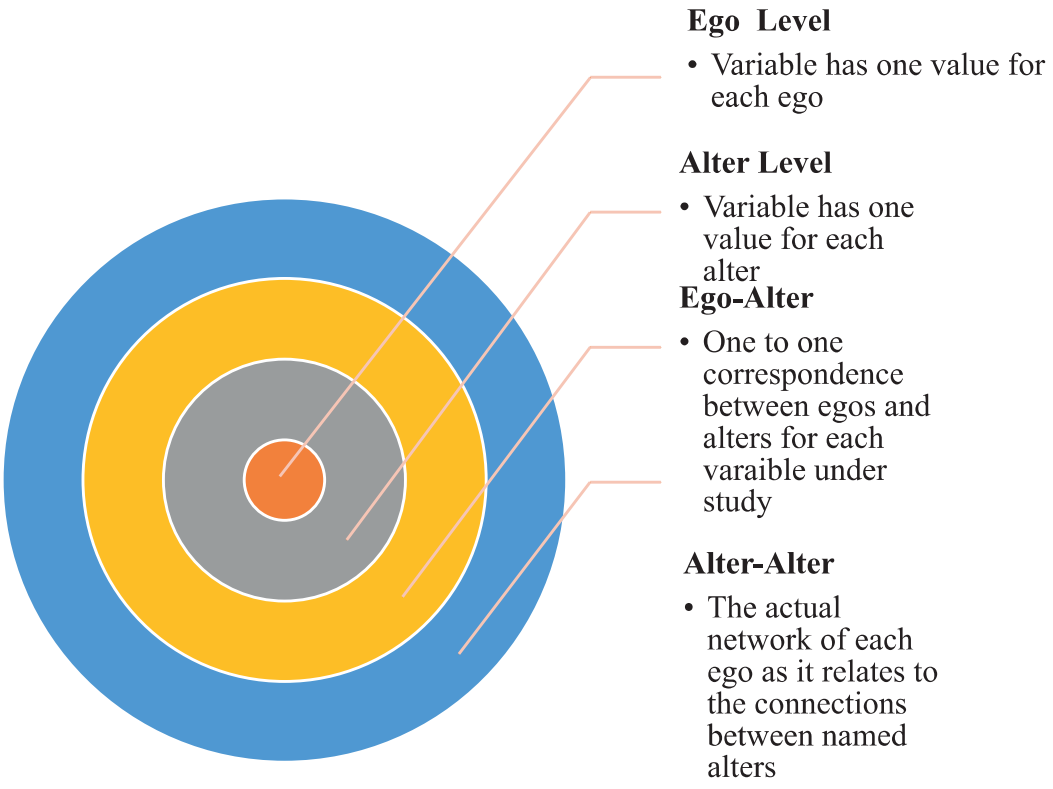
Quantitative Phase

In the quantitative phase of data collection, the researcher utilized a survey instrument to collect data on foster youth in the following domains: education, employment, and perceived support and their relationships with peers and adults. In this study, an egocentric approach was utilized to focus on the interpersonal relationships of foster youth. Prior research has found that personal networks and structural characteristics have a profound effect on individual's psychological and social outcomes in addition to helping to shape their worldviews (Lee et al., 2018). The survey instrument used a name and position generator to help elucidate important individuals that comprise of a youth's social network with the goals of identifying weak and strong ties, structural holes and brokering behaviors of network actors as they relate to social capital (Blakeslee, 2015; Burt, 2004; Halevy et al., 2019).

There are potentially four levels of data collected in egocentric analysis: ego level, alter level, ego-alter level, and alter-alter level. The ego level represents the ego-level characteristics about each person in the sample. The alter level represents the characteristics and attributes of the named alters in the network, including demographic information, types of support provided, ego's perceived closeness to the named alter, and how often the ego relies on the alter for support. The ego-alter level represents a one-to-one correspondence between egos and alters for each level of the study since each alter is attached to one and only one ego. Finally, measures taken at the alter-alter level reflect the actual network that each ego has in terms of whether alters know each other. Figure 3 presents a visualization of these levels.

Figure 3

Visualization of Egocentric Social Networks



Below, dimensions of data collection related to egocentric social networks are discussed in detail.

Name Generator. The use of name generators is common in research using social network analysis of both whole and egocentric networks since it serves as a prompt to respondents to get them to think about the people in their network (Burt et al., 2012). To elicit names, respondents were asked the following: "Over the past month, who are the people with whom you've discussed important personal matters? Please indicate just the first name or initials of people with whom you've spoken." Next, demographic information was collected about each

person the youth indicate. Demographic information included the person's biological sex, age, and race/ethnic identity.

Name Interpreter and Communication. Next, the survey protocol asked for specific details about each person that the respondent names to gain a better understanding of who is in the youth's network and how the youth perceive their role in their network of support. This process aimed to provide measurement of the attributes of ego-alter ties. Young people were asked about their relationship to each person ("What is your relationship to this person? i.e., friend, mother, father, sister, brother, sister, etc."). Tie duration ("How long have you've known this person"), tie proximity ("How far do you live from this person?"), and tie multiplexity ("How often do you rely on them for support?") were also asked on the questionnaire. Youth were asked about the primary type of communication they use to contact each person (e.g., phone, email, text, social media, or in-person). Communication multiplexity was measured through a question prompt asking youth how often they talk to each person (not in the past year, a couple times a year, about once a month, about once a week, once a day, or several times a day).

Position Generator. A position generator was included in the study to measure access to social capital within the youth's social network. The youth will be asked about alters in their networks in terms of their careers and whether they are currently employed. Employment assessments incorporated a binary yes/no response. The position generator was also associated with the person's connection to the focal youth (e.g., whether they were a friend, family member, or other trusted adult). While traditional position generators ask participants to name the type of job or employment they currently hold (Lin, 1998), it is likely that the youth would not know this information. Instead, the aim of the position generator was to provide a better understanding of

the level of access that foster youth have to individuals in their network as well as the careers/employment that may affect the youth's decisions regarding their own employment and education decision making choices in emerging adulthood.

Support Domains. Next, youth were asked to indicate the type of support each person in their network provides by the following question prompt: "What type of support does (Person X) provide?" Respondents could select as many support domains as needed to describe the types of support that people in their networks provide (academic support, career preparation assistance, extracurricular support social support, emotional support, financial support, or other support as specified).

Closeness. Youth were asked about how close they feel to each person they list based on the following question prompt "How close do you feel to this person? Not close, close, or very close." Youth were also asked how often they rely on this person for support (rarely, sometimes, often, or always).

Personal Network Density. Next, youth were asked to consider how individuals in their network might interface with each other through the following question prompt: "Think about the relationship between Person 1 and Person 2. Would you say that they are strangers (0), just friends (2), or especially close (3)?" Density was calculated out of the proportion of existing ties that are especially close among the other pairs of alters.

Network Satisfaction. Finally, youth were asked about their satisfaction with their support networks on a 6-point scale: "On a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 not at all being satisfied and 5 being extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you with the support you receive from your social network? Network satisfaction will be individual satisfaction as well as the sample satisfaction with their support networks.

Hierarchical Multilevel Logistic Regression Modeling

Egocentric networks represent a nested relationship where alters are nested in their interactions with egos, the focal unit of analysis for this research technique. Standard Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions are not appropriate for models where clustering or a nesting effect is present. Therefore, the data analysis utilized a variety of multilevel modeling techniques as discussed in this section. Egocentric network analysis evaluates network processes and relationships at the alter and ego level. The lowest level, Level 1, consists of the named alters while Level 2 consists of the ego. Additional levels of analysis can be added depending on the research question at hand, but there are typically two levels of analysis in egocentric social network analysis (Perry et al., 2018). There are several common model violations to consider in egocentric social network analysis including multicollinearity, nonlinearity, skewness, and heteroskedasticity. Using OLS regression would create a set of models using ego network that would violate assumptions of normality, independence and identically distribution of random variables, and would result in the inability to predict outcomes at the alter level since doing so would be a violation of the assumption of independent error terms in the model (p. 204). To combat these concerns, multilevel modeling was used in this dissertation to analyze ego-alter and alter-alter ties, which will allow for between and within network analysis of egos and the alters that they nominate as part of their supportive networks.

The usage of this method was experimental in this study due to the size of the support networks generated by the focal youth. As explained in Chapter 4, these results should be taken with a note of caution. As such, hierarchical logistical modeling is to analyze within and between alter ties allows for the usage of the random intercept model, random coefficient model,

and the ability to model cross-level interactions between ego and alter ties. Multilevel models adjust for dependence or "similarity between observations observed in the same context—by adding one or more extra variables that are estimated using the sample data." (Perry et al., 2018, p. 209). Hierarchical multilevel logistic regression helps researchers explore variance in their models. Researchers can explore the between-ego variation at Level 2 (interclasses differences) to describe how egos differ from other egos in the study and researchers can also examine the within ego variation or how alters associated with one ego differs from alters associated with other egos (intra-cluster differences). Thus, hierarchical multilevel logistic modeling allows for the usage of what are known as variance component models because of the examination of within and between heterogeneity simultaneously (p. 211). Figure 4 provides a visualization of the nested structure of ego-networks.

Figure 4

Visualization of Egocentric Networks as Nested Relationships

As the visualization shows, Level 1 alter characteristics, attributes, and tie information is fully nested within Level 2 or ego characteristics and attributes. This nested structure allows for reporting of ego-alter ties, alter-alter ties, and overall attributes of the reported personal network.

In short, egos are the unit of analysis for this study, so all network measures used in the examination of network characteristics must reflect ego-level measures. All measures based on the characteristics of alters or ego-alter ties will be aggregated to the ego level. These characteristics were combined into a single dataset in R using the packages *dplyr* (Wickham et al., 2021), *tidyverse* (Wickham et al. 2019), and *knitr* (Xie, 2014, 2015, 2021). More information is provided in Chapter 3.

Aggregation of Level 2 data into Level 1 also allows for maintenance of the data at the level of alters and ties. This method allowed for the exploration of the data using hierarchical logistic regression as noted by Vacca (2016). Cross level interaction is a distinct advantage of choosing to aggregate summary data to Level 2 (the ego level) while retaining a disaggregated level of alters and ties on Level 2. Vacca notes that "a distinct advantage of hierarchical modeling of personal network data is that both the individual and contextual effect of the same predictor on ego-alter relationships can be evaluated" by way of "including both a tie and alter attribute as explanatory variables in the model" (p. 74). These variables include those observed on ties, ego-alter dyads, egos, alters, and even on the ego-network overall. Thus, cross level interactions can help to understand whether the impact of individual alter-level or tie-level predictors experience changes based on distinctive contextual characteristics of the ego's social environment. More information can be found in Chapter Four.

In R, these models were created with the help of the generalized mixed effects regression command *glmer, (generalized mixed effects regression)* which is part of the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015). This command was used to create hierarchical multilevel logistic regression models. The usage of a generalized mixed effects regression has two parts. The first part of the random fixed effects model is concerned with the values that are predicted with a fixed effect.

The second portion of the equation is written as 1|*var* and speaks to the random portion of the model and the nesting structure of the egocentric network indicated by each respondent. Two types of generalized mixed effect logistic regression models were created: random intercept models and random coefficient models. For the random intercept regression models, there is a fixed effect for the intercept and the slope of the independent variable(s) added to the model, but the assumption is that the relationship between the independent variable(s) and the dependent variable is fixed across egos (Finch et al. 2019). The second type of model allows for the "impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable to vary across the level-2 effects" (p. 52). Instead of grouping the variables to vary across the level of egos, the level-1 slope is chosen to vary across level 2 units. In this case, the alter attributes are allowed to vary across egos.

Qualitative Phase

In the qualitative phase of data collection, the researcher utilized a semi-structured interview format to further delve into the social relationships of foster youth, their experiences in foster care, and to gain more understanding into how social connections influence social pathways. Youth were asked about turning points, career trajectory, and their shared connections with others participating in the Possibility Project. This approach allowed the researcher to focus on the lived experiences of foster youth and their perceptions on foster care status, relationship building, and decision-making about their future after care. Interviews were conducted via Zoom for all participants and audio was transcribed verbatim. In accordance with the New York Institutional Review Board (IRB), the video created via Zoom was deleted and the completed interview and audio were stored on NYU Box, a version of Google Drive where only the principal investigator and the researcher had access to this data.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2019; Terry et al., 2017) was used to identify key themes in the semi-structured interviews. This conceptualization of thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and characterized by the positioning of subjectivity of the researcher in a meaningful way where one's biases are incorporated in the data analysis process. Despite the popularity of thematic analysis, there is no singular definition of what can be considered thematic analysis, which serves to create diversity in how researchers utilize the analysis tool in their work. Terry et al., (2017) note that the process of determining what type of thematic analysis to utilize in one's work steps from a distinction between experimental and critical orientations within qualitative research. Thematic analysis allows researchers to code inductively, that is, working with the data to develop codes (and later, themes) using the participant interviews as a guide. Instead of deductively creating a list of themes that should appear in the data, inductive coding allows for flexibility in analysis of each participant interview. Inductive coding forms the first layer of coding within thematic analysis while choosing to code semantically or latently, forms the basis of the second analytic choice. Semantic coding captures the surface-layer of the data and are designed to capture explicit meaning of the respondent interviews while latent coding can capture what is known as implicit meaning within the participant interviews. Latent coding can take the form of using a deeper level of analysis to explore the "ideas, meanings, concepts, assumptions which are not explicitly stated" within a participant's words" (p. 27).

Additionally, the egocentric social networks generated by the youth who participated in the semi-structured interviews created an opportunity for qualitative analysis regarding the youth's social ties and relationships. This was accomplished by evaluating narrative constructions and exploring the ways in which network culture and network structure interact.

Network narratives, or the stories behind the ties and relationships discussed by youth, provided an opportunity for youth to explain what their social supports mean to them from their subjective point of view (McCarty et al., 2019). This allowed the researcher to explore the content as well as the formation of social ties, which are mutually informative. More information is provided in Chapter Five.

For the current study, the approach utilized for analyzing the qualitative strand was from the position of the critical realism framework (Bellotti, 2015; Zachardias, 2013) where it I utilized the data in an inductive/deductive hybrid fashion by allowing the words of the participants to create and understand meaning behind the research questions that they are asked while also utilizing open coding. Qualitative research is not typically acknowledged as a research methodology with critical orientations. In fact, some scholars view qualitative research as wholly subjective and lacking the level of rigor often associated with more positive, quantitative approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2020). Thematic analysis, as described and expanded by Terry and colleagues (2017) note, has the potential for critical orientation and can serve to acknowledge what is real versus what remains unobserved in qualitative research. Therefore, this dissertation utilized the six-step method for coding and thematic development described by Terry and colleagues: a) familiarize oneself with the data, b) generate initial codes, 3) use initial codes to construct themes, d) review themes against the participant interviews, and finally, e) write up a clear and concise report of the main themes and related subthemes outlined in the analysis of all transcripts. All coding and thematic analysis was conducted via Atlas.ti 9.0. See Appendix D for a sample of the semi-structured interview and related script.

Merging and Interpretation of Study Findings

The hallmark of mixed methods research is how researchers merge and interpret the quantitative and qualitative strands of their data collection efforts. As noted, the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately using separate analysis plans (e.g., usage of hierarchical linear modeling for the quantitative phase and thematic analysis for the qualitative phase). The procedures for merging the quantitative with the qualitative data involved determining important network actors, identifying structural holes and weak ties for each respondent utilizing a matrix to relate the themes uncovered in the qualitative interviews to existing quantitative variables. Finally, the interpretation of the data considered the merged dataset produced a better understanding of the study's key research questions. A visual matrix of key study themes and findings was constructed and will be further discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 will also discuss implications for social work and recommendations for future research.

Summary

Although social work has traditionally been viewed as a 'soft' science that lacks scientific rigor, the combined usage of mixed methods and social network analysis can serve to enrich the quality of the research undertaken with regards to educational and employment pathways of transition-aged foster youth. The preceding chapter provided a brief philosophical overview of the usage of mixed methods, an introduction to social network analysis and egocentric analysis, and a comprehensive discussion of the data analysis plan created to study this study's research questions. The chapter discusses the quantitative, qualitative, and integration results associated with the research study.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section 1 discusses the quantitative analysis of the Qualtrics survey data. Section 2 provides an analysis of the semi-structured interviews collected in the second phase of the study. For ease of information, Chapter 5 will discuss the integration process in mixed methods and the development of the joint display to summarize the study's quantitative and qualitative data inquiries.

Section 1: Quantitative Analysis and Results

In this section, I provide a quantitative analysis of the survey instrument used in the current study. This section provides a description of the data cleaning procedures, data analyses, and results. Demographic information at the ego-level, data visualization of the average social network, and ego-alter level characteristics are explored. Hierarchical logistic regression modeling and data visualization of the structural elements of egocentric networks will also be discussed.

Sample Demographics

As previously discussed, the president of the Possibility Project was consulted to help recruit youth to participate in the study. Early in the project development phase, it was decided that the president would reach out to youth currently and formerly engaged in the program to help increase the likelihood of participation. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all communication with eligible youth was conducted via email. In non-pandemic times, the Possibility Project maintains a foster care program that consists of 40 youth who are currently in foster care between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. Unfortunately, the new season of the program was scheduled to start in March 2020 and had to be postponed once the global

pandemic was announced and face-to-face interaction ceased in New York City. Additionally, NYU's temporary stoppage of in-person recruitment limited the ability of the researcher to interview potential youth in person. These limitations meant that only 5 of 21 youth in the study are currently in foster care, thereby eliminating the opportunity to make comparisons between youth in care and youth who've already left care. As such, the focus of the study shifted towards youth with child welfare experience in foster care placement.

In terms of alumni to the program, the president indicated that there are over 150 youth who have participated in the program since its inception in 2009. Communication with these youth was conducted via email and through the program's Facebook account. Of those youth who were considered alumni, 26 youth responded to the initial email/Facebook communication from the President. Of the 26 youth who participated in the online survey, 5 young people began the survey instrument, but did not complete it. I attempted to contact these youth with the help of program staff but was unable to reach them. As a result, these responses were moved during the data cleaning process as described in the next section. The limitations to recruiting youth to participate are further discussed in the next chapter.

Data Cleaning

Data cleaning was conducted by first importing the survey data collected via Qualtrics. Variable names were derived from the questions outlined in the survey instrument and the raw data was separated into three data sets: 1) ego-level characteristics containing n=21 youth, 2) ego-alter level characteristics where egos were matched with the alters named in the name generator (n=108), and 3) alter-alter level characteristics as derived from whether alters named by the egos know each other. Data sets were first entered into R Studio (R Studio Team, 2020) and checked twice to ensure that the data was entered correctly.

In the process of creating the data sets, I created binary and multinomial variables to aid in the data analysis. Since Qualtrics returns results for each respondent as column by row, the data had to be cleaned to fit the specifications for egocentric data analysis in R. Namely, each ego was assigned a numerical participant ID and their responses regarding their demographic background and network information was changed into a row by column format. In the ego-level data set, this means that each row represents one ego and each column represents their responses to a given question on the survey. For the ego-alter level data, each row contained one ego, the named alter, and the alter characteristics as defined by the ego (respondent). Select information for the ego was repeated in this dataset for each additional alter named by the ego. For the alter-alter level data, an edge list was created. An edge list is used in egocentric data analysis to denote the relational ties or connections between an alter and another alter as denoted by the ego/respondent. The number of relationships outlined in the edge list depended on the number of alters that the respondent indicated on the survey. Although the initial plan was to report on the positionality of the alter-alter ties, after the data was collected and uploaded to RStudio (see below), the decision was made to report this data descriptively rather than to include it in a hierarchical multilevel model due to limited or missing information from some ego respondents. More information on this limitation can be found in Chapter 5.

To account for skip logic in the original survey, the researcher created separate dummy variables to account for data that would only affect those who answered in the affirmative for some questions (e.g., youth who reported that they were not in the child welfare system were skipped to the following question that asked about when they left foster care). R version 4.0.5 (R Core Team, 2021) was used to analyze the data thorough the graphical user interface (GUI) better known as R Studio (RStudio Team, 2021). RStudio allows for ease of use of the R

programming language through its intuitive user interface. The programming language consists of command line programming via a dedicated console window. As an open-source software, users of RStudio have access to packages, which house specific coding language designed to execute a particular data visualization or analysis task. R, through RStudio, was chosen for this dissertation because of the ease of customization of the programming language to fit the demands of egocentric social network analysis. Additionally, all steps outlined in the quantitative data analysis were prepared in a RMarkdown file for replication. RMarkdown (Allaire et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2020) is a file format that creates interactive and dynamic documents using the R programming language. The RMarkdown file is written in plain, easy to follow language and contains chunks of embedded R code, making replication easy. The RMarkdown code is available upon request.

Variable Construction and Missing Data. As noted earlier, the decision was made to construct three separate datasets to capture the ego, alter, and alter-alter data in Microsoft Excel. The data were checked for completeness and recoded with shorter variable names. A codebook (available upon request) was created to track all variables included in the final version of the data. In R, missing values are represented by NA or not available and this character is used for both character, string, and numeric data (RStudio Team, 2021). All analyses conducted in RStudio additionally included the function **na.omit()** to return an object or value where the missing data was not included.

Data in RStudio are stored in what is known as a data frame. Data frames in RStudio are essentially a list of equal-length vectors where each element of a list has a column, and the length of each element is the number of rows contained in a data set (RStudio Team, 2021). The datasets mentioned earlier that represented the ego, alter, and alter-alter data were converted into

standalone data frames. Descriptive statistics for ego and alters were derived using several packages including *dplyr* (Wickham et al., 2021) and *summarytools (*Comstois, 2021). Data visualizations for the descriptive statistics and hierarchical multilevel logistic models were created using *ggplot2* (Wickham, 2016), *tidyverse* (Wickham et al., 2019), and *tidygraph* (Pedersen, 2020) packages.

Results

Below, I provide descriptive statistics related to egocentric network analysis of the youth's support networks. This section is divided into three parts: ego characteristics or characteristics related to the youth who participated in the study, ego-alter ties or the relationships between the ego and their alters (persons named in the survey), and finally, alter-alter ties or the relationships of named persons in an ego network to others named in the same network.

Descriptive Statistics for Ego Respondents

The following section includes information on age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, current school enrollment, type of school attended by the respondent, current foster care status, and when youth left foster care.

Age

The average age of respondents in this study was 23.65 (*SD=3.95*).

Gender Identity

Gender identity was an open-ended question in the sample. Of the 21 participants, 7 identified as male, 13 identified as female and 1 preferred not to say.

Race and Ethnicity

The data for race and ethnicity for the ego yielded interesting results. In terms of racial identity, 16 youth (76.19%) identified as Black or African American, 2 youth (9.52%) identified as Asian, and 2 youth identified as being of another race. In terms of ethnic identity, 6 youth (28.57%) identified as Latino/a while 12 youth (57.14%) indicated that they did not. Overall, for multiracial youth, 4 (19.05%) youth identified as Black and Latino/a. The variable for ethnicity was derived from write-in responses under the race category, suggesting that some youth did not differentiate between race and ethnicity when describing oneself as Latino/a. Further discussion of this finding can be found in the qualitative phase of the study**.**

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation was asked as a multiple-choice question with an option for youth to self-describe their orientation. Of the 21 participants, 9 (42.86%) identified as heterosexual, 1 (4.76%) identified as gay, 3 (14.29%) identified as lesbian, 3 (14.29) identified as bisexual, 2 (9.52%) identified as pansexual,1(4.76%) preferred to self-describe, and 2 (9.52%) preferred not to say.

Current School Enrollment

Youths were asked if they were currently enrolled in school at the time of participating in the survey. Of the 21 respondents, only 7 were enrolled in school. Of those enrolled in school, 2 were enrolled in a High School/GED program, 2 were enrolled in community college, and 3 were enrolled in 4-year college programs.

Current Foster Care Status and Age when Youth Left Care

Youths were asked about their current participation in foster care and the age they were when they left care. Of the 21 participants, only 7 were still in care (33.33%). Of the 14 youth who had already left care, the average age of leaving care was 20.03.

Average Number of Alters Named by Ego

To generate alter attributes to create Level 1 data, each ego was asked about who they've discussed important personal matters within the past month. Egos could enter up to ten names of persons in their networks (e.g., family, friends, or trusted adults). Egos named 108 persons with the average ego network consisting of 5.10 persons (*SD*=3.06).

Ego Satisfaction with Network Support During Covid-19

Youth were also asked about their overall comfort level when using social media during the Covid-19 quarantine. Ego satisfaction was rated on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being extremely uncomfortable and 5 being very conformable using social media. The results indicated relative comfort using social media to communicate with loved ones during the pandemic (*M*=2.90; *SD*= l.09). In a separate question, youth reported that their relationships with their support networks changed significantly during the height of the global pandemic with 95.24% of the sample reporting that their level of access had changed during the quarantine. Below is a summary descriptive statistics table containing the information outlined above.

Table 4

Sample Descriptive Statistics (Ego) (N=21)

	N	*%*
Age (*M* = 23. 65; *SD* = 3.95)		
Gender Identity		
Male	7	33%
Female	13	62%
Prefer Not to Say	1	4.8%
Race		
African American/Black	16	76.19%
Asian	2	9.52%
Other Race	2	9.52%
Ethnicity		
Latino/a	6	28.57%
Non-Latino/a	12	57.14%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual/Straight	9	42.86%
Gay	1	4.76%
Lesbian	3	14.29%
Bisexual	3	14.29%
Pansexual	2	9.52%
Prefer to Self-Describe	1	4.76%
Prefer Not to Say	2	9.42%

Overall Satisfaction with Support Network Members

Finally, youth were asked about their overall satisfaction with their support network in the past six months. Results indicated that youth were generally pleased with their overall supportive networks during this time (*M*=4.19; *SD*=0.93).

Ego-Alter Characteristics

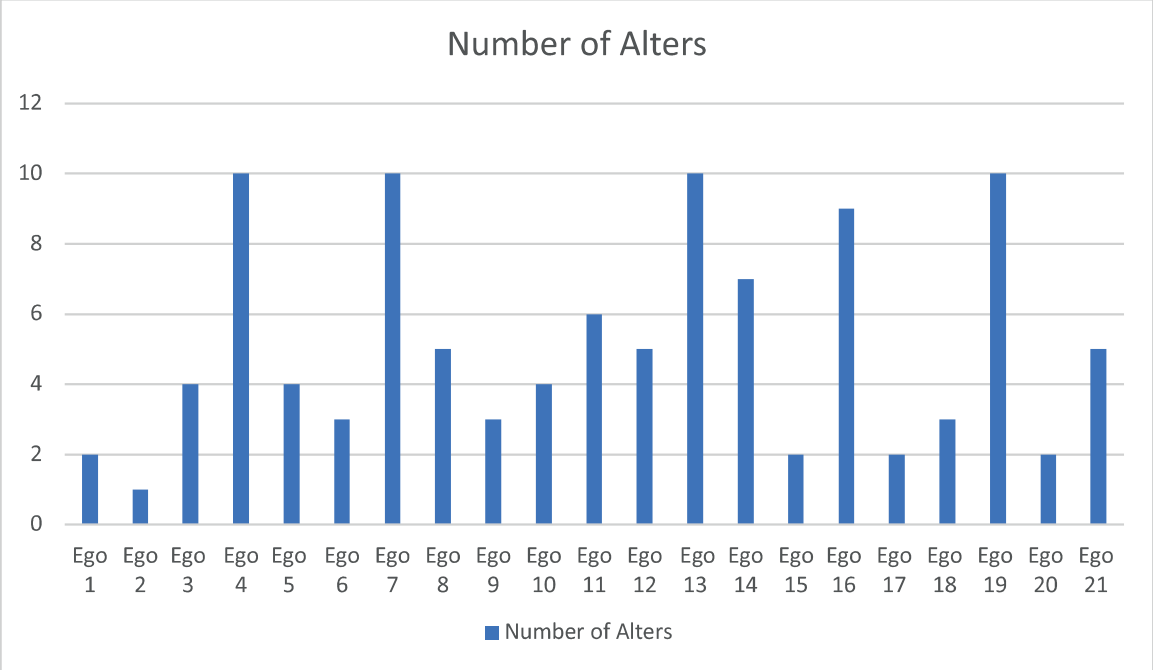
As noted earlier in Chapter 4, egocentric data analysis creates two levels of data for analysis: Level 1 (Alter) and Level 2 (Ego). In this section, I created summary variables to describe alter-level characteristics. These variables will be left-joined with the ego (Level 2) to create one data set to analyze ego-alter relationships. In this section, I will report the alter-level attributes and the ego network structure.

Average Number of Alters Reported by Ego

To generate alter attributes to create Level 1 data, each ego was asked about who they've discussed important personal matters within the past month. Egos could enter up to ten names of persons in their networks (e.g., family, friends, or trusted adults). Egos named 108 persons with the average ego network consisting of, on average, 5.10 persons (*SD* =3 .06), suggesting that the youth could likely name 5 persons in their supportive network. Figure 5 below shows the dispersion of ego alters across the sample.

Figure 5

Bar Plot of Named Alters by Ego



Egos 4, 7, 13, and 19 reported having the maximum number of alters in their networks by reporting 10 persons in their supportive network while Ego 2 reported only having one other person in their network. It is important to note that the number of alters and subsequent support provided according to the youth in this study had fluctuations outside of what will be reported

quantitively when it comes to how these supports were activated in when they needed help. This phenomenon is further explored in the qualitative data analysis and the integration subsections.

Alter Race and Ethnicity as Reported by Ego

Youth were asked about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their named alters. As with reported ego ethnic and racial identity, youth often responded with ethnicity rather than racial identity. Of 108 reported alters, the majority of reported alters were Black (63, 58.33%), followed by those who identified as white (19; 17.59 %), mixed race (15; 13.89%), and Asian (10; 9.26%). 1 alter was not described as a race or ethnic category. In terms of ethnicity, 12 alters were reported as having a Latino/a background. These figures may be underreported due to how the youth identified versus the options that were available on the survey. This is discussed in greater detail in the limitations section.

Network Closeness

Alter closeness in the summary network denotes ego's perceived level of closeness to their named alters on a scale of 0-2. Zero means that the person is not close and 2 means that the alter is very close to the ego. Across all alters included in the data set, the average closeness is 1.152. Figure 6 demonstrates the relationship between named alter closeness and density Most youths in the study reported their average alter closeness as being very close, resulting in near perfect density of 1.

Alter Average Age and Geographical Closeness

The average age of alters reported by respondents was 34.76 (*SD*= 14.71). Youth were asked about how far they lived from their named alters. Youth were allowed to elect whether the alter lived in the same household, less than a mile to 5 miles, 5 to 10 miles, 10 to 25 miles, or

more than 25 miles away. These responses were scaled from 0 to 4. The average geographical location of alters was between 5-25 miles from the ego (respondent).

Length of Time Alter Was Part of Ego's Support Network

Of 108 reported alters, overall, most egos reported knowing their alters for over 5 years (n=67, 62.02%).

Alter Employment Status as Reported by Ego

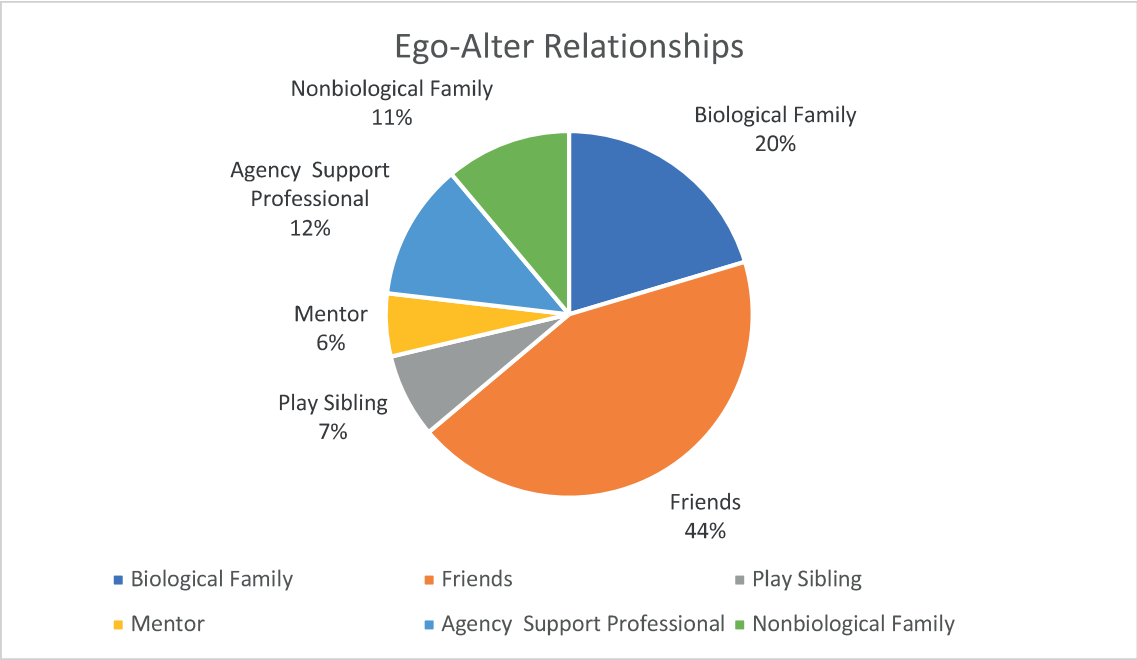
Of 108 reported alters, 31 alters were reported as unemployed (28.60%) and 67 were employed (62.04%). The employment status of 10 alters (9.26%) was unknown by the respondent. Due to missing data regarding the type of employment held by the alters as reported by the youths, it was not possible to list all occupations of alters named. This will be explained in the limitations section to this dissertation.

Alter Relationships to Ego

Each youth was asked to explain their relationship to alters they named as part of their supportive networks. Of 108 named alters in ego networks, only 22 (20.37%) of alters were biologically related to the respondent. Biological family members included parents, sisters, brothers, or other relative such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles. Friends made up the majority of alters reported by youth in this study (n=47; 43.52%). Figure 6 provides a visual display of ego-alter relationships.

Figure 6

Ego-Alter Relationships



Nonbiological family included current and/or former foster caregivers and "play parents". Play parents are adults in the community who often serve as parental figures even though they are not biologically related to someone. One of the respondents, Hope, described her nonbiological parents as "Heart Mom" and "Heart Dad" to separate her relationship with her biological parents (noted on her response as "Bio Mom" and "Bio Dad"). I separated play siblings from what was the nonbiological family since play siblings could include biological cousins and/or neighborhood friends that the ego knows. Mentors were persons in the community who provided support while agency support professionals often included therapists, financial counselors, case managers, and social workers. No youth indicated an alter as having multiple statuses (e.g., no one was listed as a friend and a mentor).

Alter Support Domains

As noted in Chapter 3, each youth was asked to select the types of support provided by their named alter from six domains: academic support, career preparation assistance, extracurricular support, social support, emotional support, and financial support. The current dissertation, however, will focus on academic and career preparation assistance for the later hierarchical logistic regressions. For now, descriptive statistics will be provided for the supports provided to youths in the study.

Number of Different Supports Provided

In terms of the different types of supports provided by alters in the youth supportive networks, there were at total of 285 instances of support provided across five domains: academic, career preparation, extracurricular, social, emotional, and financial support. In the study, of 108 alters in the study across youth, an overwhelming majority, 70.37% (n=76) provided support in more than one support domain. Table 5 provides additional information on the frequency of types of supports provided outside of academic and career preparation supports, which will be discussed later.

Table 5

Types of Supports Provided by Named Alters

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Academic Support	31	10.88%
Career Preparation Support	25	8.77%
Extracurricular Support	31	10.88%
Social Support	78	27.37%
Emotional Support	88	30.88%
Financial Support	32	11.22%
Total	285	100%

It is interesting to note that most supports named by youths in the study provided emotional and social support, suggesting that these support domains held utmost importance to them. This phenomenon is further discussed in the qualitative data analysis subsection.

Ego Network Compositional Measures

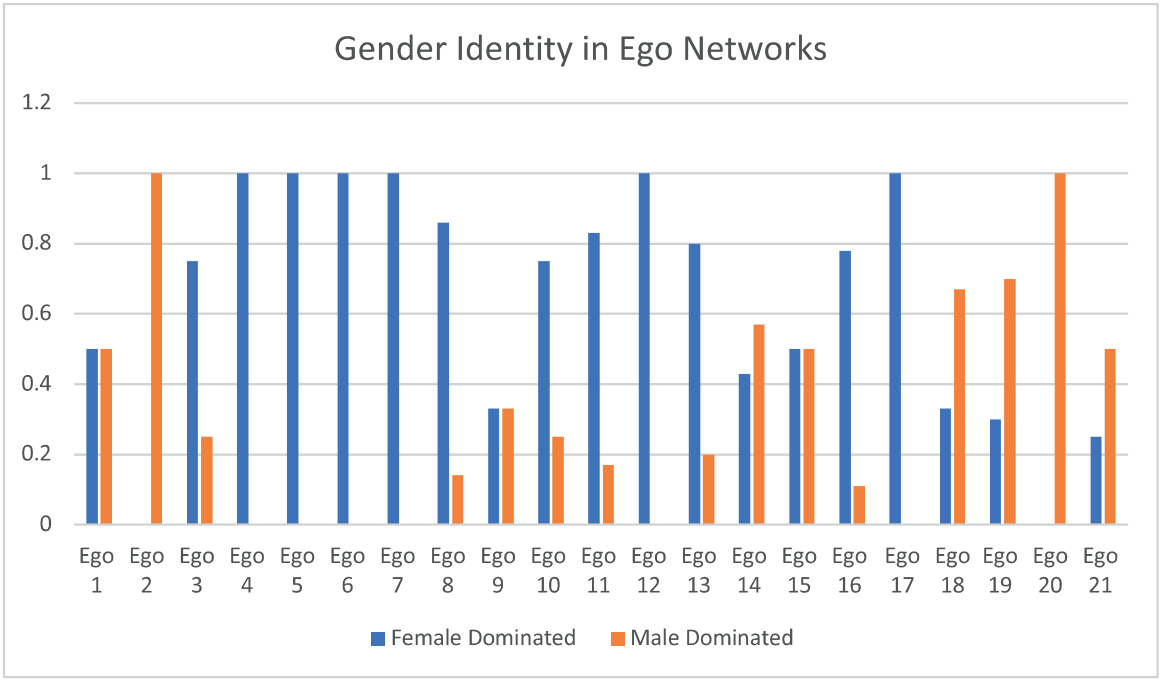
As part of the steps to aggregate some of the data at the alter-level to the ego level for a broad overview of the ego-alter networks, I obtained the proportions of persons in each network in terms of gender identity, how often they relied on their supports, and overall length of time that the ego has known the named alter.

Gender Identity

Egos overwhelmingly reported the occurrence of alters who identified as female in their networks as demonstrated in the bar chart below. Gender homophily yielded inconsistent results, meaning that egos did not tend to have networks that only represented their gender identity.

Figure 7

Gender Identity in Ego Networks by Proportion



Ego	Respondent Gender Identity
1	Female
2	Female
3	Female
4	Female
5	Female
6	Male
7	Female
8	Male
9	Male
10	Female
11	Male
12	Female
13	Female
14	Female
15	Male
16	Female
17	Female
18	Male
19	Male
20	Female
21	Nonbinary

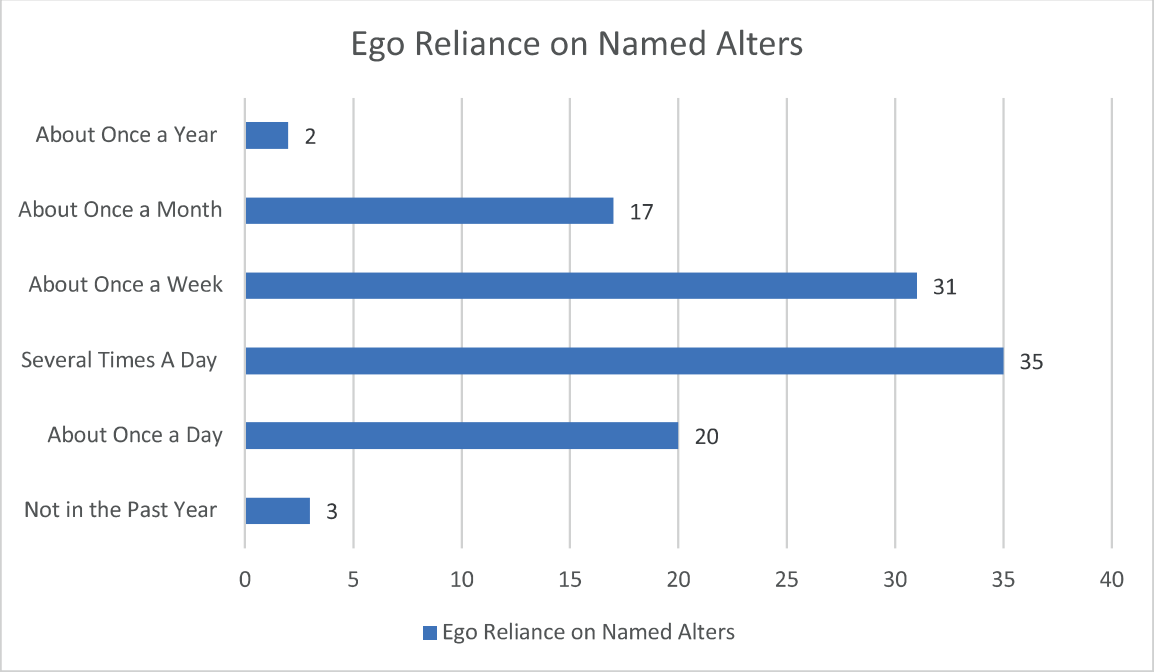
In terms of gender homophily, ego gender identity did not seem to lend a role in selection of alters within ego networks as seen in the breakdown of ego identity versus the proportion of gender identities within their networks. What is clear, however, is that the majority of alter networks within this study were largely dominated by females. For instance, Egos 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, and 17 reported alter networks that were completely female. Egos 3, 8, 10, 11, and 16 reported networks that were largely female with few male supports. In stark contrast, while there were male-dominated networks in the data, there were fewer completely male networks with ego networks 2 and 20 as the only completely male networks within the data. This suggests that it was more likely that youths interfaced with largely female networks rather than male dominated networks. However, this finding should be interpreted with a note of caution since this data is derived from the ego's reporting of gender identity, not from the alter directly. Additionally, I am not making a value statement on whether there are only two genders available for comparison but am simply reporting the data as identified by the respondents in this study.

Ego Reliance on Named Alters

Youth were asked how often they contacted their alters for support across any domain. Figure 10 shows the distribution of ego reliance on named alters.

Figure 8

Ego Reliance on Named Alters



Interestingly, 3 alters were reported as being part of an ego network despite not being contacted for over a year. Youths typically contacted their support networks several times a day largely for emotional and social support. This will be further discussed in the qualitative data analysis subsection.

Data Visualization

To gain a better understanding of eccentric social networks, data visualization was utilized to allow for a range of network characteristics to be explored. In this section, I explore the network connections egos reported between their named alters in their personal support networks in terms of networks without alter-alter ties, reciprocal supportive networks, and asymmetrical supportive networks. For each network type, descriptive information regarding race/ethnicity homophily and occupations of the named alters is provided in an example data visualization.

Alter-Alter Ties

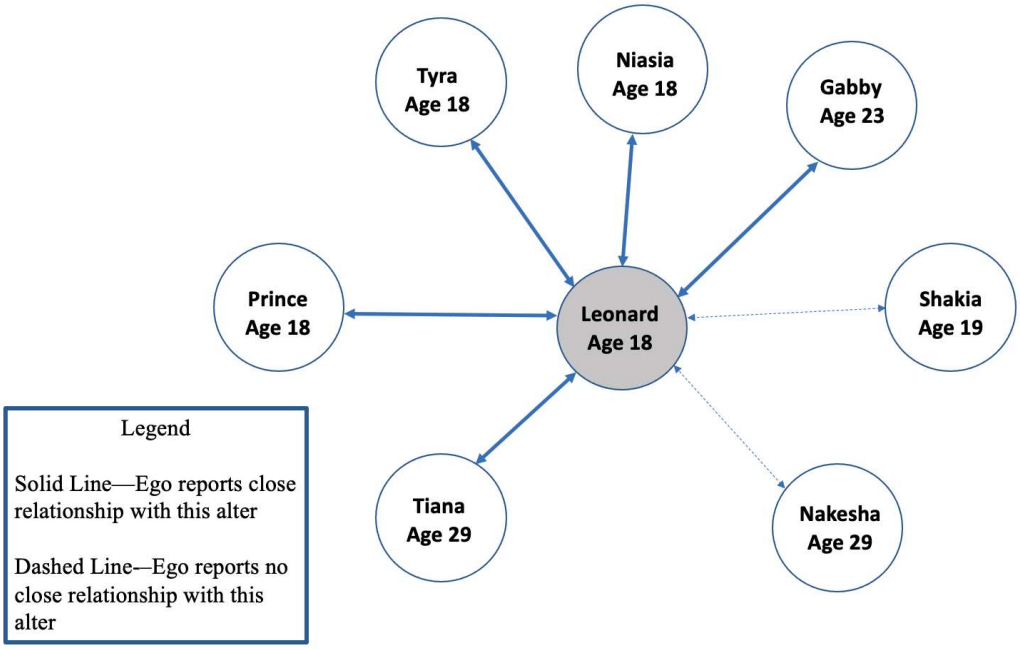
In egocentric social network analysis, it is possible to construct network visualizations based on whether the named alters within a supportive network know each other. These relationships can be used to determine how social capital is transferred and received throughout the network by way of information sharing to the focal actor (ego). While every attempt was made to collect not only ego and alter-level data through the survey data collection, but there were also several youths in the study who did not provide this information. In this section, I visualize three types of networks within the collected data: networks without alter-alter ties, networks with reciprocal ties, and networks with sparse ties amongst alters.

Networks without Alter-Alter Ties

Alter-alter ties consists of data that depicts whether the ego's named alters know each other and can be used to determine whether the support network has relationships that are reciprocal, asymmetrical, or without connection between alters. This is visualized in Leonard's support network below in Figure 9:

Figure 9

Egocentric Network-No Alter-Alter Ties



In Leonard's support network, none of his network supports are noted as knowing each other. Leonard reports that he is close to five of his personal support network members and has known them for more than one year. In contrast, has known Shakia and Nakesha for less than one year with no close relationship. Missing information from the focal youth made it impossible to explore the existence of alter-alter ties across the sample. There were 9 youth in the sample who did not indicate that individuals in their networks knew each other. Information and resource sharing in this network is likely limited to 1:1 interaction with Leonard and his network members and information is less likely to be shared from alter to alter. This affects social capital receipt and transmission of potential resources (Lin, 2001). Of the seven network actors in Leonard's network, 4 are employed (Tyra, Niasia, and Gabby are FedEx drivers and Prince is a Home Health Aide). All actors within Leonard's network have a high school diploma. Due to the

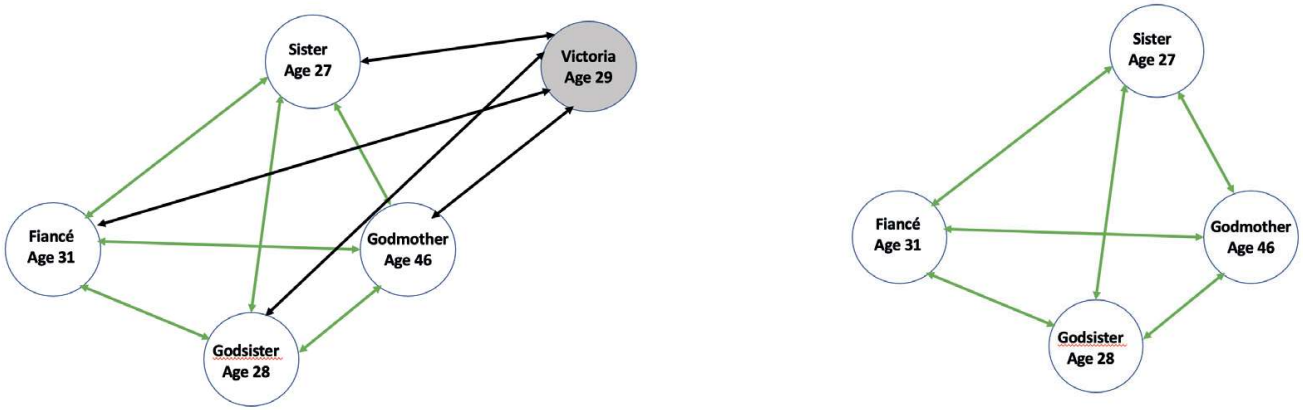
burden of egocentric data collection (Perry et al., 2018), it is possible that participants did not complete this section due to survey fatigue. This limitation is further discussed in Chapter 5.

Reciprocal Personal Support Network

In a reciprocal personal support network, all network actors are known to each other and represent a closed support network (Perry et al., 2018). This means that resources are shared amongst all network alters in relation to the ego and that the ego potentially shares resources with network alters. For example, Victoria, who has four alters in her network, reported that everyone in her supportive network knows each other and speaks to each other regularly. Figure 10 demonstrates the Victoria's support network and highlights that even without Victoria present, the network remains intact.

Figure 10

Reciprocal Personal Support Networks



Note: The ego (Victoria) is visualized as part of the support network on the left and is removed from the visualization on the right

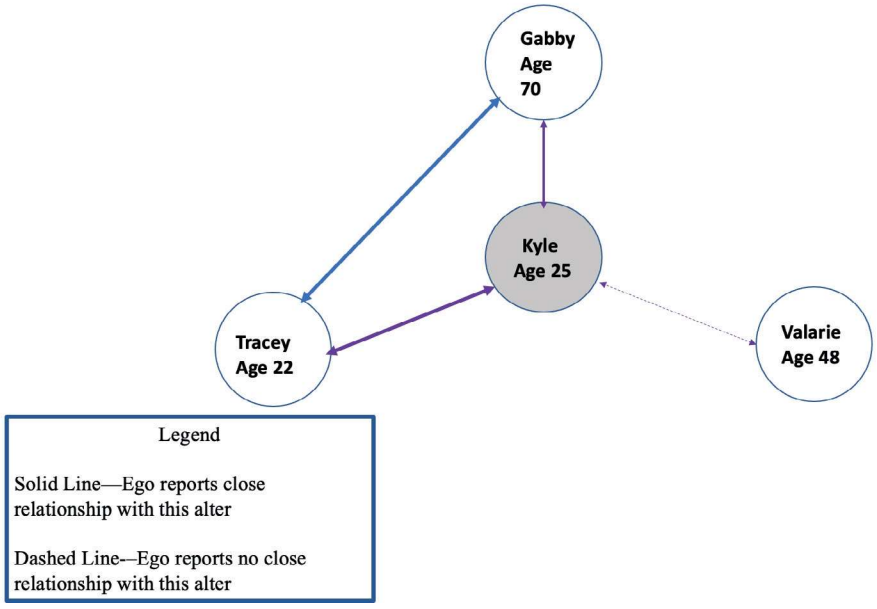
All actors within Victoria's network are employed and have at least a high school diploma. In this study, highly reciprocal networks consisted of family supports rather than formal network supports such as case workers, therapists, and other professional support alters. In networks where alters were formal professional supports, it was not clear based on the youth's responses in the survey that these formal supports know each other. Closed networks where alters knew each other accounted for the support networks of 4 youth participants.

Sparse Alter-Alter Personal Support Network

In this last configuration of personal support networks, there are few alters within the youth's named supports who know and regularly talk to each other. Kyle, a 25-year-old Black male recently released from prison due to drug and alcohol charges, commented that his network consists of three actors: his girlfriend Tracey, grandmother Gabby, and an aunt named Valarie.

Figure 11

Sparse Alter-Alter Personal Support Network



In this visualization, Kyle reported a stronger connection to Tracey, who provides all supports for Kyle, but he reports feeling not as close to his aunt and marginally closer to his grandmother. Tracey and Gabby are known to each other and as will be demonstrated in the qualitative interview, they are strongly connected to Kyle's release from prison and relocation from New York City to Cleveland, Ohio after his release. 8 participants reported networks where few alters knew each other and this cluster was indicative both of youth who were still in the foster care system and youth younger than age 26.

In summary, while it was not possible to carry out further analysis of the alter-alter ties that exist within the ego networks of youth who participated in care, it is clear from this descriptive and visual analysis of networks that closed or strong supportive networks occurred in cases where the ego was primarily supported by family members. This phenomenon will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Hierarchical Multilevel Logistic Regression Models

In preparation for comparing alter data and hierarchical multilevel logistic regression, I created a new data frame called "newdf" that contains the proportion of responses for alter-level data as grouped by ego ID. In short, this step was needed so that Level 1 data can be merged to level 2 data without loss or sacrifice alter data. As noted by Vacca (2018), there are two reasons why all data available in an analysis of personal networks should not be aggregated to a single level. Firstly, data aggregation typically results in loss of information since the development of ego-level measures calls for the creation of a summary variable (e.g., mean or proportion) to describe the characteristics at the alter level. This can hide patterns of variation across alter-ties. Secondly, Vacca notes that ego-level aggregation can expose researchers to ecological fallacy which occurs when researchers "make observations about egos… to draw conclusions about ties

or alters" (p. 66). Therefore, to respect the hierarchical nature of egocentric network data, I aggregated some of the alter-level attributes to the ego-level to create the multilevel logistic regression structure while retaining separate data frames that contained the ego and alter level data. As noted earlier, I was unable to obtain the information needed to construct alter-alter ties for every ego and I was limited in exploring structural differences between ego networks due to the number of respondents. I was, however, able to explore ego-alter differences when it comes to type of support provided collectively by named alters.

Assumptions for HMLMs

Before running the hierarchical multilevel model with mixed effects, I conducted several tests of assumptions underlying the usage of a multilevel model (not shown). There are several factors to consider before using an MLM. First, there should be exactly one alter for each ego and these alters are not shared across networks. This was checked by reviewing the entries made in the Qualtrics survey and further checked during the qualitative interviews. None of the alters listed by the youth appeared in other networks and no agency staff of the Possibility Project appeared in any ego network. Next, overlap between the ego networks with regards to whether alters appear in other ego networks is assumed to be minimal or not present in the data because of the way the sample was derived. Because the sample contains youths who participated in the program across various years and contains youth who have already aged out of care, it is safe to assume that if overlap between alter ties exist, this overlap is likely minimal.

Random intercept logistic regression models via the *glmer* (Windham et al., 2021) package was used and was described in Chapter 3. The steps for running the random intercept logistic regression models with mixed effects included: 1) running *glmer* with a null (intercept-only) model, 2) obtain confidence intervals for parameter estimates using the **confint** code to

generate fixed and random effects, 3) repeat step 1 with additional predictors in the model, and 4) compare the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and Chi square statistics to determine if the new model provides a better fit to the data. For both models, the null hypothesis of the likelihood tests is that the fit of the two nested models is equivalent, so a statistically significant result ($p<0.05$) would indicate that the models provide a better fit to the data than the null model.

The models described in the following sections are largely experimental due to the limitations on ego network size and number of respondents in the study. Due to limitations on the number of egos in the study, it was not possible to compare/contrast differences between ego networks utilizing the quantitative data alone. However, the models below attempt to describe the variation that may occur within ego networks based on the responses to the survey. This will be discussed further in the discussion section.

Random Intercept HLM with Mixed Effects

Below two experimental HLMs using logistic regression are described. In Model 1, the dependent variable was academic support as provided by the named alter and the independent variables were the types of relationships as reported by the ego: friends, biological family members, nonbiological family members (includes caregivers, non-biological foster siblings, and resource parents) and mentors. Inclusion of race and gender of the named alter, race and gender of the ego, and employment status of the named alter did not result in statistically significant results. In Model 2, the dependent variable was career preparation support as provided by the named alter and the independent variables were the types of relationships as reported by the ego: friends, nonbiological family members, and mentors. As with Model 1, when race and gender of the named alter, race and gender of the ego, and employment status were added to the model, this

produced non-statistically significant results. Furthermore, the addition of biological family members to the model caused the model to fail to converge, resulting in a model with incorrect slope and coefficient estimates as reported by the *glmer* package. In both models, chi square tests and crosstabs additionally indicated that including these variables would result in errors due to small cell sizes.

Random intercept models were chosen here to allow the intercept to differ across clusters to reflect the nested relationship of egos and alters in the ego-alter networks. To begin analysis, it is customary to begin with a null or empty model, which is the model that contains the intercept and the dependent variable given by the equation below:

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi_{ij}}{1-\pi_{ij}}\right) = \beta_0 + u_{0j}$$

In this model, the intercept (β_0) is shared by all alters while the random effect is specific to the ego. There is also an assumption that the variance follows a normal distribution. As noted in Finch and colleagues (2019), the purpose of the null model is not to provide information about the impact of specific independent variables on the dependent variable but rather it is used to determine "variation in *y* is partitioned between variance among the individuals σ^2 and variance among the clusters τ^2." (p. 31). As such, the null model can be used as a baseline for model building and comparison of models to determine goodness of fit to the data.

Model 1: Does alter relationship to ego influence the receipt of academic support for youths with foster care experience in emerging adulthood?

I tested the null or empty model containing just the dependent variable and then added the predictors as outlined above. Table 7 provides a side-by-side comparison of Model 1 to the null model while Table 8 shows the results of the analysis of variance of models demonstrating academic support receipt from the ego's relationship networks.

Table 6

Model 1 Comparison to Null Model

	Intercept Only			With Predictors		
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	0.33	0.33 – 0.33	**<0.001**	0.86	0.35 – 2.14	0.750
Friends				0.13	0.03 – 0.51	**0.003**
Biological Family Member				0.59	0.12 – 2.95	0.522
Nonbiological Family Member				0.98	0.20 – 4.84	0.984
Mentor				0.51	0.06 – 4.21	0.530
Random Effects						
σ^2	3.29			3.29		
τ_{00}	0.72 $_{.EGOID}$			0.37 $_{.EGOID}$		
ICC	0.18			0.10		
N	21 $_{.EGOID}$			21 $_{.EGOID}$		
Observations	108			108		
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.000 / 0.180			0.193 / 0.276		

Table 7

Analysis of Variance Comparison of Models for Academic Support

	npar	*AIC*	*BIC*	*logLik*	*deviance*	*Chisq*	*Df*	*Pr(>Chisq)*
Null Model	2	130.534	135.898	-63.267	126.534	NA	NA	NA
Model 1	6	126.148	142.240	-57.074	114.148	12.386	4	**0.015***

The ICC between both models shows a slightly higher effect in the null model as compared to Model 1. This indicates that there may not be a clustering effect within the data. However, the null hypothesis of the ANOVA indicates that there is a statistically significant result ($p<0.05$), indicating that Model 1 provides a different fit to the data. The AIC of Model 1 versus the null model (126.149 to 130.534) and the log likelihood (-57.074 to -63.267) show smaller values, which indicate a better model fit. Finally, the chi square was statistically significant $\chi^2(4, N=108) = 12.376$, p<.015. Table 9 presents the results to the model.

Table 8

Model 1 Academic Supports Hierarchical Logistic Regression Results

	Academic Support							
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*std. Error*	*std. Beta*	*standardized std. Error*	*CI*	*standardized CI*	*Statistic*	*p*
(Intercept)	0.86	0.40	0.31	0.10	0.35 – 2.14	0.16 – 0.60	-0.32	0.750
Friends	0.13	0.09	0.36	0.13	0.03 – 0.51	0.18 – 0.71	-2.94	**0.003**
Biological Family Member	0.59	0.48	0.81	0.27	0.12 – 2.95	0.42 – 1.55	-0.64	0.522
Nonbiological Family Member	0.98	0.80	1.00	0.25	0.20 – 4.84	0.61 – 1.61	-0.02	0.984
Mentor	0.51	0.55	0.86	0.21	0.06 – 4.21	0.53 – 1.39	-0.63	0.530
Random Effects								
σ^2	3.29							
$\tau_{00\ .EGOID}$	0.37							
ICC	0.10							
$N_{\ .EGOID}$	21							
Observations	108							
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.193 / 0.276							

Egos who rely on friends for academic support, when holding all other predictors constant, have an 87% lower likelihood of receiving academic support from their friends (p<0.003). This result, though not surprising, is concerning when considering that the majority of alter networks as described by egos in this study are friends. The other indicated relationships were not found to be statistically significant.

Model 2: Does alter relationship to ego influence the receipt of career preparation support for youths with foster care in emerging adulthood?

In Model 2, I tested the null or empty model containing just the dependent variable and then added the predictors as outlined above. Table 10 provides a side-by-side comparison of Model 2 to the null model while Table 11 again shows the results of the analysis of variance of models demonstrating academic support receipt from the ego's relationship networks.

Table 9

Model 2 Comparison to Null Model

	Intercept Only			Model 2		
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	0.18	0.07 – 0.51	**0.001**	0.34	0.09 – 1.30	0.114
Nonbiological Family Members				2.04	0.34 – 12.23	0.434
Mentors				0.29	0.02 – 3.49	0.332
Friends				0.12	0.02 – 0.89	**0.037**
Random Effects						
σ^2	3.29			3.29		
τ_{00}	2.25 $_{.EGOID}$			4.00 $_{.EGOID}$		
ICC	0.41			0.55		
N	21 $_{.EGOID}$			21 $_{.EGOID}$		
Observations	108			108		
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.000 / 0.407			0.143 / 0.613		

Table 10

Analysis of Variance Comparison of Models for Career Preparation Support

	npar	AIC	BIC	logLik	deviance	Chisq	Df	Pr(>Chisq)
Intercept Only	2	110.85	116.21	-53.42	106.85	NA	NA	NA
Model 2	5	107.09	120.50	-48.54	97.09	9.76	3	**0.02**

In this model, the ICC is higher in Model 2 as compared to the null model, indicating that a clustering effect may be present. The null hypothesis of the ANOVA indicates that there is a statistically significant result ($p<0.05$), indicating that Model 2 provides a different fit to the data. The AIC of Model 2 versus the null model (110.85 to 107.09) and the log likelihood (-53.42 to -48.54) show smaller values, which indicate a better model fit. Finally, the chi square was statistically significant $\chi^2(3, N=108) = 9.76$, $p<.02$. Table 9 presents the results to the model.

Table 11

Model 2 Career Preparation Support Hierarchical Logistic Regression Results

	Career Preparation Support							
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*std. Error*	*std. Beta*	*standardized std. Error*	*CI*	*standardized CI*	*Statistic*	*p*
(Intercept)	0.34	0.23	0.14	0.10	0.09 – 1.30	0.03 – 0.56	-1.58	0.114
Friends	0.12	0.12	0.35	0.18	0.02 – 0.89	0.13 – 0.94	-2.08	**0.037**
Nonbiological Family	2.04	1.86	1.24	0.34	0.34 – 12.23	0.72 – 2.14	0.78	0.434
Mentors	0.29	0.37	0.75	0.22	0.02 – 3.49	0.43 – 1.33	-0.97	0.332
Random Effects								
σ^2	3.29							
$\tau_{00\ .EGOID}$	4.00							
ICC	0.55							
$N_{\ .EGOID}$	21							
Observations	108							
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.143 / 0.613							

Egos who rely on friends for career preparation support, when holding all other predictors constant, have an 88% lower likelihood of receiving this support from their friends (p<0.037). The other indicated relationships were not found to be statistically significant. As noted earlier, these models are experimental, and readers should exercise caution when attempting to generalize these results to the broader population. Implications for future studies will be explored in the integration subsection to this chapter and in Chapter Five. While the statistical models are experimental, the descriptive statistics presented earlier in this subsection indicate a strong presence of friends in ego support networks with relatively few friends providing academic or career support.

Section 2: Qualitative Data Analysis

Semi-Structured Interviews

To facilitate sample selection for the qualitative phase of the research study, the quantitative survey used to gather social network indictors also included a question to solicit participants' willingness to participate in the qualitative interview phase of the study. Respondents who indicated that they wanted to participate were contacted by the researcher and a time was set to discuss the study questions via Zoom. The qualitative phase garnered interviews from 14 participants. Each interview ranged from 30 minutes to up to two hours in length and was recorded and transcribed verbatim to keep the original integrity of the responses. All coding was completed in Atlas.ti 9.0 using reflexive thematic analysis.

The interview questions fell into three main domains that mirror the quantitative inquiry; experiences in the Possibility Project and youth's experiencing either aging out of care or preparing to age out of care. The second domain involved areas of support, including questions related to who was considered a VIP in their network, and rules for how someone could become part of their supportive networks. Finally, the last domain explored career aspirations and their inspirations from others. Table 13 briefly provides a review of the qualitative research questions for this study, the domains covered in the semi-structured interview, and provides examples of the questions asked during the interview. For a complete copy of the semi-structured interview instrument, see Appendix D.

Table 12

Overview of Qualitative Research Questions

Study Research Questions	Domain	Qualitative Interview Examples
RQ1: How do BIPOC youth with foster care experience utilize their personal social networks as they age out of care or after they've transitioned from care?	Experiences in the Possibility Project and Aging Out of Foster care	How does the Possibility Project help you in your daily life? What was the easiest choice you made/will make when you left/leave foster care/prepare to leave care? What was the biggest challenge you faced/face when you left care/prepare to leave care?
RQ2: How do social origins and environment, and perceived social support impact social pathways related to perceptions of BIPOC youth education and employment decision-making after youth transition from foster care and into emerging adulthood?	Career and Educational Aspirations	What career do you plan to pursue? • When did you decide what you were going to do "when you grew up?" • Did you always feel this way? • What educational background do you think you need to participate in this career? • Who inspires you to pursue this career?
RQ3: How do these factors relate to the principle of linked lives through BIPOC youth's shared relationships others in their personal support networks?	Areas of Support and Decision-Making	Are there people in your network that tend to take charge in certain situations? (For instance, are there people in your network that always seem to know what to do for any situation?) How can someone be dropped or added to your network of support? How can someone become a VIP in your network?

Guiding Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework for qualitative analysis was egocentric social network theory discussed in prior chapters. The rationale for usage of egocentric social network theory which focuses on the actor's position within the broader society by examining their social ties to those within their network and how those relationships might impact decision-making throughout the life course. In this dissertation, that was accomplished by examining the way in which the ego activates social ties when discussing their intentions to purse employment and educational opportunities in emerging adulthood. Additionally, this dissertation was guided by

social capital, particularly Lin's conceptualization of the term. Lin's view of social capital is a slight departure from more widely used theories posited by Bourdieu (1986/2016) and Coleman (1988) since Lin's theory views capital as a process of gaining new resources while maintaining existing ones. Thus, the interview questions aimed to discover how youth gained new friends or persons who supported them, why someone can be added or dropped from the network, and how can individuals be assigned the role of VIP. The interview also explored who in their networks helps them with educational or employment decisions.

Usage of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

As noted in Chapter 3, reflexive thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the qualitative data collected for this dissertation. Despite the popularity of thematic analysis, there is no singular definition of what can be considered thematic analysis, which can create diversity in how researchers utilize the analysis tool in their work (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Labra et al., 2018). In fact, the usage of thematic analysis is often wrongly attributed to being a singular qualitative analytic approach rather than a method that is more of an umbrella term for describing approaches aimed at finding patterns or themes across qualitative datasets (Braun et al., 2018). Below, I provide an overview for how I utilized reflexive thematic analysis for this phase of the research study. There are six steps in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Braun et al. 2018) process with the first five steps occurring iteratively. The first five steps are familiarizing oneself with the data, generating a an initial list of codes, generating themes from the initial list of codes, reviewing themes, and finally defining and naming the final themes. The final step, which occurs after many iterations of code comparison and reflection is producing the report of the reflexive analysis. Note, reflexive thematic analysis is not intended to reflect a linear process, but rather, it celebrates the iterative nature of the qualitative research process.

Below, each step is described in relationship to how I used each step of the reflexive thematic analysis process with the current dissertation study.

Familiarizing Oneself with the Data

Braun and Clarke (2006; 2020) note that engaging in the analysis is important since researchers arrive at their qualitative inquiry with some prior knowledge of the subject area and data and some beginning analytic thoughts. All audio files for this research project were transcribed using artificial intelligence methods via Temi.com. After the initial transcription via an artificial intelligence service, I reviewed each transcript while listening to the accompanying audio the check for accuracy and to further immerse myself in the data. During the interview process with each participant, I additionally took field observation notes to check in with my own biases, thoughts on the research process, and my progress in thematic analysis. I reviewed each transcript three times, searching for meaning within the text while also exploring my own prejudices and biases as they related to the child welfare system since I have a similar background to most of the youth involved in the Possibility Project with foster care experience. As such, I kept a reflective journal to keep track of my biases, thoughts about the research process, and any concerns I had regarding the youth and the information they shared. After each interview, I wrote about the experience of talking to the youth and the key takeaways I had with regards to what they shared.

An example of the reflexive notes taken during the data analysis process is provided below:

Table 13

An Example of Reflective Journaling for Thematic Analysis

Respondent	Date Recorded	Initial Thoughts
Amanda	November 25, 2020	"I'm scared to be black," Blackness is important to Amanda, but the coronavirus has made maintaining connections important but almost out of reach. I felt comfortable talking to her. It was as if I knew her for a long time. Friendship and connections are important to her, but she also struggles with developing a true sense of place in Atlanta. In NYC, we enjoy the freedom of knowing to a certain degree that racism will not be tolerated. She feels almost like the veil has been lifted somewhat because she is seeing for the first time that blackness is harmful. She values her time with the Possibility Project because it was the first time that she truly felt connected through all her identities: foster youth, black, dancer, poet, and actress.... She pointed out that she often feels like the most out of place person now because she is more aware of the "real" world outside of the protected bubble of New York City.

Generating a List of Initial Codes

Next, I searched for potential themes in the data by conducting two cycles of code construction as suggested by Saldana (2009) utilizing a combination of descriptive coding (for field notes and the transcripts themselves to create an inventory of their contents for future use), *in vivo* coding (use of the youth's words as the native code rather than applying a descriptive code), simultaneous coding (applying two or more codes to the same area of text to show overlap), and structural coding (using the research questions to initially categorize the data). This resulted in the generation of 377 codes from the transcripts, field notes, and memos for all 14 respondents. All coding was conducted in Atlas.ti 9.0 and separated by temporary headings and initial codes. A snippet of the coding organization for the initial coding process is provided below:

Table 14

Example of Initial Coding and Initial Code Definitions

Data Extract	Coded For
[Amanda] I like it. Um, it's hard to adjust. I think being an adult it's hard to adjust, especially, like being a foster because you don't really, ... unless you got blessed with like good foster parents that like generally cared for you because then you're just someone who moves around a lot from house to house without a family that cares about you and only cares about the money. So, adjusting to like a deal a little bit more difficult for me because I don't have a safety net, like most people my age do.	1. Youth Adulty Adjustment 2. In Vivo Code "I like it" 3. Contradiction

In my initial efforts to code the transcripts, I relied heavily on Braun and Clarke (2006) and Terry et al. (2017) in that I coded inclusively by keeping all data surrounding the excerpt that I was interested in coding. As the snippet above shows, I was initially hesitant on how to phrase Amanda's entry into adulthood since she first states that she likes being an adult and yet she finds it to be difficult to adjust. Therefore, I added the code of contradiction and kept the snippet as an in vivo code. Since the question asked about youth adjustment in adulthood, I used the structural coding method described earlier and ascribed a portion of the question's topic, youth adult adjustment, as a way of identifying the code snippet. I completed the same initial coding scheme for all respondents in the study and created the initial list of codes and snippets.

Searching for Themes Within the Data

The next step in reflexive thematic analysis was to collect the individual codes into potential themes by gathering all data that was relevant to each identified theme. This phase allows the researcher to re-focus their analysis "at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant data

extracts within the identified themes" (p. 89). A snippet of this thematic mapping process is shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12

Initial Grouping of Themes within the Data

For example, the theme of *Emerging Adulthood Adjustment* concerns the interconnectedness of reestablishing familial ties, seeking others to serve as parental guides, re(establishing) one's independence from the child welfare system, and an overall feeling of being out of place, just to name a few components of the network map. Network maps were used to combine, refine, and discard codes that were similar or lacked clarity.

Reviewing and Naming the Themes

The process of revieing the themes consisted of narrowing the candidate themes for the data analysis phase. There are two levels to this review process. In level one, focus is placed on reviewing all coded extracts by reading each theme and then deciding if they create a consistent pattern across the dataset. In level two, potential themes are matched against the thematic maps created to explain the theme developed. Through an iterative process of creating network maps and then reviewing the connections between the themes and patterns across the dataset, I created thematic maps for each theme outlined in the results section. I also created a separate thematic coding scheme for *in vivo* codes and used these code snippets to create the names of the themes presented in this dissertation. The following sections details the key themes as related to the qualitative research questions for this dissertation.

Findings

Demographic Information

As noted in Chapter 3, each young person who completed the online survey was invited to participate in the semi-structured interview with additional compensation. From the 21 youth who participated in the quantitative survey, 14 youth agreed to be part of the qualitative inquiry. The remaining 7 Every attempt was made to follow up with youth who indicated that they would like to participate in the interview and several youths (n=4) indicated that they were not

interested in participating. Three youths were unable to be contacted for follow up. Nevertheless, the semi-structured interviews offered a rich insight into youth relationship building and decision-making. Demographic information for the qualitative sample is provided in Table 16

Table 15

Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Demographics

	(n= 14)
Age	M=25.1
Foster Care Status	Yes= 5 No= 9
Sex at Birth	Male= 5 Female= 9
Racial Identity	Black/African American = 11 (78%) Asian = 1 (7.1%) Latino/a = 3 (21.4%)
Education	Currently Enrolled Yes = 7 No = 7 Education Program High School/GED = 4 Community College= 7 4 Year College = 3

Main Themes

There were five consistent themes throughout the qualitative interviews in this study. These themes included sense of community and home, hard to adjust to adulthood, keep it consistent, having a career and not just a job, and owning my inner circle. Overall, the transition to emerging adulthood was rife with mental health concerns (namely depression and anxiety), feelings of longing to reconnect with family and friends, and a general sense of uncertainty due to the ongoing Covid 19 crisis. I discuss each of these themes in detail below.

Main Theme 1: Sense of Community and Belonging (Research Question 1) The theme of sense of community and belonging applies to both macro and micro levels of one's

ecosystem. These concepts applied to youth participation in the Possibility Project, child welfare system, friendships, and even family relationships. I asked each participant about how they connected to the Possibility Project and about their experiences in the program with staff and other youths. The Possibility Project does varied levels of community outreach in New York City by partnering with community foster care agencies and with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). All youth interviewed responded favorably about their interactions with the Possibility Project.

To understand more about the Possibility Project through the eyes of the youth, each youth was asked why they chose to participate in the program. Answers varied here, with the most prominent response being that youth wanted to challenge themselves, offer a positive view of the foster care experience, and finally, to just have an escape from the foster care agency. Youths tended to join the program after a chance encounter with a representative from the Possibility Project or a caseworker/community member who had connections to the program. Across the sample, youth decided to participate on the program because they viewed participation as a worthy challenge, believed that the program could offer others a more positive view of being in foster care, and that the program offered an escape from the monotony of being in a group home or agency setting.

Youth could audition as actors, dancers, or if they did not wish to have an onstage role, they could also apply to work backstage as a stagehand, lighting assistant, or floor director. Ashanti, a Black 18-year-old cisgender female originally from Antigua, viewed the opportunity to meet others who grew up in poverty but still had the dream of acting onstage:

> Well, um, I am a very entertaining person. I always knew I wanted to be in the performing field, so I, but I didn't know how to get involved as someone who's, um, you know, coming from a different country…. And I always knew I wanted to be in that field

> because it was so interesting how this one actress, no matter what role she had, she killed it.

The admiration of established actors and dancers drew most youths to audition for the opportunity to participate. Most youths (n=8) were in the program for two years or more (n=6). Youth often dropped out of the program due to aging out of care, increasing work or school demands on time, or ongoing personal issues. Despite the stress of creating an original Broadway-quality play, all youths in the sample spoke highly of the sense of community and belonging that participating in the program brought them. They often described the experience as one where they were creating a new type of family of like-minded peers with similar backgrounds in the child welfare system. Table 17 summarizes the creation of community within the Possibility Project.

Table 16

Sense of Community within the Possibility Project: Narrative Voices

How does the Possibility Project Create Community?	Example Quote
Creating a Safe Space for Sharing One's Story	"I really do appreciate the Possibility Project because honestly, if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't really know what I wanted to do. I know I want to do something in the arts, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And just thank you for like creating a safe space for teenagers going through hard times. Like not having any money, maybe getting kicked out there, close to home, just a safe space for us to be ourselves. And I prayed that like, you know, they start paying attention to, especially the older kids in foster care because a lot of people will end up on the street, do end up on streets." (Amanda, Age 24)
Learning De-escalation Skills in Relationships	"….one of the things we're taught in Possibility Project is honesty. When, you know, let others like learn from their mistakes and then not hold it against them because they had a specific opinion in the beginning. And, um, yeah, so like, I just don't, I don't tolerate, um, any, um, like willful ignorance to things that are going on in the world because it's like, you know what, we're going to have this conversation. We're going to have this conversation" (Camilla, Age 27)
Giving Foster Youth a Voice	"Honestly, I can say the Possibly Project really is a great platform for young adults that's in the foster care system and to voice their opinion to talk about. 'Cause you know, people was talking about how the money issues was and all that. I feel like that's a great place because it may sound weird, but we're like in a separate group, you understand, than actual regular kids, you understand? So sometimes we can't connect with kids that have the real parents and got Christmas 24/7 and actually have the actual blood relatives around them. You understand? So, when you can get into that group that understands you because they're in that same group, I feel like that's a great opportunity to just let grow, cry, whatever, because people will actually understand, you feel me?" Kyle, Age 25

Sense of community transcended youth's individual experiences in the child welfare system and created an opportunity to, albeit indirectly at times, discuss the sense of uncertainty of being in the child welfare system. Youth often described an unspoken feeling of acceptance from others in the Possibility Project and a feeling of normality of their experiences. The creation

of a safe space to tell one's story was also accompanied with the feeling that others would not bring judgement because someone had a different experience, or they felt out of place being in the child welfare system in general. Sense of community allowed for open communication and a desire to work on deescalating skills to help keep the safe space a truly inclusive space to learn about others in the program. Finally, comfort within the youth voice as expressed through their shared lived experiences was met with understanding because of lack of judgement.

Participating in the Possibility Project created an opportunity for youth with a variety of backgrounds to participate in a singular program goal: to create a Broadway-quality show based on collective youth experiences. Thomas, who has since become a paid member of staff with the program, describes the initial meetings with youth as an opportunity for everyone to describe their background without fear or judgement from other youth in attendance:

> So, in the Possibility Project, we started out the year and we basically are just getting to know each other. We're doing little skits or having fun with having one-on-one time to just talk. We're having group time to just talk. Like it's a lot of just talking and a lot of just building things and then towards about now, well, right before now we will be doing life stories basically…. We're basically in the, in the physical setting, there's just a chair and the whole group sits on the floor around and you just talk about whatever it is you to talk about from your life that makes you who you are. And these stories can get dark. They can get depressing; they can be bright and hopeful. There's a wide range of stories. And so it's always this uniquely sobering experience that leaves people emotionally drained…And we would take all of these life stories. We would take all of the writings that we had done over the year. We would take all these conversations that we had, and we'll begin to build this mold of what the show would be.

To protect the youths from reliving past traumas or uncomfortable experiences while in foster care, youths do not perform their own life stories on stage. Instead, though this storytelling process described brilliantly by Thomas, the final show becomes an amalgamation of pieces of everyone's history, their fears, their highs, and their lows. This process created a sense of

community because, despite the origins of their time in care, each youth could relate to the stories that were being shared.

The program not only allowed the youth to create their own plays based on their lives, but also encouraged the youth to become active participants in their communities through civic action. Even for alumni of the program, continuing to show their support for their community is important to their worldview. Tyrone, a 27-year-old Black cisgender male had left the program after he aged out of care at 21 years old. He moved back to be with his biological mother, who had fallen on hard financial times, in Pennsylvania. He had a few rough years there after leaving the system, failing out of his freshman year at Penn State University and working odd jobs until COVID-19 caused him to lose employment. Despite all of this, Tyrone dropped what he was doing in mid-April 2020 to come back to New York City to support a new production created by the most recent cohort of youth in the Possibility Project. He remarked:

> I felt like it did because for the years after that I left foster care that I was still in contact with a lot of people in the Possibility Project. And there are even times where I would go to some of the other people's plays, even though it's been like years since my own personal play, but I still like to go ahead and see because of all the effort that they have put in to try to make it happen. And this is coming from a guy that has experience what they went through. So, I always want to try to like, give my support to them as much as I can.

Three youths still actively volunteer their time with the Possibility Project even after they aged out of care. One youth, Thomas, was recently hired by the program to help with audio/visual technological needs for podcasts and future plays. All participants expressed need for the development of an alumni network to be developed so that they can use their experiences to help others in similar situations. This will be discussed further in the implications for social work section of Chapter 5, but peer support networks of former foster alumni show promise in creating

a sense of community and belonging for those with child welfare experience (Greeson et al., 2015)

The need for a sense of community and belonging was strongest for those who experienced multiple placements moves and long-term foster care placements. As noted by several youths in this study, the stress of being in long-term foster care created situations where they did not feel that they could be themselves around their friends or others with little knowledge of the child welfare system.

I reflected on this concept throughout the interviewing and data analysis phase to ensure that my own biases would not impact the final analyses of the youths' stories. Unfortunately, the research community and society have been conditioned to hear and believe that only children and youth with significant abuse/neglect histories are removed from their homes. Devaluation of the self and one's identity because of child welfare involvement has been shown to have a negative impact on identity development (Kools, 1997). Storytelling, even indirectly telling one's story as is the case in the development of plays by the youth of the Possibility Project, allows one to take charge of the personal narrative of their lives in a way that simply being a system statistic does not tell. I will expand more on this concept in the data integration subsection in Chapter Five.

Main Theme 2: Hard to Adjust (Research Question 1)

The difficulty related to adjusting to adulthood was split into two sub-themes: adjusting to being alone and reestablishing family ties. As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, the action of leaving the child welfare system meant the end of formal relationships of supports for most youth interviewed in this study and denoted a period where they needed to create or reestablish dormant ties to access different levels of support such as emotional, social, financial, and career support. Each subtheme is further discussed below.

Subtheme: Adjusting to Being Alone

Adjusting to adulthood was met with several challenges for the youth including feeling that they do not have the support necessary should they find that they are unable to live or survive without system help, particularly the feeling of being alone. All the youth interviewed lived in group home or residential treatment settings at some point while in foster care, with a few youths living in kinship care settings with other relatives. For the youths in the study who had aged out of care years prior, being alone meant coming into one's own terms of trusting their ability to navigate the adult world without defined system supports. Amanda, a 24-year- old Afro-Latina cis-gender female, recalled that the biggest challenge after leaving care was combating feeling helpless while on her own:

> The biggest was the lack of support and the lack of setting up things because they didn't provide that. They provided like a little help, but then it was like, whatever bitch, you're on your own... Um, I mean the hardest thing is trying to figure out like what to do with your life. What's next? Like where do you go, come here and just being on your own by yourself. Like, you gotta learn how to land your bills and, and, you know, get a job. And it, it was difficult. Like, you know, they let me stay in care all the way up until I graduated college. Cause I was in school back then. It was like, it was hard. It still is hard. I mean, just to learning how to be a self-sufficient adult.

Amanda also noted that she does not have a safety net like many peers her age do, so she must rely on herself to really survive outside of the system. Although the youth reflected on receiving life skills training while in their group home or residential treatment settings, many commented on their inability to utilize what they had learned in practical, real-life experiences. As noted by Berzin and colleagues (2014), this feeling of being in-between is often difficult for youth aging out of care because of the feeling that one is not entirely an adult but are no longer considered to be under the watchful eye of a parent or state-appointed guardian. Emerging adulthood for foster youth presents an interesting paradox of having to fend for oneself while also struggling to

escape the unintended consequences of being subjected to a rigid state system where all decisions are made for youth with very little input from them.

Subtheme: Reestablishing Family Ties

Adjustment in emerging adulthood also meant trying to reconnect with family and friends after state care ended to create a new system of support. Within the realm of the theme of hard to adjust was a subtheme of reestablishing family ties upon leaving the child welfare system. While child maltreatment led to these youths being removed from their homes and placed in the care of the child welfare system, it does not mean that these youths did not want to continue a relationship with their biological families after their removal from their biological homes. Three of the youths interviewed for this dissertation indicated that their removal from their biological homes was not due to them experiencing direct abuse or intentional neglect but was due to their parents dealing with substance abuse or medical problems that prevented them from taking care of their children. One participant, Victoria, a 27-year-old biracial cisgender female from Brooklyn, noted that she initially did not feel like a "true" foster youth when she entered care because she did not have the same experience as other youths of coming from a home where abuse or intentional neglect was common. Victoria noted that when she started to participate in the Possibility Project, it was hard for her to relate to her peers at first:

> I feel like, you know, me personally having the background that I've had going into foster care, you know. It—my experience wasn't necessarily like everyone else's as to why I ended up in foster care. My mom just no longer had control over her sickness. You know, she was when we first moved to California, my mom was doing really, really well and she ended up falling down the stairs and hit her head. She from hitting her head, she also broke her coccyx…. And so, from that, you know, she just kind of spiraled, which we had no choice, but to go into foster care. But prior to that, my mom kind of gave us a pretty full life, you know? And so having to be a part of the Possibility Project or just being in that type of environment, it was really humbling to know that even though I'm in the situation now with these people, I didn't necessarily have those same rough experiences prior to my entry of foster care.

It is important to note that not all youth who participated had a negative, abusive, or neglectful experience with their birth parents or caregivers prior to entering the foster care system. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are differential experiences within the foster care system that are often not well explored in the research literature. Several participants noted that participating in the Possibility Project made them realize that their entrance into the foster care system was not "typical" and that the Possibility Project marked the first time they really learned about others who were in the system.

Reconnecting with one's family was often mentioned as a chief desire of youth in the study, regardless of why they entered the child welfare system. Most felt unprepared for the mental health burden of trying to reconnect with family members they had not had relationships with for several years. For instance, when Victoria left the care system, one of her first actions as an adult was to reconnect with her birth family because she felt overwhelmed by the thought of being alone to adjust to life as an adult. Victoria searched Facebook for any relatives that would be willing to talk to her and provide support and eventually stumbled upon her birth father: While Victoria was overjoyed at the prospect of meeting her birth father, unfortunately the time she spent in the system changed the nature of their relationship and she felt she could not have the father figure she wanted in her life. She traveled to Florida to be with him and his other children, but felt in her heart that he could not be the father figure she wanted:

> I'm an adult you know, my dad, he tries to be a father, but he still set in his ways of not having necessarily the responsibility of his children that I don't feel like he knew how to have a relationship with me.

Victoria tried three additional times to make her relationship work with her father because she felt that she could not become an independent adult without family support, despite reconnecting with other relatives online. She felt that the system did not prepare her for the ability to return to

her biological family after being discharged from care. Her longing and desire for a relationship with her father saw her travel to six states in seven years after leaving care and ultimately failing to reconnect with her father. She felt unprepared for the enormity of trying to reconnect with her family because of the nature of how she left care in the first place. What makes Victoria's story truly shocking is that her emancipation from the system was not due to her own choice. When I asked her about why she continued to pursue her father even after he ceased wanting to have a father/daughter relationship, she remarked:

> The way that I left foster care was very unfortunate because, you know, I didn't emancipate out of foster care until I was nineteen. I know a lot of people age out at 18, but me personally, I aged out at 19 and was solely because I was forced out of foster care. You know, I didn't, I was a little ignorant to how things operated behind the scenes of being a ward of the court. And basically, my social worker, she did not tell me she was coming to get me. She just showed up to my group home 'cause I was living in a group home at the time. And she came to our group home and basically told me how it is and to pack up my stuff because I was leaving. I was going to another place. She's not telling me exactly where I was going until I actually arrived there. And I did not find out what was happening really until I started speaking with the people of [a group home in Brooklyn].

For youth who left care without a discharge plan in place, this also meant increased difficulty adjusting to life without an artificially created network of supports (e.g., social workers and caseworkers who provided care during their time as wards of the court). Thus, the desire to reconnect with family while also adjusting to being alone made adjusting to adulthood difficult. As demonstrated in Amanda and Victoria's narratives, fulfilling basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter remain difficult when suddenly your safety net is no longer available.

Theme 3: Keep It Consistent (Research Question 1)

While the youth provided varied answers on how they connect with others such as friends, trusted adults, or even community members, each interview discussed the importance of consistency. Youth connection building was often discussed as difficult if consistency and

feeling validated were not key to a potential network member's relationship with them and was often the reason why they could be dropped from the inner circle altogether. Tyesha, an 18-year-old Black cisgender female discussed at length how consistency plays a role in who she keeps in her inner circle. Consistency to her is being there to answer her call and not making every interaction about them when she needs support:

> If you just show that you have no respect for me at all. Like, you know, like you make it seem like, you know, all you care about yourself and not no one else. You feel like everything evolves around you…. For example, like if I could text you one day, and be like "Oh my God, hey, you know, like I'm just having a bad day" and then you would ask me about it. And then I'll tell you today, and then you just flip it and you just make it all about you. Like, everything is not, everything is not always about you. You know? I don't like when people do that annoying, you know, you just assumed that I could trust you and stuff.

When asked how consistency played a role in her developing a relationship with a potential member of her network, Tyesha remarked that the ability to speak to people in her network daily helped to build their relationship beyond simply designating someone as a "friend" or a "close friend". Rather, their relationship becomes sustained through collective action and consistency is reciprocal:

> My close friends... I just speak to them every day. You know, they do things for me. They help me out whenever I need them. I'm there for them whenever they need me. I hang out with them. I go to their house, they come hang out with me. We just, we just go out together. We just like, I just do things to get closer with them and eventually we just become close.

The feeling of being validated within relationships was also tied to how consistently someone who was activated within a youth network took time to listen to the youth's needs. Thomas, a 27-year-old Black cisgender male, described at length the feeling of people saying that they would be there for him unconditionally and then reneging on that pledge of support because they feel that they know more about his needs than he does.

This was tested when Thomas lost his birth mother due to a drug overdose in late August 2020. Thomas had left Brooklyn to live in China in 2019 and returned in March 2020 due to the global pandemic. He was not aware that his mother, who had a history of substance abuse problems, had relapsed and was living in a dangerous environment because his family thought that he would not be able to handle such devastating news. When she passed in August due to a drug overdose, friends he considered to be close and almost like family suddenly disappeared and even family members stopped talking to him. The lack of consistency and the feeling that he did not belong in Brooklyn led him to break off relationships with those who failed to listen to his need for validation and comfort at one of his most vulnerable times. Thomas's response to feeling invalidated was to rely on himself since others have been inconsistent.

Victoria, who is now a mother of three, discussed the way she will put in effort to maintain relationships where consistent contact is reciprocal, and she feels validated in her relationship. Even though she had a negative experience aging out of the child welfare system, she keeps in contact with an old caseworker she met when her foster family moved to Los Angeles. Leanne is her biggest supporter and Victoria feels that she can relate and depend on her in times of need:

> I've always kinda, you know, felt that way about Leanne because I've known her the longest, but other than that, not really. No, because I feel like if you are meant to be in my life and you genuinely want to be a part of my life and you will, I feel like Leanne and I, of course like when I am in LA I do touch base with her, but that's just about it, you know, unless I post something on Facebook, then everyone wants to come on and kind of like the woodworks, you know, but I have select people in my life that have never left me, you know what I mean? So, and those are people that I rely on and those are the people that I can count on a daily basis.

When I asked her to clarify if the people listed on the survey were in fact people that had consistent relationships with her, Victoria responded that only people who are there for her and

allow her to vent and express herself are part of the network. Anyone who shows selfish or unsavory motives due to inconsistency are cast out of her network. I will elaborate on the concept of owning one's inner circle in a separate section, but as demonstrated, consistency is the key to youth relationship building and can be the cause of the dissolution of relationships.

Theme 4: Having a Career Not Just a Job (Research Question 2)

Future orientation for the youth interviewed in this study revolved around the desire to have a career and not just a short-term gig on the pathway to their eventual dream jobs. In terms of determining career pathways, the youth elicited selective activation of their support networks in navigating decision making. Selective activation occurs when certain members of one's supportive network are activated to deal with a specific task or role (Perry & Pescosolido, 2015). As noted in the quantitative section, most supportive networks consisted of friends, followed by biological family members, and more nuanced supports. In fact, the breakdown of career discussions with supportive members were split into two distinct instances of selective activation. For younger youth still in care (n=5), formal supports such as caseworkers or mentors helped the focal youth in decision making regarding education and employment. These youth relied heavily on formal supports to apply for financial aid, complete college applications, and in choosing a housing arrangement that would allow them to complete their course of education.

On the other hand, for older youth who aged out of care at the time of the interview, they relied heavily on informal supports through friends and family when making career decisions. These youth (n=9) aged out of the child welfare system before age 21 and often were called to make adult decisions before they were fully ready to do so. For these youth, having a career and not just a job was tied into reduced future orientation due to lack of credible information sources with regards to how to apply for financial aid, lack of support in educational program choice, and

other intervening life decisions such as having children at a young age or being incarcerated that made it difficult to have a career and not just employment. For instance, in the case of Kyle, past criminal justice involvement may hinder his life goals and his eventual career path. When I spoke to Kyle, he had just left prison a month earlier after spending 5 years locked up on drug and weapons charges. After he was released from prison, he wanted to use his knowledge of the legal system to help others in similar situations as much as he could. But, unlike the younger participants, he lacks access to formal support mechanisms that can help him navigate education and employment decision making. He relied heavily on his current girlfriend to assist him in applying for financial aid, moving to a new state, and applying to college upon his release from prison.

Still others were required to put their dreams of having a career instead of just a job on hold. Maria, another participant, had a child at age 18 and was kicked out of her group home placement and left to fend for herself at a shelter for homeless young adults. She had applied to complete her GED in an alternative program within her group home setting, but after it was discovered that she was pregnant, she was forced to put those dreams on hold. She later had two more children and at age 29, she is still struggling to take care of her children while completing her GED. Thus, young people who aged out of care prior to age 21 without a stable plan for pursing their careers were at a greater disadvantage when compared to those who were able to age out with structured system support in assisting in career-related decision-making.

Career aspirations and decision-making for youth in this study largely varied when considering those networks where there was a VIP who took charge of their mental, physical, and sometimes spiritual wellbeing in relation to career-related decision-making. These VIPs were consistent network actors who were involved in the focal youth networks for more than one

year and often these relationships resulted in mutual advice-giving regarding career aspirations and future orientation for both the ego (e.g., focal youth in this study) and the VIP identified in the network. Career aspirations manifested from youth's interactions with professionals in their networks, interactions with others who share the love of performing arts, or they derived their career goals from chance encounters with a singular person such as an herbalist, doctor, nurse, or IT professional. Careers provide a sense of purpose in a way that simply viewing work as a job cannot.

The youth discussed VIPs in their network that always seemed to take charge for them in times of stress or uncertainty. As noted in the quantitative analysis, while some youth had on average 5 people within their networks who could provide support for career decision-making, the sample still included youth who had very small networks of support. For instance, Camilla discussed having a small social network comprised of her friend Destiny and her boyfriend Troy. In this support network, Destiny provides Camilla with the help she needs when Camilla is not sure of her own direction. Destiny was also in the Possibility Project and was in care in the same group home as Camilla so the two often bounced ideas off on each other. Even though VIPs take charge in youth relationships, there is often a give and take in those relationships where the youths can provide the VIP with help or support in the same manner that the VIP provides to them. Youth activate VIPs in their networks in two ways: consulting with them on career advice and confirming that their desired educational path is the correct one.

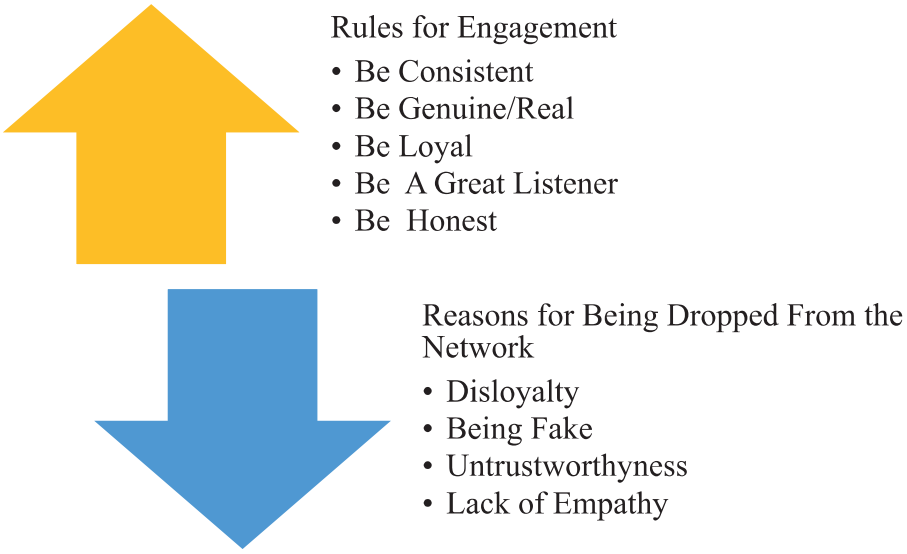
Finally, while career and educational advice ultimately helped some youth to aspire to educational and/or career-related decisions, several youths felt that although they would run their decisions by their VIPs and others in their networks, the youths made the final decision on their

next steps. This often created a situation where their VIPs did not agree with their career and/or educational choice.

Theme 5: Owning my Inner Circle (Research Question 3)

Finally, I asked each youth how someone like me or other young people can become part of their support networks. Responses ranged here, but as I noted with consistency, being genuine and real were amongst the top two requirements after consistency. Being genuine was a positive trait that granted someone enclave into the youth's inner supportive networks. Youths were also asked about rules that network members needed to follow to become or remain part of the support network. These rules are visualized in Figure 14 below:

Figure 13: Rules of the Game: Becoming Part of Youth Social Networks



Across the sample, rules for engagement tended to focus on the individual qualities of the potential network actor and their ability to hold one in confidence without being fake. Consistency, as noted earlier in the discussion regarding creating sense of community, was highly prized amongst the youth interviewed because consistency allowed for deeper development and relational connections with a potential network actor. Being able to see or talk

to a network connection and knowing that the feeling was mutual was also part of the development of strong networks of support. Support network members who lived near the focal youth or who was reachable consistently through social media or by telephone were amongst the most prized network members. Tyesha, a past victim of domestic and sexual violence, felt that being able to see her close friends consistently helped her feel protected and accepted and that consistency was of the utmost importance when she considered in creating her inner circle:

> …my close friends. I just speak to them every day. You know, they do things for me. They help me out whenever I need them. I'm there for them whenever they need me. I hang out with them. I go to their house, they come hang out with me. We just, we just go out together. We just like, I just do things to get closer with them and eventually we just become close.

Additional characteristics such as being a great listener, being oneself, displaying loyalty through one's actions, and exuding honesty were also important hallmarks needed to remain or become part of youth social networks.

Being dropped from social networks largely occurred because the focal person lost interest in the reciprocal nature of their relationship with the ego or youth interviewed due to accusations of being fake, demonstrating actions that were viewed ss untrustworthy, or lacking empathy towards others. Amongst these characteristics, perhaps no greater insult to the focal youth was being disloyal in one's actions and intentions within the relationship. Lauryn, who identifies as bisexual, describes ending her relationship with her best friend, describes disloyalty that resulted from entering a new intimate relationship:

> I could definitely say not having my back and not being there for me…. My best friend stopped talking to me because her new boyfriend. He was acting funny. Like, I guess he was jealous of, you know, my sexuality. I'm bisexual. So, but I have a boyfriend and he, he basically was jealous that we, we used to go out everywhere and do stuff and he didn't like it. But my thing is, I wasn't after your girl, dude, I was, that's just my friend.

Lauryn felt that if her friend did not step up and clearly define their relationship to the boyfriend that their relationship was not worth keeping.

Disloyalty also ended one's network connection if the person lacked the ability to be truthful in one's intentions and respect relationship boundaries. Kyle, as mentioned earlier, made immediate changes to his support system when he was sentenced to 5 years in prison for drug-related charges. He had a large support network before prison because he was part of group of youth who committed non-violent offenses to support their drug dealing and drug using habits. He estimates that his network consisted of at least 20 people before he went to prison. After being sentenced to prison and losing his mother while he was serving time, he realized that those who claimed loyalty were nowhere to be found when he really needed them and were incapable of being truthful. He remarked when asked about disloyalty:

> Because like at the end of the day, you can't, you can't be disloyal to me…. So, if you sit there and like, take me for granted, I can never trust you again. Like you feel me like, even with shorty, if you cheat on me. It's quiet. There's no second chances. There's no third chances. You feel what I'm saying? Because at the end of the day you knew what you was doing beforehand. You know what I'm saying? You had multiple decisions and multiple opportunities not to do it. You feel what I'm saying? So just that disloyalty, the non-trusting um, I hate liars. Oh my God. I hate liars. Like, I feel like it's no point for you to lie. Like you feel me like, especially if I'm the way I am. I'm so outgoing. I'm so truthful.

Disloyalty was also mentioned by several youth as one of the primary reasons why they stopped working with caseworkers while in care or why they cut family members from their supportive networks after aging out of the foster care system.

Additionally, individuals could be cut from supportive networks if they harbored negative reactions to the racially motivated incidents of police brutality that have occurred in the US for the past two years. Youth across the sample reported feeling uncomfortable discussing issues of race and ethnicity with their friends since they do not have the tools necessary to have what are

deemed to be uncomfortable conversations. Corrinne, an 18-year-old who participated in several civic engagement events with the Possibility Project before the start of the Pandemic, expressed feeling a desire to protest with her friends, but also feeling that this would lead to someone not coming to save her should things go wrong. This touched me because her personality is a firebrand and yet she is uncomfortable fighting for what she truly believes:

> A lot of my friends come from different backgrounds and have different ethnicities. So, I guess we didn't feel comfortable talking about it with each other. Um, I brought it up one time and me and one of my close friends agreed that, you know, as long as we're friends and, you know, I don't know, I guess it was just a very sensitive and very hard topic to bring up and have a conversation about.

Furthermore, individuals within their networks who harbored negative feelings towards the Black Lives Matter movement and other racial movements within the US were dropped from the network if their inability to emphasize was made clear.

These themes demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of youth networks of support and how these networks help the focal youth not only navigate educational and employment decision-making but also the nature of how relationships are maintained in emerging adulthood.

Summary

In short, there is a disconnect between how people describe their support systems and the people they share a connection with and how they use them in times of need. This highlights a known problem for egocentric social network analysis work where only one method of data collection is used. This will be further in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I first begin by discussing the integration of the quantitative and qualitative datasets and interpretation of the combined dataset. In this integration of the datasets. Next, in the discussion section, I provide a summary of the research design, and study implications for social work practice. Finally, I explore the strengths and limitations of the current study, discuss future research priorities, and end with a conclusion.

Section 1: Integration of Mixed Methods Results

Steps in Decision-Making for Integration of Datasets

Integration represents a key component of mixed methods research (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2019), and the goal of this section is to demonstrate how the two separate data sets were merged to uncover meaning and in-depth understanding of the research questions. Integration can enhance the overall quality of the research study as the qualitative strand can be used to assess the cogency of the quantitative study findings (Fetters & Creswell, 2013). For reference, Figure 2 in Chapter 2 demonstrates the overall research design and integration of this study.

Integration has occurred three areas in this dissertation study. Firstly, integration occurred at the research design level thorough utilization of convergent parallel mixed methodology. As such, data was collected for both phases of the study at the same time. Secondly, each phase was analyzed separately to allow for full understanding of the research inquiry as evidenced in the previous chapter. Lastly, integration occurred at the methods level where linking occurred through connecting and merging activities (Creswell et al., 2011). The concept of connecting data in mixed methods research occurs when one type of data links with another through the sampling frame (Fetters & Creswell, 2013). The sample for this dissertation was derived from a

singular source, the Possibility Project, and participants in the quantitative phase were purposively sampled for the qualitative phase.

Additionally, after the separate data analysis of each strand, each phase was then merged to allow for analysis and comparison (this section). Because the dissertation utilized egocentric social network analysis with the goal of learning a great deal about focal youth and their available supports, the quantitative survey and semi-structured qualitative interviews were constructed so that the same domain questions (e.g., education and employment decision-making, availability of supports, network size, etc.) were addressed in each phase of the study. These steps led to the creation of the integration matrix, or a visual joint display that helps to map the quantitative and qualitative findings together for interpretation, as discussed in the next section.

Integration Matrix

On the next page, I provide the integration matrix that maps the quantitative and qualitative findings for this study.

Table 17 *Integrated Results Matrix for the Effect of Egocentric Personal Support Networks on Social Pathways*

	Quantitative Survey (N=21)	**Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews (N= 14)**
Domains (Major Themes)		
Supports Provided by Network Alters	**Average Network Size:** 5 alters; 108 alters named by 21 BIPOC youth **Average Network Utilization:** Network supports were contacted on average at least once weekly. **Types of Support Provided by Network Alters**: Types of Support Provided: Academic Support (10.88%), Career Preparation Support (8.77%), Extracurricular Support (10.88%), Social Support (27.37%, Emotional Support (30.88%), and Financial Support (11.22%) **HLM Models** **Model 1: Alter Influence to Ego—Academic Support:** Egos who rely on friends for academic support, when holding all other predictors constant, have an 87% lower likelihood of receiving academic support from their friends ($p<0.003$) **Model 2: Alter Influence to Ego—Career Support** Egos who rely on friends for career preparation support, when holding all other predictors constant, have an 88% lower likelihood of receiving this support from their friends ($p<0.037$).	**Network Size:** Network depended on rules for engagement of focal youth. While the quantitative inquiry did not find statistically significant results regarding race/ethnicity with regards to network size, network size was found to be impacted if actors were less than sympathetic to the current racial/ethnic movements in the US, causing those actors to be dropped from the network. **Network Utilization:** Selective activation of network supports depending on situation (e.g., educational or employment advice). Some supports were not contacted at all or were dropped according to engagement rules. Youth often fell into two camps: They made decisions regarding education/employment on their own and reported it to their network without needing additional support (n=9) or they utilized their support networks to make decisions for them and relied heavily on them for execution of those goals (n=5)

Ego-Alter Relationships	**Overall Satisfaction with Support Network Members:** (*M*=4.19; *SD*=0.93) **Ego Satisfaction with Network During Covid-19**: *M*=20*; SD*=1.09—relative comfort using social media for communication **Network Closeness:** Average closeness was reported at 1.152 on a scale of 0-2. **Alter Relationships to Ego:** 20.37% were biologically related to respondent; Friends made up majority of alters reported (43.52%). Remaining alters were nonbiological family members (11%), agency support (12%), mentors (6%), and play siblings (7%)	**Overall Satisfaction with Support Network Members:** Youth were generally pleased with their overall supportive network members but indicated that more support was needed in financial and mental health concerns. **Ego Satisfaction with Network During Covid-19:** Youth reported that they utilized social media and text to contact their supports during quarantine but largely self-isolated. Youth reported loss of employment, loss of loved ones in network, difficulties with mental health (anxiety and depression), and feeling alone during quarantine. **Network Closeness**: Variable during quarantine depending on geographic location
Career and Educational Aspirations/Decision Making	**Current School Enrollment:** 7 enrolled in school (2 High School/GED program; 2 Community College; 3 enrolled in 4-year University) out of 21 participants **Alter Employment Status:** 28.60% were unemployed; 62.02% employed	**Current School Enrollment**: Majority of youth in qualitative sample expressed a desire to return to school, but due to COVID-19 those plans are either on hold or abandoned in favor of work. **Alter Employment Status:** Youth with alters employed in their area of interest often solicited advice from these alters, but youth without such ties made decisions on education and employment on their own.

As noted in the quantitative phase to this study, the average young person surveyed had at least 5 people in their network who they could rely on for ongoing support. Network actors provided social and emotional support above other types of supports such as financial support, career development support, and extracurricular support. Youth in the survey reported that their networks were largely unchanged during COVID-19 quarantine, but they experienced significant hardships such as loss of employment, loss of loved ones to COVID-19, and the stress of aging out of care at the beginning of the pandemic without ongoing support. Youth relied on their support network at least once a week for emotional and/or social support, but fewer reported the same level of support requirements for financial, career, or extracurricular support.

Additionally, it was less likely that focal youth relied on their friends in their support networks to provide academic or career support, instead relying on other actors such as biological family members, caseworkers, and other more formal supports for advice in these areas. In the qualitative phase, it was discovered that while youth often boasted having integrated support networks of friends, families, and others who could provide support, the activation of network supports differed for youth still in care versus those who had already aged out of care years prior. For youth who were still in care, their networks were largely an amalgamation of formal supports (e.g., caseworkers, social workers, therapists, and vocational coaches) and informal family and friend supports. Older youth who aged out of care prior to participating in the survey had fewer formal supports and relied more heavily on informal support members for support domains outlined in this study.

Finally, youth created and abided by set rules when incorporating actors within their support networks. Actors who did not sympathize or understand the importance of race/ethnicity in the current political climate were dropped from support network in addition to those who were

disloyal, lacked empathy, and lacked general interest in being consistent and genuine in their intentions with the youth under study.

Contradictory Findings in Support Networks

The usage of a convergent parallel mixed methods research design combined with egocentric social network analysis allowed for richer understanding of the complex fluidity of BIPOC youth with current and past foster care experience and their support networks. These designs are often utilized by researchers attempting to show convergence of data based on two methods of data collection and analysis. But divergence is also important in understanding the significance and innovation of the research study findings. Contradictory findings have been linked to errors in the research process in data collection and analysis or poor theoretical application (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2019), but contradictory findings can also be utilized to uncover new theories or mechanisms that may work to encourage convergent findings in future studies (Bergman, 2011).

The contradiction and lack of convergence in this study in these areas should not be viewed as a limitation but perhaps calls into question if traditional egocentric social network analysis research could benefit from the utilization of mixed methods approaches. Such approaches serve to help contextualize the quantitative findings in terms of accessibility of social network actors in personal networks. Small and Sukhu (2016), in their research regarding how people decide to reach out to others for help, discuss the importance of accessibility of network support since the accessibility of an alter can depend on the situation at hand and the focal person's level of interaction with an alter in their network. They note that few studies focus on why certain people were activated in times of need and do not reflect on the deliberation process that the focal person undergoes when seeking out help in certain situations.

In the current study, as evidenced by the qualitative inquiry, foster youth often relied heavily on supports that were of close geographical distance rather than potentially stronger supports that were inaccessible due to distance and the desire of some foster youth to turn towards more emotionally available supports in times of need. Therefore, future studies should employ a mixed methods approach to help better understand accessibility in addition to uncovering what network supports provide a given domain function in an individual's life. As shown above, the network size, purported domains of support from network actors, and network activation of supports differs in the quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Although youth may report having individuals is their networks that provide certain types of support, there is divergence in how these actors are used in times of need by the focal youth. Most youth fall in two categories when it comes to how they make education and employment decisions. Youth may come up with a plan for education or employment, but then leave it to their supportive networks to carry out the actions necessary to make those goals happen. This was primarily viewed in youth who were about to age out of care (n=5).

Conversely, youth made education and employment decisions on their own but informed their networks of their plans without the goal of using the feedback they receive in their decision making. This was largely seen in youth who left the foster care system before age 21 but after age 18 (n=9). In some cases, alters that were named did not provide academic or career support. The majority of supports that are named in these networks provide emotional or social support, which (as explained in the qualitative portion) allows the youths to pursue their interests academically or employment wise. This contrasts with the exploratory hypothesis that alters would largely provide academic and career support and that these actors would outnumber the alters who provide only a singular support from the other domains indicated in the study.

Additionally, activation of support network actors depends on the situation, but most youth reported greater instances of self-reliance despite nominating actors via the name generator in the quantitative phase of the study. Thomas, whose dance group made up the bulk of his support network, commented during the qualitative phase that he does not call on members of his support network for help or guidance unless he has no other avenue. Even in smaller support networks (e.g., fewer than the average of 5 actors), youth did not always consult or rely on their network supports for help and guidance. During the height of the pandemic when stay at home orders were in effect, youth reported that despite having access to their supportive networks, they largely did not contact them and instead engaged in self-isolation due to anxiety and depression.

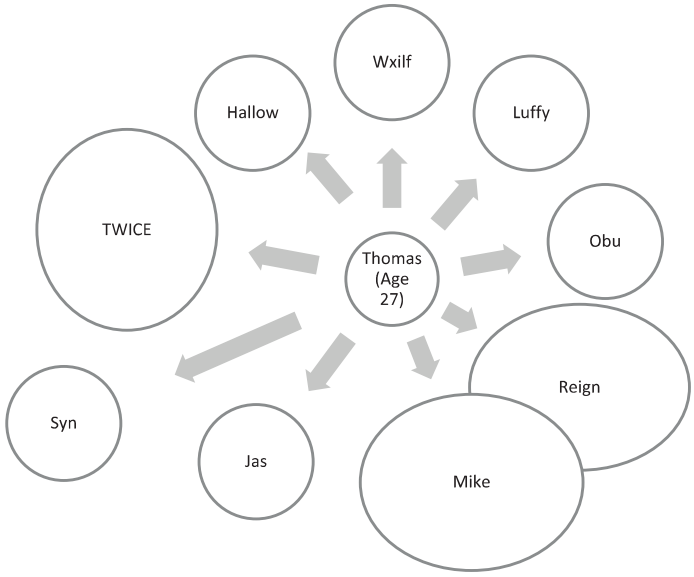
This phenomenon of selectively contacting supports within one's network is known as the functional specificity hypothesis (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Perry & Pescolido, 2010). Functional specificity hypothesis is rooted in research regarding social network usage in times of severe mental illness and focuses on tie activation where the fit between the problem or support need is juxtaposed against the skills, information, resources, and other qualities that lie within the alter within one's support network. In other words, people tend to determine in times of crisis who amongst their social network connections can readily provide acute and sometimes ongoing support. In mental health research, this type of tie activation is often a temporary measure based on the availability of supports and may not represent an indicator of prolonged network activation of network actors.

Returning to the dissertation and its findings, I explored the personal support network of an ego with a complete alter network where individuals named as supports know each other. Thomas, a respondent in my study, reported a network of 10 alters who all know each other from an underground dance troupe in Brooklyn, NY in the quantitative survey. Thomas is 27 years old

and the average age of his alters is 27.5 years. His network largely consists of males (70%) with a small portion of the network consisting of female alters (e.g., his sister, aunt, and grandmother). The figure below demonstrates selective activation within his network:

Figure 14

Example of an Ego Network with Selective Activation



As is shown in the figure above, Mike and Reign's circles are larger than the others in this figure because they are the closest to Thomas and he considers them to be his best friends. Syn, his sister, is part of Thomas's network but she is not as close to Thomas, so her circle is further away from all other alters. She also lives more than 25 miles away from Thomas. Twice, one of Thomas's mentors, provides three levels of support to Thomas, indicated here by the subscript 3 next to his name. Twice is also 27 years old. He provides extracurricular support, social support, and emotional support. Surprisingly, despite providing multiple levels of support (as discussed further in the qualitative interview), Twice is not considered to be a friend and is instead in a role of a mentor. Everyone, except for Syn, is in contact with Thomas at least once a week. Thomas contacts Syn at least once a month. In short, Thomas's network revolves around his dance crew

and his family and seems very tight knit. Geographic location forms the basis for how Thomas's alters are activated within his network. This phenomenon, as indicated, is viewed in other support networks in this study.

Section 2: Discussion and Conclusion

Research Questions and Study Summary

This study employed a two phase, convergent parallel mixed methods research design to explore the personal support networks of youth with foster care experience as they navigate emerging adulthood and decisions regarding education and employment. The study used an innovative egocentric data collection effort via Qualtrics and provided semi-structured qualitative interviews to help elucidate personal support networks for this emerging population. opportunity to explore the rich interconnections of youth relationships with friends, family, and trusted adults in emerging adulthood. Additionally, the study uncovered stories of trauma, resilience, and resistance in emerging adulthood that warrant further exploration.

Recall from Chapter 2 that this study was largely of an exploratory and experimental nature due to the usage of a mixed methods design with a traditionally monomethod data analysis technique in the usage of egocentric data analysis. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What role does youth social origins and environment, individual characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, foster care status, gender identity, neighborhood factors and lived experiences) play in the development and utilization of social capital?
2. What role does social capital (e.g., individual, and collective factors) and development of bonding social capital play in the development of BIPOC foster youth's social networks?
3. How do BIPOC youth with foster care experience utilize their personal social networks as they age out of care or after they've transitioned from care?
4. How do social origins and environment, and perceived social support impact social pathways related to perceptions of education and employment after BIPOC youth transition from foster care and into emerging adulthood?

These questions were used to guide the exploration into the personal supportive networks of Black and Latinx youth with current and past child welfare experience who participated in a performing arts program based in New York City. The current study employed egocentric social network analysis combined with mixed methods research methodology to explore the complexity of minority foster youth personal networks and their relationships with youth education and employment decision making. The usage of this sophisticated data collection and analysis technique produced some contradictory findings in how youth utilize their support networks, evidence of differential application of support networks for minority youth who participated in this study and highlighted the influence of one's network environment in relation to aging out of the foster care system.

Systemic Barriers

Overall, the youth reported systemic barriers that left them feeling unable to truly become an adult outside of the child welfare system. Among these barriers are leaving care without establishing housing or having employment, needing but ultimately having lack of access to affordable mental health professionals who are knowledge about the aging out process, inability to enter post-secondary education because they are not aware of how to access available financial supports that can help with postsecondary enrollment, and finally lack of a true permanency plan.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, youth described some difficulty in connecting with supportive actors while in quarantine and feelings of being lost in terms of securing employment or starting/continuing a program of postsecondary education. For several youth, plans to begin a course of education were put on hold due to lack of financial stability after employment loss or because their availability shifted in terms of additional responsibilities. For instance, Victoria, who has three children, had to temporarily halt her plan to complete her GED

because she could not find specialized childcare for her youngest child, who has autism and requires round-the-clock care. Others could not adjust to life completely online and dropped out of school due to the difficulty of maintaining concentration in such an environment (n=3).

Additionally, the imposed quarantine caused those who suffered from anxiety, depression, and the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19 or other complications to feel increasingly more isolated from the outside world. Several youths reported that they felt overwhelmed by the prospect of spending time alone because they needed better access to their social supports. While social media provided an outlet for reaching their network supports, it did not replace the ease of access to supports in the case of providing emotional support.

Individual Barriers

In terms of individual barriers uncovered in the qualitative data, the youth discussed having a mistrust of mental health care providers due to their past experiences receiving mandatory services while they are in care. Additionally, almost of the youth in the sample felt unprepared for the stresses of returning to their families after care. In many situations, the youths were unable to establish healthier relationships with their relatives because the desire to do so was not reciprocal. There was also a general sense that they felt unable to talk about past trauma. It was surprising to hear that many youths discussed the holding facility where they were placed while a more permanent placement was decided for them as a wholly negative experience. Participating in the possibility project and using their stories to illustrate this trauma was often the closest that they got to talking about their pasts with others. And finally, youth felt unable to achieve employment or education goals due to a lack of financial support as noted in earlier sections.

Applications of the Egocentric Social Network Perspective with BIPOC Foster Youth

The findings in this study support the existing research in that BIPOC youth with foster care experience champion honesty, genuineness, trust, and loyalty in relationship building and often rely on actors within their networks who can demonstrate all or some of these characteristics consistently. Best and Blakeslee (2020) conducted a qualitative study to explore foster youth network ties and areas of meaningful support and relationships using a network approach. Participants in the study were ages 16-20 (n=22) with a history of foster care placement in metropolitan or urban areas. The study used support network mapping based on a prior study (Blakeslee, 2015) where the youth identified people who played a supportive role in their lives in the past year (e.g., family, friends, school/work, and community). Youth created a hand-drawn mapping of the connections of these individuals to indicate the strength of these relationships where thicker lines indicated a stronger connection, narrower lines showed a neutral relationship, and dotted lines indicated a weaker connection. Their study found that closeness and strength of network ties indicated who was reliable in their networks, capable of maintaining confidentiality, provided a reciprocal relationship, and provided consistent emotional support.

The current study demonstrated similar findings, as youth who expressed having close network ties with fewer weak ties could rely on network supports for multidimensional support domains as evidenced by the finding that the majority of the 108 actors identified in this study provided more than one level of support. Even in small networks where the youth identified only two network supports, if the relationships were reciprocal in nature, there was a higher likelihood that the actor was called upon for support by the focal youth. While I was unable to demonstrate the employment positions of persons nominated within the network, I was able to discern that the

focal youths in this study did not follow the traditional usage of social capital and available resources when exploring their education and employment options in emerging adulthood.

The youth who participated in this study also reported that having a support system did not necessarily help them in their education and employment endeavors. The youth reported that they struggled to make the changes necessary in their lives to complete a course of postsecondary education or sustain gainful employment after leaving the foster care system. These results mirror those of Loring (2011), who investigated the distal outcomes of 16 former foster youth 3 years after their transition to adulthood and found that although all youth reported having at least one adult connection, 50% of these youth reported having very little in savings, no health insurance, and reported struggling with alcohol or substance abuse problems. The youth struggled to remain independent and were unable in many cases to complete postsecondary education because of lack of financial stability and overall resilience to social and personal issues. Like the findings in the current study, Loring's findings suggested that amongst those who could be considered "successful", those who reported having a period of transitional residence or programming before leaving care along with consistently positive support systems that included a mix of formal and informal supports such as family members and agency personnel.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant disruption in the daily lives or persons around the world, including the youth who participated in the study. While most youth reported that they were able to maintain contact with their support networks during the pandemic, many lamented about the stress of the pandemic and the subsequent stay at home orders that put a hold on their education and employment plans. This effect, as discussed in the previous chapter, occurred whether youth were still in the foster care system or had left years

prior. Social network discussion, as argued by Perry (2006) affects the strength and structure of personal networks of support while ongoing or repeated instances of social network disruption creating a situation where youth are at great risk of future negative psychological outcomes.

Weak ties, as noted by Burt and colleagues (2013), represent an opportunity for a person to gain a network actor or support that may provide access to a resource in the future. But due to the unpredictable nature of the current COVID-19 pandemic, several foster youths in both the quantitative phase and the qualitative phase of this study felt that their lives were on hold. In this study, foster youth with smaller networks of core supporters who were reachable via social media or via text were more likely to provide educational and employment assistance to youth in care. However, for the youth who had already aged out of the system, the disruption in their social networks led to fewer instances of reaching out for support as discussed in the previous chapter.

While existing research highlights the individual and systemic barriers to aging out of the child welfare system such as homelessness, substance abuse, lack of post-secondary education participation, early parenting, and other factors, this study highlighted the importance of viewing minority foster youth experiences in care as a series of interconnected identities. These identities include race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and mental health status and are important when considering BIPOX youth with foster care experience education and employment decision-making skill set in relation to social capital and networks of support.

Strengths and Limitations

The usage of a mixed methods study allowed for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in a singular study. Combining mixed methods with focus on the personal networks of youth aging out of the foster care system allowed for a richer analysis. By

combining the quantitative data collection of network supports with qualitative interviewing about the nature of the supports that foster youth receive, this study can show how youth formulate new ties, how the dissolve ties that no longer work to their benefit, and why they have smaller or larger support networks. Another strength of the study lies in the qualitative interviewing process where the initial relationships discussed via quantitative inquiry provided an opportunity to move beyond knowing the structural patterns of youth relationships and network density towards the creation of network stories (McCarty et al., 2019; Perry, 2006; Perry et al., 2018). These network stories provided more information into how youth valued their relationships, how persons were selected for certain roles within their lives and provided an insider's view into the relational building of youth with child welfare experience as they journey through the early years of emerging adulthood. Recall that ego networks are completely independent and randomly selected in their nature. This is an advantage of using the personal networks of youth aging out of foster care, since inference to other egos and their networks would be appropriate in determining what level of support exists for youth across ages, gender identities, and geographic locations (Lin, 2001; Luke et al., 2007; Magino, 2009).

Although the study utilized a robust method of data collection and analysis by combining egocentric social network analysis with a mixed method, convergent parallel design, there are limitations to the study. Egocentric data analysis places heavy response burden on participants and uses proxy measures to analyze network characteristics (Perry, 2006). There is an inability to measure received or reciprocated network ties and it is often a disadvantage to rely solely on the ego's perspective of the nature of their relationships (Kadushin, 2012; Crossley, et al., 2015). It is possible that some of the youth felt pressured to provide a list of supportive adults and friends on the quantitative study while they felt more comfortable talking about why certain people in

their networks take charge, were elevated to higher status in their networks, or even why someone was dropped from their network altogether. This leads to a larger methodological question regarding the usage of purely quantitative egocentric data since it is likely that due to social acquiesce bias, the youth felt they had to list support rather than provide honest feedback on the supports that they received. Furthermore, critics of the egocentric network analysis method have noted that it is not possible to map the broader social structure in which the ego's personal networks are embedded, meaning that we cannot assess the implications for ego ties that we do not know exist (Perry et al., 2015). Finally, while this study combines two robust strategies for egocentric social network analysis, the study is cross-sectional in nature. There is no way of knowing how the youth social networks will change and evolve over time. Additionally, barring conducting whole network analysis, the study does not confirm the perceived supportive networks of youth identified in the study.

Implications for Social Work

Mechanisms of Change in Child Welfare

Supportive, consistent adult relationships are important to the overall wellbeing of youth transitioning from the foster care system to adulthood. As evidenced by research on emerging adulthood and the life course cycle, supportive relationships become central to how youth obtain housing, obtain employment, or participate in programs of postsecondary education. Additionally, supportive adult relationships can help to mitigate the development or the worsening of mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Future research and interventions regarding minority foster youth in transition should additionally consider the role of racial identity formation in young adulthood to ensure that the racial/ethnic is represented in intersectional social work endeavors. Research suggests that the presence of natural mentors, or

mentors that exist outside of planned intervention or child welfare-related programming, may hold the key to positively influence foster youth emerging adulthood outcomes (Greeson, 2013). Helping older minority foster youth in transition to develop strong racial identity can also aid in their development of strong supportive networks where natural mentoring is a chief provider of stable and consistent connections that can help bolster individual and collective social capital.

Additionally, this study uncovered several implications for social work practice. Each are outlined below.

Creation of culturally sensitive, trauma-informed interventions to build minority foster youth social capital.

There are misconceptions regarding youth transition to adulthood that champions self-sufficiency and survivalist techniques over valuing the interconnected relationships of foster youth in transition (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Researchers in child welfare are beginning to understand the importance of social networks to understand how foster youth gain access to material and intangible resources necessary for a successful transition into adulthood. Thus, viewing the interconnections of emerging adulthood, social capital, and social relationships requires a sophisticated method that can not only look at individual level factors related to adulthood while understanding the importance of interdependence versus independence.

Understand how racial injustice can impact the development of strong and consistent networks after youth leave care.

At present, the seemingly unrelenting news cycle of the deaths and mistreatment of blacks in the United States has created a crisis of public health proportions. In fact, racism has been declared a public health crisis by a growing number of counties and states in the US without a clear pathway on how to provide relief to those who feel discriminated against and

largely unheard (Jones, 2011; Mitchell, 2018). By employing critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2011; Stovall, 2005; Yosso, 2005) to develop culturally sensitive discharge procedures in the child welfare system, caseworkers can help current BIPOC foster youth develop coping mechanisms for dealing with ongoing racial injustice while also providing opportunities for youth to increase their social awareness through active participation in targeted programming. One such avenue could be to expand the role of Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) in most child welfare jurisdictions to include more peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities and opportunities to engage their communities in broader discussions of racism and foster care transition through civic activism. Additionally, the child welfare system could help to bolster social network development of transitioning BIPOC foster youth by employing foster alumni to key positions within the child welfare system. A common complaint of BIPOC foster youth when interfacing with caseworkers and others in the child welfare system is the lack of representation of people who have had similar experiences and who may provide a sense of comfort and support throughout the transition process. As evidenced by this dissertation, identity formation in emerging adulthood can be strengthened via the power of storytelling and feeling a sense of community with others with similar experiences in the foster care system.

Extend timing of receipt of Educational Training Vouchers (ETVs).

As evidenced by the current study, BIPOC foster youth often experience homelessness, unemployment, and racial/ethnic barriers to higher education completion well into their late twenties that can hinder self-sufficiency. In terms of the development of social capital, failure to complete a course of higher education can seriously hinder their ability to find employment in later life, thus rending their social mobility in jeopardy. When individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds seek employment, for example, they often look first to individuals and resources

within their social networks, then to opportunities through more formal processes such as job application sites or workforce programs. For black foster youth who have few stable and consistent supports, lack of financial support, or individuals in their networks with post-secondary degrees, it can become difficult to complete a course of higher education if they feel that they lack the information necessary to make an informed decision or lack of access to others with similar degrees to help when coursework becomes difficult (Pecora et al., 2006a).

Since the passage of the Child Abuse and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in 1974, the federal government has tried to assist in reducing barriers to educational access to current and former foster care youth). With CAPTA, the government created the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) to administer grant programs, identify issues related to youth in foster care, and established basic state-level grants to train caseworkers and other child welfare stakeholders on the importance of the foster care system and successful transition into adulthood (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016, p. 24). Subsequent legislation such as the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 helped to address educational barriers for foster youth. The Educational and Training Voucher Program (ETV), administered through the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), provides grants to all states that have a plan in place to help current and former foster youth with education, financial management, housing, mental health, and employment opportunities.

Most ILPs aid with youth between the ages of 18-21 who have aged out of the foster care system. The ETV program provides up to $5,000 annually for foster youth who are attending two-year, four-year, or approved vocational and technical education programs. But the ETV waiver may not be accepted at all college programs and most programs that are authorized by state governments to assist foster youth in accessing ETVs only allow youth to use the waivers at

state institutions and community colleges, which means that foster youth interested in utilizing the waiver must be interested in attending those colleges, which may or may not be a good fit for them (Davis, 2006). Foster youth interested in utilizing the ETV waivers must attend an approved two-year, four-year, or vocational education program. The funding is utilized for expenses such as room and board, textbooks, and other related items.

Although this funding exists, there is evidence to suggest that some foster youths are unaware of the ETV waiver program (McMillen et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005). In addition, there is a lack of discourse about postsecondary education options between foster youth and their caregivers (Bass, 2004; Wolamin; 2005). Foster youth additionally lack supportive adults who are consistent in their lives to provide instruction on college preparation and skills to navigate the college application process (Blome, 1997; Wolamin, 2005). Lack of quality information about the application process and financial aid process may cause some foster youth to perceive college as unaffordable and may add to existing barriers preventing educational access for foster youth. Extending timing of receipt for educational training vouchers, wraparound funding, and other financial supports may help black foster youth by allowing enough time for youth to make decisions about their educational pathway without fear of losing all support once they reach the terminal transition age in their states.

While the study has limitations, they do not dimmish the value of considering the role of social capital and social network development in how youth make educational or employment decisions in emerging adulthood. There is also a greater need for research in understanding how to strengthen or provide access for more informal networks of support. Finally, understanding and youth experiences aging out will help to shape more relevant interventions before, during, and, after the transition process.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings to this study demonstrate the fluid complexity of social support networks of minority youth with child welfare experiences. For the youth in this study, creating a supportive network relied on creating a sense of community and belonging over and above one's foster care experience. Participation in the Possibility Project and other youth-focused endeavors created opportunities for these youth to not only be themselves but exposed them to others in the system with similar stories to their own. For youth that did not meet the traditional foster care experience, hearing and supporting others in the program helped to validate their experiences and provided a way for them to find comfort in others without fear of judgement. Emerging adulthood for both youth who were still in the system and those who had already aged out was rife with difficulty adjusting to adulthood while also dealing with past unresolved trauma. Anxiety and depression were often experienced by these youth, but few sought professional help, instead relying on support network actors to help in times of emotional stress. Youth have clear boundaries that must be respected when maintaining their core support networks and failure to adhere to these boundaries and rules often results in casting bad actors away from the network entirely. The youth interviewed helped to elucidate the disconnect between having a supportive network and defining one's own sense of autonomy in emerging adulthood.

Appendix A

Informed Consent and IRB Approval]

This appendix contains a letter of support from the Possibility Project and a copy of the Informed Consent form given to participants at the start of the research study. The same informed consent was embedded into the Qualtrics survey (Appendix C), and verbal consent was again obtained prior to the start of the semi-structured interview (Appendix D).

Consent Form for IRB-FY2020-3996

You have been invited to take part in a study whose aim is to learn more about your perspectives as a foster youth and your educational and employment experiences. This study will be conducted by Rachel Ludeke, SSSW - Silver School of Social Work (SSSW), Silver School of Social Work, New York University, as a part of her Doctoral Dissertation. Her faculty sponsor is Professor Darcey H. Merritt, PhD, Department of SSSW - Silver School of Social Work (SSSW), Silver School of Social Work, New York University.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Complete a questionnaire about your background (age, gender identity, education, etc.) and your support network (i.e., friends, family, community members, other adults, etc.)
- Take part in an interview about your responses to the survey and about your impressions of your network supports before and after COVID-19

You will be audio recorded. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed.

Participation in this study will involve one and a half hours of your time: 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire and approximately 1 hour to participate in each of the two interviews. The survey questionnaire and interview will be completed on the same day. There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life.

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the educational and employment pathways of youth with experience in the child welfare system through their supportive social networks. Participants to the study will receive up to $70 for completion of both parts of the research study. If you choose to complete only one phase, you will be compensated $35 for your time.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by assigning code numbers to each participant so that the data is never linked to an individual identity. All completed questionnaires and related forms will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible to the investigator. In addition, audio recordings will be deleted after the interviews are transcribed so that subjects remain anonymous. Your information from this study will not be used for future research.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires, or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Rachel Ludeke at (212)-998-9186, rdl384@nyu.edu, 1 Washington Square North, Office # 401 , or the faculty sponsor, Darcey H. Merritt, PhD at (212) 998-9186, darceym@gmail.com, 1 Washington Square North, Office# 401 .

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects (UCAIHS), New York University, 665 Broadway, Suite 804, New York, New York, 10012, at ask.humansubjects@nyu.edu or (212) 998-4808. Please reference the study # (IRB-FY2020-3996) when contacting the IRB (UCAIHS).

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

Agreement to Participate

_____

Subject's Signature & Date

New York University IRB-FY2020-3996
Approved on 9-29-2020

THE POSSIBILITY PROJECT
EMPOWERING TEENAGERS TO CREATE A BETTER WORLD

November 25, 2019

Rachel Ludeke, LMSW
PhD Student
New York University, Silver School of Social Work
1 Washington Square North
New York, NY 10012-2231

Re: Aim Higher Dissertation Project

Dear Mrs. Ludeke:

The intent of this letter is to express support for your proposed research, titled, *Aim* ***Higher: Social Capital and Network Development of African American and Latinx Foster Youth***, to be conducted as the scope of work for the completion of the PhD Dissertation at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University. We have reviewed your outlined proposed project designed to explore the development of social capital and social networks of African American and Latinx current and former foster youth participating in the Foster Care Project at the Possibility Project.

The work is significant in that it is poised to redefine social capital through the lens of youth placed in out of home placement in the child welfare system. Further, your proposal importantly aims to identify culturally relevant barriers that may prevent African American and Latinx youth from completing secondary and post-secondary educational programs. Youth from these populations are overrepresented in the child welfare system in the United States but are underrepresented in outcomes related to postsecondary degree attainment and employment after their transition from the system into adulthood. Educational access for African American and Latinx youth is a matter of public health. Without access to quality education, these youths are at greater risk of experiencing physical and mental health concerns. The stress, ongoing trauma, and lack of stability in their relationships may hinder their academic performance without appropriate outlets of support. In their transition to adulthood, these youth must find stable housing, gain employment and become self-sufficient to avoid homelessness, chronic unemployment, and over dependence on public assistance programs.

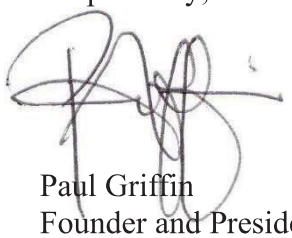
The proposed project is designed to assess how foster youth develop and maintain social capital and expand their social networks through their participation in The Possibility Project. It also seeks to understand how current and former foster youth utilize their connections to improve their educational and employment outcomes as they transition into adulthood. The research will

be conducted from a person-oriented, positive youth development framework with focus on the communities where youth live and their racial and ethnic identity.

In addition to the scope of the work proposed, we anticipate gaining a more meaningful understanding of how youth participating in The Possibility Project derive social value from their interactions with peers, staff, and other community members. This scope of research will also help our program staff understand how youth develop trusting relationships with other peers involved in the program. Pending a successful NYU Institutional Review Board application and other needed permissions, our organization is in full support of the proposed research.

We look forward to working with you in our mutual commitment to understanding the lived experiences of youth involved in the foster care system.

Respectfully,



Paul Griffin
Founder and President

THE-POSSIBILITY-PROJECT.ORG I INFO@THE-POSSIBILITY-PROJECT.ORG
104 W. 27TH STREET, 12TH FLOOR 1 NEW YORK, NY 10001 1 PHONE: 212-924-2300 1 FAX: 212-924-2167

Appendix B

Research Biography and Informational Flyer

Aim Higher: Social Capital and Social Network Development for African American and Latinx Foster Youth

Do you have experience with the foster care system in New York City? If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Complete an online questionnaire about your background (age, gender identity, education, etc.) and your support network (i.e., friends, family, community members, other adults, etc.)
- Take part in an interview about your responses to the survey and about your impressions of your network supports before and after COVID-19
- Participants will be compensated $70.00 gift card for completion of two phases of research ($35 for completion of an online survey and $35 for completion of a one-and-a-half-hour interview (Phone, Zoom or other web-based video calling software).

If you want to hear more about this study, please contact Rachel Ludeke (New York University, Silver School of Social Work) at rdl384@nyu.edu. You can also send a text to (747) 251-0012.

About Rachel:

Rachel Ludeke is a PhD candidate at NYU Silver School of Social Work. She has worked in the child welfare field as an administrator for transitioning foster youth programs in New Jersey and has also served as a program coordinator for various programs related to homelessness, disaster relief, and nonprofit management and governance. She incorporates her experiences as a homeless youth and ward of the court to examine the educational and employment disparities of child welfare-involved minority youth using social network analysis. She holds a BA in English and History/Political Science from Rutgers University and an MSW degree from the Rutgers School of Social Work. Rachel is also a licensed social worker in New York and New Jersey. All Information is Confidential.

Appendix C

Survey Questions

The following survey questions were generated in Qualtrics.

Aim Higher: Educational and Employment Pathways of Foster Youth

---

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Q1
Consent Form for IRB-FY2020-3996

You have been invited to take part in a study whose aim is to learn more about your perspectives as a foster youth and your educational and employment experiences. This study will be conducted by Rachel Ludeke, SSSW - Silver School of Social Work (SSSW), Silver School of Social Work, New York University, as a part of her Doctoral Dissertation. Her faculty sponsor is Professor Darcey H. Merritt, PhD , Department of SSSW - Silver School of Social Work (SSSW), Silver School of Social Work, New York University.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: Complete a questionnaire about your background (age, gender identity, education, etc.) and your support network (i.e. friends, family, community members, other adults, etc.) Take part in an interview about your responses to the survey and about your impressions of your network supports before and after COVID-19

You will be audio recorded. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed.

Participation in this study will involve one and a half hours of your time: 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire and approximately 1 hour to participate in each of the two interviews. The survey questionnaire and interview will be completed on the same day. There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life.

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the educational and employment pathways of youth with experience in the child welfare system through their supportive social networks. Participants to the study will receive up to $70 for completion of both parts of the research study. If you choose to complete only one phase, you will be compensated $35 for your time.
Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by assigning code numbers to each participant so that the data is never linked to an individual identity. All completed questionnaires and related forms will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible to the

investigator. In addition, audio recordings will be deleted after the interviews are transcribed so that subjects remain anonymous. Your information from this study will not be used for future research.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires, or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.
If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Rachel Ludeke at (212)-998-9186, rdl384@nyu.edu, 1 Washington Square North, Office # 401 , or the faculty sponsor, Darcey H. Merritt, PhD at (212) 998-9186, darceym@gmail.com, 1 Washington Square North, Office# 401 .

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Q1 = No

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Demographics

Q2 In this section, I am going to ask about demographic information such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, and current education. You can choose to skip questions at any time. All information in this survey, including this section, will be kept confidential. Data will not be shared with anyone else.

Q3 Are you currently in foster care?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Not Sure (3)

Display This Question:

If Q3 = No

Q4 When did you leave foster care?

- ○ Before age 18 (1)
- ○ Age 18 (2)
- ○ Age 19 (4)
- ○ Age 20 (5)
- ○ Age 21 (6)

Q5 How old are you?

▼ 18 (2) ... 30 (14)

Q6 What are your preferred pronouns?

- ○ He/his (1)
- ○ She/hers (2)
- ○ They/their (3)
- ○ Prefer to self-describe (4) _____
- ○ No pronoun preference (5)
- ○ Prefer not to say (6)

Q7 I identify my race as:

- [ ] Black/African American (1)
- [ ] American Indian or Alaska Native (2)
- [ ] Asian (3)
- [ ] Native Hawaiian (4)
- [ ] Native American (5)
- [ ] Pacific Islander (6)
- [ ] White (7)
- [ ] 8 (8) _____
- [ ] Other (please specify) (10) _____
- [ ] Prefer not to answer (11)

Q8 I identify my ethnicity as:

- ○ Non-Hispanic/Latinx (1)
- ○ Hispanic/Latinx (2)
- ○ Prefer to self-describe (3) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say (4)

Q9 I identify my gender as:

- [ ] Female (1)
- [ ] Male (2)
- [ ] Nonbinary/third gender (3)
- [ ] Prefer to self-describe (4) _____
- [ ] Prefer not to say (5)

Q10 Do you identify as transgender?

- [ ] Yes (1)
- [ ] No (2)
- [ ] Prefer not to say (3)

Q11 Do you identify as a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender Community?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Prefer not to say (3)

Q12 What is your sexual orientation?

- ○ Gay (1)
- ○ Lesbian (2)
- ○ Bisexual (3)
- ○ Pansexual (4)
- ○ Prefer to self-describe (5) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say (6)

Q13 What language to you primarily speak while at home?

_____

Q14 Are you currently dating or in a relationship with someone?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Prefer not to say (3)

Q15 Do you have any children?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Prefer not to say (3)

Display This Question:

If Q15 = Yes

Q16 What is the age and biological (birth) sex of your child or children?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q17 Are you currently enrolled in school?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Q17 = Yes

Q18 What type of school do you attend?

- ○ High School (includes public and private settings) (1)
- ○ Magnet or Specialized School (2)
- ○ Trade School (3)
- ○ Vocational School (4)
- ○ 4 Year College/University (5)
- ○ 2 Year Community College (8)
- ○ Other (6) _____
- ○ Currently not enrolled in school (7)

Page Break

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Block 5

Q19 Over the past month, who are the people with whom you've discussed important personal matters? You can create aliases or use initials for each person if you do not feel comfortable sharing the person's name. You can enter up to 10 names of family, friends, or trusted adults in your support network.

- Person 1 (1) _____
- Person 2 (2) _____
- Person 3 (3) _____
- Person 4 (4) _____
- Person 5 (5) _____
- Person 6 (6) _____
- Person 7 (7) _____
- Person 8 (8) _____
- Person 9 (9) _____
- Person 10 (10) _____

End of Block: Block 5

Start of Block: Block 4

Q20 The next section will ask you more general questions about the people you named. If you are not sure of the answer, give your best response. You can choose to skip questions at any time.

${lm://Field/1}

Q21 What is **${lm://Field/1}'s** this person's biological sex?

- ○ Male (1)
- ○ Female (2)
- ○ Nonbinary/third gender (3)
- ○ Prefer to self-describe (4) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say (5)

Q22 How old is **${lm://Field/1}**?

_____

Q23 What is **${lm://Field/1}'s** race/ethnic identity? Choose all that apply.

- [ ] Black/African American (1)
- [ ] American Indian/Alaska Native (2)
- [ ] Asian (3)
- [ ] Native Hawaiian (4)
- [ ] Native American (5)
- [ ] Pacific Islander (6)
- [ ] White (7)
- [ ] Other (please specify) (10) _____
- [ ] Prefer not to say (11)

Q24 What is your relationship to **${lm://Field/1}**? (i.e. friend, biological and nonbiological family, community member, etc)

- ○ Friend (1)
- ○ Biological Mother (4)
- ○ Biological Father (5)
- ○ Foster Caregiver (6)
- ○ Biological Sister (7)
- ○ Biological Brother (8)
- ○ Other Relative (please specify) (9)

_____

- ○ Teacher (2)
- ○ Caseworker (10)
- ○ Possibility Project Staff (11)
- ○ Other Relationship (please specify) (12)

_____

Q25 How long have you known **${lm://Field/1}**?

- ○ Less than a year (1)
- ○ 1-5 years (2)
- ○ More than 5 years (3)

Q26 How far do you live away from **${lm://Field/1}**?

- ○ Same household (7)
- ○ Less than a mile to 5 miles (1)
- ○ 5 miles to 10 miles (2)
- ○ 10 miles to 25 miles (3)
- ○ More than 25 miles (4)

Q27 How do you communicate with **${lm://Field/1}**? Check all that apply for communicating with **${lm://Field/1}**.

- ☐ Phone (2)
- ☐ Email (3)
- ☐ Text (4)
- ☐ Social Media (5)
- ☐ In-Person/Virtual/ Video Screening (6)

Q28 Which social media platform(s) do you use most often to contact **${lm://Field/1}.**

- [ ] Facebook (1)
- [ ] FaceTime (2)
- [ ] WhatsApp (3)
- [ ] GroupMe (4)
- [ ] Snapchat (5)
- [ ] Twitter (6)
- [ ] Google Duo (7)
- [ ] Skype (8)
- [ ] Other (9) _____

Q29 How often do you talk to **${lm://Field/1}**?

- ○ Once a day (1)
- ○ Several times a day (4)
- ○ About once a week (5)
- ○ About once a month (6)
- ○ A couple times a year (7)
- ○ Not in the past year (8)

Q30 Is **${lm://Field/1}** employed?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Not sure (3)

Display This Question:

If Loop current: Q30 = Yes

Q31 What position does **${lm://Field/1}** hold?

- ○ Current employment (please list) (1) _____
- ○ Not sure (2)

Page Break

Q32 **${lm://Field/1}** provides the following support (check all that apply).

- ☐ Academic Support (1)
- ☐ Career Preparation Assistance (2)
- ☐ Extracurricular Support (4)
- ☐ Social Support (5)
- ☐ Emotional Support (6)
- ☐ Financial Suppport (7)
- ☐ Other support (please specify) (8) _____

Q33 How often do you rely on ${lm://Field/1} for support?

- ○ Daily (1)
- ○ Weekly (2)
- ○ Monthly (3)
- ○ Other (please specify) (4) _____

Q34 How close are you to **${lm://Field/1}** ?

- Not close (1)
- Close (2)
- Very close (3)

Q35 How often do you talk to **${lm://Field/1}**? (i.e. on the phone, email, text, social media, etc.)

- Once a day (1)
- Several times a day (2)
- About once a week (3)
- About once a month (4)
- A couple times a year (5)
- Not in the past year (6)

End of Block: Block 4

Start of Block: Other Communication

Q36 Next, I want to ask if people in your network know each other.

Carry Forward Entered Choices - Entered Text from "Q19"

Carry Forward Entered Choices - Entered Text from "Q19"

Q37 Select the which of your supports know each other by checking the boxes below.

	Person 1 (1)	Person 2 (2)	Person 3 (3)	Person 4 (4)	Person 5 (5)	Person 6 (6)	Person 7 (7)	Person 8 (8)	Person 9 (9)	Person 10 (10)
Person 1 (x1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 2 (x2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 3 (x3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 4 (x4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 5 (x5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 6 (x6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 7 (x7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 8 (x8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 9 (x9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Person 10 (x10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Page Break

Q38 Did the level of your access to your support network change during COVID-19?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Not Sure (3)
- ○ Prefer not to say (4)

Display This Question:

If Q38 = Yes

Q39 If you experienced any changes to communication with your support network, how did it change?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q40 Did you reduce or increase the amount of times you contacted VIPs (Very Important Persons) in your supportive network?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q41 How comfortable were you with utilizing social media to stay in contacts with supports outside your household during self-isolation/quarantine?

- ○ Very comfortable (1)
- ○ Comfortable (2)
- ○ Neutral (3)
- ○ Uncomfortable (4)
- ○ Extremely uncomfortable (5)

Q42 On a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 not at all being satisfied and 5 being extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you with the level of overall support that this person provided?

- ○ 0 (1)
- ○ 1 (2)
- ○ 2 (3)
- ○ 3 (4)
- ○ 4 (5)
- ○ 5 (6)

Q43 The next part of the study will be a brief interview regarding your social support network. This should take no more than an hour. Are you interested in participating?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q44 Are you interested in participating in a future follow up survey and interview?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Q43 = Yes

Q45 If you are interested in participating, please provide best way to contact you. The interview can take place virtually (though FaceTime, Skype, or other video calling app) or by phone. Interviews will be conducted within 48 hours after survey completion Thank you!

- ○ Which social media platform do you use? (5) _____
- ○ What is your username? (6) _____
- ○ Preferred Email Address (7) _____

End of Block: Other Communication

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Intro Script:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. This interview will be about an hour long. I am hoping to understand the experiences of young people with experience in the foster care system, their participation in the Possibility Project, and how these experiences may have shaped your employment and education choices. I am hoping to showcase the importance of youth voices in understanding how young people create and maintain their social networks. Please be as honest and as candid as possible; it will help in the future to develop the best possible services for youth with foster care experience. If a question is unclear, please feel free to stop me and ask for clarification. If a question ever makes you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to skip it. If you need to take a break from the interview or stop it altogether, you are free to do so at any time and there will be no penalty.

I understand that COVID-19 and racial unrest has impacted every part of society, and I would like to hear how this crisis has affected your relationships and your thoughts towards your future educational and employment opportunities to help other foster youth who may be experiencing the same feelings.

Let's get started.

Section 1: Possibility Project Participation

First, I'd like to discuss your experiences with the Possibility Project.

1. Tell me a little more about yourself. How did you find out about the Possibility Project?
    a. Which program have you participated in?
    b. What was your role?
    c. How did you get along with your peers? With staff?

2. How does the Possibility Project help you in your daily life?
3. What is your biggest takeaway from participating in the Possibility Project?
4. Are you currently in foster care?

5. *If No:*
    a. What was the biggest challenge you faced when you left care?
    b. How did participating in the Possibility Project help with leaving care?
    c. What was the easiest choice you made when you left foster care?

Section 2: Current Support Network and COVID-19

Now I'd like to speak with you a bit more about your supportive network, especially in light of the COVID-19 crisis and ongoing racial unrest.

6. After completing the survey and thinking about your network of supports, do you think that there are gaps in your network?

7. What effect has quarantine had on your ability to plan for your future?
8. Did you suffer any loss of access to basic supplies during the crisis? If so, how did you manage during this period?
9. Do you feel the same level of support from your network now as compared to prior to COVID-19?
    a. What changed or stayed the same in terms of the support you receive?
10. What message do you have for child welfare providers and others about your experiences in quarantine?
11. How have the services changed if at all during COVID-19 from Possibility Project?
12. How has the rise in protests and police brutality affected how you communicate with your supportive network? In what ways?
    a. Do you think your race has influenced your education?
    b. Has race or ethnicity influenced your ability to find work?

Section 3: Areas of Support and Decision-Making

I'm now going to ask you about the types of supports you have in your support network and how these supports help you to make decisions.

13. Are there areas of support that you feel you need, but are missing from your network?
    d. How could these areas be improved for you, if at all?
14. Are there people in your network that tend to take charge in certain situations? (For instance, are there people in your network that always seem to know what to do for any situation?)
15. Can you tell me more about how you make connections with people?
    e. Does your culture influence how you develop relationships with people?
    f. What is a reason someone may be dropped from your support network?
    g. How does someone become a VIP in your support network?
    h. How can someone stay a VIP in your support network?
16. What career do you plan to pursue?
    i. When did you decide what you were going to do "when you grew up?" Did you always feel this way?
    j. What educational background do you think you need to participate in this career?
    k. Who inspires you to pursue this career?
17. Who helps you with educational decisions?
    l. Who helps you with information related to education and financial aid?
    m. How do you verify this information?

18. What conversations did you and your friends have about the future? Did you talk about going to college or some other educational experience? [*This could be going to a trade school, getting a professional certificate, or participating in an apprenticeship*].
19. Who helps you make decisions about employment?
    a. What resources will you need to meet your goals?
20. *If enrolled in college or other post-secondary program: What were the main factors that led you to enrolling in college?
21. *If enrolled in college or other post-secondary program: What were your biggest challenges in enrolling in college? What support did you receive from your family and friends?

Section 4: Final Questions and Other Comments

22. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your support network or your participation in the Possibility Project?
23. Are you interested in participating in a future follow up study? This is totally voluntary.
    a. What is the best way to contact you?

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me. My email information is in the informed consent and you should have it from your email.

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