1-1-2016

Identifying Spiritual Themes in Narratives of Young Adults Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care: A Qualitative Study

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Identifying Spiritual Themes in Narratives of Young Adults Who Have Aged Out of

Foster Care: A Qualitative Study

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver

and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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June 2016

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Title: Identifying Spiritual Themes in Narratives of Young Adults Who Have Aged Out
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Degree Date: June 2016

Abstract

Each year up to thirty thousand young adults age out of foster care in the United

States. Historically research has focused on more tangible issues for this population (e.g.,

employment, education, etc.). Recent research addresses more intangible issues (e.g.,

quality of their relationships, resilience, etc.). This study reviews and then furthers such

research by doing qualitative research to conduct nine loosely structured interviews with

young adults who aged out of foster care to (1) discern if and how they made meaning of

their experiences and (2) identify if there are spiritual themes within those narratives.

This project used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological inquiry approach

and a modified grounded theory for the data collection process and thematic analysis for

the analytical procedure. Four super code categories of meanings about aging out

emerged with both beneficial and detrimental outcomes: (1) the interviewees'

foundational beliefs about self and coping, (2) their relationships (3) their worldviews

about spiritual topics; and (4) tattoos: a physical manifestation demonstrating meanings

made. These super codes were discussed using psychology of religion, especially

definitions and theories from religious coping (Pargament), meaning making (Park and

Folkman), and meaning centered approaches to resilience (Wong & Wong). There were

five topics of significance: (1) interviewees did, indeed, make meaning of their foster

care and aging out experiences; (2) spiritual themes are present in the interviewee

narratives of how they made meaning out of foster care and aging out; (3) spiritual narratives are implicit versus explicit; (4) Pargament's (2007) attributes of the sacred can be used to identify implicitly sacred statements; (5) tattoos can demonstrate the ways interviewees symbolically represented spiritual themes to do with being in foster care and aging out.

The findings emphasize the need for expert knowledge and training to recognize how young adults make meaning out of the aging out process, and to identify the implicitly sacred aspects of those meanings.

Clinicians can engage and build upon this study by recognizing the implicit spiritual dimensions of the aging out process, and exploring with young adults the beneficial and detrimental aspects of these implicit spiritual meanings.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

In the United States each year, up to thirty thousand 18-21 year-olds age out of the foster care system (McCoy-Roth, DeVooght, & Fletcher, 2011; US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Administration on Children Youth and Families Children's Bureau, 2016, p. 16). In most states they 'emancipate' from the services of foster care at age 18. They are on their own if they have not been reunited with their biological family or been adopted. Historically, research on this population has primarily focused on pragmatic issues and outcomes associated with their transition to adulthood (Collins, 2001; Cook, 1994; Pecora et al., 2005). Recently there has been a shift towards addressing less tangible aspects of the aging out process, such as the quality of these young adults' relationships and their resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Samuels, 2008).

This dissertation explores an aspect of this process that has not been adequately addressed: if and how these young adults make meaning of their experiences of having been in foster care and having aged out, and whether there are spiritual dimensions to such meaning making. According to psychologist of religion Ken Pargament (2007) "spirituality [is] a search for the sacred" (p. 32). He describes 'the sacred' broadly:

> for many, the sacred is equivalent to higher powers or divine beings…[while] others think of the sacred in a broader sense, one that encompasses any variety of

objects, from mountains, music, and marriage to vegetarianism, virtues, and visions. (Pargament, 2007, p. 32).

This dissertation recognizes variations of spirituality and emphasizes more diverse and idiosyncratic ways of understanding the sacred.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to (1) discern if and how young adults who have aged out of foster care made meaning of these experiences and (2) identify if there are spiritual themes within those narratives. Findings from this research may assist not only those who provide services to this population on a regular basis, such as social workers, but also those who have direct contact with them in other aspects of their lives including but not limited to educators, religious and medical professionals. As a result of this research these care-givers may listen more closely for the specific and unique spiritual issues that are present for this population. In addition, this exploratory qualitative research provides a theoretical grounding for further research on how young adults make meaning of and, as applicable, experience the sacred in the aging out process.

Research and theories on how people draw upon religion and experiences of the sacred to cope with stress have defined a well-integrated spirituality as

> …broad and deep, responsive to life's situations, nurtured by the larger social context, capable of flexibility and continuity, and oriented toward a [spirituality] that is large enough to encompass the full range of human potential and luminous enough to provide the individual with a powerful guiding vision. (Pargament, 2007, p. 136)

Well-integrated spirituality fosters resilience and stress-related spiritual and psychological growth (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Spilka, Hood Jr, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). Spirituality that is not well-integrated is exactly opposite.

The component parts clash with each other, the destinations are fragmented or lead to small or false gods, pathways do not fit the situations, persons or environment, and spirituality is either too flexible or too rigid to deal with life's changes.

Research and theories on religious coping have explored how adults make sense of many kinds of suffering and trauma (Pargament, 1997, 2007; Park, 2008; Shafranske, 2005). There is little research on how young adults draw upon religion or spirituality to cope with stress (Carleton, Esparza, Thaxter, & Grant, 2008; Desrosiers & Miller, 2007), and there is no research on how those aging out of foster care make meaning of this experience and if there are spiritual themes. The purpose of this dissertation is to use qualitative research strategies to explore whether young adults who have aged out of foster care make meaning of these experiences, and identify whether any of their meaning making and coping is spiritually-oriented.

Rationale for Pursuing the Thesis: Significance and Contributions to the Field

The challenges faced by young adults who age out of foster care have only gained significant attention in the last 35 years. The primary focus has been on meeting basic needs given the likelihood of homelessness, educational deficits, and lack of gainful employment (etc.) (Barth, 1990; Festinger, 1983; Pecora, et al., 2005). While assessing basic needs is essential, these young adults also have less tangible needs. Recently there has been a shift in the literature calling for more strengths-based research and practice and a less deficit oriented youth development perspective (Collins, 2004; Frey, Greenblatt, & Brown, 2005; Nixon, 2005). Positive outcomes studies are more likely to garner political attention and funding (Collins & Clay, 2009).

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This shift to a strength-based approach to understanding this population coincides with a growing interest in stress-related spiritual and psychological coping, growth, and health among psychologists (Pargament, 2007), social workers (Canda & Dyrud Furman, 2010; Hawkins, 2005; Scott & Magnuson, 2006), and health (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Religious coping research in particular has focused on the importance of meaning-making (Park, 2005a; Park, 2005b; Spilka et al., 2003). Since the rise of positive psychology, much of this research has been formulated within this framework (Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2010). These fields engage topics such as the

> pursuit of values, the problems of self-actualization and their obstacles, the development of personal freedom, the centrality of love and caring for others in human relationships, the concern for the ultimate meaning of life, and the ability to cope with stresses and strains of everyday living in a harmonious way. (Giorgi, 1984, p. 462)

This research project contributes to research on spirituality and meaning-making by using a strengths-based approach to understand the aging out process, and also contributes to research at the intersection of health and spirituality by focusing for the first time on identifying the spiritual themes in the narratives of this population. The use of qualitative strategies gave these young adults space to describe their experiences of meaning-making, articulate the unique spiritual dimensions of their experiences, and demonstrate evidence of their resilience, strength and inherent value and worth, while also fully acknowledging the challenges they have experienced.

Specifically, this research addresses the following research questions:

1. Have young adults made meaning of the phenomenon of aging out of the foster care system?

2. Additionally, if they have, are there spiritual themes within those narratives?

My expectation from the beginning was that any spiritual themes present for these young adults would be unique because of their particular foster care experiences and subsequent emancipation (e.g., their lack of family support systems, their untraditional life phase experiences). The findings for this research support those expectations and suppositions, provide the groundwork for further research, and highlight the need for care-givers to address spiritual dimensions of the aging out process.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Methodology

I chose qualitative methodology in this exploratory study in order to give young adults voice to articulate the vast breadth and depth of possible meanings and spiritual interpretations of their aging out experiences. This interpretative strategy research design allows for the discovery of new meanings about aging out that have not been addressed in prior research. The foundational purpose of a phenomenological research study is to recognize the lived experience—the phenomena of a specific experience for an individual, or a group (Patton, 2001, p. 104). Additionally, this type of study aims to understand in what ways having experienced this particular phenomenon impacts how individuals understand themselves, and the world around them, as well as the worldviews that are formed from these experiences (Patton, 2001, p. 106). This dissertation lends itself to a phenomenological approach because of its focus on recognizing the meanings these young adult interviewees have given to the phenomenon of having been in, and having aged out, of foster care.

Another reason for using qualitative research strategies was to create an opportunity for these young adults to be heard in a direct and meaningful way. The purpose of the interviewer is to learn from their interviewees, not to judge them (Creswell, 1998, p. 18). I do not have an 'insider's perspective' of the phenomenon of being in foster care and aging out as I was never in foster care myself. The goal of this work is to hear what wisdom and knowledge they have to offer, not to advise them on how to live their lives. I am specifically interested in what meanings they have made in regards to being in foster care and aging out, as well as if, and how, they discovered and maintained a sense of spirituality through those experiences. In order to accomplish this, I chose not have a pre-set definition for terms such as spirituality and religion. Instead I listened to their vocabulary to recognize what was meaningful to them, thus increasing the possibility of a broader understanding of their experiences.

This dissertation is founded on the concept that identities are constructed using narratives, and that they are always being interpreted, or reinterpreted, as individuals make meaning of their lives (Patton, 2001). The ways the individuals have coped can be identified in the narratives the interviewees share. While each persons' interpretations and coping styles will be unique, there is an expectation that the themes identified in their narratives will also resonate with others who have, or will, age out of foster care. Qualitative interviews also provide an opportunity to identify meanings that are life diminishing, and therefore provide understanding to future care-givers in ways to work with these young adults to reassess these meanings to form more beneficial, life giving meanings that foster spiritual integration of aging out experiences.

Research Design

For this study I used a purposeful sampling procedure. This approach looks for cases with deep substantive meanings rather than looking for "empirical generalizations" (Patton, 2001, p. 230). Specifically, a criterion sampling strategy was applied, which looked for cases wherein all participants have experienced the same phenomenon, in this case that of being in foster care and aging out. There was additional criterion for possible co-researchers which is described in detail in the methodology chapter. Within the parameters of those criterion, nine loosely structured in-depth interviews were completed. I used a modified grounded theory approach, which recognizes the interrelationship between data collection and analysis, for the data collection procedures in this project. (Strauss & Corbin, 2015, p. 8). For the analytic procedure I used thematic analysis to discern how meaning was made, and to identify if there were spiritual dimensions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-93). I describe the detail the steps taken for this analytical procedure in the methodology section of this dissertation.

Summary of the Significance of the Findings in regards to the Literature of Aging Out Theory and Practice and Psychology of Religion

In the discussion chapter, I elaborate on five topics of significance discovered by this dissertations project from the thematic analysis in the findings chapter in conversation with the relevant literature that is reviewed in chapters two and three. The five topics are

- Interviewees did, indeed, make meaning of their foster care and aging out experiences.

- Spiritual themes are present in the interviewee narratives of how they made meaning out of foster care and aging out.

- Spiritual narratives are implicit versus explicit.

- Pargament's (2007) attributes of the sacred can be used to identify implicitly sacred statements.

- Tattoos can demonstrate the ways interviewees symbolically represented spiritual themes to do with being in foster care and aging out.

In this project I relied upon the ways psychologists of religion describe the importance and process of making meanings. Within this literature and research, meaning "refers to perceptions of significance" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 116). For example, Wong describes personal meaning as

> an individually constructed cognitive system, which endows life with personal significance.…[T]he meaning system consists of three components, namely, cognitive, motivational, and affective.…it is conceived of as a cognitive map that orients the individual in steering through the life course…[and] is used for self and life interpretation. (Wong, 1998, p. 368)

Building upon psychological studies of religion and the process of meaning making I demonstrate through the findings in the thematic analysis chapter that interviewees made meaning of their foster care and aging out experiences, and did so in both beneficial and detrimental ways. The specific meanings made by my interviewees were demonstrated in the findings chapter via the four super-code themes discovered in this dissertation research project of

- Development of foundational beliefs about the self and how to cope

- Development of foundational beliefs about relationships

- Development of foundational beliefs and worldviews about spiritual topics

- Tattoos: a physical manifestation demonstrating meanings made

These super-codes are representative of the over-arching themes shared by the interviewees about the meanings they made regarding their experiences of being in foster care and aging out.

Additionally, in this dissertation research I identified that there are spiritual themes within those meanings made, although these meanings are not often expressed explicitly, or in traditional languages of religion and/or spirituality. In order to identify spiritual themes, I moved back and forth between the interviewees' narratives and emergent themes, and what I knew about spirituality as a search for the sacred from my review of the literature in chapter three addressing the works of psychologist of religion, Kenneth Pargament. As I explain in detail in the discussion chapter, combining the categories of the sacred core and the sacred ring, identifying aspects of spiritual/religious coping, and recognizing the three dimensions of significance—subjective, objective and motivational—helped me to identify implicit spiritual themes that were present in the narratives of young adults who have been in foster care and aged out.

The findings chapter demonstrates that themes to do with the sacred appeared both explicitly and implicitly in these interviews. An important research finding of this dissertation is that the presence of spirituality was nearly always implicit in these interviews. Therefore, this dissertation also demonstrates the importance of expert knowledge of psychological studies of religion to identify spiritual aspects of narratives, most especially implicit ones. With training, expert knowledge of these foundational

concepts can assist in recognizing implicit aspects of the sacred in the narratives of those who have been in foster care and aged out, as well as how to assist them, when needed, concerning these narratives.

In the process of identifying if there were spiritual themes present within the narratives I had to infer if there were implicitly sacred aspects to their narratives. In order to identify implicitly sacred statements I found the use of Pargament's attributes of the sacred a powerful tool to analyze the interviewees' narratives (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). As I describe in greater detail in the review of the literature, and the process of thematic analysis, those attributes are transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. The ways in which these attributes assisted in this dissertation is described in the discussion chapter in collaboration with each of the four super code categories.

The final subject of significance to be discussed is that of tattoos as a possible physical manifestation of implicitly sacred beliefs. An unexpected finding from this research about understanding how the interviewees made meaning emerged through conversations about tattoos. Even the most reserved of the interviewees became animated and energetic when discussing the topic of tattoos. It becomes apparent that recognizing the importance of tattoos for this population may offer care-givers a gateway to conversations about deeply held meanings made by those who have been in foster care and aged out.

Conclusion

In concluding this introduction, it is necessary to recognize that this work is exploratory and as such, identifies generalized over-arching themes. While this research

documents specific contextual factors such as marginality (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, specific mental and physical disabilities) as well as other experiences specifically addressing their foster care experience (e.g., amount of time in foster care, experiences of maltreatment, etc.) it does not solely focus on any one of these particular experiences. Focusing on such specific contextual factors will be part of future research projects. But what is apparent from this research project is that focusing on the implicitly spiritual narratives of those who have been in foster care and aged out is a powerful tool providing care for this population.

Chapter Preview

Chapter 1: Introduction

> This chapter gives a brief overview of the project, the rationale for pursuing this research topic, the methodology and research design, and a very brief description of the significance of the findings. It also presents the chapter outline.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Understanding Aging Out: History, Outcomes, and Theoretical Approaches

> This chapter begins with the history of foster care in the United States and the perceptions of the society's responsibility to those in care. Then it describes how the aging out population came to be recognized by the law-makers, and the laws that have been created to try to assist them since then. It then reviews the literature on the experiences of those aging out: it shows statistical representations such as how many become unemployed, homeless, incarcerated, and become

young parents, as well as those that go on to college or have more beneficial outcomes. It finishes with a review the theoretical and psychological approaches to knowledge that have been used in understanding this population

Chapter 3: Literature Review: Introducing Religious Coping Theory, the Meaning Making Model, the Meaning Centered Approach to Resilience

This chapter discusses the literature and research on coping and religious coping theory, meaning making theory, and explains the meaning centered approach to resilience. It then explains ways to define and understand religion and spirituality, and discusses how each may be engaged in the coping and meaning making processes.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter explains the rationale for using a qualitative research design and phenomenological inquiry approach for exploring spiritual issues. It then outlines the research design and explains each step of the procedure that was followed for this research study. Within this chapter are the demographic results of the questionnaires given to the interviewees. This chapter explains the processes of analysis that was followed. It then explains the specific methodology used for identifying spiritual themes in the narratives. Then it finishes by presenting the findings in explaining the four super-codes established via the analysis.

Chapter 5: Presentation of the Findings

This chapter presents the emergent themes found for ways of making meaning and when applicable, the spiritual themes within those narratives. It begins with a short introduction to each of the interviewees. Then the findings are presented by each category of the super-code topics: the interviewees' foundational beliefs about self and coping, their relationships, and their worldviews about spiritual topics. The final section discusses the topic of tattoos: how the interviewees' actual tattoos or planned tattoos can be interpreted as physical representations demonstrating meanings made. Throughout this chapter I use direct quotes from the narratives of the young adults to demonstrate these topics.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In this chapter I discuss five topics of significance from the thematic analysis presented in the findings in regards to the literature presented on aging out, religious coping theory and meaning making. The topics discussed are: (1) interviewees did, indeed, make meaning of their foster care and aging out experiences; (2) spiritual themes are present in the interviewee narratives of how they made meaning out of foster care and aging out; (3) spiritual narratives are implicit versus explicit; (4) Pargament's (2007) attributes of the sacred can be 963 #174"   Erikson, 1963, p. 250   ) . Formative experiences fostering mistrust in pe ople, and the impossibility of permanence and happiness seemed to make the intervi ewees view peaceful moments with then discusses the clinical implications of this

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research project, and concludes with a description of the limitations, and the

implications future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review: Understanding Aging Out: History, Outcomes and Theoretical Approaches

The History of Aging Out

To begin to understand this population of young adults, we must recognize that historically their primary care-giver has been essentially a system. This system is foster care which consists of

> facilities [that] are intended to provide services for children who, for one or another reason, cannot be adequately cared for by their own families, temporarily or for an extended period. Foster care can, in a sense, be regarded as 'the ultimate form of parental prosthesis'. It is the actual operational response to the problem posed by the concept of *parens patriae* which 'suggests that society has ultimate parental responsibilities for all children in the community'. Society must therefore provide alternative, adequate care. Child welfare services, [via foster care], are the formal instrument through which the community discharges these responsibilities. (Festinger, 1983, p. xi)

In order to comprehend the current experiences of those who are aging out, one must first cognize the history of foster care as a whole in the United States.[1] This is a long and complicated history: I will only explain some of the more relevant overarching trends of how children in need have been viewed and the ways the United States as a nation has perceived their responsibilities to them. There is, of course, far more to this history than can be noted here, but an overview can help as a guide to understanding the

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[1] As a note, the aging out phenomenon is a world-wide issue, but the discussion of the international literature is beyond the scope of this project. For literature on this topic, one can look to other resources (Boshier & Wademan, 2010; Colton & Williams, 1997; Reid, 2007).

experiences of aging out in contemporary times. The question of how the aging out population came to be recognized in the late 1950's and the subsequent policies in the 1980's that came into being actually needs to begin long before the aging out population was even acknowledged.

McGowan has pointed out that when looking at the history of the child welfare system it can be seen that many of the challenges being experienced today are actually reflections to the solutions to problems of the past (McGowan, 2005). Many of these challenges stem from debates and tensions that have never been fully resolved. Examples are: whether our job is to just protect children or to assist in their development; who is ultimately responsible for care once children are removed from their family: federal, state, or local governments; whether care should be uniform or customized; and whether assistance should focus on children or be integrated to assist families, and what are the boundaries between child and family care. As McGowan notes, child welfare services are strongly influenced by social trends and the larger societal context, both negatively and positively. Systemic change is also reactive to media attention focusing on individuals or groups, again, in beneficial and detrimental ways.

McGowan (2005) has done a comprehensive review of the history of foster care in the United States that is worthy of summary here. We begin in the 17th and 18th century. In these early days most individuals in the country were preoccupied with basic survival and in that time the family was actually seen as an economic unit. As children grew old enough, it was expected that they would immediately begin doing work for the family to sustain survival. As the country grew, the public became aware that there were

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children in need. With the establishment of a government came responsibilities to assist these children. With such assistance came moral judgments such as viewing poverty as depravity. In order to not reward depravity, assistance needed to be done for as little cost as possible. Initially, the only children acknowledged as needing government assistance were orphans and children of paupers, the latter primarily because of concern that without intervention, these children would be raised to become paupers as well. In establishing provisions for the welfare of these children they initially looked to the English Poor Law Tradition and used their methods of how to handle this population. There were four primary approaches. One was outdoor relief, where the family receives a meager amount of money to be able to sustain themselves and stay in their own homes. The second was farming out, where the individuals in need were auctioned to other citizens, to assist them in work that needed to be done. The third approach was the almshouses and poorhouses, which housed not only orphans, but poor families, and those deemed to be insane, retarded, blind, and anyone else in need of the government's assistance. And the final approach was indenture, where the child was contracted to specific individuals so the child could be apprenticed in a specific field and also taught good work ethics, remaining until they worked off their room and board. These children were expected to be obedient and loyal to the people helping them.

In the 1820's several reports were published explaining that the children that were being farmed out and indentured were actually being mistreated and that emphasized that something needed to change. Concerned citizens proceeded to advocate for children to be removed from abusive situations and placed in almshouses and poorhouses. The benefit

here was that people were finally starting to recognize children as human beings and not just property. There was still no awareness, as McGowan explains, that alms/poorhouses put children at physical and social risk because they were placed with a large variety of other people, not all of whom would be inclined to treat children well. Because quite a bit of money was spent on these alms/poorhouses, and because there were no other readily available better options, the children were left in this environment for an extended time.

In 1824, there was another important realization by the government: not all children should be treated the same. While some were orphans or children that responded well to care, others engaged intentionally in delinquent behavior. It was at this time the government established courts that specifically handled the needs of this latter group. The history of child courts has a lengthy chronology of its own that would be too complex to detail here; suffice it to say that this was another important shift in the degree of sanctioned state intervention.

In 1853 we see the first semblance of what would come to be known as foster homes. It was decided that the children not only needed good work ethics, but moral upbringing as well, so Christian, and specifically Protestant homes were recruited to take in these children to do just that. Catholics disputed the placement of Catholic children in Protestant homes. It would not be until the early 1900's that the government became involved and took control of the care of all foster children via the child welfare services and this model of using foster homes was integrated into their care plans. In doing this, the issues regarding the religious foundations of foster homes may have decreased, but a new issue arose: how to address the religious and spiritual issues of these children at all

while in the government's care. As will be discussed further in this chapter, these issues continue to be problematic in current times as well (Meinert, 2009; Sheridan, 2009; Wilson, 2002).

The next relevant moment in history has to do with "little Mary Ellen". In 1874, a concerned citizen witnessed that this child was being abused in the home that had taken over her care, so the citizen (Etta Wheeler) went to local social work institutions for assistance to no avail. So she took her plea to an associate that was involved in the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and they immediately took the situation to court and the care-givers were arrested. In the wake of this event, a society was created to prevent cruelty to children. Initially they wanted their mission to focus on punishment of abusive parents, but found they could not be tax exempt with that mission, so their mission was revised to helping children. This incident illustrates that societal efforts were finally starting to assist children, however there was still not sufficient attention paid to the children themselves.

In 1877 the Charity Organizations Society was created to rationalize what charities were deserving of receiving money. Initially it was their belief that being in poverty was the fault of the individuals who needed assistance. The "friendly workers" sent out to assist the poor in time came to discover that much of their poverty was actually caused by societal issues far beyond the individual's control. This is important because it is the first time there was recognition in this field of the larger context/environment as having an influence on poverty.

By the end of the late nineteenth century two things had become apparent. The public had come to expect a minimum standard for child rearing and if those standards were not met, the government was willing to intervene. At last the children themselves began to gain the attention of the system as a whole. Additionally, concerns were raised because many of the group homes being run by state funded private entities were more focused on profit than the care of children. States began to recognize their responsibility for monitoring the abuse of children in group homes and rectifying abusive treatment. The first important event in the 20th century was the White House Conference on children in 1909, which established that the two primary principles for addressing the needs of children were 1) the home was the highest form of civilization and children were best reared there; and 2) that the best form of philanthropy was not curative but preventative. In 1912 the Children's Bureau was established to assist the federal government in recognizing and meeting the needs of the children in the United States. Since it was inconceivable at the time to imagine that there might be children that could not go back to their homes, there was no anticipation of the phenomenon of aging out of foster care. It is easy to see how this population was overlooked for so long.

By the 1920's, adoption and foster care became more formalized, with an increase in the number of laws regulating the process. For the first time, adoption became a formal service guided by social work institutions. Prior to this, adoptions took place through an informal process. With the establishment of a formalized process, there was acknowledgement of the need to 1) legally terminate biological parents' rights to the children before the formal adoption, and 2) assess if those who were adopting were

capable of caring for children. Such assessment was indicative of another shift towards recognizing that children needed protection in more ways than just keeping a roof over their head. Initially the formal adoptive process involved only healthy white children adopted by white couples; minority children and parents were not included in this process.

In 1935 the Social Security Act was passed, which included the Title IV-E allotting federal funds to assist states with a portion of the costs of establishing mandated public child welfare services. Attention to children in long-term foster care was raised by a study published by Maas and Engler in 1959 which challenged child welfare institutions for the many foster children in "limbo" with no permanent type of plan, and also for the inherent racism and classism in the foster care system (Maas & Engler, 1959). In the early 1960's different task forces were established to assess what was taking place and in 1962 and 1967 the Social Security Act was reformed to create a more comprehensive welfare system to solve the problem of poverty. It is at this point when poverty and child welfare became related by law. In order for federal monies to cover the cost of foster care, the child had to be eligible for Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC), which means they were below the poverty level. By focusing on the systemic issue of poverty this reform movement should have benefited the children in care. However, stereotypes of those being in poverty being responsible for their own conditions continued to predominate, limiting the possible benefits. In the 1970's attention shifted from national concerns about childhood poverty back to the specific needs of children at risk of abuse, and how to provide efficient and cost-cutting

protection. In an effort to protect children at risk the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was passed in 1974. This act required states to pass mandatory child abuse reporting laws in order to access parts of their federal funding. Mandatory reporting laws resulted in a dramatic increase in reporting, assessment and protection of children, flooding foster care systems, which was problematic as at the same time those agencies were being encouraged to decrease expenses and to be more cost efficient.

In 1980 the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act was hailed as the most important legislation in three decades. What is relevant from this law for the aging out population is that it 1) introduced the concept of permanency as a primary objective for the first time; 2) required that states keep an inventory of all children in its care longer than six months; and 3) required a case review for all children in care over six months. Keeping such records raised awareness of the plight of children who remained in care until they were no longer eligible. The issue of long term foster care finally became apparent to legislators. In 1983 the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recognized the phenomenon that would come to be called "aging out". The DHHS called for a study to find out how these young adults were adapting to community life once they were out of foster care. In 1984 young adults who had aged out sued the city of New York for not preparing them for independent living, and won. The culmination of these events led to the passage of the 1985 Independent Living Initiative Act that put aside federal funds to assist youth to cope with, and adapt to, independent living by helping them with daily living skills, education, employment, etc. As Collins notes, this was a good beginning, but the funds were so small that the impact was

negligible (Collins, 2004). Between 1987 and 1999 only approximately 50% of the youth

in care that were eligible for these services actually received them (Nixon, 2005). In 1993

the Omnibus Reconciliation Act was passed. It made the federal funds from the

Independent Living Initiative available indefinitely. Prior to this states had been cautious

to invest funds in independent living programs because they would be required to

continue paying for them on their own in full even if the federal funding was

discontinued.

In 1997 the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act essentially reaffirmed

the importance of permanency and pushed for adoptions, which had become the panacea

of the child welfare field at that time. In general, permanence was understood to include

> a stable, healthy, and lasting living situation in the context of a family relationship
> with at least one committed adult; reliable continuous, and healthy connections
> with siblings, birth parents, extended family, and a network of other significant
> adults; and education and/or employment, life skills training, supports and
> services. (Renne & Mallon, 2005, p. 498)

Over time, legislators and advocates began to realize that the laws being passed were not

decreasing the aging out population and that they needed to do more. They held

congressional hearings with both social science experts and real life experts: the young

adults who had aged out themselves. In 1999 they passed the Foster Care Independence

Act that created the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) named after

Senator John H. Chaffee, a long-time advocate for the foster care field. Massinga and

Pecora (2004) describe this act in great detail, but a brief explanation identifies that this

act doubled the federal funds assistance to $140 billion, and made a minimum allotment

for each state of $500,000 (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). This act also allowed for the

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extension of Medicaid to age 21 and allowed for up to 30% of the funds to be spent on room and board for those who were aging out. This law stressed that the independent living program was not an alternative to permanency. It also required states to create written plans for those aging out and it penalized states for not reporting on how they were complying with these requirements. While states were given a high degree of flexibility with the funds allotted, the law suggested spending money on things such as education services (tutors, etc.), employment assistance, housing needs, money management, daily living skills (e.g., personal hygiene, etc.), and preventative health training (avoid smoking/pregnancy etc.) (Massinga & Pecora, 2004).

In 2001 Congress passed the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act and in it they revised the CFCIP by adding the Chaffee Educational Training Voucher program that offered young adults up to $5,000 a year up to the age of 23. In 2008, they passed the Fostering Connections to Successful Transitions and Increasing Adoptions Act in which they extended the federal funds from the IV-E, within the Social Security Act, until the age of 21 and also allowed CFCIP funds to go to young adults adopted after age 16 from foster care. This act also required that a plan for the transition out of foster care be prepared at least 90 days prior to aging out, in consultation with those who were aging out.

An additional law of note is the Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act which was enacted in 2011. Many things were addressed in this act, but the item most pertinent to this population was that it

> amended the case review definition to require that each child age 16 and older in foster care receives a free copy of any consumer credit report each year until

discharged from foster care and be offered [assistance] in interpreting…[it] and resolving any inconsistencies. ("Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act," 2011)

This partially became necessary as it appeared some of the children's identities were being used by others illegally leaving them in challenging situations financially upon aging out.

Analysis of Legislation on Foster Care and Aging Out

Having summarized the pivotal legislative acts that shaped foster care and eventually social care of young adults aging out, I turn now to thematic analyses done by researchers regarding these laws.

Collins' study of relevant reports, literature and legislation analyzed and summarized the research about these laws addressing independent living programs. (Collins, 2004). Collins identifies five overarching primary themes throughout the documentation studied.

Her first theme concerns values. She identified three specific program values being promoted. One value focuses on positive youth developmental approaches, which was promoted when creating programs and policies. The next value concerns permanence. The final value concerns self-sufficiency: the need to assist young adults in becoming self-sufficient.

The second overarching theme is about the target population themselves and the legislation around benefits. Collins explains that the legislation is clear that young adults can receive training up to the age 21, but elaborates that confusion arises about the legislators' criterion on how to interpret which youth will "likely be in care until age 18,"

the criteria that warrants the receipt of these independent living skills trainings (Collins, 2004, p. 1057).

The third theme, which also concerns legislation, is about funding and the various options states have for offering services. According to Collins, the flexibility in implementation has often made it very difficult to assess the kinds of services that were offered, how services were prioritized, and most importantly, how successful they were. The variety in implementation does, however, open up possibilities for comparative research of success rates if researchers would use the different states as a control group for evaluating what works and what does not.

The fourth theme concerns the living skills themselves. Collins notes that there are a wide variety of different types of skills suggested for young adults aging out (e.g., money management, daily living, etc.). There is not much guidance on how to actually assess the youths' needs, nor were there many formal presentations of evaluations to assess if these programs are working or not.

The final overarching theme has to do with the concrete supports. These are tangible benefits and services such as: housing assistance, Medicaid, and educational services. Collins notes the importance of identifying these needs, but notes: unfortunately, that needs far exceed available resources.

In a similar vein Barth reviewed various types of emancipation services (e.g., training foster parents to teach independent living skills, subsidized housing for youth ages 16-18 and independent living subsidies for youth) available to those aging out. He found that these types of services are deserving of research to investigate future use, but

that little has been done to assess these services and if they are meeting the needs of these young adults (Barth, 1986). Sadly, outcome assessment evaluating these services is still minimal nearly thirty years later.

An important issue for people assisting this population is the concept of permanency. Nixon (2005) identifies a negative correlation between supporting independent living and permanency planning: as states began to offer more independent living skills services, they often began to neglect working on permanency plans for these young adults, even though the law stated that should not happen (Nixon, 2005). According to Renne and Mallon (2005) the option of "Long Term Foster Care" has been eliminated by federal legislation, since foster care is not a form of permanency (Renne & Mallon, 2005). There was an addition of an option called Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) that was only supposed to be used in compelling cases, but unfortunately became the catch all for those who did not have other plans like adoption, reunification, or living with a guardian (Renne & Mallon, 2005, p. 490).

This historical overview of foster care illustrates the shifts that have occurred in how to care for youth in the care of child welfare services, whom is ultimately responsible, and what challenges about which services do the best job for meeting their needs. These transitions occur as the needs of these adolescents have been recognized and addressed through subsequent policies that have come into being in both historical and contemporary times. While many needs have been identified and addressed more or less successfully, many needs remain.

Recently scholarly literature has begun to specifically address what things need to be done in order to gain the attention of those in legislature in beneficial ways, and what focuses need to be the center of attention to gain that assistance.

In 2009 Collins and Clay did a qualitative study with stakeholders in the foster care environment and used agenda setting theory to evaluate their findings (Collins & Clay, 2009). The purpose was to determine what helps and hinders in gaining the attention of policy makers in order to better understand how to keep and/or gain the funding needed to assist these young adults. What they found is that as a field, "those who work in the area of foster care (practitioners, programmers, agency directors, and researchers)" (Collins & Clay, 2009, p. 750), are not cohesive in their understanding of what the problems are, how to frame those problems, and/or agreeing on the possible policy solutions to fix them. They note that research studies demonstrate the dismal outcomes for this population, making it hard to gain political attention because this group of young adults may seem too burdensome to assist. Plus, as research in general has noted, teens and young adults can be a challenging population to work with in any environment, therefore making it difficult to gain the attention of policy makers. Younger children seem much more vulnerable and therefore may seem more deserving of attention. Collins and Clay argue for a more cohesive understanding of the problems of aging out, along with possible solutions. They advocate presenting these young adults in a more positive light in order to be able to gain political attention and therefore the funding needed for research and assistance.

Frey, Greenblatt and Brown published a "Call to Action" appealing to the child welfare field and others to find ways to integrate services for this population (Frey, et al., 2005). They focus on key services that are especially beneficial for these young adults, improving their final outcomes. Such services include: using a youth centered approach; looking at what the individuals in their lives *can* offer, not just what they cannot; educating youth on permanency options and giving comprehensive training services; assisting them in building and sustaining relationships; and creating comprehensive transition plans that engage all parties important in their lives that address their needs for permanency, relationships, and well-being including cultural needs such as linguistics and spirituality. This array of priorities demonstrates a shift taking place in much of the literature. Instead of narrowly focusing on immediate physical needs, such as housing, there is a widening perspective on an array of needs, including intrinsic needs related to meaning and spirituality. This dissertation research assessing if and how young adults that have aged out of foster care make sense of their experiences, and if there are spiritual aspects to those meanings made, reflects this widening attention to intrinsic needs.

Outcomes Studies

Attempting to summarize and compare the historical and contemporary research findings regarding outcomes is challenging, and often problematic. Many of the outcomes studies lack rigor, are often cross-sectional, with small samples, and have too little theoretical foundation. In order to provide a general overview, I will offer a generally interpreted statistical description of those who have aged out, along with related

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recommendations. I will then follow with some statistics specific to the research projects

related to this dissertation project.

Prior to reviewing the literature regarding this population, it is essential to

recognize that while these young adults have relevant challenges to be addressed, they

also have tremendous potential. Far too often these young adults are perceived as

troubled children and many approaches to working with them come from a focus on their

deficits rather than a recognition of their strengths. Yet as Collins (2001) has noted

> [i]t is a mistake…to assume that those aging out of the child welfare system are
> 'problem' youths. Certain problems may have brought them into care, and many
> foster care clients have experienced severe and numerous difficulties…[but they
> can] successfully attain lifestyles of stability, productivity, and well being…
> (Collins, 2001, p. 284)

Viewing these young adults through the lens of problems may contribute to less

successful outcomes. Making the shift to a strength based perception of care might very

well increase their possibilities of leading adult lives in ways that society would deem as

successful.

Overall, assessment studies (Barth, 1990; Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin,

Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Festinger, 1983; Pecora et al., 2006; Pecora, et al.,

2005) indicate that approximately 26-38% of these youth are considered successful in

their transitions to adulthood, 33-43% are considered "problem ridden", and the

remainder are in between. Education levels range from 45-81% have graduated from high

school with up to 25.8% of these being completed by GED, which research shows is less

beneficial for long term income earnings. Only 1.8-6.5% have graduated from college. In

terms of their employment, 60-80% are employed, but 33-53% are living at or below

poverty level and 33-51% do not have medical insurance. The lack of insurance is problematic, given that the Pecora et al. (2005) study showed 25.2% of the young adults were experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As a note of interest, PTSD rates among veterans of war range from 6-15% (Pecora, et al., 2005, p. 32). In terms of housing, 22-29% have been homeless at least one night if not more, and 29-30% have moved five or more times since leaving foster care (usually within the first 5 years). Studies have also assessed the rate of childrearing and have found that between 40-60% of young adults have given birth to a child since aging out. Being a parent at too young of an age can be detrimental to long-term adulthood success in the areas of education, employment and general life well-being. The use of various forms of public assistance ranges from 17-32%. Tragically, 18-35% have been incarcerated. In terms of social support, findings show that only 15% reported not having a social support system and that between 80-86% said they did have support systems. Except for this final statistic, all the other findings differentiate this population from the general population in negative ways.

Festinger provided a helpful overview in 1983, based on findings from her extensive research on the outcomes of young adults who have aged out of foster care (Festinger, 1983). She looked at three dimensions of their lives: having, being, doing. She begins by addressing the common prejudice that aging out youth are problem ridden and beyond help. These prejudices influence not only the general public, but also social workers and agencies. Her research was motivated by the need for a more balanced perspective. Her conclusion was that the doomsayers were unwarranted in their beliefs

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about the uselessness of helping this population and that most of the young adults were not only turning out fine, but that their lives were often inspiring. For example, she looked at how many did/did not have problems at the beginning and at the end of their time in foster care, and found that: 17.8% entered with one or more problems and left without any; 20% entered with none and left with one or more; 14% entered with one or more and left with one or more; and 53% of the young adults from foster homes and 31% from group homes entered and left with none. She concluded that while it is true some are experiencing problems, that is not the case for all of them. An important, but often neglected until very recently, topic discussed by Festinger addresses the differences in experiences between those in foster care versus those in-group institutions. Her findings showed that those in foster homes were statistically faring better in all categories.

The next important prominent research study was done by Barth in 1990 (Barth, 1990), who highlighted the struggles of this population. His recommendations for care include the need for specialized caseworkers to assist these youths; transition planning spanning at least 3 meetings, and finally that these young adults need to be allowed to save more than $250 before aging out (the cap amount allowed at that time).

In 1994 Cook reported on the National Longitudinal Study regarding the assessment of the amendments to the Title IV-E done by Westat Inc. (Cook, 1994). Her primary findings were that, when implemented, the independent living skills promoted by the legislation were positively related to beneficial outcomes, most specifically in the areas of employment, education and money management (in the forms of training on budgeting, consumer skills and obtaining credit). In spite of such gains, these young

adults were more likely to be living at poverty levels compared with the general

population. Cosner-Berzin (2008) addressed this final concern and she proposed that it

was not the unique experience of being in foster care that was statistically significant to

poor outcomes, but the socio-demographic features that made the difference (Cosner-

Berzin, 2008). In her evaluation of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 she

compared the outcomes of youth with foster care experience to those who did not have

such experiences but were living at poverty level and/or had low educational attainment.

She found that these two groups did "not differ to a statistically significant degree on any

of the outcomes measured" (Cosner-Berzin, 2008, p. 190). She suggests "poverty

and…low educational attainment…are key factors that hamper a youth's ability to

transition successfully to adulthood" and not necessarily the experience of having been in

foster care (Cosner-Berzin, 2008, p. 190). Accordingly, she suggests "[t]hese findings

suggest that negative outcomes are not predicted by foster care experience but by a set of

individual, familial, and communal characteristics" (Cosner-Berzin, 2008, p. 190).

  The next major research project was done by Courtney et al. in 2001 (Courtney, et

al., 2001). They found that 31% of these young adults moved in with biological family

immediately after aging out. In 2004, Collins questioned why it is acceptable enough/safe

enough for them to return to their biological families after leaving care, but not before

(Collins, 2004). Another intriguing statistic in the Courtney et al.'s (2001) study is that

41% said they wished they had been adopted, which is contrary to the commonly held

belief that older teenagers are not open to adoption. Separately, they found that 75% of

the young adults reported to be close, or somewhat close, to their foster parents, but that

37% of them still ran away from these care-givers at one point to return to their biological

family. They also found that 76% of these youth came into care because of experiencing

one or more forms of maltreatment. Finally, they found that 78% felt lucky to have

entered foster care, 90% said it was necessary to do so, and that 89% said that no child

welfare service could have prevented the removal from their biological family home from

happening (Courtney, et al., 2001).

The next major study to be done was a complex project done by Pecora et al. in

2005 that involved 6 collaborators (3 universities, 2 public child welfare agencies and 1

private agency) (Pecora, et al., 2005). Their project is unique because they interviewed

different types of stakeholders, and provided qualitative descriptions of their findings

along with statistical simulations to find out what things could be done to improve the

outcomes for this population. In conclusion they addressed policies and practices that can

be changed *now*. Their most comprehensive simulation demonstrated that that these

young adults would have a 22.2% better outcome in education, employment and mental

health if the following issues were addressed:

- increasing education services (tutoring, educational psychologists for assessment,
  etc.);
- increasing assistance in concrete resources (getting a drivers' license, having at
  least $250 cash, and having dishes and utensils);
- decreasing the number of placement moves (to less than 3);
- decreasing the number school moves (also to less than 3).

With regard to school moves, they noted that one third had moved three to six times, one third seven to nine times, and one third ten times or more. They recommended overhauling independent living programs, connecting with the larger structural environments and community, finding ways to get college students places to stay when dorms are closed during breaks, and creating an 800 telephone service number for advising on housing and employment. Finally, they suggested extending the ages for college scholarships for those who would be better off taking a short break after high school, but were afraid to do so because they feared being unable to regain their scholarships. Pecora et al. (2006) note that the goal of many child welfare service programs involve the idea of 'benefiting the children's' well-being', but they explain that advocates weaken their positions by using such broad terminology because in reality, child welfare is not equipped to meet those needs and, and other sources need to be recruited (e.g., schools, hospitals, etc.) to assist in those needs (Pecora, et al., 2006).

Freundlich and Avery (2006) did a study that included stakeholders from traditional sources (social workers, aging out youth, foster parents, etc.) but also included legal stakeholders like judges and child law advocates (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Their findings were similar to previous research in the field: housing is an issue; obtaining medical insurance is problematic; and other such regularly noted issues. Two notable findings are, first, only the more high-functioning young adults are accessing the resources they need, and the lower-functioning youth are far more vulnerable. Second, when asked about independent living training all the stakeholders except one said that it needed to be overhauled; those representing the child welfare agency disagreed, saying

the problem was not the structure, but the young adults themselves who were not motivated to do the work.

Massinga and Pecora (2004) focused on specific barriers that can cause difficulties in getting the independent living trainings accomplished (Massinga & Pecora, 2004): staff turnover; transportation for the young adults to get to the trainings; lack of service coordination; and finally the local economy (e.g., affordable housing, medical insurance and jobs paying livable wages).

Some of the more recent research has begun to note that not all aging out youth are the same, making a 'one size fits all' approach unhelpful. Courtney and Barth (1996) posited teens aging out of kin/foster homes/guardianship have better outcomes, while those leaving group homes and those who have been in and out of foster care on multiple occasions have worse outcomes (Courtney & Barth, 1996). Then McCoy et al. (2008) explained that even in states where the youth are able to stay in care until 21 over 50% leave by age 19 because the foster system either frustrates them/treats them poorly, or they are mistakenly told they have to leave because of their age by staff unknowledgeable about the laws (McCoy, Curtis-McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). Only 16.8% of the youth left because they "achieved their plan goals". They also note that if states do extend the age required to exit, that the foster care system needs to make it more tolerable to stay when needed, and to be sure all the practitioners know the laws so young adults are not released earlier if they do not want to be. The final study that looks at the variations of types of aging out youth was done by Keller et al. in 2007 and they discovered there were four types of youth aging out (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007):

- distressed and disconnected 43%;

- competent and connected 38%;

- struggling but staying 14%;

- hindered but homebound 5%.

They noted each group had varying needs that could be addressed through services, but the uniform approach to independent living services did not allow for varying needs.

Vaughn et al. (2008) looked at the percentages of youth involved in the legal system after aging out and discovered there were four groups (Vaughn, Shook, & Mcmillen, 2008). The low risk group was 69% of the study's sample (65% female and 59% youth of color); the moderate group comprised 14%; the high risk with externalizing behavior was 8% (90% had been arrested before); and the high risk drug culture group, who were heavily involved in illegal activities, but rarely got caught, was 7%.

As this overview of the diverse types of outcomes research demonstrates, there are many important studies that describe this population in a variety of ways. The primary focus of these studies has been about tangible issues, but there has been a lack of reflection regarding the intangible aspects of the issues that may be effecting the results of the tangible findings. The most recent studies recognize that this population is heterogeneous, with varying needs. In acknowledging the need for recognizing intangible aspects of these situations as well as the heterogeneity of this population this dissertation research is assessing what young adults' needs are from a general existential perspective, and providing a deeper understanding of the ways this population copes with their own

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history, therefore allowing care-givers to assist these young adults in more meaningful ways.

Psychological Perspectives Used for Understanding

In reviewing the scholarly research that seeks to understand the experiences of this population there is no cohesive theoretical approach used in working with this population. This lack of cohesive theory is noted by many experts. For example, Stein entitled a 2006 article "Young People Aging Out of Care: A Poverty of Theory" (Stein, 2006). He recommends the use of related psychological concepts and theories, such as attachment theory, the focal model theory, and theories of resilience, to understand this population. Though admittedly, one challenge in using clinical theories is that they often do not sufficiently attend to the larger social context. Despite that, there are a number of psychological theories that are providing helpful insights enabling a better understanding of those who have aged out, as well as providing possible ways to assist them.

Collins (2001) also made note of the need for theory in researching this population. She recommends using theories founded in more holistic approaches that include acknowledgement of the contributions and inherent worth of this population (Collins, 2001). She recommends using life span perspectives with an emphasis on positive youth development, resilience, coping, and social support. Her plea for the use of these types of theories must have been heard by others, because recent articles are now using these theories.

More recent research has been striving to ameliorate the lack of theory, though there is still a great deal of work to be done to gain the theoretical consistency needed to

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solidify knowledge of this population (Avery, 2010; Hughes et al., 2008; K. S. Smith & Teasley, 2009; W. B. Smith, 2011).

Jensen-Arnett (2007) utilizes life span development theory by introducing a life phase called emerging adulthood that takes place between adolescence and young adulthood (the late teens to the mid-20's) (Jensen-Arnett, 2007). He suggests this life stage is often self-focused, unstable (in terms of not being committed to specific jobs or relationships yet), exploratory, transitional (with a feeling of being "in between"). Most importantly, this is a socially accepted time of change, full of possibilities for all young adults. Important to those aging out, this supports the possibility for relevant personal change upon aging out no matter what their earlier circumstances. Jensen-Arnett stresses this final feature of emerging adulthood, and uses it to reframe this life transition for aging out youth in more positive ways.

Renne and Mallon (2005) and Nixon (2005) both advocate the use of positive youth development theory (Nixon, 2005; Renne & Mallon, 2005). In summary, for the field of social work, positive youth development recognizes that youth are entitled to permanency. It is a client-centered approach, in terms of being youth driven. It focuses on achieving permanent living conditions, relationships, and comprehensive training for independent living skills. It is strengths based; and begins at entry when children or teens enter care. It is designed to be accessible and widely available to all. Finally, it honors culture, including spirituality.

Involving these young adults in the process of their care has been emphasized by Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, and Painter (2007). They explain that what sometimes

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appears to be a lack of motivation to determine their future by the young adults is actually just a reflection of the feeling that they do not feel invested in the process of planning their own lives. Young adults explained that one of the challenges to accomplishing self-sufficiency often involves the youth not feeling like they are being collaborated and/or communicated with (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007).

A number of studies focus on resilience, including assessments of what helps youth make successful transitions. Daining and DePanfilis discovered that resilience is higher in females than in males; older versus younger teenagers; those that have lower rather than higher perceived stress; and finally, those that feel they have social support systems including spiritual support systems (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Hass and Graydon studied former foster youth that are now young adults whom had graduated from college or were at least a Junior in college, in order to assess what helped them succeed and maintain their resilience (Hass & Graydon, 2009). They found that 86% said that their educational achievements were due to feeling like they had a purpose in life; 84% attributed their educational achievements to assistance from at least one other person; and 12% attributed their educational achievements to personal characteristics. An interesting finding in this study is that even these "successful" young adults still felt like the world was unpredictable: they did not feel confident in their abilities or that others would continue to "be there" for them.

Another psychological approach to helping this population is "hearing their voice" through story-telling. As the Casey Family Programs noted in *Strategic Sharing* (2008), stories are compelling, memorable, and they assist people making meaning of

their experiences (Casey Family Programs and Foster Care Alumni of America, 2008, p. 2). Desetta (1996) used this approach in editing a collection of 39 stories by youth in foster care or young adults who had very recently aged out of foster care (Desetta, 1996). His purpose in putting this book together was to help "make these kids real" rather than introducing more mind numbing statistics. He wanted these young adults "lifted from the abstract statistics of 'the system'" (Desetta, 1996, p. xvi). Shirk and Stangler also collected the stories of specific youth that had aged out, in order to "make them real", let their stories be heard, and move readers from empathy to action (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Weisberg and Roth took this narrative approach one step further and produced a documentary film that followed three young adults as they aged out of foster care, poignantly demonstrating the troubling experiences that they encountered in working towards making it on their own after leaving the foster care systems assistance (Weisberg, Roth, & Sanders, 2004).

A recent shift in understanding this population questions the foundational concept of independent living itself (Avery, 2010; Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). Propp et al. (2003) argue that independence is an idealistic myth in the United States supported by the ideal of "rugged individualism" (Propp, et al., 2003, p. 7). They introduce the goal of interdependence; the ability to connect with and when necessary lean on others. Interdependence is proposed as a far more realistic and healthy approach to adulthood (Propp, et al., 2003). As an interesting caveat, Samuels and Pryce (2008) found that these young adults identified survivalist self-reliance as a form of resilience (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Aging out young adults experience an early conferral of adulthood and face the

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developmental task of "growing up without a parent"; development transitions that instill the survivor pride experienced by these youth, which may actually come into conflict with the ideals of interdependence. Many of these young adults take fierce pride in their ability to make it on their own. They often reject opportunities for assistance, even ones that can have healthy and beneficial outcomes, because they do not want to appear "weak" and dependent, or regressing backwards from the progress they have made. One wonders whether the saying, 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger' is an explanation for their resilience, as well as their resistance to interdependence. As the authors note, surviving does not necessarily mean emotionally healing; in time survival pride, helpful initially, could become problematic.

Whether one believes independence or interdependence is the most beneficial goal for these young adults, Krebs and Pitcoff (2006) point out that the reality of these young adults is that they will be required to make it on their own at some point (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). Krebs and Pitcoff posit that the current independent living programs are doing a dismal job of preparing these young adults for that situation. In an attempt to create a program that can do a better job of assisting these young adults they created and implemented their program *Getting Beyond the System Self Advocacy Seminar* whose aim is to empower "teens by teaching them to advocate for themselves and prepare[s] them for independent futures" (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006, p. x). No matter what the teens' beginnings may have been like, they stress the need to focus on the future by helping through various kinds of assistance and guidance. While they share that they have had a fair bit of success in working directly with teens, when they tried to assist those within

the child welfare services system to apply the program they encountered resistance from staff, which the authors claim diluted the benefits of the program itself. They believe that "the government must abandon the present foster care for teens that rewards behavior management and control in exchange for policies that promote educational goals, personal responsibility, and control of one's future" (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006, p. 220).

An additional concern addressed within the research has inquired about the relationships these young adults have in their lives and if they are beneficial. Samuels examined relational permanence for aging out young adults and found that they did have social support systems, contradicting the supposition by many that they did not (Samuels, 2008). There were two relevant challenges though. One was that social support was not necessarily helpful and could even exacerbate stress. The other challenge was that many of these young adults yearned for close and loving relationships, but the self-protective coping mechanisms they had established to survive often made them distance themselves in order to not be hurt by loved ones once again.

Samuels noted that several youth referenced the poem "A Reason, A Season, or a Lifetime" in explaining how they coped with losses in their life (Samuels, 2008). Samuels uses this poem as a framework for understanding how these young adults reframe their losses and make meaning of their experiences in their past and present. Such meaning-making can be understood as a form of spiritual coping: a way of dealing with some of the existential issues that come from their challenging life experiences.

As was noted earlier, there has been a shift recently towards recognizing less tangible needs of those in the foster care system. Several psychological approaches

explicitly address the role of religion and/or spirituality in the lives of the youth in foster

care, and the importance of addressing these topics (Cheon, 2010; Crompton, 1998;

Jackson et al., 2010; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Roller White, Havalchak, Jackson,

O'Brien, & Pecora, 2007; Van Hook, Hugen, & Aguilar, 2001; Wilson, 2002, 2004).

Crompton cites the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which

mandates governments to address the spiritual and religious needs of children in their

care (Crompton, 1998; "United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child," 1959).

As Moss (2002) has explained "experience[s] of loss frequently raises the question of

meaning in many people's minds and hearts, then human services practitioners are

inevitably caught up in these painful searchings for meaning" (Moss, 2002, p. 36).

In 2006, the Casey Field Office Mental Health studied "the mental health of youth

receiving foster care services from Casey Family Programs" (Roller White, et al., 2007,

p. 1). They surveyed 188 youth between the ages of 14 and 17. Within this study the

researchers included questions addressing the topic of spirituality in order "to explore

what youth believe and how they feel about spirituality, what spiritual activities you

participate in, coping mechanisms, and the relation between spirituality and mental

health" (Roller White, et al., 2007, p. 29). While they report that there were "no

significant differences in mental health between youth who expressed a belief in God, a

Creator or a Higher Power [than] youth who did not hold this belief" (Roller White, et al.,

2007, p. 33), they also report that spirituality did appear to be an important part of life for

many of their sample. They concluded that it would be beneficial to integrate spirituality

into casework (Roller White, et al., 2007, p. 39). This study is part of a trend in

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understanding how spirituality specifically manifests in the lives of these youth, in terms of "spiritual coping mechanisms, beliefs about spirituality and participation in spiritual activities" (Jackson, et al., 2010, p. 107). Jackson et al. (2010) found that youth describe spirituality in terms of belief in a higher source, prayer, worship, living a moral life, and a source of their identity and cultural heritage. Their study also identified some of the positive spiritual coping mechanisms in use: trust in God/a higher power as a source of strength in troubling times and hope for the future; working through a process of forgiveness as a form or spiritual coping and healing. There were signs of negative coping as well, in themes such as feeling separate from and/or angry at God/a higher power; and/or not being able to believe in any kind of God/higher power because of all the suffering in the world. This study demonstrated that the youth in their research did have active spiritual lives. These activities included: attending religious services; attending classes, workshops, and/or spiritually oriented retreats; and volunteering for those in need. Indeed, 93% of those surveyed had specific spiritual goals. The top three goals were: 'to follow God/Higher power/Creator's plan for me', 'to become a better person', and 'to know my purpose in life' (Jackson, et al., 2010, p. 114).

A number of recent studies assess the importance of religion and/or spirituality in the lives of youth in foster care, or anyone being assisted by social services, and demonstrate positive correlations between their beliefs and/or practices and their behaviors and/or life outlooks. For example, Scott, Jr. et al. found an inverse association between religious involvement and risk behaviors:

> religious service attendance was associated with reduced odds of youth's engagement in sexual behavior in the past 2months and current use of

cigarettes…[and] greater religious beliefs were associated with a reduction in odds of youth's use of alcohol in the past 6 months and current use of cigarettes. (Scott Jr., Munson, Mcmillen, & Ollie, 2006, p. 223)

Similarly Banerjee and Canda, in attempting to understand the importance of spirituality for persons that are vulnerable and receiving services from the social services, found that spirituality was central in assisting African American women affected by the challenges of poverty and welfare reform (Banerjee & Canda, 2009). Their findings demonstrated that spirituality gave them strength to continue through their challenges. It assisted them in keeping calm when they might not have been. Their feelings of being connected with God/a higher power helped them feel supported when they felt helpless. Their fellowship with others of similar beliefs let them feel they were not alone in their struggles, even when struggles differed (Banerjee & Canda, 2009).

These types of findings support Hawkins (2005) arguments for the need to integrate spirituality into social work (Hawkins, 2005). According to Hawkins the field of social work is in the midst of a paradigm shift towards secular spirituality and also postmodernism, which recognizes there is not one universal truth and that truth is socially constructed. Hawkins describes spirituality as the very core of identity, personality, and behavior. In not addressing spirituality, social workers cannot hope to fully understand their clients in their larger context. Hawkins explains that while social workers are obligated by ethics to acknowledge and work with diversity, they are not behaving ethically when they dismiss a person's spirituality or choose not to address it. She reviews and rejects arguments against exploring spirituality in social work practice (e.g., it's too subjective, it's too personal, there is a danger of proselytizing clients). She notes

that all clinical approaches deal with values and beliefs in one way or another; all of this work engages intimate aspects of peoples' lives; and finally, every theory and approach is value laden, we simply need to be explicit about our values and get better training in how to integrate a values awareness.

An additional concern in integrating spirituality is the relationship of church and state for government funded social work. Would funding cease if social workers included spirituality as part of their practice? Wilson (2002) notes that "there is, unhelpfully, no set of guidelines telling publicly funded social service agencies precisely how to legally develop religious programming" (Wilson, 2002, p. 56). Additionally, Wilson notes that the lack of outcome studies for this population makes it difficult to justify government funds for spiritually oriented practices. It is most often the case that "unproven interventions will also remain un-reimbursable ones…[and that there is] no substitute for well-controlled studies by objective researchers" (Wilson, 2002, p. 58). In spite of these obstacles, the "use of spirituality in agency settings was widespread and growing" (Wilson, 2004, p. 5). Additionally, research has begun to assess how social workers are already incorporating religion and spirituality into their practice, often without formal guidance on how to do this (A. J. Hill & Donaldson, 2012). Due to this, there is a call by educators, researchers, and policy makers to revise the curriculum within the social work educational field. (Ashby Jr, 2005; Crompton, 1998; Hodge, 2011; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Lee & O'Gorman, 2005; Lindsay, 2002; Mathews, 2009; Meinert, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2010; Sheridan, 2009; K. S. Smith & Teasley, 2009). The revised curriculum needs to include curricula specific to the professional

training of social workers in the areas of religion and spirituality. The training must include assistance in understanding how this knowledge can be applied in helpful and ethical ways in their daily practice

Clinical approaches to spiritually oriented social work are beginning to emerge. Scott and Magnuson demonstrate the use of spirituality in social work (Scott & Magnuson, 2006). They explain that spirituality is normative and whether we acknowledge it or not, children are already experiencing and having insights about their own spirituality even without guidance from adults. They also explain that spirituality affects children and youth now, as well as in the long term. Finally, they note that spirituality is associated with what it is in life that is worth living for. Their framework uses four core values. One value is described as gift giving, in contrast with production exchange: when interacting with these youth clinicians should be gift giving of their time rather than holding a production exchange mentality (e.g., I help you with this and I expect you to get better/behave better, etc., and if you do not, I will withdraw my care). Given that these children have already experienced the ultimate spiritual violation of shattered families they do not need conditional models of "care". Second, they want clinicians to value seriously the suffering experienced by these young adults. Next, they value appropriate forgiveness when young clients "act out". They suggest handling these "acting out" moments by explicitly telling these young adults that while their behavior is not appreciated, they are still loved and cared about. Understanding this last concept is often difficult for those in foster care with their challenged family histories. Finally, they value seeing care as a process of creation and rebirth, with time in care being seen as an

opportunity for a new beginning. One question raised by approaches like this is what sort of training and knowledge social workers need. For example, are they educated in the comparative study of religions of the world and/or do they need to be theologically ready to assess life giving and life limiting ways of understanding suffering?

Spirituality and religion are not always viewed as sources of positive influence (Crompton, 1998; Kvarfordt, 2010; Pargament, et al., 1998). In a national study Kvarfordt investigated how often social workers encountered varying forms of spiritual abuse and neglect and concluded that "maltreatment of this nature may be occurring often enough to be an issue that needs to be addressed and explored" (Kvarfordt, 2010, p. 143). She stressed that the most common abuses found were not ones that would be sensationalized by the mass media, such as abuse by those with religious authority, or practices of satanic ritual, but more subtle abuses found at the societal level that tend to be "detrimental in the development of meaning, purpose, connection/belonging to faith, or moral and ethical guidelines" (Kvarfordt, 2010, p. 143). Kvarfordt stresses the need to increase knowledge about spiritual abuse, in order to assist social workers in assessment and treatment.

Current research is shifting towards training social workers to assess and respond to both the abuses and the benefits of spirituality needs via a comparative approach to the study of religion, and especially religious diversity. Conceptual and clinical approaches that respect religious diversity are increasing (Canda & Dyrud Furman, 2010; Carrington, 2010; Van Hook, et al., 2001; Wilson, Carraway-Wilson, & Jackson, 2005). For example,

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Canda and Dyrud Furman (2010) propose a guide for spiritually sensitive social work practice that ranges from

> …defining central values and concepts, to portraying the wide range of religious and nonsectarian expressions of spirituality in social work, to setting a context for understanding, assessing and practicing spiritually sensitive social work, and to providing ethical and practical guidelines for spiritually oriented helping activities. (Canda & Dyrud Furman, 2010, p. 359)

While the authors' approaches to spirituality in social work are not oriented directly to any specific population being served by the social work field, specifically the aging out population, they can be applied to any and all situations that a social worker may encounter. The authors encourage clinicians to use their book *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping* as a starting point for engaging religion and spirituality in social work and strongly encourage readers to push forward with these complex ideas, engaging and integrating them in their personal, professional, and community lives. These authors hope to provide common ground for educational and research purposes, with pertinent definitions, models of implementation, and ideas of practical application in varying contexts, all of which can assist in interdisciplinary communications for those assisting vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

This review of the literature on the history of foster care demonstrates the progression of assistance, beginning with initial historical perceptions of the youth in foster care as being mere property, moving to recognition that these youths are human beings deserving of care that involves more than just a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. Even though children have been removed from the homes of their

biological families in the United States since at least the 17th century, the phenomenon of aging out was not noticed until the late 1950's, and it took until the early 1980's to see laws passed as well as research literature explicitly addressing their situation. Knowledge of the experiences of this population only began to evolve in the last thirty-five years.

In reviewing outcome studies of foster care and aging out, I have summarized the many challenges facing these youth, and also the potential for positive outcomes. In reviewing the variety of theoretical, psychological, and clinical approaches used for gaining knowledge and treating those who age out, I described a growing sophistication and pool of knowledge that is helping those working with these youths in assisting them on their journeys through and after foster care. Lastly, I share recent works being published on social work and spirituality that are moving towards the integration of religion and spirituality in the field of social work, as well as challenging researchers to increase their knowledge of how these topics are affecting those in care.

This dissertation uses qualitative interviews to collaboratively explore how members of this population make meaning of their experiences in foster care and of aging out, and identify if there are spiritual aspects in their narratives, since as of yet, it is a topic that has not been specifically addressed. From the beginning I anticipated that these young adults would describe using forms of spiritual coping (the literature by Pargament would say religious coping; this literature will be discussed in a later chapter) (Pargament, 1997, 2007). I anticipated that the stories of these young adults would illustrate many forms of spiritual coping: some of which would be positive forms of coping and some of them would not. I believed that if the stories of these young adults

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replicated the research findings, then negative forms of coping would be experienced in personally detrimental ways. For example, in my Master's thesis, in a survey of the scholarly literature involving the direct narratives of those who had aged out, I identified existential/spiritual themes such as:

> loss, abandonment, and feelings of unworthiness; the stigma of being in foster care; profound disappointment in authority figures; ambivalent attachment; need for safety and structure versus need to be independent; and/or a profound need for a healthy mentor figure. (Tokarski, 2006, pp. 9-14)

A clinical implication may be that if challenging issues of spiritual coping and meaning making are not addressed, then it does not matter how much, or what kinds of, independent living training or educational services, etc. are offered, these young adults may not be able to benefit from them. In other words, it is going to be quite difficult to assist these young adults in beneficially tangible ways until they deal with their spiritual issues and if necessary, find ways of reframing their perceptions/definitions of their history in more beneficially meaningful and healthy ways. By bringing these types of issues to light through this dissertation, I hope to motivate clinicians to integrate spiritual assessments and interventions into the social work care of these young adults, enhancing positive youth development, resilience, and social support. Additionally, in addressing these existential themes, I am hoping to deepen the knowledge of others who may have direct contact with these young adults in other aspects of their lives including but not limited to educators, religious leaders, and medical professionals, in understanding the experiences of those who have aged out and the ways in which they can assist them in meaningful ways.

Chapter 3 Literature Review: Introducing Religious Coping Theory, the Meaning Making Model, and the Meaning Centered Approach to Resilience

Taking into consideration all that was discussed in the history, outcomes, and research findings section for those who have aged out, it is important to consider how these young adults aging out of foster care cope with all that they have been through. The aim of this dissertation is to assess and understand if and how they have made meaning of their experiences, and identify if there are spiritual components to their understandings of their experiences. The purpose of this section is to review the literature on both religious coping and meaning making in preparation for discussion of the findings chapter.

Coping Theory

Before introducing religious coping theory, it is helpful to understand the basic foundations of coping theory in general. The often cited forefathers on the topic of pyschological theories of coping are Lazarus and Folkman. Their theoretical model, called the transactional model of coping, is the foundational model of many modern coping theories (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman research about coping has been stimulated by several occurrences. One is the concern about individual's differences and their impact on the individual's well-being. Another concern is the desire to understand how the environment impacts individuals, which has become an essential component of understanding human functioning. Finally, the rise of theories looking at how people develop over their life course has increased awareness that

psychological functioning changes over time. These factors have increased interest in the concept of coping.

After introducing the history of the concept of coping Lazarus and Folkman focus on two of the dominant theories at the time they formulated their transactional model: Darwinian thought and psychoanalytic ego psychology. Darwinian thought explains coping in terms of the human need to survive, predict, and control. According to this conception, when a "noxious agent" appears, humans will attempt to avoid, overcome, or escape whatever the problem may be. Lazarus and Folkman reject this evolutionary theory as far too simplistic. It does not take into account the complex emotions and behaviors that are inherent in human nature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The psychoanalytic ego psychology model is a relatively more recent development, and has tended to dominate the field in terms of theory and the development of measurement scales. This theory states that people cope by using realistic and flexible thoughts and behaviors to solve their problems and therefore reduce stress. Coping is described as a dynamic versus static endeavor (Pattison, 2005). According to Lazarus and Folkman the psychoanalytic ego psychology theory is not comprehensive or complex enough to understand the transactional nature of coping. For example, ego psychology describes coping in terms of traits that are constant through life (e.g., having a 'type A' personality). Another limitation is their hierarchical ranking of some forms of coping as better than others. Lazarus and Folkman reject this either-or approach of coping as good or bad, preferring an interactional approach that details "how much stress, at

what point in life and what kinds, are considered to be more helpful than harmful"

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 182).

Lazarus and Folkman propose the definition of coping as consisting of

"constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal

demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus

& Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Several key concepts in this definition address the limitations

of traditional approaches. For one, this is "process-oriented rather than trait oriented"

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Secondly, this definition distinguishes between

"coping and automatized behavior" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Thirdly, this

definition addresses the "problem of confounding coping with outcome…by defining

coping as efforts to manage" in order to assess all forms of coping—those that are

successful, and those that are not (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 142). Finally, coping is

about managing rather than mastering because "managing can include minimizing,

avoiding, tolerating and accepting…as well as attempts to master the environment"

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 142). This definition is centered in the belief that there is

interplay between the environment and the individual—a foundational component of this

transactional model for coping. In any situation encountered the person and the

environment interact and create a new transaction with each other. This interaction

stimulates psychological efforts, and as the situation unfolds, it continues to create new

relationships between persons and their environment. This model is both reciprocal and

dynamic. There is an important role as well for resources, which can consist of many

things such as problem solving, social skills, material resources (e.g., money), health and energy, each of which can influence a person's ability to cope.

In the transactional model used by Lazarus and Folkman when situations occur in someone's environment, he or she makes a cognitive appraisal of what the situation is. There are two forms of appraisal: primary and secondary. The primary appraisal is to decide if the situation is irrelevant, benign, positive, or if it is stressful. If it is stressful, then appraisals are needed to decide if it involves actual or possible harm or loss, threat, or is a challenge. Once this has been decided, then the person makes a secondary appraisal which assesses the options for how to handle the situation and what needs to take place in order to do that. This can include deciding to avoid doing anything at all.[2] As the situation unfolds, or as time goes by, there may come a time when a person needs to reappraise the situation; he or she may come to see the situation in a different way. One form of reappraisal is defense reappraisal, which is a cognitive appraisal of benefits that can come from challenging situations. Cognitive appraisals are the mediators of emotions and feelings. What is important for care-givers is that eventually, in order to assist in making changes in an individual's life, it will always be necessary to work with those cognitive appraisals.

The transactional model stresses "that coping involves much more than problem solving and that effective coping serves other functions as well" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 148). There is a difference between coping functions, which refer to the purpose

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[2] Lazarus and Folkman specify that the terms primary and secondary describe a temporal process and are not meant to infer any kind of hierarchy of appraisal. In hindsight they admit that there might have been better terms to use.

served by a coping strategy, and the outcome (the effect a strategy has) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 149). Two strategies of coping are (1) problem-focused coping, which "is coping that is directed at managing or altering the problem causing the distress", and (2) emotion-focused coping which "is directed at regulating emotional response to the problem" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Emotion-focused coping, in general, is used when "there has been an appraisal that nothing can be done to modify harmful, threatening or challenging environmental conditions" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Neither strategy takes precedence over the other. It is the "goodness of fit" that determines whether coping is effective or not (Bun Lam & McBride-Chang, 2007, p. 162). An adaptive coping strategy needs to "fit" or match the situational characteristics. A mismatch between coping strategy and situation "is likely to reduce coping effectiveness" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 190).

The transactional model recognizes that the person and the environment each bring components to the situation that can alter the coping process. Persons bring their commitments, which are their ultimate beliefs about life, what life is, their life's goals, and their beliefs about how the world works. This can include their beliefs about how much control they believe they have over the situation at hand. In regards to the environment, that encompasses the situation itself and factors here often include timing (e.g., the duration of the stressor; the level of threat, the immanency of the stressor; and the time of life it takes place in). Any uncertainties about the event (e.g., if and when it will take place) can create stress.

In summation the transactional model is the experience of putting together factors associated with the person and the environment, which creates a new transaction, and through the unfolding process of the situation, new relationships between the person and the environment are created.

Religious Coping Theory

Transactional coping theory is the foundation for religious coping theory. Pargament, the oft-cited author on this topic, expands and deepens understandings of the transactional coping model by recognizing how religion and spirituality are specifically involved in the coping process. He posits that religious coping involves finding significance in ways related to the sacred in times of stress. He has eight assumptions about the coping process, aspects of which have parallels to the transactional model. Those assumptions are as follows (Pargament, 1997, pp. 90-126):

1. people seek significance;

2. events are constructed in terms of their significance to people (primary appraisal);

3. people bring an orienting system to the coping process (person factors);

4. people translate the orienting system into specific methods of coping (secondary appraisal);

5. people seek significance in coping through the mechanisms of conservation or transformation;

6. people cope in ways that are compelling to them;

7. coping is embedded in culture (environment factors);

8. the keys to good coping lie in the process(es) and the outcomes.

Pargament stresses that the coping process is not simply about individuals reacting to life events, but that people are "volitional, goal directed beings" that actually strive in their lives, and they can engage the coping process without stressors even being present (Pargament, 1997, pp. 92-93). As mentioned above, much of the history of coping theory has related it to people managing stress. Pargament counters that this is true of some cases, but at other times, in striving for things, people may actually draw stress into their lives for motivational purposes.

Key to the eight assumptions of the coping process is an understanding of what Pargament means by the term significance. For Pargament, significance has three properties which are subjective, objective and motivational (Pargament, 1997). The subjective is the sense of significance "a phenomenological construct involving feelings and beliefs associated with worth, importance and value. It embodies the experience of caring, attraction, or attachment" (Pargament, 1997, p. 92). The objective property of significance addresses objects of significance, the things "we care *for*, [and] are attracted *to* (Pargament, 1997, p. 92). The objects, being shaped by culture and experience, can be represented by a "limitless set of significant objects…[such as] material (e.g., money food, cars, houses, drugs or weapons), physical (e.g., health, fitness, or/appearance), psychological (e.g., comfort, meaning, growth), social (e.g., intimacy, social justice), and or spiritual (e.g., closeness with God, religious experience)" (Pargament, 1997, p. 92). Individuals are not confined to one object of significance in life "[i]t may be more accurate to say that the significance people seek is made up of a system of objects, an

organization of values" (Pargament, 1997, p. 93). It is interesting to note here that in addressing the topic of making meaning, Pargament states "[f]rom my point of view, meaning represents one of many possible objects of significance, constructive and destructive. The attainment does not necessarily bring happiness or well-being" (Pargament, 1997, p. 467). The final property he speaks of is the motivation to attain significance. He explains that "significance be it constructive or destructive, has motivational properties—people are drawn to it" (Pargament, 1997, p. 93). He is careful to note the motivation to search for significance is not always life promoting, and that "searches that negate life can be every bit as tenacious as the quest for more affirming forms of significance" (Pargament, 1997, p. 94). He finishes by explaining that "the pursuit of significance is a necessary condition for a productive life" (Pargament, 1997, p. 95).

Pargament describes "two functional mechanisms guiding the coping process: conservation and transformation" (Pargament, 1997, p. 108). Conservation is trying to maintain significance as it is, and transformation is making efforts "to change the character of significance itself" (Pargament, 1997, pp. 109-110). There are different pathways to significance (means) and destinations of significance (ends), and that both conservation and transformation apply to both the pathways and destinations (Pargament, 1997, p. 110). He explains that "any approach to coping involves conservation or transformation of both means and ends" (Pargament, 1997, p. 111). There are four possible combinations in understanding how these concepts can work together. One is the aim for preservation, which is conserving both means and ends, often involving

reassurance one is on the right path. The second is reconstruction, which is transforming the means but conserving the ends. This can include literal blockages on one's path such as not having a handicap ramp to get a wheelchair into the church (means) but building one so that a wheelchair is able to get into the church (ends). Issues for this can be figurative as well. There is then the option of revaluation which conserves the means, but transforms the ends, which are times when the ends are no longer compelling. Finally, in some rare cases there is recreation, which is the transforming of means and ends and is essentially a new way at looking at life (Pargament, 1997, pp. 111-113).

Understanding the assumptions of the religious coping process and recognizing the functions of these approaches can be helpful in ascertaining the ways individuals are coping and where they are in the coping process.

Meaning Making Theory

In turning to the concept meaning making it is important to understand what meaning is, and the ways meaning is believed to impact an individual's life. As is often the case, there is little agreement within the literature on the actual definition of the term meaning, but for the purposes of this paper it is understood in the following ways. Meaning "refers to perceptions of significance" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 116). Wong deepens this explanation by defining personal meaning as

> an individually constructed cognitive system, which endows life with personal significance.…[T]he meaning system consists of three components, namely, cognitive, motivational, and affective.…it is conceived of as a cognitive map that orients the individual in steering through the life course…[and] is used for self and life interpretation. (Wong, 1998, p. 368)

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According to Frankl, "striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in [human life]" (Frankl, 1985, p. 121). Steger shares that "[m]eaning by its very nature, appears to be an integrating factor in people's lives, drawing together the threads of their efforts to achieve happiness, withstand distress, and attain transcendence beyond their solitary selves" (Steger, 2012, p. 165). Concepts such as these put in perspective the tremendous importance that the process and results of making meaning can have in an individual's life. A well-functioning meaning system "is likely necessary for healthy human functioning" as its essential role is to guide individuals in their "coherence, mastery and control, the reduction of uncertainty, identity, existential answers, and behavioral guidance" (Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013, p. 158).

In addressing meaning, it is important to understand what needs are being met by making meaning. Baumeister has proposed that there are four needs for meaning in an individual's life that can be analyzed. Those meanings are the need for

1. a sense of purpose: to perceive their current activities as relating to future outcomes...including meeting objective goals and reaching a state of subjective fulfillment
2. efficacy and control: people seek to interpret events in ways that support the belief that they have control over their outcomes and that they can make a difference in some important way
3. value and justification: people want to view their actions as having positive value or as being morally justified
4. self-worth: people seek ways of establishing that they are good, admirable, worthy individuals with desirable traits. (Sommer, Baumeister, & Stillman, 2012, p. 298)

Baumeister explains that "[p]eople think the compelling, ineluctable part of a meaning of life is in the answers they find, but my analysis suggests that it is rather the questions (i.e. the four needs for meaning) that are inevitable" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 362). In a further

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discussion of meaning Baumeister concludes that "[a]nswers come and go, but the

questions remain the same" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 362). For Baumeister, these four needs

for meaning are central to how people make meaning both in ordinary, as well as

extraordinary, life events.

In working to recognize how meaning making may be involved in the coping

process, Park and Folkman have proposed a conceptual model to identify various forms

of meaning. Park and Folkman's meaning making coping model corresponds to

Pargament's religious coping model, but more explicitly recognizes meaning making

through the coping process (Park & Folkman, 1997). The two primary levels of meaning

they distinguish are global meaning and situational meaning. The initial level they

discuss is that of

> [g]lobal meaning…[which] refers to the most abstract and generalized level of
> meaning: people's basic goals and fundamental assumptions, beliefs and
> expectations about the world. Global meaning influences people's understanding
> of the past and the present and it influences their expectations regarding the
> future. (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 116)

The two most frequently discussed dimensions of global meaning are people's

assumptions about order and its motivational orientation. Global meaning includes

people's beliefs about the world (e.g., how fair and just the world and other people are);

beliefs about the self (e.g., one's self-worth including "evaluations of one's essential

goodness and morality and…the effectiveness of one's actions"); and beliefs about the

self in the world (e.g., the trustworthiness and value of intimate relationships with

others") (Park & Folkman, 1997, pp. 118-119). These assumptions about order often

include people's "distribution of negative and positive events" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p.

116). In later writings on her own, Park refers to these conceptions of order as global

beliefs which are "the basic internal cognitive structures that individuals construct about

the nature of the world" (Park, 2005a, p. 709). Global beliefs address additional issues

such as "…luck, control, predictability, coherence…,and personal vulnerability" and

"[t]hese beliefs form the core schemas through which people interpret their experiences

of the world" (Park, 2005b, p. 297).

The motivational orientation of global meaning concern purpose: "beliefs that

organize, justify, and direct a person's striving….typically framed in terms of goals"

(Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 119). Schnitker and Emmons explain, "spiritual strivings

function at motivational, cognitive, and interpersonal levels to provide meaning to people

and [can] increase well-being" (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013, p. 323). Park explains global

goals as "those ideals, states, or objects that people hold most important in life, those that

they work toward being or achieving or maintaining" and that these goals "inform plans,

activities, and behaviors" (Park, 2005b, p. 297). Researchers have cautioned that people's

behaviors do not always correspond to their stated goals (Baumeister, 1991). Because of

this, "rather than asking directly about global goals, researchers sometimes infer them

through indicators such as the amount of time, energy, resources or money spent in their

pursuit" (Park, 2005b, p. 298). Overall, these global goals "are the basic internal

representations of desired outcomes that motivate people in their lives" (Park, 2005a, p.

709). In later writings Park does add another aspect of global meaning that she refers to

as subjective feelings: "subjective 'sense of meaning' refers to feelings of

'meaningfulness,' that is, a sense of meaning or purpose in life"; this is a "sense of being

headed in the direction of, rather than actually achieving, ultimate goals [which] creates the sense of meaningfulness" (Park, 2005b, p. 298). In addressing global meanings, Park explains that they are "usually constructed unwittingly, acquired from surrounding culture…and through accumulated experiences, and tend to remain outside people's awareness" (Park, 2005b, p. 298). But she goes on to stress that

> [r]egardless of their awareness of global meaning…it exerts powerful influences on people's thoughts, actions, and feelings, and gets translated into their daily lives through interpretations,…strivings,…and sense of well-being and life satisfaction. (Park, 2005b, p. 298)

The second level of meaning discussed by Park and Folkman (1997) is that of situational meaning which "refers to the interaction of a person's global beliefs and goals and the circumstances of a particular person-environment transaction" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 121). The individual's appraisal of the situation will influence how he or she will "cope with the demands of those transactions and their outcomes" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 121). Situational meaning has three major components which are: appraisal of meaning; search for meaning; and meaning as outcome. The appraisal of meaning "refers to the initial assessment of the personal significance of specific transactions between the person and the environment" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 121). They explain that "[t]he appraisal of personal significance is influenced by the relevance of the event to the person's beliefs, commitments, and goals, and by options regarding what can be done about the situation" and therefore "[t]he personal nature of the appraised situational meanings helps explain why a given event…may be stressful to one person and not…to another". Additionally, it explains why a situation may be stressful at one time in a person's life, but not at a different time (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 122). Once meaning

has been appraised, if the person identifies a discrepancy/discrepancies between the situation and their global meanings and goals they can often "experience distress and attempt to alleviate this distress, or cope" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 124). Once a situation has been appraised as stressful, if the situation is not amenable to being resolved by emotion-focused or problem-focused strategies, this often leads to the second component of situational meaning, the search for meaning. According to Park and Folkman "the major task in the management of meaning is to reduce the incongruence between the appraised meaning of a situation or event and the person's preexisting global meaning in terms of beliefs and goals" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 124). Accordingly, they believe that

> the meaning making process is considered successful when people achieve reconciliation either by changing the appraised meaning of the situation to assimilate it into preexisting global meaning, or by changing their beliefs or goals to accommodate the event.…If neither occurs, the reappraisal process continues and can lead to rumination. (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 124)

An important aspect of this model is that the appraisal of meaning is not a single event, but that reappraisals can occur many times through the coping process. Therefore, the possibility for change exists. The meaning made at one point if life that assists an individual in beneficial ways, may at a later date become detrimental, and with the reappraisal process, that individual can understand the situations in a new, possibly more life promoting, way. The other noteworthy aspect of their argument is that just because an individual attributes causality to a situation, it does not necessarily constitute having made meaning of the experience. Parks specifies that

> the meaning-making model distinguishes between *attempts* to make meaning and the *successful creation* of meaning [and that] the development of such 'meaning

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made' or 'products' of the meaning-making process…is thought to differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive meaning making. (Park, 2012, p. 524)

This leads to the final component of situational meaning which is referred to as meaning as outcome. This component assesses the extent to which an individual has been "able to integrate appraised meaning of an event with their global meaning" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 130). They explain that research findings have demonstrated that a better general sense of coherence leads to better adjustment, and less reconciliation of the incongruence(s) can lead to further distress. They explain that confirming meaning has been made is not sufficient in and of itself, but the content of the meaning made is an important influence on adjustment. In later writing Park calls for research that does "a finer grained analysis of the types of meaning making in which individuals engage…[which will assist] in sorting out the effects of meaning-making efforts on adjustment" (Park, 2010, p. 290). This dissertation project is a step in meeting that call. Park does caution that in making these kinds of analysis researchers must remain "aware of the inherent value judgments they are making in deeming particular meanings as 'negative'" (Park, 2010, p. 290). I believe the same should be said of judgments of what is positive as well. Finally, in her effort to make sense of the meaning literature, Park concludes that

> [r]ather than asking whether meaning making is helpful in adjusting to highly stressful events, we first need to better understand what meaning making is and then ask for whom, and under what circumstances, are particular types of meaning making and meaning made helpful and why? (Park, 2010, p. 293)

In her recent research, Park has been testing the meaning making model to try to assess the answers to these questions, and while the results vary on how and what meaning is

being made, she has discovered that the meaning making model is beneficial to assist in understanding the meaning making process. Additionally, this model assists in demonstrating that meaning making is an important aspect of dealing with trauma and loss (Park, 2008; Park & Gutierrez, 2013).

In summation, the meaning making model explains the flow of the coping process. If individuals assess that the situational meaning of the stressor violates or threatens their global meaning they will often experience distress. Then they will work to decrease the discrepancy between their appraised and global meaning by way of making meaning of the situation. Meaning making is understood here as a process by which individuals reduce this discrepancy by either "changing the appraised meaning of a situation,…[or] changing their global beliefs and goals, or both, to achieve integration of appraised (or eventually reappraised) meaning of the event into their global meaning system" (Park, 2005b, p. 299). This process can take place multiple times before the individual is able to come to a place where the original situation no longer creates an experience of distress. It is also possible that if individuals are not able to decrease this discrepancy then they will experience even more profound distress, which will often become problematic for a sense of positive well-being.

Meaning Centered Approach to Resilience

There is an additional concept that needs to be addressed in the coping research literature, most especially in regards to working with vulnerable youth, and that is the idea of resilience. In much of the current research on how children and young adults in foster care are coping with their experiences there is a trend towards discussing resiliency

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(Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Gitterman, 2001; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities and Initiative, 2012; Masten & Powell, 2003; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005).

There is much dispute about how this term should be defined and minimal consensus on these definitions (Kaplan, 2005). In order to understand resilience, O'Dougherty, Wright, and Masten explain that there have been three major waves in the research (O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005). In the first wave, resilience typically referred "to a pattern of positive adaptation in the context of past or present adversity" (O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 18). Psychologists have noted "[i]n the early days of resilience research, the focus was on 'the invulnerable child,' who did better than expected despite adversities and disadvantages" (Rutter, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wong & Wong, 2012, p. 585). As research progressed the focus shifted to factors and/or characteristics that were present, or not present, in youth that were assessed for resilience and to what extent they were considered resilient (Bolger & Patterson, 2003; Fergusson & Horwood, 2003; Luthar, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). This became problematic because often it inferred that youth were either resilient or not, and at times the youth were implicitly blamed for not being resilient enough to adapt well (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 405; O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 29). Essential to the conversation about resilience is the recognition that "[t]here is a huge difference between resilience and survival. The former implies an ability to maintain healthy functioning…in the wake of threat or crisis. The latter subsumes distorted development and negative behavior" (Garbarino, 1999, pp. 166-167).

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In time, researchers shifted from assessing 'what' resilience was to understanding 'how' resilience came to be and what things could be done to promote it (O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 25). This leads to the second wave of research which began to view resilience as a process and to recognize the importance of context. There was a shift to "an ecological, transactional systems approach" which was a "dramatic shift from the traditional focus on the individual" (O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 26; Seidman & Pedersen, 2003). With this perspective research could be done for interventions that could be implemented to increase competency in resilient characteristics, recognize risk factors, and begin to work to alleviate them, as well as promote protective factors in the individual's environment (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Resilience is now being seen as more of a dynamic process, some even call it a trajectory, wherein if things are not going well, an intervention can be implemented to assist the individual and their surrounding community to get things back on a track of positive adaptation (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Richardson, 2002). With this understanding of resilience, researchers realized that they did not have to wait until a challenge was occurring, but that preventative measures could be taken with at-risk populations to try to circumvent negative circumstances from taking place to begin with (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

This leads to the third wave of research which takes the form of experimental studies to test theories of resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005). Intervention studies are being designed to "reduce risky behaviors, delinquency, and other problems", as well as to promote protective factors and

increase competence (O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 31). From these studies the literature has begun to describe and use "a 'resilience framework' for practice and policy" which is described as "[i]ntervening to alter the life course of a child potentially at risk for psychopathology or other problems, whether by reducing risk or adversity exposure, boosting resources, or mobilizing protective systems…" (Masten & Powell, 2003; O'Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 31). In a longitudinal study done assessing resilience in children that had contact with child protective services Jaffee and Gallop found that even if children were considered resilient socially, emotionally, and in academic competence at one point in time, they might not be so at other points in time. They stress that the instability often experienced in a child's life while involved with child protective services may make it difficult to achieve the stable conditions needed for resilience (Jaffee & Gallop, 2007). Houshyar & Kaufman counter that

> [a] resiliency framework can be especially productive in guiding maltreatment research given that resiliency focuses on…the pathways to *positive adaptation*, and…*how* children who experience considerable risk factors…'beat the odds'. (Houshyar & Kaufman, 2005, p. 181)

In suggesting what he considers a postmodern and multidisciplinary view of resilience, Richardson proposes that it be viewed as a process, which he calls resilience reintegration. This "refers to the reintegration or coping process that results in growth, knowledge, self-understanding, and increased strength of resilient qualities" (Richardson, 2002, p. 310). He explains that this process of resilient reintegration "requires increased energy to grow, and the source of the energy…is a spiritual source or innate resilience" (Richardson, 2002, p. 313). He suggests an additional component of the third wave of resilience research is to question "[w]hat and where is the energy source or motivation to

reintegrate resiliently" (Richardson, 2002, p. 313)? In an effort to begin to answer these questions, he takes a multi-disciplinary approach to view the probabilities and assumes two postulates. The first postulate is "ecological sources provide or trigger resilience in people. The energy or force that drives a person from survival to self-actualization may be called quanta, chi, spirit, God, or resilience" (Richardson, 2002, p. 315). The second postulate states "resilience is a capacity in every soul…[and that] soul refers to the whole integrated being of an individual with one's…human spirit as the primary guiding force of the system" (Richardson, 2002, p. 315). An approach such as this takes into serious consideration the importance of an individual's spirituality and the power it can provide in providing a path to positive well-being.

Several current researchers have challenged the field to recognize 'western-based' priorities in how research tends to view resilience, most especially what is defined as protective factors (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Rigsby, 1994; Ungar, 2008). Researchers are now pushing for "interventions that seek to bolster aspects of resilience among culturally diverse populations of at-risk children and youth" and are "responsive to a broad spectrum of ethnic, racial and religious identities" (Ungar, 2008, p. 233). One attempt to address this issue has been proposed by Wong and Wong who explain there are differences in the types of resilience. They state there are three prototypical patterns of resilience which are:

1. *Recovery*: bouncing back and returning to normal functioning

2. *Invulnerability*: remaining relatively unscathed by the adversity or trauma

3. *Posttraumatic growth*: bouncing back and becoming stronger

Differences between these manifestations "can be attributed to different person-context interactions rather than individual differences in their resilience strength" (Wong & Wong, 2012, p. 588). Recognizing these contextual variances in important in understanding resilience.

In addressing the varying patterns, they acknowledge that others have noted that there are multiple pathways to resilience (e.g., hardiness, self enhancement), but they propose that an additional pathway to resilience that should be addressed is meaning and purpose (Wong, 1998; Wong & Wong, 2012). An extensive review of the literature lists many protective factors assisting youth in the process of resilience, one that is particularly pertinent to their proposal is "faith and a sense of meaning in life" (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). With this in mind, Wong and Wong have presented a meaning-centered approach to resilience which they describe as a "holistic and integrative theory for understanding resilience" (Wong & Wong, 2012, p. 596). Their model is "based on interactions between the three modules of the positive triad through the dual-systems model of approach and avoidance" (Wong & Wong, 2012, p. 596). In this model there are three modules of survival and flourishing that constitute the positive triad. One module is the PURE principles of meaningful living, the acronym standing for: purpose, understanding, responsibility, enjoyment. The second module is the ABCDE strategy of resilience, which stands for: acceptance, belief, commitment, discovery, enjoyment and evaluation. The final module described engages the elements of tragic optimism, which they explain as being: acceptance of the worst; affirmation in the value and meaning of life; self-transcendence (altruism); faith in God and others; and courage

to face adversity (Wong & Wong, 2012). According to Wong and Wong, this triad is

mediated by the dual-systems model of approach and avoidance which

> incorporates principles of effective coping and stress management…[and] mediates between the interactions of PURE, ABCDE, and tragic optimism to ensure that the positive triad works in a balanced and efficient manner to enhance resilience and flourishing. (Wong & Wong, 2012, p. 605)

With this model, one can assess if an individual is avoiding making meaning at all, as

well as recognizing if they are approaching meaning, via using the concepts introduced as

PURE, or transforming or transcending the situation via the ABCDE strategy.

Additionally, in the PURE, ABCDE, and tragic optimism modules we can begin to

recognize and assess specific themes that might be found within the narratives of those

who have aged out.

Defining/Understanding Religion and Spirituality

How do religion and spirituality specifically function in the coping process? Cole,

Benore, and Pargament note that often religion is seen as a form of defense to a chaotic

world, and psychologists regularly refer to Freud's negative view of religion on this

matter (Cole, Benore, & Pargament, 2004; Freud, Strachey, & Gay, 1989), while

disregarding the positive view of religion held by other forefathers of psychology like

William James (James, 1958). This idea of religion as defense may contain a grain of

truth, but it is not "*solely*" about defense (Cole, et al., 2004, p. 53). Other arguments state

that religion is about decreasing anxiety, but Cole et al. respond by saying it can also play

a proactive role in keeping anxiety from taking place to begin with. Though, religion can

cause anxiety as well. Some psychologists claim that religion promotes passivity to

which Cole et al. respond that it can also be about the collaboration between persons and their religion.

In recent times, there has been a trend towards polarizing religion as a dogmatic institution imposing its beliefs, versus spirituality, as a free form style of understanding the sacred (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). Pargament and others warn against this polarization stating that it is far too simplistic an understanding of the two concepts and that this perception tends to disregard both the positives and negatives of each concept (Ammerman, 2014; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Admittedly, this lack of consensus on the multivalent nature of religion and spirituality, along with lack of consist definitions, theories and methods, makes research challenging.

For this dissertation, I use Pargament's definition of religion as "a process, a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). In this definition, spirituality is understood as the central function of religion, which is a search for the sacred (Pargament, 1997). Pargament describes "spirituality [as] an important, irreducible motivation and process in and of itself" (Pargament, 2013b, p. 271). In discussing the sacred, Pargament recognizes the impalpable nature of this term in explaining that

> [l]anguage, symbols, myths, and stories…must always fall short of capturing the essence of ultimate reality…according to most religious traditions, the divine or ultimate reality is inherently mysterious, elusive, and indescribable…[but] that should not stop us from trying to articulate the meaning of the sacred…. (Pargament, 2007, p. 33)

In order to begin this articulation process, Pargament and Mahoney define the sacred "in terms of concepts of God, the divine, and transcendent, as well as in other aspects of life

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that take on divine character and significance by virtue of their association with, or representation of, divinity" (Pargament, 2007, p. 32; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002, pp. 647-648).

While this definition is a solid beginning to understanding the sacred, it does not necessarily assist in recognizing that which is sacred in an individuals' life. Though the forms the sacred take in people's lives are innumerable, Pargament identified two primary arenas to begin to distinguish the range of phenomena people experience as sacred. The two arenas are the sacred core and the sacred ring. The sacred core "refers to ideas of God, higher powers, divinity, and transcendent reality" and the sacred ring surrounds the sacred core which includes "aspects of life that become extraordinary, indeed sacred themselves, through their association with the sacred core" (Pargament, 2007, p. 32). In representing the sacred within individuals' lives, the sacred ring can incorporate an endless number of possible manifestations, but Pargament identifies three possible spheres in which to identify the sacred: the self, relationships, and place and time. In order to recognize that which is sacred within each of these spheres, Pargament distinguishes three attributes of sacredness: transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. Transcendence "speaks to the perception that there is something out of the ordinary in a particular object or experience, something that goes beyond our everyday lives and beyond our usual understanding" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39). Boundlessness "involves a perception of endless time and space" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39). Ultimacy is "perceived as something vibrant and alive, something basic and elemental…it refers to the essential and absolute ground of truth, the foundation for all experience" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39).

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The self becomes sacred through attaining the "highest of human potentials"
realized in "acts of justice, courage, creativity, compassion, forgiveness,
honesty,…hope…and even humor" (Pargament, 2007, p. 43). Pargament notes that "no
dimension of the self is more fully identified with the sacred than the soul". The soul
"refers not to a 'thing' but to a 'quality' of ourselves and our experiences…[it] has both
transcendent and immanent qualities…[and] can be seen as a point of connection between
individuals and God" (Pargament, 2007, pp. 43-44).

In describing sacred qualities of relationships Pargament focuses on love:
"[t]hrough experiences of love and compassion, many people feel they come closest to an
encounter with the divine" and often "[t]he products of love—marriage, sexuality, and
family—can also be perceived in sacred terms (Pargament, 2007, pp. 44-45). He
describes the sacramental quality of relationships and the ways that "[s]prituality can
unfold in daily relationships with family, friends, and others in the community"
(Pargament, 2007, p. 84). While "family life may not always be so divine…empirical
studies suggest that many individuals perceive family life in spiritual terms" (Pargament,
2007, p. 46). Pargament broadens his description of the sacredness of family relationships
to include "the larger human family of neighbors, communities, institutions, nations, and
indeed, all of life" (Pargament, 2007, p. 47). Even if the individuals do not explicitly
state, or even recognize for themselves, that specific relationships in their lives are a part
of their sacred ring, quite often they do speak of their relationships, especially in their
more reflective moments, as infused with those sacred qualities. It can be through those
sacred perceptions that they understand the significance of these people in their lives.

The final components that he speaks of in the sacred ring are place and time. While sacred places can "be created almost anywhere", they are often places that for the individual are "saturated with power, creativity, and timelessness" (Pargament, 2007, p. 48). Time itself can be considered sacred. For example, religious holidays are often imbued with a sense of the sacred. Additionally, "[l]ife transitions such as birth, coming of age, marriage, retirement and death can also be seen as sacred" (Pargament, 2007, p. 48). Within the foster care experience, there may be times that might be considered as sacred, such as the actual process of aging out. Besides place and time, Pargament describes the possible ways that material objects are experienced as sacred (e.g., religious objects, personal items, etc.), and the way practices are experienced as sacred (e.g., meditation, prayer, church attendance, etc.).

Pargament explains that nearly anything can be imbued with qualities of the sacred. This process of giving sacred meaning to things that might not otherwise be considered religious is called sanctification, and can take place in two ways: theistic and nontheistic (Pargament, 2013a). "In theistic sanctification, a significant object is linked directly with God or a higher power" (Pargament, 2013a, p. 259). "In nontheistic sanctification, a significant object is assigned divine-like qualities, such as transcendence, boundlessness, or ultimacy" (Pargament, 2013a, p. 259). These types of attributes can be discovered both explicitly and implicitly within individuals' narratives. In identifying and defining the concept of the sacred and its attributes in this way, and in placing it at the center of spirituality, Pargament explains that this "opens the door of social scientific investigation to people with diverse orientations toward religion and spirituality"

(Pargament, 2013a, p. 260). In discussing this issue he stresses that he is speaking about an empirical approach and that "[p]sychologists have nothing to offer the debate about the ontological validity of the sacred…[but] can examine the perceptions of the sacred and emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that precede, accompany, and follow these perceptions" (Pargament, 2013a, p. 260). Pargament does stress though that we cannot "reduce religion and spirituality to purely psychological, social and physical processes" as research shows that "spirituality is a distinctive human motivation and process in and of itself" (Pargament, 2013a, p. 269).

Religion and Spirituality in the Coping Process

These basic definitions of religion and spirituality can help clarify their role in the coping process, especially in the field of the Psychology of Religion. In the transactional model presented by Lazarus and Folkman, the initial step in coping by the individual is cognitive appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). McIntosh proposes the use of religion in coping as a schema (McIntosh, 1995). Schemas are cognitive representations of previous experiences in regards to specific domains. In developing a schema one will experience an event which will then be cognitively organized, stored, and if needed, can later be retrieved and processed. Schemas play an important role in the structure and function of religion. They allow people to experience a situation, sort the stimuli, identify the components, assimilate them into their worldview and then assist them in deciding on a strategy or a way to make meaning of the experience. In challenging situations, people with religious schemas will most probably use the above process to quickly identify the stimuli and use their religious meanings to assimilate the information into their

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understanding of the situation. If people identify too quickly with only certain aspects of religion, or use less complex religious schemas, they may come to simplistic religious assessments of the situation, which may temporarily relieve stress but create greater long-term problems with meaning making. Understanding religion as schema is one possible way of identifying how religion is viewed in the coping process.

For Pargament, "[r]eligion and coping are separable concepts, not to be mistaken for each other. But they are also related phenomena" (Pargament, 1997, p. 161). While they have similarities, they "differ in a critical respect—their point of reference" (Pargament, 1997, p. 131). While the coping process may involve religious components, it also may not. Coping is oriented to stressful life experiences. While religion can be a part of the coping process, it can also be involved in other areas of life that are not related to stressful life experiences. As Pargament notes, religion "can provide an overarching framework for living, applicable to the widest range of human experience" (Pargament, 1997, p. 132). Religion is "relatively available and accessible…because religion offers a more compelling route to significance than nonreligious alternatives" (Pargament, 1997, p. 162). Religion is often a resource when human resources hit their limitations; the use of religious coping can also take place in ordinary circumstances as well. To confirm though, not all religious coping is helpful: "there are times when it is the religious solution to the problems of life rather than the secular that is found wanting…" (Pargament, 1997, p. 162). The relationship between religion and coping involves a complex interplay between the person, the situation, and/or the context, which can be both beneficial and detrimental to the individual in the coping process.

Religion and Spirituality in Meaning Making

In working with the meaning making model, Park explains that "[r]eligion is often invoked when discussing meaning in life" (Park, 2005b, p. 299). Due to this, Park explicitly details some of the ways that religion is engaged in people's global meaning, global beliefs, global goals, and meaning making, especially in the coping process.

Park uses Pargament's definition of religion– "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (Pargament, 1997, p. 32; Park, 2005b, p. 299) and states religion "is central to the global meaning systems of many people, although its importance varies greatly among individuals" (Park, 2005b, p. 299). Research has shown that there are a wide range of ways that religion can be involved in global meaning, that it often has central involvement, and that "[t]he extensive, nearly universal, reliance on religious meanings systems may be due to the fact that, compared to secular meaning systems, religion is typically more comprehensive…and more existentially satisfactory" (Park, 2005b, p. 299).

In terms of global beliefs, religion provides "comprehensive frameworks of meaning that enable [people] to explain events in the world in highly satisfactory ways" (Park, 2005b, p. 300). Not only can religion give people guidance on beliefs about deeply challenging issues such as "suffering, death, tragedy, and injustice", but also the more mundane and less explicitly religious issues such as "fairness, control, coherence, benevolence of the world and other people and vulnerability" (Park, 2005b, p. 300). "People's understandings of why a given event occurred, can be of a naturalistic or a

religious type" (Park, 2005b, p. 302). Beliefs about causal attributions are often central in how individuals interpret the situation, as well as how they choose to cope with them.

Religion can also be central to global goals. Not only can religion assist in providing the goals themselves, but also in contributing to the motivation and guidance for accomplishing those goals. "While some goals are explicitly religious…, each and every goal that an individual holds [as important] may become connected to the sacred through the process of sanctification" (Park, 2005b, pp. 300-301). Sanctification as noted previously is the process of giving sacred meaning to things that might not otherwise be considered religious. "Therefore, any goal can take on religious value if the individual ties it to his or her conceptualization of the sacred" (Park, 2005b, p. 301). These global goals can influence all areas of an individual's life.

While religion can be important in all aspects of an individual's life, it can become a potent influence in moments of crises, times that may involve great stress or loss and may challenge ones "most deeply held beliefs and purposes" (Park, 2005b, p. 304). According to Park,

> there are at least two reasons for religion's prominence in times of crisis: (1) because, for most people, religion is part of their global beliefs, and goals, which may be threatened or violated by traumatic events, and (2) because most religions provide ways of understanding, reinterpreting, and adding value to difficulties and suffering. (Park, 2005b, p. 304)

The specific content of these religious meanings varies dramatically, but understanding the process of coping while using religious meaning making corresponds with the meaning making model. When an individual makes an initial assessment using a lens of religious understanding, he or she is more likely to experience distress if the crisis

violates or threatens global meaning for that individual. Individuals begin the meaning making process by way of accessing their religious resources. If upon reappraisal they are still in distress, then they may need to reevaluate their religious resources, and possibly their global meanings, beliefs, and/or goals as understood by way of their religion, as well as their understandings of their religion itself, which they may discover needs to be revised. These latter possibilities can be exceptionally distressing and will often take time for an individual to work through.

How Religion and Spirituality Can Specifically Function in the Coping Process

How does religion function in the coping process? According to Pargament, Ano, and Wachholtz religion can function in a variety of ways, but the most common themes are ways to search for control and mastery, get closer to and connect with God, find support, and make life transformations (Pargament, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2005). As Hood, Hill, and Spilka explain, "the search for meaning is of central importance to human functioning, and…religion is uniquely capable of helping in that search" (Hood Jr, Hill, & Spilka, 2009, p. 12). When situations make people recognize the frailty of the human condition, it is quite common for them to draw on their religious resources. The procedures for this search are most often found in the processes of discovery and conservation.

Pargament and Mahoney describe the process of discovery as the search for God/sacred in one's life. Once found, people hold onto what they have found through the process of conservation (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). What is found may once again change and therefore the process of discovery begins again and so goes the cycle. This is

where the approaches noted above—preservation, reconstruction, revaluation and recreation—would/could function, in the form of spiritual trajectories.

If there is a threat, violation, or loss then an individual will begin conservational spiritual coping. If distress diminishes and equilibrium returns, then people are more likely to stay on a pathway to spiritual integration. If distress does not diminish, then the individual will experience a spiritual struggle. When a trajectory involves transformational spiritual coping, then what often follows is a conservation phase. If a trajectory involves spiritual disengagement, this may in turn lead back to discovery, or possibly lead to chronic spiritual struggle (Pargament, 2007). The latter is what Pargament calls spiritual disintegration and can be problematic for the individual's sense of well-being. This is the point at which spiritual interventions, described in his approach to spiritually integrated psychotherapy, can be beneficial.

In continuing the explanation of how religion may work in an individual's life, it is beneficial to recognize possible benefits of religion. Shafranske explains that it assists us in having hope in challenging situations. It provides the perception of control in situations with less control. It can bring meaning to situations that seem incomprehensible. It can provide hope from like-minded individuals (Shafranske, 2005). As Masten explains "[r]ekindling hope may be an important spark for resilience processes to begin their restorative work" (Masten, 1994, p. 21). Spilka, Hood Jr, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch explain that "religion 'works' because it offers people meaning and control, and brings them together with like-thinking others who provide social support" (Spilka, et al., 2003, p. 506).

Religious orientations play a central role in religious coping (P. C. Hill & Pargament, 2003). Religious orientating systems involve things such as: understandings of the sacred, destinations, pathways, meaning making, and what is considered virtues versus vices. Much of the literature focuses on three specific forms of religious orientation (Pargament, 1997). The first orientation is an intrinsic religious orientation, in which people are involved in religion primarily for personal spiritual reasons and their connection with the transcendence. The second orientation is an extrinsic religious orientation, wherein people are involved in religion primarily for self-involved and social purposes, such as to make business connections, or because it "looks good". The third orientation is the spiritual quest which involves an active process of searching for the sacred and very often involves some amount of spiritual struggle.

Pargament has proposed that three distinctive approaches to responsibility and control in coping directly correlates to each religious orientation: collaborative; deferring, and self-directing (Pargament, 1997, pp. 180-182). An intrinsic religious orientation is correlated with a collaborative approach wherein people see themselves as partners with God in the processing of coping. An extrinsic religious orientation is correlated with a deferring approach wherein individuals passively give their power over to God to handle the situation even in cases where they really could do something about it. The final orientation of spiritual quest is correlated with a self-directing approach wherein the individual keeps control and does not hand the situation over to God. Bänziger, van Uden and Janssen describe self-directing as a non-religious form of coping (Bänziger, van Uden, & Janssen, 2008), but Pargament notes that often, maintaining an affiliation with

their church is still important to those using a self-directing approach (Pargament, 1997, p. 181).

The next component that is essential to understanding how religion functions is to look at the variety of ways that people use religion to cope measured by the Brief RCOPE scale (Pargament, et al., 1998). This scale replaced simplistic one item measures of religiosity (i.e. how often do you go to church) with an array of coping behaviors related to religious values and beliefs, and spiritual practices of individual's. The Brief RCOPE model specifically distinguishes the use of positive versus negative religious coping mechanisms, not in terms of whether coping is good (positive) and bad (negative), but as resources that may have specific times and places of application that can be both beneficial and detrimental. For example, positive religious coping involves mechanisms such as: benevolent reappraisal, religious forgiveness, and searching for spiritual support and connection to God/sacred. The negative religious coping mechanisms include things such as: spiritual discontent, reappraisal of God's power, demonic reappraisal, and punishing God appraisals.

The Brief RCOPE helps researchers understand the myriad of ways that religion can be both helpful and harmful. For example, there are far more ways religion can go wrong than it can go right (Pargament, 1997, pp. 315-358). Pargament's definition of spirituality as a search for the sacred highlights problems on the pathways such as going in the wrong direction, an example of which is when people use religious one-sidedness and use their religion to explain their situations to the extreme of ignoring other possible options (e.g., I am sick because God made it happen versus looking at environmental

issues). There is also the possibility of taking the wrong road by either letting go of situations where something can be done (e.g., I don't need to take medicine, God will make it better), or holding on too tight in situations over which they have no control. This can be problematic in making individuals feel like they have failed in a situation, when really they could not have done anything to control it. Finally, there can be problems of fit between persons and their social context. An example is the shunning of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-sexual) persons from communities of faith because of beliefs that the GLBT's sexuality is not "acceptable to God". Walsh tells us that these kinds of harsh judgments are often culturally embedded beliefs and values rigidly proscribed by church doctrine, which can leave people feeling unsupported (Walsh, 2008). Pargament would remind us these kinds of situations can also be a motivation to encourage social change movements.

Research on religious coping has demonstrated the ways that spirituality can be both harmful and helpful (Pargament, 2007). Spiritual struggles "are defined as religious/spiritual expressions that reflect a religious/spiritual system in tension and turmoil" (Ano & Pargament, 2012, p. 419). Spiritual struggles "embody fundamental questions about the ultimate benevolence, fairness, and meaningfulness of the world…" (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005, p. 254) and researchers caution that "spiritual struggles should not be equated with spiritual deficiency" (Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al., 2005, p. 249). Spiritual struggles can take the form of: interpersonal struggles, which are conflicts with family, friends, and congregations; intrapersonal struggles, wherein individuals experience sacred clashes within themselves (e.g.,

questioning how to live out their sacred purpose); or divine struggles wherein persons

hold conflicting views of the divine which can disrupt their lives (Exline, 2013). The

latter can be seen in ways such as: people who believe in an ambivalent God that does not

care about them; and an inconsistent God that neglects them. Spiritual struggles such as

these can become harmful if people do not find resolutions to these types of issues.

According to Thomas Johnson, "[r]eligious struggles [can] be both a cause and a

consequence of [a substance use disorder]. People experiencing spiritual struggles may

not be effectively using religious or spiritual forms of coping and thus turn to substances

as a coping mechanism" (Johnson, 2013, p. 301). Other research has found that certain

spiritual struggles "partially mediated the relationship between trauma and PTSD

symptoms" (Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2011, p. 442). In some cases, research has

found that continued spiritual struggles in the elderly that have been hospitalized have led

to higher mortality ratings (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). But in less

dramatic circumstances, most often these times of struggle have been related to less life

satisfaction and well-being (Bryant & Astin, 2008). On the helpful side, spiritual

struggles can also motivate people to better themselves, and to find their life's purpose

(Exline, 2013; Maunu & Stein, 2010). Persons that are devoted to an ultimate cause have

been found to be more invested in their lives and have greater life satisfaction and well-

being.

Pargament, in reviewing the empirical literature on the possible benefits and costs

of religiousness and its implications for well-being, makes five conclusions:

1. [S]ome forms of religion are more helpful than others. Well-being has been linked
   positively to a religion that is internalized, intrinsically motivated, and based on a

secure relationship with God and negatively to a religion that is imposed, unexamined, and reflective of a tenuous relationship with God

2. [T]here are advantages and disadvantages to even controversial forms of religion, such as fundamentalism.

3. [R]eligion is particularly helpful to socially marginalized groups and to those who embed religion more fully into their lives.

4. [R]eligious beliefs and practices appear to be especially valuable in stressful situations that push people to the limits of their resources.

5. [T]he efficacy of religion is tied to the degree to which it is well integrated in the individual's life. (Pargament, 2002, p. 168)

Research questions about the general efficacy of religion are less helpful than more difficult questions such as: "[h]ow helpful or harmful are particular forms of religious expression for particular people dealing with particular situations in particular social contexts according to particular criteria for helpfulness or harmfulness" (Pargament, 2002, p. 168)?

In summation, using religious coping has the capacity to lead people down paths to destinations that leave them in despair and less life satisfaction, as well as to inspire them to live out their ultimate life's purposes in ways that lead to greater life satisfaction.

Religion, Spirituality, and Meaning Making in the Young Adult Population

In understanding the possible benefits and detriments in using religion and spirituality in coping, and understanding the processes and outcomes of making meaning, researchers have begun to question in what ways we can begin to address these topics in working with young adults specifically. While some may question whether modern day United States of America young adults are even contemplating religion and spirituality at all, research has found that they most definitely are engaging these topics (Ammerman, 2014; Gortner, 2013; C. Smith & Lundquist Denton, 2005; C. Smith & Snell, 2009). Barrett, for example, discovered that she was accidentally addressing spiritual issues

during therapy sessions when her young adult clients trying to cope with trauma were bringing up these topics on their own (Barrett, 2008). Way has explained that understanding how children experience spiritual dilemmas in bereavement is essential to being able to assist them through the grieving process, but that relatively little attention has been paid to finding ways to do this (Way, 2013). Some authors have proposed that religion and spirituality can assist not only in grief work, but in post-traumatic growth, yet research has often neglected these sources (Bray, 2013; Harris et al., 2010). In her study with adolescent girls Davis found "that spirituality, far from being a marginal aspect of girls' lives, is the vibrant center of their chief hopes and fears, a clear measure of their strengths and vulnerabilities" (Davis, 2001, p. 8). Experiences such as theirs have led researchers to call for more systematic ways of integrating spirituality into therapy (Coles, Elkind, Monroe, Shelton, & Soaries, 1995; Durà-Vila & Dein, 2009; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; Larimore, Parker, & Crowther, 2002; Pargament, 2007).

There are ways to work with spirituality in therapy in sensitive but guided ways as Pargament demonstrates in formulating spiritually integrated psychotherapy (Pargament, 2007). Spirituality can be an integrating or disintegrating force in people's lives, and that it is these variances that make a difference in how people's lives are influenced by religion. Integrated spirituality synchronizes the component parts of a persons' life, with the destinations large enough to hold all the complexity of human functioning, and the pathways fit to the environment, person and situations, and spiritual understandings flexible enough deal with life's changes, but stable enough to guide them through those same changes (Pargament, 2007). Spiritual disintegration is exactly opposite. The

component parts clash with each other, the destinations are fragmented or lead to small or false gods, pathways do not fit the situations, persons or environment, and spirituality is either too flexible or too rigid to deal with life's changes. Understanding how individuals are using religion and spirituality in daily and trauma-related coping and meaning making can assist us in understanding how to assist them in deeper and more helpful ways.

Why It All Matters

An individual's perceptions of the meanings of traumatic events, as well as normal daily events have significant impact on their resilience and coping. In understanding how young adults who have aged out of foster care understand their experiences, it is essential to listen for themes related to meaning-making within their narratives. Meaning making is a complex process that impacts every arena of an individual's life. As Garbarino explains "once th[e] spiritual foundation is in place, *then* educational programs, counseling, vocational experiences, and regular psychotherapy can help a boy [or girl] move to a positive path in his [or her] life" (Garbarino, 1999, p. 161). Garbarino also explains that "[w]ithout attention to this spiritual impulse, we fear that our intervention efforts will fall short of the mark" (Garbarino, 1992, p. 36). This dissertation shows that gaining an understanding of how these young adults have made meaning of being in foster care and aging out, most especially in religious and spiritual ways, is a powerful tool for assisting this population.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methodological rationales and actions taken for this dissertation. This chapter will explain in detail the procedures followed and the reasoning for taking those steps. It begins with the rationale for the use of the qualitative research design, continues on with the development of the research design, then gives the specifics of the procedural steps, and finishes up with the strategies used for analyses that led to the findings. Additionally, the demographic results of the questionnaires given to the interviewees will be presented within this chapter.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design and a Phenomenological Inquiry Approach

The purpose of this qualitative research is to (1) discern if and how young adults who have aged out of foster care made meaning of their experiences and (2) identify if there are spiritual themes within those narratives. This project required qualitative rather than quantitative research strategies since this topic has not been researched in-depth before. Qualitative methodology is the most appropriate approach because of the vast breadth and depth of possible meanings and spiritual interpretations which could be made by this population. A qualitative approach engages an interpretative strategy of research, which allows for the discovery of new meanings about aging out that have not been

addressed in prior research. The theoretical qualitative inquiry approach of this project is phenomenology. This term is not being used in the philosophical sense, nor in the use of a biblical interpretive approach, but in the hermeneutic methodological sense of understanding what meaning and interpretations are being engaged and understood by this population. The foundational question that a phenomenological qualitative research study asks is, "[w]hat is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (Patton, 2001, p. 104). In such a phenomenological study "we are less interested in the factual status of particular instances" but rather are asking "what is the nature or essence of the experience?" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). How does one understand the phenomena experienced "in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview?" (Patton, 2001, p. 106). This dissertation lends itself to a phenomenological approach because of its focus on recognizing the meaning these young adult interviewees have given to the phenomenon of having been in, and having aged out, of foster care.

Qualitative inquiry is a participatory research process, therefore participants are seen as "co-investigators" or co-researchers (Patton, 2001). My co-researchers (the young adults who have aged out) and I worked together to discern how they made meaning of their experiences of being in and aging out of foster care, and in what ways they perceive of, and understand, spirituality in their lives. The qualitative approach begins with the narratives of these young adults, opening up opportunities for more profound understandings of what they experienced in foster care and aging out, as well as how they cope with these often varying experiences.

There are several additional reasons why qualitative research strategies are justified for this project. Historically, when research has been done with this population, they were rarely given the opportunity to speak on their own behalf. While recently the opportunities for them to speak directly about their experience has become a more common practice, much of the research emphasizes that they still often feel "unheard" by those in authority. One purpose for using a qualitative research strategy was to create a space for them to be able to give voice to their experiences and to be heard in a direct and meaningful way. As Creswell explains, it is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to take the position of being "an *active learner* [italics in original] who can tell the story from the participant's view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 18). I was never in foster care myself, so I do not have an 'insider's perspective' of the phenomenon of being in foster care and aging out. The purpose of this work is not to advise the interviewees about what they should be thinking and feeling, but to hear what wisdom and knowledge they have to offer. I am specifically interested in if, and what, meanings were made in regards to being in foster care and aging out, as well as if, and how, they discovered and maintained a sense of spirituality through those experiences. Another benefit of the qualitative approach is that it eliminated the need for a pre-set definition for terms such as spirituality and religion. This approach offered interviewees freedom to use their own vocabulary to explain their situations in a way that was meaningful to them, thus increasing the possibility of a broader understanding of their experiences.

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Qualitative research strategies can lead to knowledge which is relevant to other young adults that have aged out of foster care, even if it is not universal to all of them. As Kluckhohn and Murray's maxim suggests, "every person is in certain respects (1) like all others, (2) like some others, and (3) like no other" (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1948). This maxim recognizes the near-universal experience of losses, and possible spiritual issues faced by these young adults, as well as aspects of their narratives unique to each of them.

Lastly, a qualitative research strategy acknowledges that identities are constructed using narratives that are always being interpreted (Patton, 2001). This perception takes seriously the idea that individuals actively work to interpret and make meaning of their lives. From this perspective one can identify the ways individuals cope in the narratives they share. Each individual brings a unique and creative approach to meaning-making. Their narratives are interpretations of their own history and the significance they have given to foster care and aging out. While these interpretations are particular to each person, there is an expectation that the themes within the narratives will also resonate with others who have aged, or will age, out of foster care. Qualitative interviews provide opportunity to identify meanings that are both beneficial and life giving, as well as those that are not. Such findings can guide care-givers in assisting other young adults aging out to recognize and possibly reassess meanings in order to form more beneficial, life promoting meanings that foster spiritual integration of the aging out experiences.

Research design

      Data collection.

For this study I used a purposeful sampling procedure. As Patton (2001) explains, "[t]he logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth…rather than empirical generalizations" (Patton, 2001, p. 230). Specifically, a criterion sampling strategy was applied, which "works well when all the individuals studied represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 104). There were multiple criteria for possible co-researchers. They must have legally emancipated from the foster care system (i.e. they were no longer in the custody of the county or state). They had to have aged out of foster care (i.e. they were not legally reunited with their family, or adopted, at the time of leaving foster care). They had to be over the age of 18 and legally able to consent. They had to have the mental faculties to be able to understand the informed consent and make their own decision to participate. Since the primary goal of this study was to understand meanings made by young adults specifically, the participants were not to be older than twenty-five years of age. Since I wanted to do interviews face to face in order to be able to ascertain if there were any important visual cues, the co-researchers needed to live within the Denver metro area. Additionally, since English is my primary language, I felt I would be better able to do interviews and thematic analyses in English: hence, all flyers posted were written only in English. All of interview volunteers spoke English fluently, so the interviews were conducted in English. No limitations were set regarding gender, race, or ethnicity.

I decided a sample size of eight to ten participants would be a sufficient number to do analysis for this research project. As Gray explains "…[a] small…study…may produce findings that are interesting and possibly indicative of trends worthy of replication by further research" (Gray, 2004, p. 89). I aimed to interview a "sample of sufficient intensity to elucidate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2001, p. 234). This sample size also allowed me to stand by my commitment to really hear the in-depth voices of these interviewees in a meaningful way. This sample size provides a spring board for possible future research with larger sample sizes. This research is founded on the concept that the meanings made by these interviewees who have already aged out will resonate with teens that have, or will be, aged/aging out of foster care. Consequently, I believe these research findings will be valuable to future research with, and clinical/spiritual care of, youth that have been in and aged out of foster care.

Recruitment process and the interviewees.

Upon initial Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Denver, recruitment began in order to find participants through a variety of methods. I did searches on Google and Facebook for the terms foster care and Colorado to look for groups involving those who have been in foster care. I made contact with several groups that let me put my flyers up in their central locations. Several institutions required that they pre-approve my flyers, so I dropped those off to the specific individuals, and all but one put my flyer up in their office. The one that did not, took longer to approve the flyer than the actual time it took me to conduct all of the interviews. Additionally, through the years when I had discussed my project with others in a variety of settings, I had made

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contacts willing to help once I was in the recruitment phase. A few of these contacts had resources for locations where I could post the flyers. Ultimately, the interviews came from one group source that worked regularly with those who had aged out; my flyers were handed out at the monthly meetings of this group. The flyers briefly explained that I was interested in hearing the stories of those who had aged out of foster care and how that impacted their lives. I offered an incentive of a $10 gift card to Walmart for their time. At the beginning of our meeting together I explained verbally, and showed them in writing on the informed consent, that this incentive did not require them to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable, and/or that they did not want to answer. Additionally, I let each of them know that if the interview raised any internal challenges that they wanted to discuss with a professional, that I would refer them to a professional. None of the participants requested a referral.

While recruiting, per my IRB and dissertation proposal approval, I did a pilot interview over the phone with an individual that was intentionally older than the participants being sought in order to 'test' out the possible questions and approaches to interviewing. The consent was explained and accepted by the interviewee verbally. The interview went well. It was not recorded or transcribed, nor were the contents used in this research project. From this experience I decided that no significant changes would be needed to my research questions and interview approach.

Nine loosely structured in-depth interviews were completed with signed informed consents. Ten possible interviews were scheduled, but one participant did not arrive at the designated time and location, and did not respond to follow up inquiries via phone and

email. All interviewees agreed in writing and verbally to allow the interview to be audio-taped. Additionally, I took minor notes through the interview to track any key ideas and phrases they spoke of. I did explain ahead of time to the participants that the notes were strictly reminders for myself of what they said, and if necessary, they were a back-up for my audio technology. The average length of the interviews was sixty-nine minutes. The interviews took place between November 2010 and February 2011.

I used a modified grounded theory approach to data collection for this project. Grounded theory sees an interrelationship between the data collection and the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2015, p. 8). The data collection procedure entailed my listening to the previous interview before conducting the next one in order to assess what variations might be needed in the upcoming interview.

As noted earlier, the approach for the interviews was a loosely structured interview. In explaining the guidelines for a qualitative interview Padgett states

> [a] qualitative interview is a goal-directed conversation. It should not be confused with a clinical or therapeutic interview. Nor should it be considered unstructured or unfocused…[one should] develop an interview guide…[with] an initial set of questions that focus on your area of interest…[that is] detail[ed] enough to cover key domains, but should not become a straitjacket. (Padgett, 1998, pp. 59-60)

I created an interview guide that was approved by both my committee and the IRB. For each interview, once we had addressed the informed consent process, I began with a sentence or two at the most, explaining what my research project was about. I then explained to them that in my experience many individuals that had been in foster care often have a story to share about what they had experienced both in foster care and in the aging out process. I then asked them if they would be willing to share their experiences

with me. As Drisko explains "…qualitative researchers need to ask appropriate and generative questions, but experience indicates participants will provide detailed answers not only to the expectable questions, but will direct you to new, unexpected, and useful questions, too" (Drisko, 2004, p. 116). Only one person paused at my request to share her story by asking if I would be asking her questions, and I confirmed I would, but that I wanted to hear what she had to say first. She then made herself comfortable by laying horizontal on her couch where upon she launched into her story. The remaining participants began immediately telling me their foster care and aging out stories. Beginning the interviews in this manner allowed the participant "to determine what subject to talk about, at what pace, in what order, and to what depth" they would talk about it (Strauss & Corbin, 2015, p. 38). Additionally, it allowed me to hear if they raised the topic on their own of how they made meaning of their experiences, as well as if they brought spiritual and/or religious themes into the conversation, and if so, what vocabulary they used. During their story sharing I made an intentional effort to "listen with an open mind and an open agenda and not let nervousness...on [my] part…inhibit the free flow of information from the participants" (Strauss & Corbin, 2015, p. 38). Each of the interviewees came to a point where I could tell they felt they had shared the story they wanted to be certain I would hear. I then looked at my handwritten notes of key words they used, as well as the interview guide, which over time gained hand written notes in the margin from previous interviews about topics to address, in order to continue the interview using their key terminology until the interview came to completion. This loosely structured approach to the interview process allowed some consistency in the

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topics covered, but with language distinctive to each interviewee. At the end I always asked if they felt there was anything I forgot to ask; only a few responded with additional comments. I then asked if it would be okay for me to contact them if I had any follow up questions, to which they all agreed. I only had to do one follow up call, and that was to obtain missing data on the demographic questionnaire that had been over-looked.

At the end of the interview each participant completed an IRB preapproved demographic questionnaire. Once I left the participants I then wrote up my field notes addressing the highlights of what was said in the interview, any visual cues that would not be picked up on the audio, as well as noting any personal observations that I felt would be important when it came time for analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Sample.

As noted above, participants completed a demographic questionnaire after the interview, which included self-reported information regarding gender, age, race and ethnicity, the specifics of their foster care history, their sibling information, their use of mental health services, their current status of education, employment and volunteer work, living arrangements, relationships, and whether or not they had children, as well as their upbringing within a religious tradition. The information was provided solely by the interviewees and events noted are strictly from their perspective. I did not do any secondary research on the interviewees via any other sources. The responses reported from the participants were as follows.

Gender, age, race and ethnicity of the sample.

- There were seven females and two males.

- The ages ranged from 18 to 24, with the average age at the time of the interview being 20.

- Three females and two males are white/Caucasian; two females are Latina/Hispanic; one female is Native American; one female is both white/Caucasian and Latina/Hispanic.

Specific foster care history.

- Four entered foster care between the ages of one and eight (two females and two males), and five, all females, entered between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.

- All nine stated that once they were placed in foster care that they stayed in foster care until they aged out, but in the interview itself two stated that they entered and exited foster care up to two times.

- Only one individual lived in a single foster home, four lived in three to seven homes, one in ten homes, another wrote in twenty-nine plus homes, one reported losing track of how many foster homes there were, and the final person wrote n/a, but during her interview she did share situations within at least four different foster homes.

- Only one individual stated she was in kinship care at any point, and that did not last (she is the person that had twenty-nine plus homes).

- All but one spent time in group homes, the number of homes each reported ranged from one to five group homes.

Sibling information.

- Only one individual said he did not have a sibling on the questionnaire, though in the interview he answered questions about a sibling and explained that his sibling spent time in foster care, too.

- Seven out of the eight that reported having siblings stated their siblings went into foster care also.

- The number of siblings varied from one to twenty-one siblings, with some making distinctions between full siblings versus half siblings.

- Five were placed with their siblings, but none were able to stay with their sibling through their full foster care experience.

- Seven of the eight were still in regular communication with their siblings at the time of the interview.

  Mental health services usage.

- Eight out of nine had used mental health services, though the ninth person that said she had not on the questionnaire spoke in her interview about the many diagnoses' she received while in foster care.

  Education.

- Five had graduated from high school, two had completed their GED, and two were actively working on their GED at the time of the interview.

- Three were currently enrolled in college classes, and three others had taken college classes but were not currently enrolled.

- Of the three currently enrolled, two were enrolled full-time. One individual had already received her Associates degree as a medical assistant, and was in college

full time working towards her LPN. The other was working towards a major in social work with a minor in criminal justice (and this individual had already completed the work for her cosmetology license). The third person was undeclared for a major and was attending school part time and working part time, but stated she would like to teach.

Employment and volunteer work.

- Three were employed part-time (one in education, one assisting those in foster care, and one as a cashier).

- Two were doing full time college course work.

- One was looking for work.

- Three were not working at all, one of which said he was waiting to be approved to receive Social Security Income (SSI), another of which was already receiving SSI.

- Four individuals were active in volunteer work, though only one was volunteering with children in foster care.

Living arrangements.

- Four stated they rented/owned their home (one was living in a portable trailer).

- One lived with a biological parent.

- One lived with her husband's parents.

- One was staying in a previous foster home.

- One was residing in a state sponsored post independent living facility.

- One individual was sleeping on friends' couches.

Relationship status.

- Three were married (during their interviews they all shared stories about their spouses that enabled me to infer they are heterosexual marriages).

- One female was in a committed triad relationship (two females and one male).

- One was separated from her husband.

- Four were single.

Children.

- Three had children, though only one had her child living with her (and was pregnant with the second at the time of the interview; she is the one living with her husband's parents). The other two had had their children removed from their homes by social services.

- The children's ages ranged from 16 months to five years of age.

- One of the individuals with no children was pregnant at the time of the interview, and another thought his girlfriend might be pregnant.

Upbringing within a religious tradition.

- One was raised Roman Catholic.

- Another wrote in both Roman Catholic and Christian.

- Five stated "none".

- One wrote in "too many/all".

- One wrote in "just believed in god".

Data Analysis.

As was noted earlier, one of the benefits of a qualitative research approach is that it allows one to discover new and different information that has not been researched before. One of the challenges of the qualitative approach being conducted via interviews is managing/analyzing the massive amounts of information generated by interviews and using analyses to generate research findings. There is no one agreed upon way to do qualitative analysis, therefore it is essential as a researcher to be as transparent as possible about the specific procedures followed and the progression of the ideas that lead to one's final findings (Patton, 2001, p. 432).

For the analytical procedure I used thematic analysis to discern how meaning was made, and to identify if there were spiritual dimensions. Generally, the procedure followed the phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke: familiarizing yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; defining and naming themes; then producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-93). While certain components of the analytical process I followed were linear, and the process below is described in a linear manner, the majority of these steps were more cyclical.

For the analysis phase I used a combination of working with printed transcripts and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to work with the data. Saldaña (2013) encourages this approach: "[t]here is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes [by hand] that give[s] you more control over and ownership of the work" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 26). Upon completion of the transcription of all the interviews, I listened to the interviews again while reading the printed transcriptions to confirm their accuracy and I

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noted in the margins any key ideas that could possibly become emergent codes. Later I used these printed transcriptions for the entire analysis process to note the codes found by either my peer and me, and where they were found.

Next I created a codebook in order to analyze the interviews for absence or presence of codes: a process explained by Boyatzis (1998) described in greater detail later in this chapter. In creating the codebook I kept in mind Braun and Clarke's words that "engagement with…literature can enhance your analysis by sensitizing you to more subtle features of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86; Glaser, 1978). I reviewed the literature for religious coping theory and meaning-making theory to identify possible codes. I looked for findings in other research projects addressing topics that were spiritual in nature, even if the term spiritual was not explicitly used. I used Pargament's (1997) definition of spiritual as 'the search for the sacred' as a guide in recognizing topics of spirituality. I looked for similarities among research terms and codes emerging from my data. With the codes I discovered from these reviews, I created an Excel spreadsheet and gave each possible code its own line on the spreadsheet and assigned it a sequential number beginning with the number one. The order of the codes and the numbers assigned to each were not based on any sort of priority, but simply the order in which I identified each code. I also went through the foster care and aging out literature to assess if there were any possible codes that appeared as spiritual in nature, again, even if that term was not explicitly used. Each of these codes was added to the Excel spreadsheet list and assigned a number as well. I also reviewed my field notes to be certain if there were any notations that would be pertinent to the creation of the code book. Upon completion of

this process there were fifty-two possible codes gleaned from my review of the literature. After analyzing the first interview I realized that I had not pulled possible codes from my own Master's thesis[3], so I added seven codes (Tokarski, 2006). In total, I had formulated a codebook with fifty-nine possible codes derived from the literature of these varying academic fields.

The interviews were then analyzed by me, and a volunteer peer in the same doctoral program, who also has been certified to work with human subjects and trained in the procedures of qualitative analysis. I used collaborative coding because "multiple minds bring multiple ways of analyzing and interpreting the data…that could possibly generate new and richer codes" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 34). I did not use numerical reliability ratings because they did not apply due to the subjective and interpretive dimensions of my qualitative research (Saldaña, 2013, p. 35). Instead my goal was recognition of the absence or presence of a code, as well as where it was found in the interview, with any differences between our analyses being discussed until we agreed upon the ways a code was understood and used (Boyatzis, 1998, pp. 130-131; Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005, p. 6). In addition to analyzing for the codes in the codebook, we each also made note of any emergent codes that we discovered. As Saldaña (2013) explains "[q]ualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 10). On the top of the first page of the codebook I included a reminder—in large, bolded, bright red—which

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[3] My Master's thesis was titled *Young adults "aging out" of the foster care system: Psychological and theological perspectives*, and was completed in 2006 at the Iliff School of Theology.

said 'Coders –keep asking the question, what is sacred to this person?' Additionally, just

below that, in regular black font I typed out the definition of personal meaning as

> an individually constructed cognitive system, which endows life with personal
> significance.…[T]he meaning system consists of three components, namely,
> cognitive, motivational, and affective.…it is conceived of as a cognitive map that
> orients the individual in steering through the life course…[and] is used for self
> and life interpretation. (Wong, 1998, p. 368)

These reminders kept both of us focused on the goal of discerning how general life

meaning was made by the interviewees about their foster care and aging out experiences,

as well as specific meanings that implicitly or explicitly had spiritual dimensions.

Once the first interview was coded, I added the emergent codes my peer and I

discovered to the codebook. For qualitative analysis using modified grounded theory, the

process of recognizing the presence and absence of codes generates constant comparisons

among the interviews. This process

> refers to the act of taking one piece of datum and examining it against another
> piece of datum…in order to see if the two data are conceptually the same or
> different. Data that appears to be conceptually similar are grouped together under
> a conceptual label…the purpose of [this]…comparison is to uncover the many
> different properties and dimensions of a concept. (Strauss & Corbin, 2015, pp. 93-
> 94)

With this in mind, I decided to change the format of the codebook. Up until this point the

codebook format was sequentially numerical as explained earlier. In an effort to make the

codes more manageable I reformatted the codebook with nine super-code categories of

overarching themes to do with meaning-making. I then distributed the individual codes

discovered up to that point that were conceptually similar to each other as sub-codes of

those super-codes. We then used this reformatted codebook for the next interview, which

my peer and I analyzed separately by looking for absence and presence of each code, as

well as noting emergent codes as applicable. We then came together to reach consensus on the codes. We used this procedure until all nine interviews were coded: individually analyzing, meeting and coming to consensus on where the codes were found; agreeing on any new emergent codes; adding these to the codebook, which was then used for analysis of the next interview. The final version of the master codebook included one hundred and ten sub-codes and nine super-codes. The initial nine super-code categories I had created were sufficient to encompass all the later created sub-codes.

For the next step in the analytical process I did a second round of coding with the final master codebook of all of the interviews. As Saldaña (2013) notes, "[r]arely will anyone get coding right the first time…[r]ecoding can occur with a more attuned perspective…" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 10). Since the final master codebook had all of the emergent codes within in it, this allowed me to see if codes that were found later in the coding process were actually in any of the earlier interviews and just not recognized as such. I once again coded for absence or presence of the codes within each interview. This also allowed me to confirm the validity of the final master codebook. I did not discover any new emergent themes in the second round of coding. Upon completion of this process I created an Excel spreadsheet with all the sub-codes grouped under the super-codes as they showed on the final master codebook, and then created a column for each interviewee. I then went through each interviewee's paper codebook completed by my peer and me, and notated if either of us noted that code in the interview at all, and marked that on the master Excel spreadsheet in order to get an overarching view of the sub-codes that were actually present within each super-code category. Later, when it came time to

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write the findings, I referenced this spreadsheet to confirm the number of interviewees that had been coded as having stated something referencing the specific sub-code, and used the paper codebooks to confirm the page numbers where I could look up specific quotes for the findings chapter.

Simultaneous to my doing the second round of coding on my own, my peer and I did a table top analysis using two sets of index cards for each sub-code. On our own, we each laid out our card deck and began analyzing what kinds of groupings we saw as overarching categories to consolidate the information. As Saldaña (2013) notes

> there is something to be said for a large area of…table space with each code written on its own index card…spread out and arranged into appropriate clusters to see the smaller pieces of the larger puzzle–a literal perspective not always possible on a computer monitor screen. (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 27-28)

This process was done to assess what other ways the information could be grouped to discover primary overarching themes, other than the ways already assessed as super-codes on the master codebook.

Once completed, my peer and I met to discuss our findings and agreed that there were strong similarities between our over-arching analyses of the interviews. Essentially, the categories revolved around the development of foundational beliefs that led to their understandings of themselves, as well their relationships. We also agreed that the interviewees had indeed made meaning of their experiences. We also agree there was a presence of spirituality (the search for the sacred), with what we believed are both beneficial and detrimental implications, related to each of those categories. Additionally, within each of these topics were reflections of the specific ways that the interviewees had

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learned to cope with the experiences they had encountered while in foster care and in aging out.

Additionally, through the general analysis there was a subject that my peer and I agreed needed to be addressed on its own, and that is the topic of tattoos. This subject was present in each of the interviews. Eight out of nine interviewees had tattoos and/or plans for tattoos. My peer and I discussed the descriptions of these tattoos and agreed that perhaps the tattoos could be understood as a physical manifestation of the implicit and explicit spiritual meanings the interviewees have made of themselves, their relationships, as well as their worldviews.

The analysis process was now complete. As Strauss and Corbin (1998 & 2015) explain "one of the ultimate goals during…coding…is to achieve saturation –'when no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data'" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136; 2015, p. 222). Since the second round of coding, as well as the table top analysis yielded no new sub-codes or super-codes, I decided that saturation had been accomplished.

Methodology for Identifying Spiritual Themes in the Narratives

Having described the specific steps taken in analyzing the data, let me state the ways in which spirituality was identified in the narratives of these interviewees. While my overall goal is to identify if and how these interviewees made meaning of their experiences of having been in foster care and aging out, an additional goal is to identify any spiritual aspects of the meanings made. Through this research project I kept

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Pargament's (1997) definition of spirituality, the search for the sacred, at the forefront of each step of the process. While I have alluded to how codes to do with spirituality were developed and used in analysis, I would like to explain the specific steps I took to identify and integrate spirituality into this dissertation project.

For the interview phase, knowing that one of my primary goals was to identify if spiritual themes were present in these narratives, I was intentional in engaging ideas including concepts generally believed to be spiritual in nature. Only one individual brought up the specific term spirituality on his own. For interviewees that did not use that term on their own, I had to use probing questions using any language they had provided to me earlier in the interview about what was meaningful to them in order to probe for spiritual dimensions in their narratives. In contrast, in seven out of the nine interviews, participants explicitly brought up the specific term 'religion' on their own.

In the analysis phase and generating a code-book, I created a code that looked for the term 'God', or anything that explicitly related to some sort of higher being. I also included a section of codes that identified where the interviewees explicitly addressed religion and general ideas about spirituality. While there was substantive information with only these explicit statements, I did not feel that those codes allowed me to identify the full spectrum of how the individuals made meaning of their experiences. Nor were these explicitly religious or spiritual codes fully identifying all of the spiritual aspects of those meanings made. Therefore, when it came time to write the findings, I had to be more intentional about identifying the more implicit forms of spirituality that I was not able to identify using explicitly religious or spiritual codes.

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In order to recognize emergent codes for implicit spiritual themes I looked to see what statements within the interviews reflected an implicit search for the sacred involving attributes of the sacred—identified by Pargament—of transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. For example, I looked for transcendence in experiences participants deemed as out of the ordinary, perhaps involving a sense of awe or unexpected love. Conversely, I also paid attention to statements expressing disgust, or some other sense of detestation, as well as signs of exceptional apathy. Those kinds of significant emotions, or lack thereof, can also be sign-posts to how meaning has been made. I came to recognize that these experiences of transcendence, be they based in love, anger, apathy, etc., often actually led to descriptions infused with ultimacy, associated with an "absolute ground of truth" and/or a "foundation for all experiences" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39). I also looked for inferences of boundlessness. Most of those used spatial descriptions (e.g., of living situations, places to escape to, etc.). I examined the interviews with this lens of the sacred attributes, and thus I identified both explicit and implicit spiritual themes for these individuals.

The Findings

Upon the completion of all the variations of analysis noted above, I identified evidence that the interviewees did make meaning of their experiences of being in foster care and aging out. Additionally, some meanings did have spiritual themes, even though that term was not explicitly used by eight out of the nine interviewees. The four final super-code categories representing these findings are:

- Development of foundational beliefs about the self and how to cope

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- Development of foundational beliefs about relationships

- Development of foundational beliefs and worldviews about spiritual topics

- Tattoos: a physical manifestation demonstrating meanings made

These super-codes are representative of the over-arching themes shared by the interviewees about the meanings they made regarding their experiences of being in foster care and aging out. While spirituality was present through each of the other categories listed, since one of the primary goals of this project was to identify if there are spiritual themes in their narratives, I did include a category to specifically discuss that topic.

Chapter Five: Findings

Introduction to the findings

      This chapter will present the findings of this research project, demonstrating that the interviewees did, indeed, make meaning of their experiences of foster care and aging out. These findings will also identify, when applicable, the spiritual themes in these narratives. The findings are presented by discussing the super-code topics: the interviewees' foundational beliefs about self and coping, their relationships, and their worldviews about spiritual topics. The final section will discuss the topic of tattoos: how the interviewees' actual tattoos or planned tattoos can be interpreted as physical representations demonstrating meanings made.

Introducing the Interviewees

      Before presenting the findings, I will introduce my interviewees. While the methodology chapter gave demographic details about them, personalized snapshots will put the findings into a more narrative perspective. As is common in qualitative analysis, pseudonyms are used and identifying information is altered in order to maintain confidentiality. These descriptions are all applicable at the time of the actual interview.

      Aaron is a single, 20-year-old, Caucasian male. He was first placed in foster care at age 5. He spent time in 10 foster homes and one group home before aging out. On his questionnaire Aaron stated he did not have any siblings, but in the interview itself he

explained that he does have a biological brother who was adopted out of foster care, and who is no longer in communication with Aaron. Aaron graduated from high school and is unemployed. He is living with his biological mother, who was present in the room during my entire interview. Some of his comments were directed towards her as questions throughout the interview, often in an effort to confirm family members' past behaviors. She did not respond to any of those comments. He does not have any children. On the questionnaire he said that he was not raised in any religious tradition, although in the interview he stated he was born and raised in a Mormon family.

Angie is a 22-year-old, married, Latina female. She was placed in foster care at age 13 and was only in one foster home until she aged out. She has five sisters and one brother. Only one sister was placed in foster care. Angie graduated high school, received an associate's degree to be a medical assistant, and is enrolled in college courses to continue her education. She is employed part-time as a cashier, living with her in-laws, parenting a 16-month-old child, and is pregnant with another. On the questionnaire, she answered that she was not raised in a specific religious tradition, and she noted in 'other' that she 'just believed in God'. Throughout the interview Angie's responses indicated that she had general theological questions about life and that she was giving those questions a lot of consideration. Her perspective about the past was that it took hard work to let herself be okay with being in foster care at the beginning, but once she was able to do that, she continually thanked God for letting her be in foster care.

Bonnie is an 18-year-old, Caucasian female. She was placed in foster care at age five and was in about 29 foster homes, one of which was kin care and three were group

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homes, before she aged out. She has one full birth sibling, a brother who was also placed in foster care, and three half siblings, one of whom, a half-sister, was placed in foster care and was then adopted out of foster care with her own baby. Bonnie has received her GED, and is enrolled in college classes to complete her bachelor's degree to enable her to obtain her ultimate goal of becoming a lawyer. She had already completed the requirements to obtain a cosmetology license. She is unemployed by choice and she is currently a full-time student. She is in a committed triad relationship with a girlfriend she knew from the foster care system, and a boyfriend that had never been in foster care. She had no children, but her girlfriend is pregnant via their boyfriend. The three plan to raise the child together. She volunteers working with children in foster care. A notable dynamic during the interview was the use of her cell phone as a distraction. When the conversation was more sensitive, she would pick up and concentrate on her cell phone which seemed to allow her to gain some space until she was ready to talk about the topic again. Her questionnaire answer to religious tradition was 'other' and she wrote in 'too many/all'.

Callie is a 19-year-old, Native American female. She was one-year-old when she first went into foster care and stayed there until aging out. She lived in four foster homes and three group homes. She reported having 15 siblings, all brothers, who were raised in foster care as well. Her primary desire for getting out of foster care was to be able to communicate with her siblings. While in foster care she was not allowed to talk with them at all. She now communicates with each of them regularly. She is working on obtaining her GED. She also works part time for the county assisting foster care children.

She is single and has no children. She said she was not raised with any religious tradition, though during the interview she did share stories about spending time on a Native American reservation. In making sense of Callie's responses, I found that even if the answers were not consistent, I needed to simply accept her explanations as representative of what she believed to be the truth. For example, she reported that her 15 siblings, all biological from the same mother, were between the ages of 19 and 25, with only one set of twins. This is of course physically impossible, but when I pressed her on that, she insisted that was the case. Another distinct feature of my conversation with her was her response of "I don't know"—an answer occurring at least 41 times in my hour long interview. I could have interpreted this response as a lack of interest in our conversation. However, a few weeks later when I encountered her at a group event involving a number of young adults who had aged out of foster care she introduced me to them, vibrantly describing how excited she was about my project and encouraging them to participate. On the questionnaire Callie left the question about what religious tradition she was raised in blank.

Catherine is a 19-year-old, Latina female. She was placed in foster care at age 13 and lived in six or seven foster homes, and one group home. She has three siblings, all of whom were placed into foster care as well. At the time of the interview she was still in communication with them all. Catherine has received her GED and is enrolled in classes to become an LPN. She is unemployed, had no children, and is single. She did state she is six weeks pregnant, and is concerned because she had had a miscarriage a year before, and then dealt with cervical cancer. Her body language during the interview was

noteworthy. When asked to share her story, she stretched out on her couch to a horizontal position and seemed to need to emulate the posture of a traditional therapeutic session in order to be able to share her experiences. She reported having no communication with her biological mother. This statement was contradicted part way through the interview when a woman later identified as her biological mother came out of the bedroom and began gathering a significant number of grocery bags holding personal possessions to take to her car. Catherine then explained that she did actually let her biological mother stay in her apartment sometimes in order to insure her little brother received adequate care. She did not respond on the questionnaire regarding the question of what religion she was raised within.

Cathy is a 22-year old, Latina/Caucasian female. She was placed in foster care at the age of 14 and resided in three foster homes and two group homes before she aged out. She has 21 brothers and sisters, who were also placed in foster care, and only stays in communication with one. Cathy has graduated from high school and had some college education. She is unemployed and living with a previous foster parent. During the interview, two boys were playing very loudly in the background, but she was able to talk over them most of the time. She reported that she is trying to change her life by getting into a drug rehabilitation center because she had gotten heavily into drugs after her brother, the one that had been her primary care-taker prior to being put in foster care, died. She is separated from her husband and has four children, all of whom are in foster care. On the questionnaire she answered that she was raised as a Roman Catholic and identified her current religion as 'other', adding the word Christian.

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Darlene is a 24-year old, Caucasian female. She went into foster care at age 16, living in three foster homes, and four group homes. She has one sibling who was not in foster care. Darlene has graduated from high school, and has had some college education but is not currently enrolled in any classes. She is unemployed by choice and is on SSI (Social Security Income) because of a variety of disabilities. Darlene is married. Her husband's name is Richard and he was present for my interview as Darlene would not participate in the interview if he was not a part of the conversation. Richard also aged out of foster care, but since he was 30-years-old, therefore outside of the age span for this project, his responses were only included as they directly associated to the conversation with Darlene. Darlene and Richard have two children together. Both children have been placed in foster care and are to remain in foster care for the foreseeable future. She adamantly stated their children being in foster care was quite unfair and only happened because of 'one small mistake' that put her and her husband 'under the microscope' thereafter. The interview location was in her mobile home, which was in a state of disarray with a strong odor I associated as insalubrious. They had two cats that appeared well cared for. Darlene had difficulty staying focused on our conversation. She occasionally shouted out a word that had nothing to do with the conversation. The dilated pupils and erratic responses throughout the interview led me to wonder if she was perhaps under the influence of some substance at the time of the interview. For the question about what religion she was raised in, she check-marked "other" on the questionnaire without any added details. During the interview she identified herself as Wiccan.

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Mark is a 21-year old, Caucasian male. He went into foster care at age seven or eight. He "lost track" of how many foster homes he was in and did not answer the question about group homes. In the interview he explained that he was in "juvie" (a detention center for juvenile offenders) quite a few times. He did not specify the number of siblings that he had, only that he had 'many', and all were put in foster care. He only specifically spoke about one sibling, and when he did it was obvious that he disliked her and had as little to do with her as possible. Mark is actively working on getting his GED. He is unemployed and explained that he is waiting to receive confirmation that he will be approved to receive SSI. He is 'couch surfing' on friends' couches while awaiting the SSI confirmation. He shared that he spent the majority of his time getting high smoking marijuana so he would stay mellow so as to keep himself out of trouble. He allegedly had to "get high" (i.e. smoke marijuana) to come tell me his story. He is single with no children, but is in the midst of trying to find out if he had fathered a child with his ex-girlfriend. He is quite emphatic that if he had, he is going to get custody of the child as there was no way she could be a fit mother. He plans to have his own biological mother, the same individual that had had all own her children put in foster care, get primary custody of the child. He did not answer the question about what religious tradition he was raised in on the questionnaire.

Melissa is an 18-year-old, Caucasian, female. She was placed in foster care at the age of 13, and lived in "many" foster homes, and five group homes before she aged out. She has two birth siblings, who were also placed in foster care. Melissa is still in communication with them. She graduated from high school and is enrolled in college

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courses. She works part time in the field of education. She is married and had no children. She has two dogs that were a regular source of interruption to the interview process, including at one point trying to eat my recording device. Her questionnaire stated she was raised Roman Catholic.

The Findings

The following findings are presented via the super-code categories described in the methodology chapter: foundational beliefs about the self and how to cope; relationships; worldviews about spiritual topics; and the final category of tattoos: a physical manifestation demonstrating meanings made. Each section describes meanings identified within those super-codes, and includes the more potent illustrative quotes. As a note, the order of the super-codes, and the topics presented within each section of this findings chapter are not hierarchical, nor does this order reflect any presumed level of greater versus lesser importance.

Development of foundational beliefs about the self.

This first section discusses the meanings the interviewees made about how foster care and aging out shaped foundational beliefs about themselves. The beliefs cover a range of beneficial and detrimental beliefs about the self. Six out of the nine interviewees expressed a belief that their experiences in foster care and aging out had at least some positive effects on their self-understanding.

Belief in one's inner strength was a recurrent theme describing how interviewees believed they had made it through foster care and aging out. They characterized

themselves as strong, both mentally and emotionally—able to cope with their life experiences, no matter how challenging.

Six of the interviewees discussed this topic, saying that through their foster care experiences they had learned that they have an inner core of strength that could get them through anything that happened in their lives. One individual went so far as to say that he believed that foster care was intentionally hard to teach those in foster care how strong they really are mentally and emotionally which enabled them to have faith in themselves once they aged out.

> *Aaron*: I think foster care is rough for a purpose… [which is] to see if you can get through it. And, uh…like mother nature has you go through…all [that] stuff…that's why…when I got out, I said hey, I did push my way through and I felt very good for myself. I kept on going until [the date I aged out] [pause] [And] I'm still going strong.

The other five interviewees' statements varied in the specific foster care and aging out experiences that caused them to recognize their inner strength, but each of them at their foundation expressed a core belief about themselves based in the understanding: I am strong mentally and emotionally and I can make it through anything.

This belief about their inner strength was helpful in a variety of ways, but most often it was described as foundational in helping them recognize and acknowledge the need to instigate and cope with change in their lives.

This inner-strength belief allowed them to be willing to believe that positive change is possible at all. Seven of the interviewees spoke of the significant life changes

they made because their inner-strength belief fostered hope rather than despair or helplessness. Examples of these powerful changes were quitting drugs, allowing themselves to embrace their stable homes in foster care in order to regularly attend school to get a good education, and releasing the need to express themselves in forms of physical violence, allowing for a less angry version of themselves.

Only one interviewee explicitly described experiences that led her to believe that change is possible. When she was asked about what motivated her to make difficult changes in her life, she shared:

> *Angie*: …wanting a better and happier life I think…that's what helped me. My foster mom helping me to see that it's possible, because if I would have never [come to] my foster home, I don't think I ever would have seen outside the walls that were built around me, and…not being able to see that kind…it's kind of like, …a fairytale, like a book, like it exists, but only on movies and books. So…it was…it was nice to see that…um…there was…happiness out there. …I mean there were husbands and wives that didn't fight and didn't hit each other and didn't have drugs and alcohol problems and stuff like that.

For this individual, her experiences in foster care introduced her to the idea that there were better options available to her than she had ever thought possible. Then, because of the beliefs she had developed about herself from her time in foster care, she was able to utilize her beliefs in her own inner strength to begin making the changes necessary to live that better life.

Another beneficial belief that led from the foundational beliefs in inner-strength involved the power to make choices about themselves and how they understand their lives. Many realized that they could make choices about how to respond to their experiences—choices that determined who they ultimately became. Several interviewees emphasized the need for self-accountability and expressed frustration with other individuals in foster care who blamed foster care for all the bad things currently in their lives. Two interviewees shared beliefs that "the past is the past" and that people need to just let the past go, and get on with life. One individual was insistent that individuals' choices can supersede their biological families' negative influences and emphasized the need to make intentional choices for themselves about who they will become.

> *Melissa*: …You can pick your friends but you can't pick your family. … So…like just be who you are, it doesn't matter where you come from, it's who you…are going to become, don't let your family mold you, you be your own person.

In utilizing this belief about choice some interviewees used their biological families' choices on how to behave and live their lives as guideposts for how *not* to behave and live life. In talking about their biological families they used phrases such as: "I want to be something better" and "everything they do, I make sure that I'm not going to do." Some of the interviewees described people in their lives—biological families, social workers, or school administrators—who treated them as unimportant, or of no value. Instead of allowing this to become their foundational belief about themselves, seven of them used these naysayers' beliefs as motivation to become better people and to prove these naysayers wrong. One interviewee was quite explicit about this:

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Catherine: …I'm a strong-willed person and…I've always told myself I'm going to prove everybody wrong…once I get [a job] to get my house, once I get everything on my own, I'm gonna look back and tell them I didn't need your help, I did it all by myself.

In sharing the plans created by this motivation, Bonnie, the interviewee who is working towards her law degree and has travelled to Washington D.C. to represent foster care youth at a Congressional hearing, shared an entire list of people to whom she will mail a copy of her law degree upon graduation. Towards the top of her list is a high school principal who told Bonnie that she would never amount to anything and that she would just end up being "knocked up" by the age of 16, and living off the government for the rest of her life, like "all the other girls at that high school." Instead of believing this authority figure, Bonnie developed a foundational belief about herself and her inner strength that gave her the courage to use this insult as motivation to better herself and her life, and inspire hope for a more preferable future. Her inner-strength belief helped her identify and resist this high school principal's sexist prejudice. Without this foundational self-belief, she could easily have internalized this prejudice and felt hopeless about her future.

Learning to be compassionate to others was another foundational belief gained through making meaning of foster care and aging out. Most often this was expressed through empathy for and desires to help those in foster care now. Six of the nine interviewees spoke of specific ways they were already doing things to help, or had plans for future ways to help foster care youth. The forms of helping varied widely. The

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interviewee who plans to become a lawyer wants to be a Guardian ad litem in order to work directly with those in foster care and assist them in the legal aspects of that experience. Another interviewee plans to become a foster care parent who treats all the children in her home equally. One is currently doing volunteer work with those still in the foster care system, as well as those who have aged out, in order to guide them through feelings associated with those experiences. One interviewee insightfully explained her desire to help others and how her experiences have given purpose to her life.

> *Bonnie*: I just have a huge amount of empathy…hopefully I went through all this stuff so that ultimately I can help somebody else, cause I couldn't help myself back then, so that's what I want to do is help somebody else.

In this statement, as well as through the desires of the other interviewees to help those that are now in the challenging situations they had once been in themselves, one hears foundational beliefs about themselves that are steeped in feelings of compassion. The meanings they have made from their experiences led them to incorporate within themselves beliefs about the importance of having compassion for others.

While each of the beliefs about self were expressed by a mix of the interviewees, there was one topic—the soul—that was raised by only one of the interviewees, but seems essential to note when discussing meanings about self gained through foster care and aging out. Bonnie described beliefs about her soul that were part of her spiritually coping with sexual assaults, one of which was perpetrated by a foster father in a foster home she was placed in. She shares:

Bonnie: …one of my official assaults, when I was younger…I would tell myself it's just my body it's not my soul. Now anyone can touch me. Everyone can touch anyone. It's just the body…we all have the same body, so it's our personalities and our soul that makes us different… [The soul is] what people that know me see [as]…my value. To me, my whole person is of value. It's the value I see in myself, values other people see in me, value my loved one see in me, value my enemies see, everyone has value. There is a certain value to even being human…I understand my, my assaults probably weren't extremely personal, they weren't doing it as an, oh, let's go see if we can mess up Bonnie today, I was probably in the wrong place at the wrong time. And if it would have been another girl, they probably would have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It had nothing to do with who I was. It was just my body not my soul…so that's how I got past that a lot.

Bonnie made the courageous choice to develop a foundational belief about her soul that enabled her to not only survive her experiences of suffering and loss, but to recognize her own value and how to understand who she has become.

In summary, in having made meaning of their experiences, these interviewees developed what can be understood as beneficial understandings of themselves with foundational beliefs such as:

- believing in one's own inner strength;
- recognizing that change is possible;
- believing that they are able to choose who they are becoming.

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These interviewees described how they demonstrated the courage to utilize these foundational beliefs in ways that helped them create a better life for themselves. By putting these foundational beliefs into action, these interviewees chose to be inspired by their challenging situations and to use them to promote a sense of hope for a better future than they otherwise might have had if they had made different choices.

To be clear though, none of the interviewees attributed only beneficial outcomes to meanings about self they derived from foster care and aging out. Even the individuals who primarily described positive ways foster care and aging out shaped their self-development also noted less beneficial attributes of themselves which came out of their foster care experiences. One interviewee noted that the system manipulated her into different situations that she did not want to be in, teaching her in turn to become a master manipulator. While self-agency is beneficial—helping one get what is needed when working with others—there was an undertone to her description that inferred a less positive view of manipulating others. Another interviewee, in trying to come to terms with his abuse, learned a form of twisted empathy in which he tried to excuse the abusers' behavior by explaining the hardships of abusers' lives. As a result, he did not hold his abuser accountable for the abuse. In a sense, he took the negative experience of being abused and distorted it into an acceptable norm for his life, developing a foundational belief that allows it to be okay to be abused by those who have suffered.

Three of the interviewees reported there were no positive ramifications in their understandings of themselves from their foster care experiences. In their explanations, only ambivalent or negative implications were inferred.

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One of the interviewees was reticent, to the point, perhaps, of being evasive, about acknowledging any feelings at all, or having made any meanings at all, much less about the impact of foster care on her understanding of her development of her sense of self.

> *Callie*: [long pause-then talks with a quiet voice] I don't know. I haven't thought about how it impacted my life. Sometimes I'm just like it never impacted my life. Then sometimes I do [long pause] think it impacted my life. I get asked that every week…how did foster care impact your life. [T]hey…bring it up and I'm just like…good question…ask me that in a month and a half [pause] It had impact, but it hasn't. I just don't know how it did and how it didn't. Cause I can't figure it out [mumbles]

The final two interviewees, Darlene and Mark, were adamant about the wholly negative impact of their foster care experiences in their self-understanding. For these two, their foundational beliefs were focused on the solely detrimental impact of foster care and aging out on their sense of self, and their ability to cope with their challenging life situations. Both interviewees described themselves as having received mental health diagnoses (e.g., ADHD, Bi-polar, PTSD, etc.), and both expressed the opinion that they had no choice but to live the rest of their lives on SSI (Social Security Income) without ever really having the possibility to be fully engaged working citizens. While many people with such challenging diagnoses are able to develop coping skills and lead fully productive lives, for Darlene and Mark, there seemed to be no sense within themselves that they had the where-withal to live with these challenges and lead healthier, productive

lives. The foundational beliefs they had developed about themselves did not appear to have been incorporated in beneficial ways to allow them to have self-confidence about such matters.

Additionally, Darlene believes that her experiences in foster care brought out her 'evil side' and led her to rebel against authority in pernicious ways. Her rebellion continues even now, with negative demonstrations of behavior, such as random outbursts of anger, and the alleged use of illegal drugs. These beliefs about herself, and the actions that come from these beliefs, might have contributed to the government's decision to take her children taken away from her and put them into the foster care system, a situation that has created an intense sense of despair for her.

Mark's experiences of the foster care system led him to foundational beliefs about himself as being violent and unhealable. These beliefs seem to have led him to an existence wherein he does everything he can to avoid living fully and vibrantly. He explained that he does everything he can to avoid any 'drama', which he described was a common experience while in foster care. He explained that these situations historically had led to his incarceration for long periods of time. When asked whether he at least experiences feelings of peacefulness when he is doing nothing, he shared:

> *Mark*: No. I just, I just sit at home. That's all I do. I don't feel peace, I don't feel nothing, I just sit at home. That's all I do is just sit at home…I just sit at home…sometimes, like I said I clean the house, play games…watch TV most of the time, smoke a couple cigarettes, smoke some weed. Um, if I don't have no weed, smoke some spice…I just don't like drama. That's why I do nothing…I just

don't like drama. I've had enough of it in my life, I don't want no more. I mean,

that should explain it all.

Mark's primary orientation to life seems to consist of apathy and listlessness. These characteristics seemed to arise from foundational self-beliefs that, on the one hand appear to be keeping him from being incarcerated again but, on the other hand do not appear to be founded in attributes associated with a beneficial or healthy lifestyle.

Due to the impermanence often experienced while in foster care, the majority of the interviewees view a calm and peaceful life with suspicion. Many communicated discomfort about the idea of feeling peaceful, and in some cases expressed beliefs about the possibility of their own happiness. Their foundational beliefs stemming from foster care and aging out were distrustful—with convictions that even when things are going well, they do not trust it will remain that way. They described waiting for the proverbial 'other shoe to drop', and for things to be chaotic again. In most of the interviews there was an attitude of not trusting that any stability they now experienced would continue in the future. The majority emphasized in one way or another that they had to be prepared at all times to rely on themselves, and only themselves. One individual was quite explicit in explaining this feeling when asked about what brings her happiness and helps her feel peaceful.

Bonnie: I don't like those moments, because things tend to fall down when those

moments come. So when that happens, and the silence comes, I wait for the

storm. [pause] I don't have the same bliss as people. I'd rather have it hectic and

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crazy at all times because I am used to it. And whenever the silence comes I just

wait for the storm. And I am prepared.

This foundational belief of having distrust in a life, even in moments of possible peace,

which was expressed by the majority of the interviewees, does seem to foster an

individual self-reliance rooted in pessimism.

In summary, interviewees described a variety of foundational beliefs about self

that were acquired through foster care and aging out. While many such beliefs were about

living a life oriented in gaining fulfillment of their most beneficial self; some believed

foster care and aging out diminished their lifetime possibilities for self-fulfillment. Either

way, these findings demonstrate that young adults describe the benefits and liabilities of

their experiences in foster care and aging out in terms of evolving beliefs about self.

Being cognizant of how such individuals made meaning of their experiences in foster

care—especially the impact on their beliefs about themselves—can be a powerful way to

understand this population.

Development of foundational beliefs about relationships.

All of the interviewees described relational meanings derived from their

experiences in foster care and aging out to do with the people in their lives, for better

and/or for worse. Some relationships were described as beneficially profound and

powerful, founded in feelings such as awe and love. In contrast, other relationships were

negatively oriented, immersed in feelings of anger and pain that made them often view

others with distrust and suspicion. Some relationships were on the spectrum between

those two poles. Be it beneficial or detrimental, the meanings the interviewees had made

about relationships in foster care seemed to impact the foundational beliefs they had developed about themselves in their current relationships. These beliefs shaped meanings and expectations in their current relationships.

Six of the nine made meaning of their relationships by redefining what a family is for them. One common redefinition spoken of involved the belief that one does not have to be biologically related to be considered family. For these interviewees family came to mean people who allow you to 'be' who you really are without fearing rejection. As one interviewee explains

> *Catherine*: [My foster mom] calls me and she tells me on a daily basis you're my daughter, regardless…of…what anyone says, or…what…a…paper says, you're my daughter. And I was like I know you're my mom…Yeah, it's just amazing. She is…definitely is someone special. And she's still there…even after…I moved out. [long pause] It's hard to find people like that.

These non-biological families came from a variety of contexts. Most often they were foster parents, foster siblings, and social workers. Though, for Callie, it was not the experiences of those within the foster care system that led her to develop the foundational belief that one does not need to be biologically related to be family. For her, the experience came during her time of homelessness and being a part of what she called her 'street family'. She describes her street family as actually caring about her.

> *Callie*: … Street family…pretty much means your family wasn't there and you're homeless on the street, there's people that…care about you that live on the streets and [stutters]…that becomes your street family. Yeah, and so that's what I have.

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For all of the interviewees this belief that family need not be biologically related was a powerful source of love. They expressed a sense of awe that they were able to find people that cared about them and actually stayed in their lives.

That said, the interviewees' willingness to participate in these relationships was not without challenges. Many spoke of initially pushing these caring individuals away and doing their best to make such caring people leave their lives. One interviewee explains that even though she encountered caring foster parents, she simply was not in a place to be able to accept their love at that time.

> *Bonnie*: I did have good foster parents, I had one really good one, but…um, after I was sexually assaulted by a foster father [prior to encountering these good foster parents]… I didn't end up being able to stay with them because [I] was really [pause] sort of unfixable at that point…So, um, they really tried though, like it wasn't [that] they didn't try, they really…cared.

Bonnie does go on to explain that later in life, after she had learned to cope in healthier ways with her assault, she contacted these caring foster parents and that they are now a part of her life as an adult.

For each of these interviewees, it was the meanings they made from their experiences of consistent caring—a culmination of small important moments—which over time led them to develop foundational beliefs about themselves and their relationships that allowed them to accept that there are people that care about them, and that those people would actually stay in their lives. These beliefs allowed them to

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participate in and experience the beneficial aspects of a life involving loving interpersonal connections.

Mentorship was another form of relationship that resulted in beneficial foundational beliefs about relationships. Mentors encountered while in foster care were a regular source of positive relational meanings. The source of the mentors varied, but universally they were described as helping guides assisting interviewees in making wise decisions. Mentors helped interviewees (1) recognize their own power and value as individuals, (2) release the past to learn to live in the present, and for many, most importantly, (3) to set boundaries in their lives to protect themselves from non-beneficial sources. As Cathy shares

> *Cathy*: I had never realized…until somebody actually pointed it out to me… that I've actually let into my life… [only people] basically [into] either drugs or alcohol …but now, it's like I want people in my life that are actually good…and that are positive about things…instead of people who….when I need them I can't have them because…they have…drugs or alcohol in them…I'm trying to let the people who actually really do care into my life, to show me that everything's ok if you make it ok.

Each interviewee explained in one way or another that learning to set such protective boundaries was very difficult, most often because those negative influences came from their biological families. Not all of them were successful in setting boundaries, but they acknowledged that mentors helped them at least recognize the need for such boundaries.

In addition to families and mentors, other relationships recognized as deeply impactful were romantic relationships. Over half of the interviewees were in some kind of romantic relationship. They each described how the relational meanings from their foster care experiences impacted their choices of whom to be in relationship with, as well as how to be within those relationships. Three of the interviewees were married at the time of the interview and spoke of the benefits derived from being in those relationships. The forms of benefits varied. Angie, who was noted above as learning from her foster care experiences that a better life was even possible, spoke of being able to accept love from her husband and her in-laws, a feat she does not think would have been possible without having experienced deeply loving moments in foster care. Melissa, the individual who spoke about needing to make intentional decisions about who one becomes—a belief that she credits her foster mother for guiding her to—explained that she chose to release the insecurities that came from her biological family because as she explains, "I can't be insecure if I am married, you know, because that's just not a way to be married." Experiencing the relationship dynamic of marriage became immensely important for Melissa. She shared that her foster mother helped her understand what a good marriage would even look like. From these experiences she developed foundational beliefs about how 'to be' in a healthy relationship, and recognized that being a worthy partner in a relationship of this nature required her to better herself.

Not all the marriages resulted in these beneficial experiences. Darlene and her husband Richard appeared to ruminate on their beliefs about the detrimental impact of foster care on their lives in ways that perpetuated their feelings of emotional pain.

Darlene: we…can relate to…what each other's been through…it helps us to more

or less…be there for each other…and understand where…the other person's

coming from…Me and my husband, since we've both been in the system, we can

feed off each other's pain. He, he understands the pain that I went through, and I

can understand the pain he went through.

In this situation, while it would be a comfort to have someone that can relate to one's

experiences, there is also a liability of feeding off each other's pain, which in the long run

does not seem to be a beneficial life-giving choice.

Not all romantic relationships between individuals with histories in the foster care

system were life-diminishing. Finding comfort in a romantic relationship with an

individual who had also been in foster care was also spoken of by Bonnie. In her case, the

romantic situation involves a triad relationship. She acknowledges that their relationship

is not traditional, and that at times this created challenges with their families, biological

and non-biological, but that it has worked well for them. For Bonnie, the meanings that

she had made while healing herself from her experiences both in and out of foster care

allowed her to believe that loving relationships were even possible. These relational

meanings helped her become a loving person in a relationship. She met her girlfriend,

Tanya, in a treatment center while both were in foster care. Many years later she met

back up with Tanya, who was in a relationship with a man who had never been in foster

care, James. Over time, the three decided that being in a triad relationship worked best for

all of them. They felt it created a safe circle, both emotionally and physically, most

especially in avoiding things like STD's (sexually transmitted diseases). Bonnie felt

Tanya met her emotional needs better than her boyfriend, but she also felt that James brought a balancing component to the relationship.

> *Bonnie*: Tanya, my significant other, my girlfriend, [helps me] more than my boyfriend…I can go to her for anything...and she…can take my craziness and calms me down. She just gets it…she was also a…foster child so we can empathize with each other and James doesn't always get it.
>
> Kerri: And yet you do want him in the relationship, too.
>
> *Bonnie*: [laughing] Yeah. Too much estrogen makes a mess. … [It's been] two years with the three of us. And it's work[ed] out…good.

At the time of the interview her girlfriend was pregnant via their boyfriend, and the three planned to raise the child together. Bonnie expressed concern, as several of the interviewees did, that her history in foster care would put her constantly "under the microscope" by those representing the foster care system, whom she believed would be waiting for her to make a mistake so they could take her child away from her. But these fears aside, Bonnie developed foundational beliefs that allowed her to accept love into her life in spite of difficulties relating to others because of the experiences she had encountered both before and while in foster care. While her romantic relationships are not what some might consider the norm, they appeared to bring moments of comfort and love to Bonnie's life. The foundational beliefs she had developed about being in relationship with others enabled her to allow herself the expectation of loving, and being loved.

There were also a great number of experiences that the interviewees shared that did not result in beneficial beliefs about relationship expectations. The resultant

foundational beliefs were: being alone is better than being with others; people cannot be trusted, they should be viewed with suspicion and contempt; and beliefs that people will always disappoint you, or worse, betray you.

Eight of the nine interviewees described strong desires to be alone, or to be left alone at varying times, even in their adulthood. This desire was infused with powerful emotions from foundational beliefs that being alone was better, perhaps even safer, than being in relationship with others. Even for those with good relationships in their lives currently, this belief still seemed to create challenges in allowing those relationships to proceed smoothly. While there are certainly times when being alone is indeed a good thing, there were a variety of instances where these descriptions about being alone, or wanting to be left alone, were ways interviewees avoided situations that really needed to be addressed. Some described those wanting to be a part of their lives as interfering with being able to handle situations on their own. Others shared stories about just wanting to get on with their lives without having to deal with any of their past issues. These interviewees felt imposed upon by people expecting them to deal with those issues. They would rather be alone than have to deal with the past. As noted above, it can sometimes be best to let the past be the past. However, dealing with the past sometimes becomes a necessity in order to be able to participate fully in the present and the future.

Another belief engendered in wanting to be alone involved avoiding any attachments that could involve future pain of leaving, or being left. The foundational beliefs about avoiding endings by not being in relation to begin with was heard within their conversations about their intense awareness of the finitude of relationships in their

lives. Several spoke of simply not letting people into their lives to begin with, most especially during their time in foster care, as one interviewee specified:

> *Bonnie*: …going to school, that was a challenge cause I'd make friends and then I'd have to leave, make friend then have to leave, so eventually I probably became sort of anti-social, cause it's sort of stupid to try to make friends cause I'd have to leave, so I…did my school work but wasn't really involved, I…never did too much, too many school activities, cause it wasn't worth it.

While this situation was specific to time in foster care, several interviewees spoke of those types of beliefs continuing into their adult lives. Even if they had loved ones in their lives right now, they believed it was just a matter of time before, for one reason or another, their loved ones left, or that the interviewees themselves would have to leave.

Another result of these feelings of impermanence for some was a foundational belief that there is no possibility of a relationship bringing long term benefits to their life. When Cathy was asked about what brought her the most peace in life she shared

> *Cathy*: Having somebody hold me and tell me it's gonna be okay…when guys hold me, tell me it's gonna be okay…I just feel good…But at the same time that's like a drug, it just goes away…And everything's back to the same.

Developing this type of foundational belief about relationships does not easily allow for the possible existence of a loving and fulfilling relationship in an individual's life.

In speaking about their expectations of relationships with others one of the primary topics of discussion revolved around the interviewees' disappointment in authority figures and beliefs they would almost always be disappointed by the authority

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figures in their lives (e.g., biological family, social workers, foster families, therapists, etc.). Every interviewee had stories about such disappointments in the people often in control of their lives. Frequently these stories shaped current distrust in authorities, which seemed to deter them from wanting, or even being able to, trust people in their lives in meaningful ways.

All of the interviewees spoke of being disappointed by their biological families. Foundational beliefs about being disappointed by their biological families were infused with feelings of despondency and expectations of distress. Primarily, these stories of disappointment centered around parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Siblings were not spoken about in this way—as I will describe more fully later in the chapter. In discussing the relationships with biological family members, the disappointment of the interviewees was tinged with a variety of emotions, such as anger, sorrow, apathy, and even nonchalance at odds with stories being shared. One interviewee expressed anger:

> *Catherine*: My biological family. …they're assholes. [long pause] They're stupid, cause they didn't…nobody…stepped up and said…I'll take care of her, they all had like plenty of opportunity…for me to go live with them [but] I got put in foster care…yet, they call me and they're like oh we love you and miss you so much. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. [long pause] Like how can you tell someone you love them and not fight for them…when they need you the most, that's what I don't understand…I suffered without my parents…[but] not one just stepped,

stepped up to be there, like a frickin' stranger is there more than my own family.

What's that?

The interviewees at large had profound feelings of disappointment in their parents for behaviors resulting in the foster care of their children. Several expressed disappointments that their parents did not work to better themselves in order to get the kids back. Many also expressed disgruntlement toward their extended biological families for not doing anything to keep them from being put in foster care to begin with, much less letting them stay there.

In addition to feeling disappointment in their biological families, many also spoke of ambivalence about actually interacting with their biological families as adults. Seven of the nine interviewees shared stories expressing various forms of ambivalence regarding this topic. Several interviewees were torn between hopes/desires for family love and the reality of family dysfunction and pain. Several interviewees were clear about the challenges of communicating with their biological families because of their families' problematic behaviors, though the interviewees still wanted to know that their family was doing okay, so they continued those communications.

Cathy: Yeah. I talk to my mom and my dad's in jail, so I don't really talk to him, but I write him…just to make sure they're ok, but…it's better if just I don't talk to them cause they make everything harder than what it has to be.

Most of the interviewees had stories to share about the challenges of trying to communicate with their biological families, most especially their parents. One individual was dismissive to the point of disparaging about the possibility of interacting with her

biological parents. When asked if she currently had a relationship with her parents Callie adamantly stated "Nope. I don't even know where they are at and I don't care either."

For a few, relational ambivalence arose in the relationships with their foster families when they felt they could not allow themselves to deeply connect with any of their foster parents for varying reasons. Several expressed beliefs that they believed they could not let themselves be adopted, as they felt it was their job to go back to their biological families to fix things. In discussing the topic of whether or not being adopted was ever an option, Angie shares

> *Angie:* I never considered adoption, just because…I…it was my goal to go back home. I felt like I needed to fix my family. And being adopted…I felt like…not like I would forget about them, but, they would be like my second family now. And that my new family would be my adopted family, and, um, so…my brother and sisters like have been like just so important to me, that I need, it was my goal to…to get back home, and…not be adopted

Others felt that allowing themselves to embrace relationships with their foster families was a form of betrayal to their biological families.

There was only one interviewee that specifically spoke of spending time with his mother as an adult, saying that things were just as bad now as they were when he was put in foster care.

> *Mark*: [long pause] …um…yeah, I actually talk to my mom. My mom actually has been involved with social services plenty of times…for us it was more than just child neglect. It was a lot of different reasons…she pushed me one day, like

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not too long ago and I got mad. So I started socking her walls and throwing all of her stuff all over the place, and I just, I got mad. And then I started punching myself, telling her come on, hit me, hit me, hit me, foster care can't do nothin anymore, I mean yeah…[then] I got kicked out. …I lived on the streets for…a while…I just barely even got off the streets not…too long ago. My uncle had actually brought me to his house, before he got attempted murder. [long pause] But he just, he went to jail. I'd still be there sleeping right now if he was out…

Overall, it was apparent that experiences with biological family for all of the interviewees were fraught with uncomfortable challenging emotions and experiences of physical violence in some cases. The interviewees spoke of many less beneficial experiences that instilled foundational beliefs that relationships were problematic, perhaps more trouble than they were worth. Such complex relational dynamics made it difficult for interviewees to engage in beneficial relationships in young adulthood.

Many shared stories expressing disappointment in the foster care system as a whole, as well as in specific individuals within the system. In sharing these stories, it became apparent that the meanings the interviewees had made about these experiences impacted their ability to trust people in authority, leading to negative foundational beliefs about future relationships in their adult lives. Some experienced inconsistencies among a large number of social workers through their time in foster care, which made them feel unimportant and uncared for by the one person who they believed should have provided consistency after they were removed from their biological family. One interviewee described being so tired of telling her story over and over that she became unwilling to

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talk to her newly assigned social worker until she was certain that person had invested

time in reading her file. Several interviewees felt like their social workers were just trying

to get them placed anywhere at all just to get them off their "books". One interviewee had

an extreme dislike of anything to do with foster care and likened being in foster care to

being in a concentration camp.

> *Darlene*: …I can't remember a lot of [being in foster care], it's not the most
>
> prettiest thing, you'd have to really….be there to understand what us kids…you
>
> almost have to understand like…how the Jews were, in the concentration camps,
>
> sort of like that...without the Hitler bit…

She was the only interviewee who spoke of the foster care experience in such an

extremely negative way. For the rest of the interviewees the spectrum of emotions was

more moderate in their dislikes.

Others experienced what they felt were betrayals by those in the foster care

system. Two of the interviewees were placed in homes where they experienced abuse by

their foster family. Another individual spoke of meetings with his therapist and foster

parents in which the therapist always took the foster parents' side even when it was

obvious the parents were the ones in the wrong. Several interviewees had detailed stories

about social workers telling them one thing concerning the next steps of their time in

foster care, often things that the interviewee desired to have happen, and then those things

never coming to pass and no one ever explaining why they did not. In discussing the

actual aging out experience, nearly all expressed the opinion that they had felt unprepared

for the reality of living on their own, most especially in regards to money and how to be

responsible for themselves. Scenarios such as these seemed to lead the interviewees to develop foundational beliefs that relationships with those in authority, even those that fall under the category of paternal care-givers, are unstable, at times unsafe, and often painful—to be avoided at all costs.

Another consistent theme on the topic of disappointment in relationships involved the interviewees' belief that many foster parents are 'only in it for the money'. This sentiment was expressed by over half of the interviewees. The interviewees were highly sensitive about issues involving the use of money on their behalf. They knew down to the penny how much was supposed to be spent on them, and all of the individuals that brought this up said they were certain that they never received all that they should have. For example, Darlene believed that because of her diagnoses of disabilities and disorders she felt foster families saw her as a "walking wallet". Interviewees were also very sensitive about the issues of gifts being given, most especially during the holidays. Each one had specific details about how the biological children received far better gifts than the foster children did each year, and that experience was hurtful for them. Overall, these stories involving money were immensely powerful experiences to these individuals, but they were not positive, loving encounters.

> *Catherine*: …you know when like someone just like [offers the time] with their
>
> heart, instead of like for the money… [but others] just like…to help out the kid
>
> and feel better about themselves or something. Like…all my other homes…you
>
> could tell that…their heart really wasn't in there. …I didn't try to get close to
>
> them or anything cause…I felt and I knew that…they weren't [long pause] doing

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it 'cause they wanted to, like they felt forced or something… pretty much, they're in it for the money, you can just tell.

Such experiences shaped foundational beliefs of distrust and suspicion toward anyone coming into their lives, most especially if those people make claims about wanting to help the interviewees. These types of beliefs make it challenging for the interviewees to participate in, and embrace fully, healthy, trusting, loving relationships even in their young adulthood.

The final category in addressing meanings and foundational beliefs about relationships concerned the interviewee's siblings. Seven of the nine interviewees had biological siblings. They had both full siblings, meaning both had the same biological parents, and half siblings, with only one shared parent. All seven had at least one sibling also placed in foster care. Six of those interviewees were in foster care at the same time as their siblings, and one of the interviewee's siblings was much younger and went into foster care after she had already aged out.

Five of the interviewees with siblings in the foster care at the same time spoke of being involuntarily separated from their siblings early in their foster care experience. The reasons for the separations varied, but in all cases such separations were intensely powerful experiences immersed in the emotion of pain. These painful separations from siblings fostered foundational beliefs that even when siblings you love do not want to leave you, they are subject to outer forces that will force them to leave you anyways. Even though some had been able to reconnect with their siblings after aging out of foster care, it was apparent from the powerful emotions being expressed during the interviews

that those feelings of pain and despondency were still being experienced as real and current into their young adulthood.

For one individual, Callie, the separation was devastating. Initially she had been told she would be able to communicate with her brothers, but then she was told that no communications were permitted. She described this complete separation made her feel completely adrift in life. Additionally, she felt betrayed by those who were responsible for her care. Over time, being able to reconnect with her brothers became a primary objective in life and that was the driving force of her desire to age out of foster care as early as possible, even though she was not as fully prepared for being out on her own as she might have been if she had waited a bit longer, as she was eligible to do. Throughout the interview, it became apparent that the meanings Callie had made from these experiences had developed into foundational beliefs about relationships that disallowed her to trust anyone outside of her brothers, as she felt that it was just a matter of time until the others would betray her. These do not seem to be life-giving, long term beneficial beliefs.

Another formative experience impacting meaning was the adoption of their sibling without the interviewee. Three of the individuals had siblings adopted out of foster care. In all three cases the interviewees were unable to communicate with their siblings ever again once the adoptions were complete. In the stories shared about this, it became apparent this situation created a sense of profound loss for each interviewee. As one interviewee shared:

Aaron: … my brother is out of the picture, we used to be together in foster care …[but] the adoption family won't let me see him…cause they have a restraining order against my family…. And now that I'm living with my family, it's against me too. [long pause] So…it's hard…. But, you know…every family member, they'll come back. It's like you [un]tether a dog [pause] sometimes they come back…But that's only if you pray and you pray.

Not being able to communicate with his brother is a deeply painful experience for Aaron.

For one of the other interviewees, her half-sibling's adoption out of foster care was a source of resentment. Bonnie was placed into foster care with her brother, but was separated from him after a few years and they never got to live together again. She was told that the only way she would ever live with her brother again before aging out was if a family adopted both her and her brother. That did not happen. Later, while still in foster care Bonnie's half-sister had a child of her own, and both the half-sister and her baby were adopted by a family. Even though Bonnie is now an adult and is able to spend time with her brother, there was still bitterness in her voice as she shared this story, with its beliefs about the unfairness of life.

Several interviewees spoke of being saddened by the fact that their siblings' experiences in foster care seemed to have ruined their future. One felt her brother's negative experiences in foster care led him to drop out of school and get involved in a life of drugs. Another interviewee felt that the bad situations his sister had experienced in foster care pushed her onto the streets into a life of prostitution.

Each of these interviewees with intensely painful experiences of being separated from their sibling(s) seemed to have developed less beneficial foundational beliefs about topics such as: how easily the things they love could be taken away from them no matter how hard they fought for them; the lack of fairness of life; and for some, how poorly things could turn out for those that they love if they were not able to be with them.

This last foundational belief contained another aspect of relationships with siblings that was powerful for some of the interviewees, which is a sense of feeling responsible for younger siblings. In some situations, these young adults became parentified, meaning that as a child themselves they took on the responsibility of essentially being the parent for their younger siblings which made them become far more adult-like than their chronological age. For one interviewee, she made meaning of her experiences by believing that taking on the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings was her purpose in life. She believed God had her experience foster care so that she would be able to help her younger siblings through foster care as well.

> *Angie*: I feel like…um…I feel like that I'm the heart of my family, my biological family, and…I'm very involved in like, my younger sister's life. So…I feel like…Him [God] choosing me as like, the heart of the family and the one to go through that experience…he knew, maybe, you know that it was gonna be hard for me, but…um…being the heart, I stayed strong, I kept beating, and…now I can pass it on, and I feel like that's what I'm doing…it was my goal to go back home. I felt like I needed to fix my family…um, so…my brother and sisters like have

been like just so important to me, that I need, it was my goal to…to get back home.

While helping one's siblings can generally be a proud and powerful experience, taking on the responsibilities to the level that Angie has at such a young age could become problematic, most especially when she considers it her purpose from God. This understanding of relationships may develop into foundational beliefs that apply far too much pressure on one so young.

For each of these individuals, the meanings they made about their relationships while in foster care and aging-out seemed to impact their foundational beliefs both beneficially and detrimentally in regards to understanding how life works as a whole, as well as their place within that life. Recognizing and acknowledging what meanings have been made about these profoundly powerful relationships in foster care and the aging out process can lead to deeper understandings of the foundational beliefs these young adults have developed about who they are and how to be in their relationships as adults.

Development of foundational beliefs and worldviews about spiritual topics.

This section explores what the interviewees shared about the ways they made meanings about foster care and aging out that shaped their foundational beliefs and worldviews about topics that could be considered spiritual. Such meanings ranged from beliefs about a higher source, encounters with people in traditionally religious environments, theological concepts, and experiences with sacred spaces, material things, spaces, and practices. These spiritual meanings can be recognized as both beneficial and detrimental and are quite influential in how they live their lives as adults.

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In discussing beliefs about the possibility of a higher source of some sort, seven out of nine interviewees described or refuted some kind of possible transcendent reality, for which they used the term God. The spectrum of beliefs varied from thanking God for their experiences in foster care to rejecting belief in God because of their experiences in foster care.

Four of the interviewees described the way that their time in foster care and in aging out led them to believe that God is a source of support in trying times. The specific forms of support varied, but nearly all emphasized the concept of God being a provider of whatever was specifically needed in their direst times of need. For one participant God provided a stable foster care experience for which she was thankful every day. For another, God provided the healing of her cervical cancer once she chose to believe in, and release her cancer to God. This same participant, as well as one other, shared situations wherein God provided them with experiences that converted them from being incredibly angry children into individuals believing in hope, happiness, and love. For another participant, Jesus' experiences on the cross were a form of inspiration to survive and thrive. As he explains:

> *Aaron*: I believe in *a* [emphasis in original] God. I, I just don't know what religion I want to be in. …I know there's a Lord and a, every time I look at him [he points to 3 pictures of Jesus on the living room wall] I say, well what he went through [long pause] is worse than what I went through. So…it really helps me.

Not all participants saw God as such a helpful source. For one individual in trying to find meaning about how God allows bad things to happen to children, she developed a

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foundational belief that God is an impersonal source that allows for free-will, and then deals with the ramifications of those actions of free-will later. As she explains:

> *Bonnie*: Um…personally I think there's a God, but I don't think he…I think he sort of stands back and watches, and sees what you do, and that's about as much as I like to do, because I don't like to believe that there's a God that knows we're going to do stuff and could stop it but doesn't, so I don't like that either, so I believe that God put us here and sort of lets us do whatever, and deals with it afterwards.

For several of the individuals, there were no descriptions of specific transcendent experiences with a higher source. Instead, their experiences led them to doubt God's existence, and even going so far as adamantly stating God did not exist.

In discussing whether religion had provided any meaning in her life, Callie expressed an interesting contradiction. She was adamant about not being religious at all, but then showed me a large tattoo on her upper arm consisting of praying hands, with prayer beads wrapped around the hands, and a cross hanging off of the prayer beads. She shared that she planned to have the name of a recently deceased friend put inside the cross. So while claiming no religiosity, she was still engaging in what might be conceived of as significant religious symbolism. During the interview she rarely verbalized foundational beliefs about life, death, and how the world-at-large works in general. Yet she used religious symbols permanently marking her body with the tattoo—a graphic demonstration of the meaning she had made about how to honor the death of a loved one.

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An additional explicit reference to religion was made by Bonnie. Both of her parents committed suicide, and at one point she tried to commit suicide herself, but was brought back by the paramedics. In sharing her attempts to make meaning of and cope with these situations and understand their impact on her religious outlook, she shares

> *Bonnie*: …in a way, my parents' whole suicide thing…played a big role into the key effect of my religion and stuff because some of the religions believe that you go to hell if you try to commit suicide or whatever, it's stupid [voice is much quieter here] just the whole idea, so…

In Bonnie's trying to address her concerns about specific beliefs held by certain religions about suicide she developed foundational beliefs that made her critical of, and possibly even disappointed by, religion.

Some of the participants explained that their experiences with people representing traditional religions, such as in a Catholic group home, or while attending church, were unbeneficial encounters. Instead of being opportunities for positive life-promoting experiences for these interviewees, their actual interactions with people within traditional religions formed foundational beliefs of religion as something to be avoided or reviled. Several explicitly stated they believe the people they encountered while attending churches were hypocrites.

In probing for spiritual meanings I inquired, using their own language about meaningful experiences, about a variety of topics often associated with spiritual and/or religious experiences. For example, I asked questions, using varying language depending on the individual, about whether there were any traditionally religious sacred places that

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the individuals resonated with, such as a church, or mosque, or something of that nature, but none of them expressed having a beneficial experience in those types of spaces during their time in foster care, or even by the time of the interviews. Nearly all spoke of having been to a church. The specific denominations varied but all had a foundation in Christianity. None of them had encountered a traditional type of religious space that they felt connected to. Several noted that as far as they were concerned their encounters with any type of higher source involved their internal personal connections with God (this is the specific term those who spoke of this concept used), but that the location itself was not relevant for making, or maintaining, those types of connections.

Conversely, for Bonnie, the experience of going to church was actually a disempowering occurrence. With Bonnie's history of sexual assaults, she explained that she tended to rebuff the physical touch of others. Through therapy she had learned to set physical personal boundaries in order to recognize her own space as precious. Then, over time, she found ways to allow herself to become comfortable with being touched, and to let herself be okay with the fact that it took time for her to feel safe in allowing herself to be touched. But she shares that when she went to church with her foster mom those hard-earned advancements were challenged.

> *Bonnie*: …my step mom has a church she goes to, …but her church is real huggy, and I told them you guys can't hug me…if I want hugs, I'll hug you. Till then, don't hug me. So that's where I became [known as] a cold-hearted person in that church, so I don't go there anymore

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Chances are these church-goers were just trying to welcome her. However, their 'huggy' style not only physically alienated her; they left her feeling as if there was something unacceptable about her because of expressing the need for boundaries of her physical space. Additionally, the foundational beliefs she created from the meanings she made of having had this experience deterred her from engaging in the church experience at all even in her young adulthood, therefore decreasing the possibility of adding what could be a beneficial experience for both herself and a church community.

While none of the interviewees resonated with traditionally recognized sacred spaces, there were explanations discussing places of importance to the interviewees that were quite powerful. Two individuals described being in a library, any library, as an important space for them. In speaking about this, Darlene specifically shared "whereas most people would run off to a chapel, mine was the library." Both individuals felt the library was a place where they could escape the challenges they were experiencing and also feel comforted and safe. While a library may not be considered a traditionally sacred space, the explanations about these spatial experiences and the meaningful emotions they experienced while in these spaces demonstrate the immense importance of libraries in forming foundational beliefs about safe spaces, and beliefs of safe spaces existing at all.

There was an additional topic involving the meanings given to space, and the beliefs developed about that space, which involved the empowerment experienced by interviewees once they aged out and could actually have a physical space of their own. One interviewee spoke in great detail about how each room of her apartment with her husband was decorated. She continuously referenced what a wonderful, what I would call

liberating, feeling it was for her to be able to have the freedom to do what she wanted with the space. She expressed profound relief about not having to worry about being told to depersonalize her space, or to worry about others stealing her things, two experiences that she did encounter while in foster care on a regular basis. The pride she expressed while discussing the space within her apartment was infused with feelings of joy, comfort, and love, all of which reflect the meanings made about the power of personal space and her foundational beliefs about that space.

In addition to feeling empowered in being able to use space the way she wanted to, Melissa also spoke of the joy she felt at being able to have material objects in her life that she could call her own. These things seemed to have an importance beyond just the 'things' themselves. For her, the ability to have these things that she could trust would remain hers and not be taken away, or stolen, from her helped her feel secure in her environment. Melissa was not the only person to express feelings of this sort about material objects. Nearly all the interviewees when asked if they had any 'things' they felt were important to them from before, or during, their foster care experience had stories about specific items. The items themselves varied greatly, but encompassed things such as a baby blanket, a Winnie the Pooh t-shirt, photos and/or photo albums, and a necklace with a vial holding deceased parents' ashes. What was similar about these things was the deeply emotive feelings that were expressed by the interviewees, signs of the presence of foundational beliefs that have been made, while sharing the stories about these material things. There was a sense that these tangible items allowed them to feel connected to

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important aspects of their life; a sense that these things were a bridge over time for them to be able to bring important pieces of their past into their present and future.

In addition to asking about traditionally religious sacred places I inquired, again using the vocabulary of each individual, if they resonated with any traditional forms of sacred time (e.g., holy holidays, etc.). While none of them spoke of feeling connected to the religious aspects of traditional holidays, there were a variety of time oriented events that seemed to be infused with vibrant emotional energy. The most notable event involved graduating from high school. While this can be a momentous occasion for everyone in modern U. S. society, there was a sense that the actual graduation experience, or the goal of trying to accomplish that task, had reached levels of monumental importance. The reasons for significance varied from wanting to do something their parents had not done, to feeling triumphant in accomplishing something that has been considered challenging for many within the foster care system. For many of them, the challenges were not academic; but were bureaucratic: the frustrations of dealing with the bureaucracy of both the school system and the foster care system. Most of the interviewees had been moved many times, so just gathering their transcripts to prove they were eligible to graduate was a remarkable endeavor. Therefore, completing the task of graduating became an especially symbolic event that enabled them to feel tremendous pride and joy and establish foundational beliefs about themselves and what they could accomplish.

Another keenly meaningful event spoken of by the interviewees involved the process of unpacking one's personal things. Over half of them had stories about how they

often did not even bother to remove their personal things from their bags upon arrival at a new foster or group home as they assumed it was just a matter of time before they would have to pack it all up and move again. For several of these individuals though, when the time came that they felt confident that they would be staying where they were, and comfortable enough to want to stay, the event of unpacking took on a weighty level of importance. Reaching the level of trust in their environment that allowed them to actually unpack made the unpacking itself a pivotal experience for these individuals.

The final important event was only present in two of the interviews, but was so compelling that it needs to be noted. For two of the interviewees the event of getting what they considered "the bad places" shut down had profound implications in the development of their worldview. Each spoke of a different physical place—an abusive foster home and foster facility—and taking steps to bring the abuses to light, making it so that those places could no longer house foster children. For each of them there was a sense that this was a turning point in believing they had some control over their lives and feeling empowered to do something with that control. The foundational beliefs from the meanings they had made about these situations impacted their views of the world and their interactions in it into their young adulthood.

In discussing topics that are often considered traditionally spiritual in nature, I also asked about sacred practices. While none referenced any traditionally oriented sacred practices (e.g., prayer, yoga, meditation, spending time in nature, etc.), a few spoke of practices in their lives that seemed to be infused with expressively emotional foundations. Cathy spoke of finding comfort in allowing the words of her heart to flow out creating

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rap songs. These experiences seemed to allow her to say things she could not seem to convey in other ways, a way for her to share deeply felt feelings. The other practice she spoke about was scrapbooking while she was in foster care. While this might not often be considered a sacred practice, there was a sense that scrapbooking enabled her to feel connected to people that she loved even when she no longer was able to be with those people. This practice seemed to bring her a sense of heartfelt comfort.

The other person that spoke of personally powerful practices was Bonnie. She shared that a variety of creative outlets, such as dancing, drawing, playing musical instruments, and writing, brought her solace during challenging times. In her own words, these practices "kept her from going stupid". She did also comment that there were times now in her young adulthood when some of those practices were not as beneficial, since doing them now reminded her of being back in those challenging times and places. Those moments aside, she did note that taking the time now in her young adulthood to draw helped bring her comfort. There was a sense that both the experiences of drawing, as well as the products of her work, brought meaning to her life.

From these descriptions, it is apparent that though the traditional understandings of religious and or spiritual time, space, material things, and practices were not referenced, those topics were present in less traditional orientations, which did have important meanings. These meanings represented some of their foundational beliefs, both beneficial and detrimental, which then developed into their worldviews about conceptions of religion and/or spirituality that influence who they are, and how they live, as young adults.

Tattoos: A physical manifestation demonstrating meanings made.

An unexpected finding from these interviews about how meanings had been made emerged from discussions about tattoos. Eight out of the nine interviewees had tattoos, and nearly all of those interviewees had plans for additional tattoos. Only one individual did not have any tattoos, nor did he plan on having tattoos. That interviewee explained that he believed they "poison the body", and he also noted his grandfather would "be furious" with him if he got one. All of the others told stories of the meanings they gave to many of their tattoos. In listening, I came to recognize that these art forms were often really a physical manifestation of meanings made in their lives. They regularly represented the foundational beliefs they had developed about their relationships, themselves, and their worldviews. The tattoos themselves expressed a range of feelings from love, to anger, to disdain, to sorrow, but no matter which emotion was expressed, it became obvious that their desire to permanently place these forms of art on their bodies was often a representation of deeply profound meanings they had developed about their lives.

Additionally, the tattoos seemed to bring a sense of coherence via their bodies between their past and their present. For some their physical body was the only thing that was a 'given' that remained with them while being moved around. As was noted above, for many of the interviewees there was a feeling of impermanence, and a lack of feeling secure in their environments. Having these tattoos seemed to enable them to feel a consistency in their lives that could not be taken away from them since it was a permanent part of their bodies.

For three of the interviewees the actual procedure of getting a tattoo seemed to touch on their desire to feel connected to themselves physically and emotionally, as well as to the world-at-large. In explaining their mind set at the time of getting their tattoos they shared that they were at a point in their lives when they did not seem to "feel" anything, and/or they were feeling "numb" to everything and everyone in their lives. The physical pain they experienced while getting the tattoos made them 'feel', even if the feeling was that of pain, and even if it only lasted for just a little while. They explained that it meant something to them that at least they 'felt' anything at all.

While the interviewees that either already had their tattoos, or had specific plans for tattoos, sometimes spoke of playful or frivolous tattoos, most often they spoke of having/getting meaningful tattoos that had deep-seated significance to them.

In the realm of relationships, there were a variety of meanings described. Two of the interviewees had tattoos that represented not only relationships, but insights into their spiritual beliefs as well. Cathy has a tattoo of a cross with her deceased brother's name in it. This brother was the one that was essentially her parental figure until she was put into foster care, and having this tattoo seemed to help her feel a connection to him after his death. Cassie, as noted earlier, has a tattoo of praying hands with the prayer beads wrapped around them and a cross on top, and she plans to have the name of her recently deceased dear friend put in the cross. Darlene, whose children are currently removed from her home, plans to get her babies' footprints, along with their date of births, tattooed on the inside of her arm. Catherine's tattoo portrayed a far more painful perception of relationships:

>*Catherine*: …it says fuck love…it was just [long pause] getting my point
>
>across…it was aimed towards the love of my family cause, how can someone that
>
>has the same blood running through their veins…not do for me…as…someone
>
>that has nothing to do with me, could do so much for me, and so I don't
>
>understand, but…it's life you know.

She shared that she does now at times regret having that tattoo. In hearing her share the rest of her story, I wondered if it also reminded her to appreciate the people in her life now that do love her all the more. This tattoo demonstrates not only the meanings made about relationships in her life, but also indirectly about the self she has developed that enables her to embrace those relationships.

Another demonstration of how tattoos can be representative of foundational beliefs about the self is found in Mark. He shared that he plans to get a tattoo on his neck that says "Fear No Man", he explains he wants this because

>*Mark*: …I don't fear no one. [laughs] I don't care how big you are, how short you
>
>are or not…I don't fear you, you don't scare me. …I was, I was the trailer park
>
>hooley, I was the one running around punching people in the face, taking off from
>
>cops, and all that shit, I was just…I didn't care about anybody, I had no feelings
>
>for no one and I still don't.

This tattoo would be a reminder to himself to keep his distance from others. It represented his beliefs that people are not to be trusted, and his self-image as tough and not needing to rely on anyone.

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Bonnie's explanations of her tattoos are the most vivid. She was the most explicit about what meanings were given to them. Bonnie very obviously had a specific philosophy about the entire domain of tattoos. She spoke of the necessity to be certain you want a tattoo before getting it as they cannot ever truly be removed as your skin will always show that at least something had been there even if you try to remove it. She was also quite adamant that for her, every tattoo must be coverable so that if she is in a professional atmosphere the tattoos would not distract from the relevancy of her statements. As a reminder, Bonnie is the one that has spoken in front of the United States Congress to represent foster care children around the country. Bonnie has tattoos on both of her wrists, her feet, behind her ears, and fully covering one leg. Each area of tattoos has significance to her. She shares that she worked for years to develop the artwork for the matching tattoos on the inside of each of her wrists. When showing me the tattoos, she explained that

> *Bonnie*: … it says justice and karma, because I think they sort of go hand in hand. Justice is something people feel you deserve and karma is what the world feels you deserve. So this way it says k.a.r.m.a. and you flip it around and it says j.u.s.t.i.c.e.

The letters were very decoratively drawn so they blended into each other so that only one word could be seen depending on which direction one looked. One does not realize the other word is there until she flips her arm in the opposite direction. This tattoo represents her worldviews about the world-at-large and how it works

In describing the tattoos covering her entire leg and the back of her ears, she shared stories involving a significant number of important relationships in her life. While it is a lengthy description, I feel she speaks of the meaningfulness so eloquently, that her words must be shared directly. In explaining the many tattoos on her leg, she shares

Bonnie: …it's actually…is sort of my whole life story before I was 18. It has me as a little girl…it has my mother, because both of my parents are severe drug addicts I had them put on…as half skull, half person because I do remember my parents and I love them, but in a way they were sort of dead before they were dead, because they were super meth addicts. …I put the puzzles because these are pieces of my life, my brother and my family…the butterfly represents…my sisters, because even though we've never really been close we love each other, but it's just bad, it's just bad relationships…Um, I have autumn leafs up here, and that is for my Grandpa because every Autumn we go and 'see the colors'…And then here [she points to her ankle] …at the bottom it's…the past, but it's not who I am. And that's how I view my life…my past may have trauma, but don't touch, because it's my life. My parents aren't who I am, no one else, I'm…I'm me. That's it…The diamonds on my foot. I have three of them: for past, present, future. And I also…it was before I was with my significant others at the moment, but, um…in my town we have a big thing of [big sigh] teenage girls getting married and pregnant like they do the whole marriage thing, and I just decided I never wanted to have to be [married] to make me happy, so…all my friends…got their diamond rings, and I was like well I can be happy with my own three

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diamonds, I don't need someone else's diamonds. So…I got tattooed diamonds on my foot…What else? …I have like a heart, it's sort of like a trapped heart and it's all twisted together…and I got that…because for so long I had struggled for my freedom and sometimes I felt like that my freedom just flew away and maybe messed up my happiness. …I have snowflakes on the back of my ears, for my parents, they have the initials of my parents in them 'cause snowflakes come and they go. We all know they are there but they never stay long…they make an impact while they're there… Each one of them is different. No snowflake is the same. …Most of my tattoos have been thought about for years before I even got them…my tattoos have always been very meaningful to me.

Through this explanation, Bonnie revealed the deeply held meanings made about the relationships in her life, most especially in regards to her parents. The tattoos also revealed her foundational beliefs about things such as marriage, and how to cope with the past. Additionally, the tattoos demonstrated the questions she has in her heart about personal happiness and what the future holds—both topics reflecting aspects of how to understand herself. Together, Bonnie's tattoos are an impressive demonstration of how tattoos can be a physical manifestation representing the meanings made about of one's life.

Through this section one can see that conversations about actual tattoos, or plans for tattoos, might provide insight about how young adults have made meaning of their experiences of having been in foster care and aging out, and possibly into the spiritual aspects of those meanings made.

Chapter Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that these interviewees did make meaning of their experiences of being in foster care and aging out. These findings also identify, as I will elaborate in the next chapter, that there are spiritual themes in the narratives of these young adults. By discussing topics such as the foundational beliefs that have developed from their understandings of the self and how to cope, of relationships, and of worldviews about spiritual topics, one may gain a deeper understanding of the meanings that have been made by young adults about their experiences of having been in foster care, as well as having aged out, both beneficially and detrimentally. Additionally, these findings show tattoos are a physical manifestation of how meaning has been made, often with spiritual dimensions. As such, their narratives about their tattoos can be deeply informative in understanding these young adults. Perhaps these understandings can guide care-givers to deeper and more profound ways of assisting these young adults in coping with their experiences of being in foster care and aging out.

Chapter Six: Discussion

This chapter discusses the significance of the findings by engaging the literature on aging out, religious coping theory, and meaning making. I use the literature reviewed in chapters two and three to elaborate the spiritual meanings identified in the thematic analysis of interviews about the aging out process. Additionally, I discuss the clinical implications of this research project. I conclude with an explanation of limitations of the study and a discussion of the implications for future research.

The primary goals of this dissertation research were to (1) discern if and how young adults who have aged out of foster care made meaning of their experiences and (2) identify if there are spiritual themes within those narratives. The findings confirm these interviewees are making meaning of their experiences and that there are spiritual themes within those meanings made, although these meanings are not often expressed explicitly or in traditional languages of religion and/or spirituality.

Significance of the Findings in Regards to the Literature of Aging Out Theory and Practice and Psychology of Religion

This chapter discusses five topics of significance from the thematic analysis in chapter five and engages relevant literature reviewed in chapters two and three. The five topics are

- Interviewees did, indeed, make meaning of their foster care and aging out experiences.

- Spiritual themes are present in the interviewee narratives of how they made meaning out of foster care and aging out.

- Spiritual narratives are implicit versus explicit.

- Pargament's (2007) attributes of the sacred can be used to identify implicitly sacred statements.

- Tattoos can demonstrate the ways interviewees symbolically represented spiritual themes to do with being in foster care and aging out.

Making meaning of aging out experiences.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to (1) discern if and how young adults who have aged out of foster care made meaning of their experiences and (2) identify if there are spiritual themes within those narratives. The thematic analysis of chapter five demonstrates that these young adults did, indeed, engage in long-term processes of meaning-making which had implicit spiritual themes. In this project I relied upon the ways psychologists of religion describe the importance and process of making meanings. Within this literature and research, meaning refers to "perceptions of significance" (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 116). For example, Wong describes personal meaning as

> an individually constructed cognitive system, which endows life with personal significance.…[T]he meaning system consists of three components, namely, cognitive, motivational, and affective.…it is conceived of as a cognitive map that orients the individual in steering through the life course…[and] is used for self and life interpretation. (Wong, 1998, p. 368)

Building upon psychological studies of religion and the process of meaning making I have demonstrated through the findings in the thematic analysis chapter that interviewees made meaning of their foster care and aging out experiences, and did so in both beneficial

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and detrimental ways. Meaning making may play an adaptive or maladaptive role in adjustment to stressful life events and circumstances, as noted by psychologists of religion like Park and Folkman (1997). The specific meanings made by my interviewees were demonstrated in the findings chapter via the four super-code themes of foundational beliefs about self and coping, their relationships, and their worldviews; and tattoos (a physical manifestation demonstrating meanings made)**.**

Spiritual themes.

As was noted in the literature review, some people question whether modern day young adults in the United States are even contemplating religion and spirituality at all. The thematic analysis of chapter five demonstrates that there were spiritual themes, though most often they were implicit, in the ways my interviewees made sense out of their experiences of being in foster care and aging out. These findings support other research findings that young adults are definitely engaging these topics (Ammerman, 2014; Gortner, 2013; C. Smith & Lundquist Denton, 2005; C. Smith & Snell, 2009).

My thematic analysis demonstrates the importance of expert knowledge of psychological studies of religion to identify spiritual aspects of narratives, most especially implicit ones. The cornerstone of this dissertation—its hypotheses, the use of qualitative research methods, the design of the loosely structured research questions— rests upon psychological studies of religion and religious coping. In a nutshell, this research can be summarized by Pargament's (1997) foundational and oft-cited definition of spirituality as the search for the sacred. This definition has informed several generations of psychological research on religious coping along with clinical approaches

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to spiritually-integrated counseling and care. Building on this research I listened to my interviewees' narratives with this definition in mind. Defining spirituality as the search for the sacred helped me coalesce a variety of emergent narrative themes into the four super-codes. Through the process of thematic analysis, I came to understand that the ways these interviewees were making meaning included spiritual themes. Through this thematic analysis, I eventually was able to see how all but the tattoos could be understood as corresponding to Pargament's description of spirituality as a search for the sacred, which he envisions as having a sacred core surrounded by a sacred ring.

Pargament's definition of spirituality as a search for the sacred, with the sacred being recognized via the sacred core and surrounding ring, was instrumental in identifying super code themes involving implicit spiritual meanings. Pargament builds upon extensive research in psychology of religion and his own clinical practice to elaborate various categories of the sacred. His work proved to be invaluable in my thematic analysis of implicit spiritual meanings in my interviewees' narratives. In describing the range of phenomena people experience as sacred, Pargament distinguishes between the sacred core and the sacred ring, as I noted earlier. The sacred core "refers to ideas of God, higher powers, divinity, and transcendent reality" and the sacred ring surrounds the sacred core which includes "aspects of life that become extraordinary, indeed sacred themselves, through their association with the sacred core" (Pargament, 2007, p. 32). This sacred ring can incorporate an endless number of possible manifestations, as it reflects that which is sacred to each individual. Pargament identifies three possible classes of sacred objects: the self, relationships, and place and time. These

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topics can appear both explicitly and implicitly. One form of evidence of the presence of spirituality is that these categories parallel three of the four super-code topics that emerged from my thematic analysis: the interviewees' foundational beliefs about self and coping, their relationships, and their worldviews about spiritual topics. There were nuanced ways in which Pargament's categories were evident in the interviews: the interviewees' worldviews about spiritual topics incorporated both the sacred core and the sacred ring category of time and space within one group. It is worth noting that the theme of tattoos as a physical manifestation demonstrating meanings does not seem to correspond directly with any of Pargament's categories.

The thematic analysis also evidences the presence of implicit spirituality by demonstrating another central research finding from psychological studies of religion: the role of religious and spiritual coping described by these interviewees. Spiritual/religious coping is recognized by identifying within the narratives the ways that interviewees were searching for significance in ways related to the sacred. Pargament's use of the word 'search' in his definition of spirituality as a search for the sacred is important. This word reinforces the understanding that significance has not necessarily been found; indeed, spirituality as a search for significance in ways related the sacred is an ongoing process. Additionally, supporting more recent studies of spirituality, my research indicates that spirituality can be both beneficial and detrimental to individuals.

In the review of research on religious coping in chapter three I referenced Pargament's work on the religious coping as a search for significance in ways related to the sacred. Key to this is the term significance, and Pargament's explanation of its three

properties, which can be described as subjective, objective, and motivational (Pargament, 1997). I used each of these properties—subjective, objective, and motivational—within the coding process to identify implicit themes of spirituality within the narratives of interviewees. Each of these categories was represented within the interviewees' narratives in meaningful ways which provide further evidence of the implicit presence of spirituality within the interviewees' narratives.

Pargament describes the subjective sense of significance as "a phenomenological construct involving feelings and beliefs associated with worth, importance and value. It embodies the experience of caring, attraction, or attachment" (Pargament, 1997, p. 92). This dimension of significance was most prevalent in the ways the interviewees talked about foundational beliefs of the self, how they coped, and their relationships.

The objective dimension of significance concerns objects of significance—the things "we care *for*, [and] are attracted *to* (Pargament, 1997, p. 92). Such objects, being shaped by culture and experience, are imbued with a sense of sacred significance, and can be represented by a

> limitless set of significant objects…[such as] material (e.g., money food, cars, houses, drugs or weapons), physical (e.g., health, fitness, or appearance), psychological (e.g., comfort, meaning, growth), social (e.g., intimacy, social justice), and or spiritual (e.g., closeness with God, religious experience). (Pargament, 1997, p. 92)

As this description of the variety and diversity of objects invested with a sense of sacred significance demonstrates, individuals are not confined to one object of significance in life: "[i]t may be more accurate to say that the significance people seek is made up of a system of objects, an organization of values" (Pargament, 1997, p. 93). In my thematic

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analysis I recognized the ways that the foundational beliefs of the interviewees often made reference to various kinds of objects invested with sacred significance, especially in statements about what interviewees cared for in deep ways. They were describing their objects of significance, and how these featured in worldviews that helped or hindered them in their making meaning of being in foster care and in the aging out process. The antithesis is true as well. Conversations wherein the interviewees passionately spoke about *not* caring about someone or something point to the presence of significance as well.

Another dimension in Pargament's description of sacred significance is the motivational power often imbued in the search for significance: "significance be it constructive or destructive, has motivational properties—people are drawn to it" (Pargament, 1997, p. 93). He is careful to note the motivation to search for significance is not always life promoting, and that "searches that negate life can be every bit as tenacious as the quest for more affirming forms of significance" (Pargament, 1997, p. 94). He summarizes the importance of this dimension of the search for the sacred by explaining that "the pursuit of significance is a necessary condition for a productive life" (Pargament, 1997, p. 95). The fact that the interviewees made the effort to make meaning of their experiences at all is a sign of the motivational presence of the search for significance.

My process of thematic analysis moved back and forth between the interviewees' narratives and emergent themes, and what I knew about spirituality as a search for the sacred from my review of this literature. Combining the categories of the sacred core and

the sacred ring, identifying aspects of spiritual/religious coping, and recognizing the three

dimensions of significance—subjective, objective and motivational—helped me identify

implicit spiritual themes that were present in the narratives of young adults who have

been in foster care and aged out.

Implicit spiritual narratives.

As I noted above, themes to do with the sacred appeared both explicitly and

implicitly in these interviews. An important research finding is that the presence of

spirituality was nearly always implicit in these interviews. Only one individual brought

up the topic by explicitly using the word spiritual on his own initiative. When all of the

others were asked explicitly about the role of religion and spirituality they nearly all had

either negative or negating answers. But once the questions were posed in ways engaging

their own vocabulary, I could hear that they did, indeed, consider aspects of their lives

sacred. They were just describing aspects to do with spirituality in less traditional ways.

An additional supporting factor for spirituality being implicit and not explicit

comes from the fact that on the demographic questionnaire only three individuals

identified themselves as having any religious background. However, during the actual

interviews they presented a very different picture of the various ways that their lives

engaged religion and spirituality. As Ammerman notes "[r]eligiosity in practice does not

neatly conform to the survey questions with which we have tried to explain religion's

presence or absence, rise or decline" (Ammerman, 2014, p. 6). While measures for

assessing religion and spirituality have been growing in their complexity, there is still a

fair bit of research on spirituality and religion which asks the simplest of closed

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questions: How often do you attend church?; Do you believe in God?, etc. Even though psychologists of religion have developed nuanced and complex ways of measuring spirituality and religion, there are still researchers who persist in using naïve and simplistic measures that will not tap into the implicit ways that young adults like my interviewees engage in spirituality in their search for significance. My dissertation proves the inadequacy of such simple questions. In asking simple questions such as these on my demographic questionnaire, and then discussing these specific topics in the interviews, the disparity between their answers, to demographic questions and the complexities of their narratives about these topics supports the serious concerns about the sufficiency of such simple questions. Additionally, even the more sophisticated measures that have been created may not be capturing the subtle, implicit, and highly intrinsic ways young adults engage in a search for significance, as thematic analyses of these interviews demonstrate. Even if it is implicit, spirituality is definitely an important component of the lives of these interviewees.

My findings demonstrate the importance of using qualitative research methods that build upon extensive research on religious coping, in order to explore the implicit and intrinsic ways that young adults search for significance in stressful life transitions like aging out. My dissertation research is built upon religious coping studies, as I have noted in describing the purpose of this research, my review of this literature in psychology of religion, and the ways such research featured in my thematic analysis. As is evident by now, my research project demonstrates the relevance of psychological studies of religious coping for understanding how young adults search for significance in

foster care and aging out. It is important to note here the one research project by Jackson et al. (2010) that did, like my project, explore how spirituality specifically manifests in the lives of these youth, in terms of "spiritual coping mechanisms, beliefs about spirituality and participation in spiritual activities" (Jackson, et al., 2010, p. 107). There are several ways that my dissertation research project corresponds to, and varies from, this research by Jackson et al.. As I noted in my literature review Jackson et al. (2010) found that youth described spirituality in terms of belief in a higher source, prayer, worship, living a moral life, and a source of their identity and cultural heritage. While my interviewees did describe a belief in a higher source, none of my interviewees spoke of spirituality in any of those other ways. My dissertation project does, indeed, support Jackson et al.'s identification of the use of positive spiritual coping mechanisms—having trust in God/a higher power as a source of strength in troubling times and hope for the future. My dissertation also supports Jackson et al.'s findings that there were signs of negative coping as well, in themes such as feeling separate from and/or angry at God/a higher power; and/or not being able to believe in any kind of God/higher power because of all the suffering in the world. The one way in which my findings diverge from Jackson et al.'s is that I did not hear any explicit references to working through a process of forgiveness as a form or spiritual coping and healing. Forgiveness as a spiritual form of coping might be considered as present implicitly in the narratives when my interviewees discussed their desires to return to their families of origin despite their troubled histories in order to 'fix' things and make it better for them all. Forgiveness could also be implicit in the narrative by Aaron about trying to have empathy for his abuser.

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Jackson et al. (2010) used demographic questions to identify whether/how their research participants had active spiritual lives: they asked whether research participants attended religious services; attended classes, workshops, and/or spiritually oriented retreats; and volunteered for those in need. Instead of relying upon demographic questions about religious and spiritual activities, I used a qualitative methodology to step into the individual worlds of my interviewees and allow them to find their own words for making meaning. In doing so, I discovered that the majority of the young adults interviewed tended to not use the conventional language noted in the Jackson et al.'s research, but were more comfortable using far less theistic language with implicit spiritual meanings.

My dissertation demonstrates the need for qualitative research methodology that allows interviewees to use intrinsically meaningful language that often carries implicit references to a search for the sacred. A related key finding is that researchers, clinicians, and any kind of spiritual care-giver must be able to draw upon expert knowledge about psychological research on religious coping and spiritually integrated counseling and care. Without such expertise, they may not be able to recognize or identify implicit statements about the sacred. As I noted in the literature review, the transactional model of coping recognizes that the person and the environment each bring components to the situation that can alter the coping and meaning making process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These young adults are very aware of the people who surround them. Even when religion and spirituality are important aspects of their life, they need to be part of support systems that can help them co-create such meaning by drawing upon their own language. When such

expert knowledge and sensitivity is missing in their support system, these young adults will just leave those topics out of the conversations. Therefore, learning to listen in expert ways for the implicitly sacred aspects of individual's narratives can be a powerful way to deepen our understandings of young adults aging out of foster care.

The forms of meanings made and the foundational beliefs described in the previous chapter are important for care-givers working with this population. For example, for social workers, increasing understanding of how to recognize implicit spirituality provides hope for more fully understanding their clients in their larger context. As was noted in the literature review, research has begun to assess how social workers are already incorporating religion and spirituality into their practice, often without formal guidance on how to do this (A. J. Hill & Donaldson, 2012). Due to this, there is a call by educators, researchers, and policy makers to revise the curriculum within social work education and training. My research demonstrates the need to incorporate expert knowledge from the fields of psychology of religion and spiritually integrated counseling. Such expertise needs to be a foundation for curricula specific to the professional training of social workers in the areas of religion and spirituality. The training must be multi-disciplinary and include assistance in understanding how this expert knowledge can be applied in helpful and ethical ways in their daily practice; see, for example, Vieten et al. (Vieten et al., 2013). For pastoral care-givers, gaining a fuller understanding of the variety of issues faced by those in, and aging out of, foster care can enable pastoral and spiritual care-givers to provide a more profound level of assistance. Within the training for both fields, there needs to be an integration of all these resources to assist these young

adults; most especially as I have demonstrated here, expert knowledge about spirituality as the search for the sacred is a powerful insight to understanding the stories of those aging out of foster care. With training, this expert knowledge of these foundational concepts can assist in recognizing implicit aspects of the sacred in the narratives of those who have been in foster care and aged out, as well as how to assist them, when needed, concerning these narratives.

Identifying attributes of the sacred.

This dissertation has identified that there are implicit spiritual themes present in the narratives of those who have been in foster care and aged out. In my thematic analysis, the final stage of identifying three of the four super-codes was informed by Pargament's key concepts of the sacred core and ring, as well as Pargament's extensive research on spiritual/religious coping. This expert knowledge helped me at this point in the thematic analysis to recognize how my interviewees searched for significance in ways related to the sacred. As I noted above, I have demonstrated that references to spirituality as a search for the sacred were implicit, as none of the interviewees explicitly used the term sacred in describing how they coped with and made meaning of their experience of foster care and aging out. Therefore, in order to identify if there were spiritual themes present within the narratives I had to infer if there were implicitly sacred aspects to their narratives. In order to identify implicitly sacred meanings I used Pargament's attributes of the sacred to understand the emergent super-codes in my thematic analysis (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). As I summarized in the review of the literature and the process of thematic analysis, those attributes are transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy.

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Transcendence "speaks to the perception that there is something out of the ordinary in a particular object or experience, something that goes beyond our everyday lives and beyond our usual understanding" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39). Boundlessness "involves a perception of endless time and space" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39). Ultimacy is "perceived as something vibrant and alive, something basic and elemental…it refers to the essential and absolute ground of truth, the foundation for all experience" (Pargament, 2007, p. 39). I will elaborate in detail now how this expert knowledge helped me in the final stages of my thematic analysis of each super-code. In the process I will demonstrate how such expert knowledge is necessary in research and clinical work with young adults aging out of foster care. The following sections are written in parallel to the findings chapter and note, when applicable, specifically how the implicitly sacred aspects of these demonstrations was identified.

Transcendence and ultimacy in self.

I used the sacred attribute of ultimacy to identify implicit references to self as sacred in both beneficial and detrimental ways**.** On the beneficial side, ultimacy was a dimension of the interviewees' foundational beliefs about themselves associated with demonstrations of courage that enabled them to not only survive their experiences of suffering and loss, but often to go a step further and engage in thoughts of the often elusive feeling of hope, which can assist towards the attainment of one's highest human

potentials (Pargament, 2007).[4] Thus, interviewees' belief in their own inner strength was one primary foundational belief I identified as implicitly sacred.

As I noted in my thematic analysis, demonstrations of courage, one of the acts that can lead towards the fulfillment of one's sacred potential, was demonstrated in a variety of ways, often emerging through the need to cope with change. Within these demonstrations of courage, I identified an aspect of ultimacy which involved the power to choose. Many spoke of coming to the realization that they are the ones to make choices on how they respond to their experiences and who they ultimately become. In engaging this form of ultimacy, these young adults are putting into practice the foundational belief that they have a choice about who they become—choices for possibly meeting the potential of their sacred selves.

Compassion, another act that can lead towards the fulfillment of one's sacred potential, is a relevant component to understanding what may be implicitly sacred about references to the self in many of the interviews. These young adults spoke of their desire to help those now in the challenging situations they once were in. Through such conversations one hears the theme of ultimacy within their foundational beliefs— ultimacy steeped in feelings of compassion. For many of the interviewees being compassionate was an important aspect of the self. I identified these expressions of compassion as part of a progression towards the fulfillment of their sacred potential.

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[4] As was explained in chapter two, according to Pargament the self becomes sacred through attaining the "highest of human potentials" realized in "acts of justice, courage, creativity, compassion, forgiveness, honesty,…hope…and even humor" (Pargament, 2007, p. 43).

As I noted in my thematic analysis, there was one topic—the soul—that was brought forth explicitly by only one of the interviewees but seems essential to note when discussing the sacred. For, as Pargament says "no dimension of the self is more fully identified with the sacred than the soul" which "refers not to a 'thing' but to a 'quality' of ourselves and our experiences…[it] has both transcendent and immanent qualities…[and] can be seen as a point of connection between individuals and God" (Pargament, 2007, pp. 43-44). In coping with her sexual assaults, Bonnie made the courageous choice to form a foundational belief about the soul, imbued with a sense of ultimacy, that enabled her to not only survive her experiences of suffering and loss, but to recognize her own value. Through those choices one can see her implicit recognition of the self as sacred.

As I noted in the thematic analysis, though, none of the interviewees expressed solely beneficial attributes of the sense of the self as sacred. Even the individuals who primarily demonstrated positive aspects of the self as implicitly sacred expressed less beneficial attributes of themselves that seemed inspired by their foster care experiences.

For many of the interviewees, there is a foundational belief, or sense of ultimacy, that is centered in the conviction that even when things are going well, they do not trust it will remain that way. This sentiment of distrust in the world, essentially a form of ultimacy, was expressed by the majority. Having foundational beliefs in a life founded in a distrust of their continued happiness seemed to foster a kind of fateful acceptance of the inevitability of their suffering. While the church might be a resource to assist them in these existential types of concerns, those of traditional religion were unfortunately towards the top of the list of people inspiring mistrust for these interviewees. This sense

of distrust could be understood as Erikson's foundational stage of Trust vs. Mistrust, especially in terms of the human institution of religion, which he believed supported care-givers in their ability to create trust in infants (Erikson, 1963, p. 250). Formative experiences fostering mistrust in people, and the impossibility of permanence and happiness seemed to make the interviewees view peaceful moments with suspicion and therefore something to be avoided. Beliefs such as these do not seem likely to guide individuals to acts of attaining their highest human potentials and attaining a beneficial sense of their sacred self.

As I look back through the statements these interviewees made about themselves, I can see that there are a variety of ways that their experiences of what one might consider to be transcendent moments in the foster care system led to ultimate beliefs. Some of these ultimate beliefs were guiding them in circumstances towards gaining fulfillment of their human potential. In other situations, such beliefs were diminishing the possibility of the fulfillment of these types of sacred potentials. Either way, social workers and spiritual caregivers would be more helpful if they listened for how those aging out of foster care interpret their experiences in terms of meanings and significance. As I have demonstrated, I needed expert knowledge from key concepts in psychology of religion in order to identify and understand the implicit sacred dimensions of themes grouped under this super-code.

Transcendence and ultimacy in relationships.

All of the interviewees explained ways that their experiences in foster care and aging out impacted what they believe to be true about the people in their lives and their

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relationships with them. Some relationships had moments of transcendence which became foundations of ultimacy. In other words, there was an implicit sacred quality to these relationships, even though the interviewees did not explicitly use such terms to describe what was good about these relationships. In contrast, there were other relationships that were negatively oriented, immersed in feelings of anger and pain that generated distrust and suspicion.

As I noted in the findings, the definition of family changed for two-thirds of the interviewees due to their experiences in foster care. Family essentially came to mean people you could spend time with who allow you to 'be' who you really are without fearing rejection. For some, these experiences took on an essence of transcendence and led to a form of ultimacy that family does not have to be biologically related to still be a powerful source of love. There was a sense of awe that they were able to find people that cared about them and actually stayed in their lives. For each of these interviewees, it was the consistency of caring, a culmination of small profound moments which over time led them to foundational beliefs about relational safety and security. These relationships had implicitly sacred implications in their lives.

Other relationships recognized as implicitly sacred were romantic relationships. For Melissa, her forms of ultimacy about the meanings of marriage required her to better herself to be a worthy partner in what was implicitly sacred to her, the relationship experience of marriage. Not all references to marriage carried these transcendent meanings, as I noted in the conversation with Darlene and Richard whose relationship seemed founded in forms of ultimacy perpetuating pain.

There were also a great number of experiences that the interviewees shared that did not result in positive forms of ultimacy regarding relationship expectations. The desire to be alone, or to be left alone, was expressed by eight of the nine interviewees. This desire was infused with a sense of ultimacy that being alone was better, perhaps even safer, than being with others.

Another aspect of being alone involved avoiding attachments completely in order to avoid the future pain of leaving, or being left. Counter to the sacred attribute of boundlessness, which is founded on a perception of endless time, these interviewees seemed particularly attuned to the finitude of the relationships in their lives. As was seen in the thematic analysis, several had developed a form of ultimacy wherein they simply believed there was no possibility of a relationship bringing long term benefits to their life. This type of foundational belief does not allow for the possible existence of a loving and fulfilling relationship, which might allow them to experience transcendent moments in their lives.

One of the primary topics of discussion that demonstrated foundational beliefs about relationships, or ultimacy, was expressing the many ways in which the interviewees had been disappointed by authority figures in their lives. In sharing their stories involving feelings of despair and betrayal, it became apparent that these essentially negative transcendent experiences impacted their ability to trust people in authority, a form of ultimacy that became a foundational belief structure that impacts them into their young adult lives.

The final category of relationships that have sacred implications was in regards to the siblings of the interviewees. Five of the interviewees with siblings in foster care at the same time spoke of being involuntarily separated from their siblings early in their foster care experience. The reasons for the separations varied, but in all cases the stories the interviewees spoke of were focused on negative transcendent moments immersed in the emotion of pain. For each of these interviewees, the transcendent experiences of being separated from their sibling(s) seemed to create a form of ultimacy that was founded in beliefs about the lack of fairness of life; how easily the things they love could be taken away from them no matter how hard they fought for them; and for some, how poorly things could turn out for those they love if they were not able to be with them.

For interviewees, relationships seemed to impact their sense of what can be considered implicitly sacred in their lives. Their forms of ultimacy, as foundational beliefs of how life works and their place within that life, were significantly influenced by those relationships, both beneficially, and detrimentally. Recognizing and acknowledging the implicitly sacred relationships in the lives of those who have aged out can lead to deeper understandings of how these young adults have made meaning of their experiences of having been in foster care and having aged out. This requires attending to the role of transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness in the search for the sacred within relationships in order to hear implicit references to the search for the sacred in these interviewees' references to relationships.

Foundational beliefs and worldviews about spiritual topics.

Occasionally, interviewees addressed foundational beliefs and worldviews about spiritual topics. I found that the key concepts about the sacred core—"ideas of God, higher powers, divinity, and transcendent reality" (Pargament, 2007, p. 32)—were relevant and meaningful in my thematic analysis. As I noted earlier, seven out of nine interviewees described or refuted some kind of possible transcendent reality, for which they used the term God. Four of the interviewees expressed foundational beliefs, a form of ultimacy, that God is a source of support in trying times. Not all participants saw God as such a helpful source. One individual tried to understand how God allows bad things to happen to children, which might be considered a negative form of transcendence itself. Through her spiritual/religious coping she came to a foundational belief, a form of ultimacy, that God is an impersonal source that allows for free-will, and then deals with the ramifications of those actions of free-will later. Several individuals had experiences of ultimacy founded in concepts such as doubting God's existence, and even going so far as adamantly stating God did not exist. Discussions such as these demonstrate the ways I used expert knowledge in order to identify how interviewees engaged in discussions that can be understood as implicitly sacred in nature, specifically about beliefs and ideas that fall under the category of the sacred core. This expert knowledge helped me assess their experiences of transcendence as both positive and negative and as having an impact on their perceptions of ultimacy.

In following Pargament's notion of the sacred ring, I also listened for the role of sacred spaces, objects, times, and practices in the interviews. Listening for the role of sacred spaces in the search for significance helped me appreciate that none of the

interviewees resonated with traditional sacred spaces, but there were descriptions of spaces as implicitly sacred, such as libraries and having physical spaces of their own to decorate and know their things were safe. Additionally, as was noted in the findings, nearly all of the interviewees had material objects that were important to them. I interpreted these objects as significant in bringing about moments of transcendence, a sense of an importance beyond just the things themselves. There was a feeling that these tangible items allowed them to feel connected to important aspects of their life, and there was an implicitly sacred energy about these things that seemed to engage a sense of boundlessness, or a sense that these things were a bridge over time for them to be able to bring important pieces of their past into their present and future with them.

As I noted in the findings, none of the interviewees referenced traditional forms of sacred time (e.g., holy holidays, etc.) as being specifically sacred to them. However, there were a variety of events that seemed to be infused with implicitly sacred energy. The most notable event involved graduating from high school. There was a sense that the actual graduation experience, or the goal of trying to accomplish that task, had reached levels of implicitly sacred importance. Another implicitly sacred event involved the process of unpacking one's personal things. Reaching the level of trust in their environment that allowed them to actually unpack made the unpacking itself a transcendent experience for these individuals, with a sense for the listener in hearing this narrative that an implicitly sacred moment had occurred in their lives. The final sacred event which had implicitly sacred foundations was only present in two of the interviews, and that was the one that involved getting what they considered "bad places" shut down.

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For each of them there was a sense that this was a turning point in feeling like they had some control over their lives and were empowered to do something with that control. Taking action became an essentially transcendent experience for them both that created a form of ultimacy that led them to have faith in their own abilities to have a positive impact on their own lives.

The final category included in Pargament's sacred ring is sacred practices. Again, while none referenced any traditionally oriented sacred practices, two spoke of practices in their lives that seemed to be infused with an implicitly sacred essence. Both of these related to creative and artistic ventures that allowed a sense of profound comfort, solace, and boundless expression of the self.

From these descriptions, it is apparent that my knowledge of the topics of sacred time, space, material things, and practices helped my thematic analysis and clarified the finding that traditional forms of sacred time, space, material things, and practices were not referenced, although these aspects of the search for the sacred were present in less traditional forms. Key concepts in Pargament's definitions of spirituality as a search for the sacred helped identify the way these implicitly sacred topics were important in the lives of those who had been in foster care and had aged out and how they made meaning of those experiences.

Throughout each of these sections one can see that knowledge of Pargament's attributes of the sacred—transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy—can be used as powerful tools to identify implicitly sacred themes in the narratives of young adults. A key finding of my research is that such knowledge is a prerequisite for appreciating the

tremendous impact of the search for the sacred in the lives of young adults who have been in foster care and aged out.

Tattoos: Embodied sacrality.

As I explained in the thematic analysis, an unexpected finding from this research about understanding how the interviewees made meaning emerged through conversations about tattoos. Even the most reserved of the interviewees became animated and energetic when discussing the topic of tattoos.

Even the one individual, Aaron, who did not have, nor plans to have any tattoos because he believed tattoos "poison the body", was impassioned about discussing this topic. Aaron is also the interviewee who wrote on his demographic questionnaire n/a (not applicable) for what religion he was raised in, then in the interview stated he was born and raised in a Mormon family, but that he did not believe in that religion as a young adult. What is interesting to note here though, is that even though he makes no claims to the Mormon religions tradition and its beliefs, one distinctive belief held by those in that tradition based on 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 is that our bodies are our temple of God and therefore marking the body with a tattoo is a form defiling the body and "showing a lack of respect to themselves and God" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004, p. 167). Therefore, even if it was not intentional, in this situation the lack of a tattoo demonstrates the meanings Aaron has made about his body, possibly because of this specific religious tradition.

The connection between mind and body has been a long-standing discussion through millennia. Conversations specifically discussing the tattooing of one's body have

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become a part of those discussions. Arp (2012) in doing a word play on Descartes'

famous dictum 'I think, therefore I am' edited a book to specifically address the concept

of 'I ink, therefore I am' (Arp, 2012). Within his introduction he explains that persons

with tattoos often

> [r]ealize not only that s/he is intimately tied to her/his body but also that bodily
> expression is a fundamental way of communicating to others (this is the 'I *am*
> part) and…[u]tilizes the intimate connection with the body to express innermost
> thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and the like by indelibly marking the body for all
> to see (this is the 'therefore I *ink* part). (Arp, 2012, p. xvi)

The beliefs expressed in this statement support my finding that it is possible that the

meanings made by these young adults about being in foster care and aging out could very

well be recognized via conversations about their tattoos. It also supports the recognition

that the physical body can be a form of communication, and for these interviewees,

possibly the only part of their lives that remained a constant in the ever changing world of

foster care, it was there only assured form of permanence.

This conversation about tattoos is one that was not directly identified as a

category corresponding to Pargament's sacred core or sacred ring. Pargament's

categories can be used to infer that tattoos can be seen as both an objective dimension of

significance, as well as a motivational aspect of significance. The stories about the actual

obtaining of the tattoos, or the planning for them, described what the interviewees care

for, including who they love. Tattoos become a way to demonstrate these meanings in

physical ways. What the tattoos themselves represent were in many ways motivational to

the interviewees in both remembering what was important, as well as reminding them of

what they do, and do not, want to be in the future.

Recognizing the importance of tattoos may offer care-givers a gateway to conversations about deeply held meanings made by those who have been in foster care and aged out.

Clinical implications

This work is important because the meanings made about formative experiences of being in foster care and aging out impact who individuals become as adults, and how they react to life. Less beneficial meanings may affect their ability to advantageously incorporate more tangible assistance (e.g., educational and employment assistance). Resources that engage the implicitly sacred aspects of these young adults' lives provide unique opportunities for spiritually integrated care-giving for this population, as an avenue for respectfully assessing and as applicable, reappraising implicit meanings.

Even though nearly half spoke of God being a source of support in trying times, none of the other interviewees had stories about traditional religious institutions, people, places, or times as being a beneficial resource to them. Explicit conversations discussing traditional religion evoked emotions ranging from blasé dismissal to complete distrust. Many saw those representing traditional religions as ultimate representations of hypocrisy. Those within traditional religious environments might well need to reflect on what ways they are possibly deterring these young adults from engaging in what could be a life-giving beneficial form of coping. As I explained in the literature review, religion can function in a variety of ways, but most commonly as ways to search for control and mastery, get closer to and connect with God, find support, and make life transformations (Pargament, Ano, et al., 2005). As Hood, Hill, and Spilka explain, "the search for

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meaning is of central importance to human functioning, and…religion is uniquely

capable of helping in that search" (Hood Jr, et al., 2009, p. 12). Faith and a sense of

meaning can lead to resilient pathways in posttraumatic growth, as attested by Wong and

Wong's (2012) model for understanding resilience. Research has demonstrated that when

situations make people recognize the frailty of their human condition, it is quite common

for them to draw on their religious resources. These young adults do not appear to be

using traditional religious resources in this manner. I detailed reasons for this within the

findings chapter: they felt judged for their need to avoid physical touch; the experienced

church-goers as hypocritical; and they had concern about doctrinal topics such as suicide.

Only Aaron seemed to draw comfort from traditionally religious resources by

understanding Jesus' experiences on the cross as a form of inspiration to survive and

thrive, but even he did not have specific traditional religious people or places to assist

him through his coping process.

Spirituality can be an integrating or disintegrating force in people's lives, and

these variances make a difference in how people's lives are influenced by religion.

Integrated spirituality aligns the component parts of a person's life, with destinations

large enough to hold all the complexity of human functioning: pathways that fit to the

environment, person and situations; and spiritual understandings flexible enough to deal

with life's changes, but stable enough to guide them through those same changes

(Pargament, 2007). Spiritual disintegration does exactly the opposite. The component

parts clash with each other, the destinations are fragmented or lead to small or false gods,

pathways do not fit situations, persons or environment, and spirituality is either too

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flexible or too rigid to deal with life's changes. Assessing what meanings have been made about having been in foster care and aging out and identifying the implicit spiritual themes within those narratives can be a guide to understanding if individuals are on a path towards integration or disintegration. As Park notes, research needs "a finer grained analysis of the types of meaning making in which individuals engage…[which will assist] in sorting out the effects of meaning-making efforts on adjustment" (Park, 2010, p. 290). This is important because an adaptive coping strategy needs to "fit" or match the situational characteristics. A mismatch between coping strategy and situation "is likely to reduce coping effectiveness" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 190). Though, Park and Folkman also note, the appraisal of meaning is not a single event; reappraisals can occur many times through the coping process. Therefore, the possibility for change exists. Additionally, meanings made at one point of life that are beneficial, may at a later date become detrimental, and with the reappraisal process, that individual can understand each situation in new, possibly more life promoting ways. Therefore, using expert knowledge from psychology of religion can help researchers, clinicians, and spiritual care-givers to recognize and understand implicit sacred meanings that have been made and assist in recognizing if reframing needs to take place in order to create more beneficial life-promoting meanings.

As Steger notes, "[m]eaning by its very nature, appears to be an integrating factor in people's lives, drawing together the threads of their efforts to achieve happiness, withstand distress, and attain transcendence beyond their solitary selves" (Steger, 2012, p. 165). In contrast, meanings that have been made that are less beneficial can have the

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exact opposite effect. They can create a life of chaos and despondency that diminishes the possibility of becoming one's best sacred self. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, expert knowledge is needed to understand the specific types of implicitly spiritual meanings young adults make about being in foster care and aging out.

The importance of an individual's perceptions of the meanings of traumatic events, as well as normal daily events, is prodigious. In understanding how young adults who have aged out of foster care understand their experiences, I have demonstrated the importance of listening for themes related to meaning-making found within their narratives. Meaning making is a complex process that impacts every arena of an individual's life. As Garbarino et al. explain "once th[e] spiritual foundation is in place, *then* educational programs, counseling, vocational experiences, and regular psychotherapy can help a boy [or girl] move to a positive path in his [or her] life" (Garbarino, 1999, p. 161). In contrast, "[w]ithout attention to this spiritual impulse, we fear that our intervention efforts will fall short of the mark" (Garbarino, 1992, p. 36). Listening for the meanings made as well as the implicitly sacred aspects of an individual's narratives can help young adults assess whether they are on paths to destinations that leave them in despair with less life satisfaction, or on paths that inspire them to live out their ultimate life's purposes in ways that lead to greater life satisfaction.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

One of the benefits of a qualitative methodology is that it enables researchers to discover previously unknown information by going directly to the source, the interviewee, to discuss new topics about a specific phenomenon. Particularly with

vulnerable and marginalized populations, the depth of engagement allows previously dismissed persons to articulate in their own words their experiences and their significance. One of the limitations of this form of methodology is that in order to engage these voices in depth, it is necessary to have smaller sample sizes, so while still making the information beneficial, it becomes less generalizable. Additionally, while this research documents specific contextual factors such as marginality (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, specific mental and physical disabilities) as well as other experiences specifically addressing their foster care experience (e.g., amount of time in foster care, experiences of maltreatment, etc.) it does not solely focus on any one of these particular experiences. Additionally, since this project was working to discern if and how these topics were even present in the narratives of this population, it by necessity focused on the individual only, and did not focus the importance of engaging in conversations about this topic with their families, as well as in the community-at-large. Focusing on such specific contextual factors would be a beneficial addition to future research projects.

Another often noted challenge of qualitative methodology is that because of the researcher's involvement in the gathering of the data and its analysis, it is assumed there is often a built-in bias of sorts because of the researcher's beliefs. The exploratory nature of this research project justified the use of qualitative research methods, which allowed interviewees to use idiosyncratic and intrinsically meaningful ways of talking about foster care and aging out. I followed their lead in these conversations and then listened over and over again to the particular ways they made sense out of the aging out process. As I noted in describing the process of thematic analysis, themes began to emerge that

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started to form patterns or super-codes corresponding to the ways that Pargament talks about spirituality as a search for the sacred. To someone outside of psychology of religion, it could seem as though I was reading this theory into my thematic analysis. However, Pargament's ways of describing spirituality are based upon hundreds of research studies using sophisticated measures of religious coping over the past 30 years. His book *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy* (2007) interfaces his research and extensive clinical experience. I note the extensive research and clinical foundation of the concepts that became relevant in my thematic analysis, in order to explain why it is not surprising that these concepts proved so helpful in identifying implicit spiritual meaning in my interviews. It might seem difficult for another researcher to replicate my research in order to confirm or deny the findings that spiritual narratives are implicit versus explicit, but the previous extensive research, along with my own findings, lend credence to the possibility that others doing future research would discover the presence of implicitly sacred narratives as well. Though what they identify as implicitly sacred might vary given the hermeneutic nature of any evaluation of what is implicitly sacred in someone's story. There will always be a significant amount of interpretation by those doing the evaluating.

My description here of interpretations tends to represent a modernist conception of how knowledge is obtained and interpreted through discerning an essence—in my case a common 'deep structure' of a search for the sacred in stories of aging out. This structuralist description of spirituality as a search for the sacred found in stories of life transitions could easily be challenged in significant ways by post-modernist, post-

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structuralist approaches to contextual meanings as always co-constructed. In acknowledging the tensions between modernist and post-modernist approaches to meaning making, I hope that this exploratory qualitative study will promote further qualitative and, eventually, quantitative research on spiritual meanings of being in foster care and aging out. In the meantime, I also hope that my findings will provide some specific strategies for guiding clinical and research conversations about the process of aging out—notably the importance of concepts such as ultimacy and transcendence in relationship to self, relationships, places and events in listening for and exploring the implicitly sacred meanings of the aging out process.

These research findings have provided informative and exciting evidence that meanings are, indeed, being made by those in foster care and aging out, and that there are implicitly spiritual aspects to those narratives. As this exploratory study has demonstrated, further work is needed with larger sample populations, in creating training modules that incorporate strategies for recognizing how meanings is being made, as well as identifying implicitly sacred narratives, and engaging researchers from a variety of disciplinary fields (e.g., psychology of religion, social work, pastoral care, etc.) to work together to incorporate these approaches in their work together with those who have been in foster care and aged out.

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