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# Emancipated foster youth's experiences and perceptions of the transition to adulthood

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## ABSTRACT

Using a grounded theory approach, this study evaluated narratives from a sample of 170 emancipated foster youth (66.5% female; 84.6% non-white) as they reflected on their experiences between the ages of 18 and 25 across three data waves. Corbin and Strauss' (1990) three-phase coding process revealed five overarching themes: *adult values and characteristics, nature of the transition process, material needs and resources, relationship concerns, and affective experiences*. Although some elements of Arnett's (2000) model of emerging adulthood were evident in this sample of emancipated foster youth, such as individualistic qualities and instability, other core features were rarely discussed, such as self-focus and optimism, or were expressed in unique ways, such as exploration and feeling in-between. There were significant age-related changes, but not gender differences, in youth's discussion of varied themes. These findings suggest promising avenues for intervention during the sensitive period of developmental reorganization that characterizes the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Age-related changes; aging out; child welfare; emancipation; emerging adulthood; foster youth; grounded theory; youth

Over the past two decades, there has been a surge of theoretical and empirical interest in the period of emerging adulthood, which Arnett (2000, 2004) proposes is the period from 18 to 25 years of age during which youth experience identity exploration, optimism, self-focus, instability, and feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood. Although largely developed based on the experiences of upper and middle class youth of European American descent (Arnett 1994), researchers have since evaluated the generalizability of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood to underrepresented and vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities, immigrants, individuals from low socioeconomic strata, and youth with disabilities. Despite the unique experiences of youth exiting the child welfare system, however, only a few studies have evaluated the theory of emerging adulthood among system-involved youth generally (i.e. Munson et al. 2013), and among youth transitioning out of foster care in particular (i.e. Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson 2014).

The current investigation used a grounded theory approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of 170 newly emancipated foster youth as they developed from ages 18 to 25. In contrast to prior studies, which have used deductive data collection and analytic frameworks to evaluate the applicability of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood to the

experience of transition-aged foster youth at a single point in time, this study offered a unique opportunity to identify salient themes as they emerged spontaneously in this population over time, and as they converged and diverged from Arnett's characterization of emerging adulthood. This inductive approach afforded space for youth to identify unique sources of vulnerability and strength that may inform practice and policy efforts targeting this period of developmental reorganization when youth may be especially responsive to intervention and influence (Schulenberg, Sameroff, and Cicchetti 2004).

According to Arnett (2000, 2004), emerging adults are more concerned with attaining individualistic qualities and goals, such as making independent decisions, accepting responsibility for one's actions, and attaining financial independence, than with traditional signifiers of adulthood, such as marriage, starting a family, and establishing a career. Often a period of great optimism, emerging adults report feeling they can transform their lives for the better as they explore the world and learn about themselves. At the same time, however, heightened exploration and self-focus bring frequent changes in residences, educational pursuits, employment, and romantic partnerships. Amidst these changes, youth may turn to family in search of emotional and/or material supports. As a result, it is common for emerging adults to describe a sense of feeling 'in-between' because they no longer view themselves as an adolescent, but do not yet perceive themselves as a fully independent adult. Despite the prominence of these core features in multiple studies of emerging adulthood (e.g., Molgat 2007; Nelson and Barry 2005), Arnett (2000) cautioned against overgeneralizing these patterns to diverse youth groups given the sociocultural embeddedness of adolescent and adult identities.

Youth exiting state sponsored systems of care, such as child welfare, encounter unique vulnerabilities that may influence the degree to which Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood characterizes their development from 18 to 25. Each year, more than 400,000 children find themselves in the child welfare system, living away from parents, extended kin supports, and often siblings (AFCARS 2016). Of these youth, approximately 9% remain in foster care until they turn 18, and 'emancipate' or 'age out' (AFCARS 2016).

Emancipated foster youth comprise one of the most vulnerable populations of transition-aged youth in the United States. Youth exiting foster care experience significantly higher rates of residential instability and precarious housing than their non-fostered peers with between 11% and 46% of foster youth experiencing one or more episodes of homelessness during this period (Berzin, Rhodes, and Curtis 2011; Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney 2013; Fowler, Toro, and Miles 2009), versus rates of 5% to 7.7% among 18 to 24 year-olds generally (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2006). Transition-aged foster youth also experience poor educational outcomes with only 58% of the youth in this population completing high school, as compared to 84% of their non-fostered peers (Barrat and Berliner 2013). These disparities canalize further in higher education where only 3.8% of emancipated foster youth complete a 4-year college degree before the age of 26 versus 36.3% of their age-matched peers (Courtney et al. 2011). In addition to poor educational attainment, transition-aged foster youth struggle to obtain and maintain employment with roughly 40% of transition-aged foster youth reporting employment in the past year compared to 92% of their non-fostered peers (Courtney and Dworsky 2006). Finally, transition-aged foster youth report higher rates of mental illness than their non-fostered peers, with foster youth experiencing serious mental disorders (e.g. mood disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder) at two to four times the rates among

their same-aged peers from the general population (Havlicek, Garcia, and Smith 2013; McMillen et al. 2005).

Despite their uniquely challenging transition from state-sponsored care, few studies have evaluated the degree to which emancipated foster youth experience a period of emerging adulthood as described by Arnett's theory. Descriptively, prior data suggest that most emancipated youth do not experience emerging adulthood, but rather face an accelerated rate of transition that may constrain core features of emerging adulthood, such as exploration, optimism, and self-focus. For example, in a study of 584 emancipated foster youth, Courtney, Hook, and Lee (2012) found that only one in five youth aged 23 to 24 matched the central criteria for emerging adulthood in that they had finished high school and were enrolled in college and/or currently employed, but had not yet achieved key markers of adulthood, such as having children, living independently, and being married. The largest group of foster youth in this study were described as 'accelerated adults' who had transitioned to independent living and parenthood far earlier than their non-fostered peers. These data are consistent with Singer and Berzin's (2015) study showing youth with a reported history of foster care were more likely to perceive themselves as adults than a comparison sample of age-matched peers.

The few studies that have explicitly tested Arnett's theory among transition-aged foster youth have adopted a deductive orientation wherein central elements of emerging adulthood were probed to ascertain the degree to which transition-aged foster youth experience the core features of emerging adulthood as articulated by Arnett (2000, 2004). For example, in a study of 59 system-involved youth (ages 18 to 25; 72% involved in child welfare), Munson et al. (2013) found that, much like their peers who were not involved with state-sponsored care systems, system-involved youth described individualistic characteristics consistent with emerging adulthood, such as independence, responsibility, and self-reliance. However, these authors also found that the unique circumstances of system-involved youth transformed and constrained other core features of emerging adulthood, such as the presumed emphasis on self-discovery and exploration. For these youth, self-discovery and exploration were supplanted by an outward orientation to establish connections with family and friends, including the assumption of multiple caregiving roles for parents, siblings, and/or one's own children, as well as attendant constraints on the personal freedom and material resources needed to explore new opportunities. Indeed, in contrast to the presumed self-focus of emerging adults (Arnett 2000, 2004), these youth expressed a pronounced desire to connect and give back to their communities. These findings parallel those obtained by Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014) from a small but rich set of semi-structured interviews with 20 current and former foster youth in which they asked about the five themes of emerging adulthood. As with their non-fostered peers, youth in this study indicated that identity exploration, self-focus, optimism, instability, and feeling in-between characterized their experience of this age period. However, in response to open-ended questions about the meaning of adulthood, these youth also expressed feeling that their foster care history negatively affected their transition experience by hindering their pursuit of independence.

Although prior studies suggest that emancipated foster youth resonate with core features of emerging adulthood when explicitly prompted to do so, it is unclear whether or not these youth would spontaneously identify these themes if asked about their experiences in an inductive/open-ended way. Therefore, the current study drew on a large

and diverse sample of newly emancipated foster youth who provided open-ended reflections about their perceptions and experiences of their transition from adolescence to adulthood during three interview waves spanning the ages of 18 to 25. Identified themes were also explored as a function of youth's age and gender.

## Method

### *Participants and procedures*

Participants were 170 youth (66.5% female) who emancipated from the foster care system in Southern California and were between the ages of 18 and 21 years at the time of their first interview in a longitudinal study of adaptation among youth aging out of foster care ( $M_{\text{age\_W1}} = 19.63$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). The youth were 15.3% European American/White, 23.5% African American/Black, 27.6% Latin American/Hispanic, and 33.5% multiracial. On average, youth in this study entered foster care between the ages of 8 and 9 ( $M = 8.67$ ,  $SD = 5.52$ ), spent 8.99 years ( $SD = 5.75$ ) in the system, and experienced seven different out-of-home placements ( $M = 7.18$ ,  $SD = 4.91$ ) prior to emancipating from foster care at 18.20 years ( $SD = .52$ ).

Youth were invited to participate in a study of *Adapting to Aging Out* between 2009 and 2011, which was prior to the implementation of extended foster care support in California, via flyers distributed to social service providers, independent living programs, and agencies serving emancipated foster youth (e.g. resource centers, health clinics). Youth completed a brief intake screening by phone before scheduling a face-to-face interview. Interviews were conducted in English at the university or at a convenient location for the participant (e.g. agency offices, libraries) and were audio recorded for later transcription. Written consent was obtained from each participant after reviewing the study aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their information, including constraints pertaining to mandated reporting. Participants were compensated with \$75 and all procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the participating university.

Following the first interview, 144 youth (84.7%) completed a follow-up interview one year later ( $M_{\text{age\_W2}} = 20.78$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), and 133 (78.2%) completed a third interview 1.5 years following Wave 2 ( $M_{\text{age\_W3}} = 22.43$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). There were no significant differences between the 152 (89.4%) youth who returned for one or more follow-up interviews and the 18 (10.6%) youth who did not return with regard to age, gender, race/ethnicity, and child welfare experiences (i.e. age of entry, age of emancipation, and number of out-of-home placements).

### *Transition narratives*

Qualitative data about each youth's perceptions and experiences of the transition to adulthood were obtained using an identical prompt at all three interview waves. Following youth's completion of basic demographic information and a semi-structured interview about their residential, educational, and occupational history (which included child welfare placements at wave 1), each participant was asked to respond to the following prompt: *At some point every person must transition into adulthood. Please tell me what that process means to you. What does it mean to be an adult to you and how has that been*

for you? Free speech responses were recorded without further prompting to obtain youth's spontaneous reflections about the transition to adulthood. Audio-recorded responses were transcribed verbatim and verified against the original audio for data analysis.

### Data analysis

Qualitative coding and analysis were conducted using the computer-assisted data analytic program, Dedoose (SocioCultural Research Consultants 2016). The current study utilized a grounded theory approach, which supports theory development through systematic data analysis and interpretation (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Importantly, at the same time a grounded theory approach emphasizes theory generation, it also accommodates the incorporation of the investigators' own knowledge into the research process (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Thus, a grounded theory approach was well-suited to examine emancipated youth's experiences of this time period while remaining cognizant that the investigators' own experiences of this transition and knowledge of the literature on emerging adulthood necessarily influenced our interpretive lenses.

Coding is the primary tool of analysis when using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990). We adopted a three phase coding procedure as described by Strauss and colleagues (Corbin and Strauss 1990). First, youth's narratives were reviewed by both authors to identify prominent terms and phrases, as well as their conceptual similarities and differences (i.e. *open coding*). Both authors reviewed all concepts that were generated from open coding, and identified a smaller subset of thematic categories via *axial coding* (Corbin and Strauss 1990). If there were discrepancies across categories, both coders evaluated the degree to which each category was representative of the data to achieve consensus. Detailed descriptions of the retained categories guided the coding of each category as present or absent in the youth's narratives by the first author and a trained post-baccalaureate research assistant. Coding discrepancies were resolved by both authors. Coding proceeded in a similar fashion at subsequent interview waves to allow new concepts and categories to emerge across time. In the third phase of *selective coding*, both authors reviewed the relations among the categories to identify overarching themes in the data. Interrater reliability was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements between the two coders at the level of categories ( $N = 37$ ; average proportion of agreement = 92.63%) and overarching themes ( $N = 5$ ; average proportion of agreement = 90%).

In addition to gender, we examined the shifting salience of categories and themes by participant age (i.e. 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23+). Although most participants (89.4%) contributed data to more than one age group, no participant was represented more than once within any age group.

## Results

### Transition themes

Thirty seven categories were identified across the youth's descriptions of their experiences and perceptions of the transition to adulthood following their emancipation from the California foster care system. These categories comprised five overarching themes (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Themes, categories, percentages, and interrater reliabilities across chronological age and gender.

Themes and Categories	18 (N = 61)	19 (N = 90)	20 (N = 82)	21 (N = 106)	22 (N = 65)	23–25 (N = 41)	Males (N = 142)	Females (N = 303)	Total (N = 445)	Reliabilities
<b>Adult Values and Characteristics</b>	<b>95.08</b>	<b>92.22</b>	<b>92.68</b>	<b>96.23</b>	<b>93.85</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>95.77</b>	<b>94.06</b>	<b>94.61</b>	<b>94.75</b>
Accountability	19.67	17.78	17.07	15.09	10.77	31.71	16.19	18.15	17.53	94.06
Independence	73.77	51.11	59.76	70.75	49.23	68.29	61.97	61.72	61.80	85.84
Responsibilities	60.66	57.78	64.63	66.98	64.62	82.93	64.79	65.02	64.94	84.47
Striving for Success	11.48	17.78	13.41	17.92	24.62	19.51	23.94	14.19	17.30	87.67
Maturity	24.59	33.33	31.71	38.68	41.54	46.34	41.55	32.67	35.51	79.68
Planning and Preparing	11.48	18.89	20.73	24.53	15.38	34.15	20.42	20.46	20.45	91.09
Exploration	4.92	6.67	8.54	10.38	18.46	17.07	9.15	10.89	10.34	91.55
Integrity	4.92	11.11	6.10	8.49	7.69	17.07	10.56	7.92	8.76	94.29
Personal and Household Management	8.20	14.44	10.98	13.21	7.69	17.07	10.56	12.54	11.91	88.58
<b>Nature of the Transition Process</b>	<b>49.18</b>	<b>73.33</b>	<b>68.29</b>	<b>68.87</b>	<b>49.23</b>	<b>63.41</b>	<b>61.27</b>	<b>64.69</b>	<b>63.59</b>	<b>91.55</b>
Early Transition	8.20	12.22	8.54	12.26	4.62	7.32	10.56	8.91	9.44	96.57
Abrupt Transition	8.20	4.44	7.32	3.77	6.15	7.32	4.93	6.27	5.84	96.12
Gradual Transition	3.28	3.33	8.54	4.72	3.08	4.88	4.22	4.95	4.72	94.98
Easy Transition	8.20	10.00	2.44	7.55	6.15	7.32	9.15	5.94	6.97	95.66
Hard Transition	29.51	33.33	39.02	46.23	26.15	41.46	30.28	39.60	36.63	93.15
Negative Transition	4.92	6.67	4.88	7.55	7.69	7.32	6.34	6.62	6.52	91.78
Positive Transition	11.48	25.56	21.95	17.92	13.85	14.63	19.72	17.82	18.43	89.27
Reality Check	8.20	4.44	9.76	4.72	6.15	12.20	4.93	7.92	6.97	95.20
Ill-Preparation/Inexperience	4.92	8.89	7.32	8.49	9.23	12.20	9.15	7.92	8.31	93.84
Options/Opportunities	13.11	15.56	10.98	13.21	6.15	9.76	14.79	10.56	11.91	93.61
<b>Material Needs and Resources</b>	<b>57.38</b>	<b>58.89</b>	<b>63.42</b>	<b>62.26</b>	<b>63.08</b>	<b>65.85</b>	<b>65.49</b>	<b>59.74</b>	<b>61.57</b>	<b>94.03</b>
Education	21.31	18.89	20.73	17.92	21.54	14.63	20.42	18.81	19.33	96.35
Employment	24.59	37.78	43.90	33.96	41.54	43.90	47.18	32.67	37.30	93.38
Housing	19.67	18.89	24.39	27.36	26.15	29.27	27.46	22.44	24.04	92.24
Other Material Resources	19.67	15.56	18.29	17.92	24.62	17.07	20.42	17.82	18.65	93.61
Money	36.07	38.89	41.46	50.00	49.23	43.90	40.14	45.21	43.60	90.87
<b>Relationship Concerns</b>	<b>37.70</b>	<b>38.89</b>	<b>51.22</b>	<b>55.66</b>	<b>46.15</b>	<b>63.41</b>	<b>50.00</b>	<b>47.52</b>	<b>48.31</b>	<b>84.25</b>
Family of Origin	8.20	8.89	17.07	12.26	13.85	19.51	12.68	12.87	12.81	90.18
Relationship with Others	8.20	2.22	7.32	9.43	10.77	4.88	10.56	5.61	7.19	95.20
Parenting	6.56	15.56	20.73	22.64	20.00	24.39	18.31	18.48	18.43	95.43
Romantic	1.64	7.78	10.98	15.09	13.85	12.20	14.79	8.58	10.56	94.06
Negative Social Support	11.48	11.11	9.76	13.21	10.77	7.32	13.38	9.90	11.01	92.00
Positive Social Support	3.28	11.11	12.20	14.15	13.85	9.76	13.38	10.23	11.24	92.24
Support for Others	11.48	10.00	12.20	11.32	16.92	26.83	19.01	10.89	13.48	91.55

<b>Affective Experiences</b>	<b>29.51</b>	<b>32.22</b>	<b>45.12</b>	<b>30.19</b>	<b>36.92</b>	<b>31.71</b>	<b>28.87</b>	<b>36.96</b>	<b>34.38</b>	<b>85.39</b>
Desire to be a Kid	0.00	4.44	2.44	6.60	1.54	2.44	0	4.95	3.37	97.01
Regret	0.00	3.33	3.66	0.94	3.08	0.00	2.11	1.98	2.02	98.04
Feeling in Between	11.48	7.78	7.32	8.49	12.31	12.20	9.86	9.24	9.44	94.98
Anxiety	11.48	12.22	20.73	8.49	7.69	4.88	6.34	13.86	11.46	94.98
Feeling Different	3.28	3.33	3.66	2.83	1.54	0.00	3.52	2.31	2.70	97.03
Emotional Health and Well-Being	6.56	12.22	15.85	11.32	15.38	17.07	14.79	11.88	12.81	90.30

Note: *N* represents number of respondents at each age. Frequencies and interrater reliabilities are reported as percentages.



### Adult values and characteristics

Nearly all participants discussed personal qualities and characteristics that they perceived as essential to identify oneself as an adult across nine content categories. Youth who discussed this theme articulated a belief that being an adult means attaining a degree of self-sufficiency and having control over one's own decision-making with minimal influence from or dependence on others.

*[Being an adult] means growing up and getting out on your own. In my opinion though, you're not an adult unless you can stand on your own two feet. If you're eighteen and still living with your parents, technically to me, you're not an adult you're just a big teenager. (18-year-old, multiracial, female)*

A heightened sense of accountability often characterized youth's definition of adult status such that an adult was expected to be a person who takes responsibility for her/his actions and understands that actions can have positive and negative consequences.

*Becoming an adult is taking responsibility for your actions. Um - doing things that you really don't wanna do, but you know you have to do, and I mean basically just taking responsibility for your actions. Which is doing things that you wouldn't do out of your selfishness and just stepping outside of your box and knowing that, you know, you're not doing it for yourself anymore you're doing it for a greater cause (20-year-old, multiracial, male).*

Not surprisingly, notions of heightened behavioral impact and accountability co-occurred with increased emphasis on the importance of maturity and integrity in adulthood. Youth reported feeling that adults should be less impulsive, and more thoughtful, understanding, and accepting of others and their viewpoints. Adults were described as respectful and trustworthy individuals who know right from wrong, are altruistic, and serve as role models to family members, friends, and individuals within their communities.

*[As an adult, I need to] make sure that I'm setting a good example for my younger brother, or whoever is underneath me, um, so that they'll have like a good role model, um, just in case that they don't have one, and to, also to show them that anything is possible. I always have that in the back of my mind, set a good example to others, period. (18-year-old, multiracial, female)*

Relative to the presumed salience of exploration for emerging adults (Arnett 2000), only a few emancipated foster youth described this as a time to explore one's self, identity, goals, or the world. More frequently, youth discussed anxiety and limitations regarding their capacity to explore.

*It's just scary being—being an adult, cause so much goes on, and you think you've finally found yourself, and it's just a façade, and I feel like we go through life trying to see who we are cause we don't have a childhood, and we just go through life like aimlessly wondering, like oh I wonder what's next, not really having any like, goals and stuff, cause we didn't have our—our parents there who would generally like explain everything to us and teach us everything. (22-year-old, multiracial, female)*

### The nature of the transition process

Unique to this population, two-thirds of the youth talked about the pace, valence, and difficulty of their transition from foster care. This theme also included categories that captured youth's sense of feeling ill-prepared for the transition process, perceptions of changed options and opportunities offered to them as a result of their transition, and

their realization that adulthood was not what they expected. A subset of youth described a sense of having undergone the adult transition too early in development, and a corresponding sense that the transition had been relatively gradual or uneventful as a result.

*I always think I was an adult since I was twelve cuz I had three jobs and I basically helped my biological mom get money. And I was raising my younger siblings. So, yeah I guess I was, I hadda mature at a young age and I hadda grow up at a young age. (20-year-old, Latina American/Hispanic, female)*

In general, youth described their foster care experiences as a hindrance to their autonomy development, noting that they lacked proper guidance and/or the information required to be self-sufficient as adults.

*There's a lot of things that I never learned how to do, like taxes and stuff, like I don't even know how to do that, but they're not taking the time to teach me, so it's like I—I don't know how else to find out until I get in trouble for something ... So, I guess it's been hard transitioning into things that I have no idea how to do. Like grocery shopping, I never done that - in the group home you don't do that - in a foster home I never did that. (18-year-old, Latina American/Hispanic, female)*

An overwhelming majority of emancipated foster youth described their transition process as hard, abrupt, and/or not what they thought it would be.

*Oh god damn, from becoming a teen to an adult, its super hard. It's like cold water. It's just you get slapped in the face with cold water. (18-year-old, Latino American/Hispanic, male)*

Although one-fifth of the youth described their transition process in generally positive terms, these youth tended to identify their freedom from the rules and regulations of caregivers and the foster care system as the basis for this positivity.

*It's also a beautiful experience because you don't have family and foster care holding you back, the world is yours. You can choose who you decide to surround yourself with and who you don't. (21-year-old, multiracial, female)*

### **Material needs and resources**

More than half the youth spontaneously discussed one of five categories subsumed under the broader theme of material needs and resources. As in typically developing samples, many youth discussed their educational pursuits, choices, desires, opportunities, and achievements. However, pervasive material deficits, including food and housing insecurities, were identified as impediments to these pursuits.

*What's hindering me now is I have no place to stay, so it's like, how can you worry about school when you don't know where you're gonna eat or stay at, that's my main concern right now. (19-year-old, multiracial, male)*

An overwhelming majority of these youth shared serious concerns about money, including insufficient funds to cover costs for education, housing, transportation, food, and health-care, as well as insufficient knowledge regarding how to manage their finances and pay their bills.

*When you're starting from nothing it's hard to get something, and if you're starting from the streets where I started, it's harder, it's even more harder to get stuff because you have nobody. Where I came from I had nobody, I had nothing but a gang, a gang that's not worth anything. I mean they – they can't provide you with money and if they can provide you with money, who's to*

*guarantee that you won't go to jail for taking that money. I mean they can't provide you with anything that's gonna make you a better person – and the system, feels like because they just give us money at the end and tell us to go on that we're supposed to be able to manage. We're not able to manage as adults with the hundred and fifty dollars when we leave, we're not able to manage as adults, that's not gonna give us a place to sleep or a place to eat. (21-year-old, African American/Black, male)*

### **Relationship concerns**

Nearly half the youth discussed one of seven categories pertaining to intimate relationships, including the need to establish, maintain, or manage relationships with biological and foster family members, friends, mentors, romantic partners, and one's own children. Although a handful of youth discussed positive family relationships and support, by and large, family remained a source of strain and disappointment for these youth.

*It's been struggles, after struggles, after struggles, cause like, other kids haven't been in foster care, like they have their parents to rely on, their parents to get them money or a car, and all that. I have had to be by myself or just have like one or two people that barely help me. (19-year-old, African American/Black, female)*

As described earlier in the context of youth who reported a positive transition experience as a result of being freed from perceived family- and system-based constraints, several youth articulated disinterest or active avoidance with regard to establishing or maintaining connections with their family of origin in the wake of emancipation.

*It feels good to actually be over 18 and do what I want to do and need to do without a guardian or, or anything like that. Now that I'm 18, I can actually separate myself from my family members that I don't wish to be around, or I make my own choices without having to have somebody to tell me what to do. I'm satisfied with that. (19-year-old, multiracial, female)*

In addition to managing relationships with family members, youth perceived the transition to adulthood as a time to form romantic relationships and strengthen connections with friends, mentors, and co-workers.

*I feel like you should have a mentor, you know, if it's your parents or somebody that is not your family member who will help you understand the value of being an adult, and the trial and tribulations, obstacles you have to overcome while being an adult. (23-year-old, African American/Black, male)*

Consistent with prior studies showing that emancipated foster youth tend to transition to parenting earlier than their non-fostered peers (Courtney and Dworsky 2006), 36.47% ( $n = 62$ ) of the youth in this study reported having one or more biological children and discussed the challenges associated with this early transition.

*Managing how your children are gonna eat, sleep, uh - take a bath, um - get their, get whatever their need, their clothing, you have to manage that, no one else can do it for you, you have to do it all on your own and it's hard. As easy as we may make it seem, or other people or anybody would make it seem, as easy as it may seem, it's not, it's extremely hard. (21-year-old, African American/Black, father)*

Despite their own struggles to obtain social support, or perhaps because of them, a large segment of this population identified helping others as an essential component of a successful transition to adulthood.

*Now I can give advice to other people and help other people out, who have been in the same situation as me or close to the same situation as me. (23-year-old, Latina American/Hispanic, female)*

### **Affective experiences**

Socioemotional concerns were expressed by more than a third of the emancipated foster youth across six categories. These youth described the transition to adulthood as frightening with marked periods of uncertainty, frequent changes, and overwhelming pressures and responsibilities.

*A lot of things are just thrown at you all at once that it's – it's so overwhelming that you just want to give up and you don't even want to try, and you kind of get this hopeless feeling that I can't do it. (24-year-old, multiracial, female)*

In addition to feelings of anxiety, some youth reported having regrets about their past actions, experiences, or missed opportunities, with some suggesting that they would have handled prior circumstances much differently now than before.

*And if somebody was there to tell me when I was little and really be on my head, most the stuff that I've done I would have never done because somebody was there—would have been there to tell me about it. But I had to learn it the hard way. (20-year-old, multiracial, male)*

Surprisingly, a subset of youth expressed a desire to return to childhood or a younger age at which they did not have the burdensome responsibility of being an adult.

*It's hard, it's hard growing up like because when you're young, when you're in foster care, you're kinda robbed of your childhood. Now I wanna keep it, like I don't wanna grow up. I'm like, I wish I was I wish you know. I just want to be innocent and have fun again. (19-year-old, multiracial, female)*

Youth in this sample also reported experiencing a maturity gap, a sense of feeling 'in between' adolescence and adulthood.

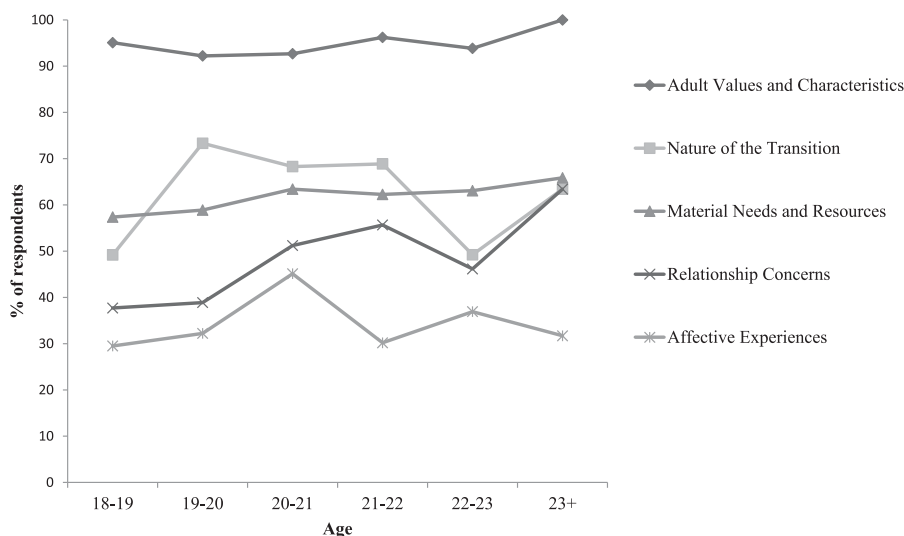
*I think I'm five years behind most people my age that aren't in the system. I think maturity wise I'm like a teenager. I think in a lot of ways I may be more mature than others, but I think in some ways I'm not as mature. There's a part of me that likes to play grown up and try to do, make adult decisions and do all these things, but I think there's a part of me that never wants to grow up because being a child is so much more fun. (21-year-old, European American/White, female)*

Finally, some youth expressed feeling different from their non-fostered peers as well as having emotional and mental health difficulties that heightened their sense of vulnerability during this transition period.

*I feel like it's always been like a very stressful situation, more stressful than I've seen others. Like if my peers do go through this, they're like oh if it doesn't work out, it's okay. But for me it's like if it doesn't work out, like the apartment, if it wouldn't have worked out I don't know where I would've [lived]. I didn't want to live with my boyfriend anymore and I guess for me if things don't work out, it's just kind of like it's all on me and I just feel bad about it. (20-year-old, Latina American/Hispanic, female)*

### **Age-related patterns in foster youth's experiences**

Chi-square analyses evaluated the frequencies of the five themes across youth's responses at ages 18 ( $n = 61$ ), 19 ( $n = 90$ ), 20 ( $n = 82$ ), 21 ( $n = 106$ ), 22 ( $n = 65$ ), and 23–25 ( $n = 41$ ;



**Figure 1.** Percent of respondents discussing each theme at each age.

see Figure 1). Across all ages, *adult values and characteristics* was the most salient and stable theme with more than 92% of youth in each age group discussing this theme. The *nature of the transition process* was also prominent, but showed significant change across time,  $\chi^2(5) = 17.009, p = .004$ . Although about 50% of 18-year-olds addressed this theme, the frequency of this theme increased dramatically from ages 19 to 21, and then declined following age 22. Similar to the response pattern of *adult values and characteristics*, discussions of *material needs and resources* remained salient and stable across time with around 60% of the youth endorsing this theme in each age group. In contrast, youth's discussion of *relationship concerns* evidenced a significant increase in frequency over time and peaked among 23–25 year-olds;  $\chi^2(5) = 12.385, p = .030$ . Finally, *affective experiences* was the least salient theme across all ages. Although not significantly different across age groups, a suggestive nonlinear pattern indicated higher rates of anxiety and distress among 20-year-olds.

### Gender patterns in foster youth's experiences

Chi-square tests revealed no significant differences in rates of thematic endorsement between males and females within any age group. However, there was a trend for females to discuss affective experiences, particularly subjective feelings of anxiety and longing to be a kid again, more often than males;  $\chi^2(1) = 2.805, p = .094$ .

### Discussion

Drawing on a large and diverse sample of recently emancipated foster youth, this study adopted a grounded theory approach to explore youth's perceptions and experiences of the transition to adulthood. Rather than imposing contemporary notions of emerging adulthood through structured questioning or surveys, youth were asked to openly

reflect on their conceptualization of what it means to be an adult and on their experiences of becoming one. These open-ended reflections allowed for an inductive analysis of emancipated youth's experiences from ages 18 to 25, and revealed ways in which they both converge and diverge from the experiences of non-fostered youth, as well as patterns of expression by age and gender.

Five overarching themes emerged across 37 categories suggested by youth's narratives. Identified themes included *adult values and characteristics*, *nature of the transition process*, *material needs and resources*, *relationship concerns*, and *affective experiences*. Overall, emancipated youth described several central elements of emerging adulthood as relevant to their own transition process. However, in contrast to the qualities of exploration, optimism, and expanding opportunity that characterize narratives of emerging adulthood among non-fostered youth (Arnett 2000, 2004), these emancipated youth described the central components of emerging adulthood as fraught with difficulty, constraint, and worry. These experiences represent novel features of the transition experience for emancipated foster youth, which may have been occluded by the use of probes explicitly targeting emerging adulthood characteristics in prior studies (Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson 2014; Munson et al. 2013).

Consistent with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, almost all youth in the sample endorsed *adult values and characteristics*, such as independence, being responsible, maturity, and accountability, as defining features of being an adult. As with their non-fostered peers, these youth identified adult status based on the attainment of individualistic qualities, such as making independent decisions and accepting responsibility for one's actions, rather than on historically-relevant events, such as marriage, starting a family, and establishing a career (Arnett 2000, 2004; Nelson and Barry 2005). Moreover, this theme was endorsed at comparable levels by female and male foster youth across ages 18 to 25. Importantly, whereas non-fostered youth often describe the acquisition of adult characteristics as an opportunity for exploration and autonomy (Arnett 2000, 2004), youth in this sample were burdened by the dire consequences should they fail or encounter difficulty in attaining these values and characteristics. Threats of homelessness, incarceration, and loss dominated foster youth's descriptions of what it means to be a responsible and accountable adult. Although non-fostered youth often discuss their motivation to learn about themselves, the world, and others (Arnett 2000), only a small minority of the youth in this study reported comparable exploration experiences. Extending prior data suggesting that opportunities for self-discovery and exploration are limited among system-involved youth because they are constrained by the multiple adult roles they have to assume during their often abrupt transition to adulthood (Munson et al. 2013), the current findings suggest that perceptions of threat and the elevated gravity of consequences in the event youth fail to meet these obligations may stymie age-appropriate identity exploration among emancipated foster youth.

The *nature of the transition process*, particularly difficulties with the transition, was a salient theme for both female and male foster youth at all ages, but evidenced particular elevations during the middle phase of this transition. In many cases, newly emancipated foster youth may retain some connection to their social networks and system-based resources in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. However, as these supports weaken across time, youth may become increasingly vulnerable to difficulties and distress. Over time, as youth progress further through the transition, they may forge

new social connections and acquire the individual skills needed to navigate the transition more effectively. Given that youth with more social capital achieve better developmental outcomes than those with fewer social resources (Perez and Romo 2011), it is important to protect foster youth's access to positive social resources and networks following their emancipation. These findings are important because they highlight the middle phase of the adult transition as a particular period of vulnerability during which youth's newly forged networks and independence from system supports are not yet fully established.

The difficulty of the adult transition was palpable in this sample with more than a third of the youth spontaneously describing their transition process as extremely hard. Consistent with research suggesting that youth who have experienced hardship as result of economic disadvantage, maltreatment, and/or racial/ethnic marginalization perceive themselves as adults at a relatively early age (Benson and Elder 2011; Foster, Hagan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008; Sanchez et al. 2010), several youth in this sample described themselves as achieving adult status long before their emancipation from care. Still, even among these youth, themes of feeling ill-prepared for adulthood both now and in the past were prominent. Consistent with the narratives of the 20 current and former foster youth studied by Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014), youth in this sample perceived the foster care system as unable to provide them with the skills and resources needed to become self-sufficient, with perceived deficits spanning domains of intellectual, cultural, and social capital.

Nearly one-third of the sample described their overall transition as a positive experience. However, in contrast to their non-fostered peers who generally describe the transition process as one of moving toward new opportunities and experiences (Arnett 2000), the emancipated youth in this study were more likely to describe the transition process as one of liberation and moving away from prior rules and limitations imposed on them by the foster care system. This raises a concern that emancipated youth may be focused on running away from their prior experiences, rather than toward new opportunities. Indeed, this pattern may account for the very infrequent discussion of topics pertaining to planning and preparation in this sample. Youth who discussed their transition experience in more positive terms tended to describe relatively stable economic and social support systems, such as those provided by a foster family or kin, and a subset of these youth articulated a desire to strive for success. These youth expressed hope that they could follow a more positive path in the wake of prior difficulties, which has been reported in other studies of non-fostered emerging adults (Arnett 2000, 2004).

*Material needs and resources* were a major source of concern for male and female emancipated foster youth at all ages. As with their non-fostered age-mates, emancipated youth emphasized the need for residential stability, educational attainment and employment, and other essential resources, such as transportation, clothing, and medical care. However, mirroring the patterns seen with regard to youth's exploration of opportunities, newly emancipated foster youth wrestled with material needs and resources from a position of anxiety and deficit, rather than confidence and opportunity. The obtained data suggest that youth's subjective sense of not being enough and not having enough may contribute to the poor educational, employment, and housing outcomes that have been observed in prior studies with this population (Barrat and Berliner 2013; Courtney and Dworsky 2006).



*Relationship concerns* were frequently discussed and increased in salience across age. Consistent with other studies showing that emancipated foster youth are at elevated risk for early entry into parenthood (Courtney and Dworsky 2006), just over one third of youth in this sample were parenting during the course of the study. For most of these youth, parenting was foremost among their relational concerns. However, relationships with foster and biological family members were frequently mentioned, with some youth acknowledging positive aspects of these connections in the form of social support, and others expressing grief about not having family connections or a sense of being overwhelmed by multiple caregiving obligations. Interestingly, in contrast to prior depictions of emerging adulthood as a time of heightened self-focus (Arnett 2000), a core relationship concern for many of these youth centered on protecting and supporting other young people who were at risk for negative outcomes. These data point to a potential site for interventions that can engage emancipated youth's desire to connect with others in the service of promoting their positive development.

*Affective experiences*, such as feelings of anxiety and not fitting in with non-fostered age-mates, were discussed by youth of all ages, particularly females. Youth also reported concerns about their emotional health and well-being, highlighting their emotional difficulties, struggles to maintain emotional stability, and efforts to improve their happiness. Although many young adults face mental health challenges (Kessler 2003; Patel et al. 2007), the prominence of this theme in emancipated foster youth's narratives was notable, particularly given that Arnett and others have *not* identified this theme in prior studies of emerging adults.

### **Limitations**

Notwithstanding the unique contributions of this study as a result of the inductive and longitudinal design, several limitations necessarily constrained the interpretability and generalizability of our findings.

First, this study relied on a convenience sample of transition-aged foster youth in Southern California. youth who were institutionalized or incarcerated at the time of initial data collection were not informed of this research opportunity. Despite this positive bias, the current sample evidenced higher levels of vulnerability than many other studies of this population. For example, 60.4% of our participants entered care prior to age 12, versus 10% in a review of older youth in care (Wulczyn and Brunner Hislop 2001). Rates of high school dropout (40%), homelessness (39.6%), unemployment (66.27%), and parenthood (32.2%) at the time of the wave 1 interview were equal to or greater than those observed in prior samples of emancipated foster youth (for reviews, see Havlicek 2011; Stein 2006). Consistent with previous studies of emancipated foster youth, our sample was disproportionately female (Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Daining and DePanfilis 2007; Pecora et al. 2006), which may reflect, at least in part, the absence of (predominantly male) incarcerated participants from our recruitment. Thus, the obtained findings should be interpreted in light of the non-random and geographically constrained nature of the sample.

Second, the interview guide included only one question about the transition to adulthood with minimal prompting. This approach allowed us to capture topics that were foremost on youth's minds, but may not adequately reflect the full range of any individual youth's transition experience. Likewise, although we did not explicitly prompt youth to



discuss specific elements of Arnett's model of emerging adulthood, questions about housing, school, and work completed prior to the prompt regarding the transition to adulthood may have primed youth to talk about these topics in ways that cannot be assessed with the current study design.

Finally, accruing evidence of the challenges emancipated foster youth face has prompted extensive policy efforts to augment the support youth receive during the transition to adulthood. In 2012, California began offering extended foster care supports to a subset of youth through non-minor dependent care. Although it will be important to examine the experiences and perceptions of youth who continue to access system supports until age 21, many youth remain ineligible for extended care supports, and, even among youth who are eligible, as many as 30% opt out of the system by age 19 (Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack 2007). Thus, the current data remain relevant for understanding the unique transition to adulthood among youth exiting the child welfare system, and potentially other systems of state sponsored care, such as the juvenile justice system and residential facilities for youth with mental illness.

## Implications and conclusions

The current study advances our understanding of emancipated foster youth's experiences of the transition to adulthood. Although some core elements of Arnett's model emerged in this sample of emancipated foster youth, such as individualistic qualities and instability, other core features were rarely discussed, such as self-focus and optimism, or were expressed in unique ways, such as exploration and feeling in-between. These findings suggest that researchers should be careful when applying traditional notions of emerging adulthood to youth exiting the child welfare system, and potentially to those in similarly vulnerable populations (e.g. youth exiting juvenile justice or psychiatric settings).

With regard to intervention and policy, these findings suggest that intervention efforts to reduce homelessness and delay pregnancy among emancipated foster youth, as well as those that provide social and material resources, may promote youth's educational attainment and employment opportunities. Of note, apparent age-related changes in thematic expression suggest that intervention efforts should be directed to emancipated foster youth during the middle of this transition when youth seem to be especially vulnerable amidst waning access to resources and fledgling capacities to develop new support systems. In the service of developing such support systems, intervention programs should harness foster youth's natural skills and desires to become civically engaged and connect with others in advance of their emancipation from foster care.

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