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## Emancipated Foster Care Youths' Romantic Relationships as Observed by Social Workers

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Emancipated Foster Care Youths' Romantic Relationships as Observed by  
Social Workers

by

Kelsey I. Hanson, B.S.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. The project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Past research has revealed that emancipated foster care youth are struggling as they leave care and enter into adulthood. Among other issues, this population is impacted by high rates of mental illness, substance abuse, pregnancy, and domestic violence. On top of these struggles they are also under-supported in their transition to adulthood and lack meaningful connections to the adult world and their communities. This research focuses on the romantic relationships of emancipated foster care youth as they attempt to make this difficult transition.

The research question asks: what is the observed experience of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships as they enter into adulthood? Due to a lack of past research on the topic, exploratory qualitative research methods were chosen to answer the question posed for this study. Ten social workers who worked closely with emancipated foster care youth took part in an individual semi-structured interview process.

Thematic Clustering was used in analysis of the interviews and revealed four major themes. These themes included: belonging, stability, and security; early pregnancy and domestic violence; influence of the past on current relationships; and life goals versus romantic relationships. The research also found that social workers believed emancipated foster care youth, compared to their peers, were less likely to view romantic relationships positively, more likely to be in a romantic relationship and to cohabitate with their partner, and equally likely to marry by the age of 21. Research also revealed that while there is support available for youth in the area of romantic relationships, knowledge of the availability of these resources was not equal among the social workers that were interviewed and in-depth assistance and support was limited

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## Introduction

Transitioning from adolescence to adulthood is no easy task. It is the time of life when one starts to take steps towards independence and self-sufficiency while also learning a new way of interdependence within family and friendships (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009; Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007). The formation of intimate and more serious romantic relationships is a significant part of this transition. One moves away from the family of their childhood, where ideally their emotional, physical, social, and spiritual needs were met for them. The emerging adult begins to learn to care for themselves and the needs of their own developing family (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996).

The developmental step of forming romantic relationships during this period of life entails two individuals coming together to form a new family. In this new family the individuals are now the primary caregivers who must be responsible for meeting the needs of the entire family (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996). What, then, happens if the transitioning young adult does not have a secure base from which they were taught how to healthily meet their emotional, relational, and moral developmental needs? What is the impact of this on their romantic relationships and new families? Youth within the foster care system in the United States are a population that often lacks this secure base, and as of yet the real impact of this on their attempts to build relationships and their own families remains unclear.

Foster care is a temporary out of home arrangement for care of children and adolescents who can no longer safely remain with their families, or whose families

are no longer able to care for them. While children are in foster care efforts are made to safely return them to their families. If the removed child cannot be reunited with family, efforts towards permanent placement through other means, such as adoption, are made ("Foster parents", n.d.). Foster youth who reach the age of majority, or "age out," of the foster care system without ties to an adoptive family, or without being reunited with their families of origin, are emancipated from the foster care system as independent adults (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). In 2011 alone 26,286 foster care youth were emancipated from care (U.S. Department of Human Services, 2012). Aged out, or emancipated foster care youth, are particularly vulnerable as they strive to become independent adults. These youth are thrown into the full responsibilities of adulthood quickly and often lack ties to supportive families or communities. They must learn, almost overnight, to manage their own financial, educational, relational, and emotional needs despite often being unprepared and under-supported (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). This raises the question: how are these youth navigating the developmental step of forming their own families?

This research hopes to gain a deeper understanding of emancipated foster care youths' experience and decision-making processes with regards to romantic relationships through semi-structured interviews of social workers who work closely with emancipated foster care youth age 18 to 21. Social work plays a large role within the child welfare and foster care system in the United States (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2005). Thus, it is important for these workers to seek a deeper understanding of the

experience of those they serve so that they might more effectively meet the needs of their clients. In gaining a deeper insight into the experience of foster youth in romantic relationships social workers within the child welfare system can develop a clearer understanding of how to best meet the needs of emancipated foster care youth as they transition into adulthood, and possibly assist emancipated youth in breaking the often destructive patterns of their families of origin.

### **Literature Review**

Ideally the transition to adulthood is gradual with the emerging adult taking steps towards independence while still experiencing the support of their childhood family. However, for emancipated foster care youth their transitional experience is usually less than ideal (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). While research within the past decade has uncovered many of the difficulties these youths are facing one area that has been the focus of relatively little research is foster care youths' experience with romantic relationships as they enter adulthood. As this is a key area of development in early adulthood it is important to explore the romantic relationships of youth transitioning out of the foster care system and the impact of their difficult transition to adulthood on these relationships. Romantic relationships are the potential foundation from which these young adults will build their own families. The health of their romantic relationships could shape much of their future lives as adults. Therefore, it is critical that the social work profession be aware of the relational needs of these youth so that they may serve them more effectively.

### **Attachment and romantic relationships**

The formation of romantic relationships in adolescence is a primary developmental task that continues, and grows in importance, into young adulthood. This task can prove to be a challenge for often mistreated foster care youth (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996; Wekerle, Lueng, Wall, MacMillan, Boyle, Trocme, & Waechter, 2009). Romantic relationships in adolescence are a major step towards independence. The adolescent moves away from family and learns to meet their own needs as well as the needs of their romantic partner. According to attachment theory, romantic relationships serve as primary attachment relationships. In childhood the adolescent's needs were met through their primary caregiver, now they are learning to care for their own needs and how to care for others (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996).

A predictor of a child's success as they transition from adolescence into adulthood is their attachment style to their primary caregivers (Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2012; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). Attachment theory is widely used in understanding and working with foster children. The theory is based on the idea that in infancy one develops an attachment with their primary caregiver. The attachment can be secure, which indicates a healthy attachment to the primary caregiver. The secure infant's primary caregiver is able to provide consistently for the child's physical, relational, and emotional needs. However, if the caregiver is not available to consistently meet the infant's needs an insecure attachment develops (Siegel, 1999).

Insecure attachment reveals itself through three attachment styles: avoidant, anxious, and disorganized. The infant learns to organize its expectation of the primary

caregiver, and thus organizes its attachment style around the ability or inability of the caregiver to meet their needs (Siegel, 1999). Insecure attachment could be a risk factor in the development of mental illness as the infant progresses through life (Siegel, 1999). Attachment styles to one's caregiver in infancy and childhood has been shown to create the framework used to understand the role of self and other in relationship as the transition from adolescence to adulthood is made. These working models greatly influence interactions within close relationships throughout one's life (Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2012; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010).

Insecure attachment can often be the result of abuse, neglect, and abandonment, which are common reasons children enter foster care (American Academy of Children & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2005; Fine, 1989; Marcus, 1991). Foster care youth are thus at greater risk of poor attachment in primary caregiver relationships; and later in life they are at a greater risk of developing poor attachments in key relationships such as dating or marriage relationships (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). A recent study found that individuals who displayed insecure attachment styles in adulthood were apt to experience more difficulties in romantic relationships, particularly when under stress such as conflict. Attachment styles in infancy have also been shown to have long lasting effects in adolescence and adulthood on an individual's emotional regulation, conflict management, and commitment to romantic partners (Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2012; Simpson, et. al., 2007; Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010).

It is clear, then, that past attachment plays a key role in the quality of romantic relationships. Additionally, romantic relationships can serve as an avenue for repairing

attachment style in adulthood. A longitudinal study of 78 individuals from birth to adulthood revealed that while insecure attachment in infancy is a predictor of later struggles in romantic relationships, that romantic relationships can also serve as an avenue for repairing past failed attachments with caregivers (Simpson, et. al., 2007).

These findings could mean that with the right support, romantic relationships could serve as an avenue for foster care youths' healing from past relational shortcomings.

### **Emancipated foster care youth and the transition to adulthood**

The transition to adulthood is a multidimensional process. The major areas of growth and transition that mark adulthood are schooling, family, and work (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007). Success in these three areas of adulthood is either hindered or supported by multiple factors in the exiting foster youth's life. The most influential of these factors were found to be: the degree of stability and support experienced, and whether or not they struggle with mental health and, or, substance abuse issues (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007; Jones, 2011).

Foster care in the United States is a government system designed to protect abandoned, neglected, or abused children. Children are placed in the foster care system by family court judges if their caregivers are deemed unable or unwilling to care for them adequately. Foster care placements include foster homes, extended family care, group homes, or supervised independent living programs. These placements are ideally temporary. During the child's stay in foster care caseworkers provide various supports to their caregivers to assist them in learning skills and creating a living environment that they can effectively raise their children in. If this is accomplished the child can re-enter the home (Children's Law Center (CLC), 2012). If, however, the caregiver is unable or

unwilling to create a suitable environment for their children their rights are terminated, and the state assumes custody of the child. The system then works to find adults who are willing to adopt, or become permanent guardians for, these children. (CLC, 2012).

In extensive studies on older foster care youths' transition to adulthood, one conducted by Courtney, Cusick, and Keller (2007), and the other by Jones (2011), it was found that the most significant factor in a successful transition to adulthood was the level of connectedness to important adults, particularly adults from the foster youth's family of origin. Connectedness to one's family often meant social, emotional, and financial support as well as free housing for transitioning youth (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007; Jones, 2011). Connectedness to child welfare caseworkers or program staff meant that youth were able to access more financial and social support as well. When youth were in need they were able to solicit help from caseworkers and program staff in accessing government and program assistance (Jones, 2011). Connectedness to family greatly increased the level of stability for older foster care youth, and made it easier to maintain steady employment, housing, finances, and schooling (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007; Jones, 2011). However, despite connectedness youths were still experiencing difficulties in completing their education and maintaining steady employment.

Jones, a social work professor at San Diego State University, conducted an extensive qualitative study of 16 foster care youth transitioning out of care over a three-year period. Of the 16 youth 56% were African-American, 38% were Caucasian, and the ethnicity of the remaining 6% was not accounted for. All participating youth reported difficulties with obtaining their education goals. Financial and transportation problems were the biggest hindrances to their education. Most youth found it necessary to work to

support themselves as they pursued an education, but this meant less time available for studies. Youth also found it necessary to put their studies on hold because their financial needs were too great, and more time needed to be devoted to a job rather than education. Transportation issues, such as an inability to obtain a license or automobile breakdowns meant that the youth were not able to get to work or school. With limited finances and connections youth were unable to procure reliable assistance with their transportation needs (Jones, 2011).

A high drug and alcohol abuse rate was also found in older foster care youth, coinciding with high levels of mental illness (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007; Jones, 2011). In Jones' study half of the 16 youth reported abusing drugs or alcohol and 10 of the 16 participants' showed mental health concerns (2011). In a large scale study of 732 Midwestern foster care youth exiting care 16.2% had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, 10.1% with a Major Depressive episode, 14.1% with an alcohol dependence or abuse diagnosis, and 14.1% with a substance dependence or abuse diagnosis (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007). This data reveals that foster youth are struggling. Emotional health concerns are evident and can greatly affect foster youth's ability to establish and maintain healthy long-term relationships.

### **Supports for foster care youth and policy changes**

The steep path to successful adulthood for older foster youth has prompted several recent large scale shifts in federal policy. The first of these changes was the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. This Act allotted federal funding to states in order to create Independent Living Programs (ILPs) to assist youth in their transition to adulthood (Graf, 2002). Programs that qualify as ILPs commonly offer services to help youths meet

educational goals, find and maintain employment, and often provide classes on living skills such as housekeeping, money management, and nutrition. ILPs teach classes that promote healthy social interactions by providing education on topics such as conflict management, and also provide temporary financial support for living and educational expenses (United States General Accounting Office (USGAO), 1999).

ILPs have been found to slightly increase academic achievement, employment outcomes, and increase availability to needed funding for housing, education, and health insurance (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2004; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999). However, these programs, in general, have been heavily focused on hard-skill development, and provide only limited soft-skills assistance, resulting in only a limited increase in social connectedness (USGAO, 1999). Yet, studies have shown the importance of social connections and the soft-skills needed to maintain those connections (Bowen & Greeson, 2008; Jones, 2011).

In response to the lack of soft-skill development resources ILPs provide and the building evidence of the importance of family, multiple government policies have been put in place, including the most recent Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 (Cowan, 2004). This Act requires states to provide mentors and develop an exit plan for each youth being emancipated from the foster care system; it also requires increased efforts towards adoption (P.L. 110-351). Mentorship programs have been successful in helping youth gain soft-skills and develop ties to adults. Foster youth have reported high levels of satisfaction with the mentorship services (Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995; Osterling & Hines, 2006). However, wide variances in the quality of the mentorship programs and a lack of follow through by both foster youth and their mentors

can stand in the way of the success of these types of program (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

Research in the past decade has revealed the need for adult connections and family ties for older foster care youth as they prepare for adulthood, and shifts in federal policy are reactions to these realizations (Freundlich & Avery, 2005). However, the experience of older youth in the system suggests that there is a failure in the execution of these policies (Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Minnesota Department of Human Services (MN DHS), Child Welfare Report, 2005; Triseliotis, 2002). In a study of foster care youth and service providers in New York City youth reported lack of inclusion on permanency plans, never discussing adoption as an option, and caseworkers discouraging them from looking into adoption (Freundlich & Avery, 2005). Another obstacle to adoption was the youth themselves, who perceived adoption as a betrayal of their biological families, or had such a mistrust of families and adults that they had no desire to consider adoption (Freundlich & Avery, 2005).

### **Emancipated foster youth and romantic relationships**

The literature concerning the experience of emancipated foster youth shows that they are struggling, and are in need of connections to family and community. Recent developments in policy, particularly the 2008 Fostering Connections Act, shows that policymakers are reacting to the research and taking steps towards meeting the relational needs of emancipated foster youth. As these youths enter adulthood romantic relationships become a major avenue of support and serve as the building blocks of family (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996; Wekerle, et. al., 2009).

Attachment theory suggests that foster youth are at a greater risk in their romantic

relationships due to poor attachment. Research on the romantic relationships of foster care youth seems to support this theory. Foster care youth experience significantly higher rates of divorce, marriage dissatisfaction, early pregnancy, and single parenthood than the general population (Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, et. al., 2011; Dumaret, Coppel-Bastch, & Couraud, 1997; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Studies have found that one-third of females exiting the foster care system were raising children on their own by the age of 21, and that foster care youth in general were significantly more prone to sexually risky behavior and early pregnancy than the general population (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). In addition, emancipated foster care youth are also significantly more at risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence within romantic relationships than the general population. Studies have also shown that those who are able to seek help in adolescence are less likely to experience violence in relationships as adults (Jonson-Reid, Scott, McMillen, & Edmond, 2007; Wekerle, et. al., 2009).

The primary concern of the available literature on the romantic relationships of foster care youth is oriented around statistics regarding the number choosing to marry, cohabitate, or divorce, and the sexual behavior and pregnancy rates of these youths (Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Courtney, et. al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Review of the available literature revealed an interesting trend. Research on marriage trends among former foster care youth from the 1980's and 1990's showed that they were more likely to marry at a younger age than the general population, were more likely to divorce, and were more likely to re-marry at a younger age (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stalling, 1996; Cook, 1994; Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch,

& Courad, 1997; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1990; Festinger, 1983; Rest & Watson, 1984; Stein & Carey, 1986; Triseliotis, 1980; Zimmerman, 1982). After 2000, these trends started to shift, and current extensive studies on foster care youth show that they are as likely, or even less likely, to be married or desire to marry or cohabitate than their peers in the general population (Buehler, et. al., 2000; Courtney, et. al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Perhaps this trend is simply reflective of the overall trend in the United States of individuals marrying less often and later in life (Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). However, this trend could also be evidence of the effect of policy changes in the services offered to older foster care youth.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 showed a major shift in the way emancipated, or soon to be emancipated, foster care youth were prepared for adulthood (P.L. 106-169). Not only were youth allowed to remain in the foster care system until age 21, but extensive programming was put in place throughout the nation in recognition of the difficulties these youth face transitioning to adulthood (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001; P.L. 106-169). Perhaps these shifts in policy created more support for youth as they transitioned to adulthood, making early marriages and cohabitation less desirable as avenues of support. However, more research would be needed to determine what has caused this shift in marriage and cohabitation rates for emancipated foster care youth.

### **Relevance to social work**

The social work profession is deeply involved with the child welfare system in the United States. Social workers who serve within this system are in constant contact with some of the nation's most vulnerable and at need populations (NASW, 2005). It is

crucial, then, that social workers undertake the task of better understanding the experience and needs of these vulnerable populations so that they may perform their vocational duties in such a way that encourages the populations' well-being (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). One avenue of furthering understanding is research. It has been shown that the more equipped social workers are with knowledge of foster youths' unique developmental experiences, the more effective their services to older foster youth (Atukpawu, Mertinko, Graham, & Denniston, 2012). Unfortunately, there is little research available on the topic of the experience of older foster care youth within romantic relationships, therefore it is relevant to the profession to seek a more informed understanding of this subject so that foster youths' needs are better met.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Despite numerous studies, which imply foster care youth are struggling with the development of healthy romantic relationships, and the known importance of the formation of romantic relationships in adolescence and adulthood, very few resources and very little research have been devoted to understanding and assisting foster youth in this area of the transition to adulthood. While caseworkers are covering the topic of safe-sex with foster care youth, relationship health, abuse, and conflict strategies are not routinely discussed (Wekerle, et. al., 2009). Little research has been conducted to discover what resources are available to foster youth exiting care concerning romantic relationships, what foster youths' views and motives are concerning romantic relationships, and where they are turning for support and advice. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand emancipated foster care youth and their experiences with romantic relationships. Additional research has the potential to provide information that would

allow social workers and other professionals to help emancipated foster care youth experience a smoother and healthier transition to adulthood

### **Attachment theory**

This research will focus on the experience of foster care youth with romantic relationships and will utilize attachment theory to conceptualize the experience of foster care youth within relationships. According to attachment theory children grow up understanding themselves within the context of their families, and particularly within the relationship between the child and their primary caregiver (Siegel, 1999). In families, and in the primary caregiver relationship, children ideally develop emotional regulation, a sense of goodness, lovability, and safety (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996; Sheperis, Hope, & Ferraez, 2004). As a child reaches adolescence the family should serve as a secure base from which to go forward into the world. With this secure base the adolescent is able to begin to find his or her own identity apart from the family. The adolescent begins to form important attachment relationships with his or her peers while still having parents to return to in times of distress (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996).

As adolescents approach young adulthood and begin to develop more serious romantic relationships, attachment styles in infancy (i.e. secure, avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized) begin to reveal themselves within romantic relationships. Attachment styles create working models for understanding relationships as an individual makes their way through life (Simpson, 2010). These working models influence interactions within close relationships into adulthood (Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2011; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). Attachment styles in infancy also have long lasting effects on an

individual's emotional regulation, conflict management, and commitment to romantic partners (Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2012; Simpson, Collins, & Haydon, 2007; Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010).

### **Application to research**

Attachment theory provides a basic understanding of the reason for someone's behavior in relationships. It is commonly used to understand and treat foster care youth because it provides a deeper understanding of foster youths' approaches to relationships based on past family experience. It is particularly helpful in understanding how trauma and neglect can effect attachment within relationships, issues that commonly affect foster youth. Due to this research's focus on the successes and struggles of foster care youth in romantic relationships, attachment theory will be used to provide an avenue for gaining deeper insight into the quality and formation of these relationships.

While attachment theory provides an in-depth understanding of an individual's relational styles, it is not always possible to develop a clear understanding of an individual's attachment style in a short period of time using developed measures. Attachment styles are developed in infancy in relation to one's primary caregiver; research has shown that this primary attachment relationship is the most important to one's view and reaction to other attachment relationships throughout one's life. However, there are multiple factors that shape one's complex approach to relationships, which are not easily ascertained. This research will not attempt to understand youth's primary attachment style. It will instead utilize attachment theory to better understand the findings of research on romantic relationship of emancipated foster care youths.

While the researcher may not always have an understanding of the full complexity

of a youth's attachment organization there are measures that can assist researchers in gaining a brief understanding of their subjects' attachment styles. Attachment theory also provides a useful framework for understanding sometimes seemingly illogical reactions within romantic relationships and can suggest possible approaches for solving relational difficulties.

The question developed for this research is: what is the observed experience of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships as they enter into adulthood? To answer this question qualitative methods will be employed to explore the naturally emerging themes in the experiences of emancipated foster care youths' with romantic relationships as reported by social workers. A semi-structured individual in-person interview will be conducted with ten social workers employed by various programs that provide direct services to emancipated foster care youth.

Social workers who work closely with emancipated foster care youth will be interviewed to gain information on the research topic rather than emancipated foster youth themselves for several reasons. First, emancipated foster youth are often highly mobile, and due to the time constraints of this study this was problematic. Second, developing a deeper understanding of social workers' point of view could potentially strengthen the strategies employed by social workers serving these youth. As such, this research focuses on the observations of social workers working with emancipated foster care youth rather than the youth themselves.

### **Methods**

What is the observed experience of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships as they enter into adulthood?

### **Research design**

This study utilized interviewing, a qualitative research method, to answer the research question posed above. Qualitative research is helpful in providing an in-depth understanding of a topic, and also allows participants to expound on questions in order to provide a more accurate representation of the informants' true meaning in their answers to interview questions (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Due to minimal previous research on the experiences of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships qualitative methods were chosen to gather data and to provide an in-depth look into the experience of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships as observed by social workers.

### **Sample**

Ten participants were recruited for this study through non-probability convenience sampling. Participants were selected based on their work with emancipated foster care youth. Recruited participants were social workers who participated in a Coldwater County Education and Instruction\* program drop-in day that provides educational and mentorship support services for emancipated foster care youth. Staff were contacted through a forwarded email containing background information on the study and brief expectations for participation. Emails were forwarded to staff through a contact working within the program known to the researcher prior to the study. The interviews then took place at the drop-in site over the course of a two-day drop-in meeting time for youth. Staff who were willing to participate in the study were interviewed over the course of the two-day drop-in meeting times.

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\* Name has been changed.

**Protection of human subjects**

Considerable efforts were made to protect the confidentiality of study participants. Interviews were conducted in a private location. Interviews were audio recorded directly onto the researcher's computer and notes were taken throughout the interviews. Audio files were password protected and labeled with participant numbers rather than using any identifying information. Interview notes were labeled with participant numbers rather than names and kept in a secure file box. Transcripts of interviews were also password protected and participant numbers, rather than names, were used throughout the transcript and in the file name. Participants were asked to refrain from revealing any identifying information concerning their clients. The recorded interviews and any information linking participants with codes will be destroyed on June 1, 2013, upon the successful completion and defense of this paper.

Participation risks were minimized as much as possible for this study. Participants were informed of the risks involved with participation in this study both verbally and in writing. Participants were also informed both verbally and in written form that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and could choose to skip interview questions they did not feel comfortable answering. After being informed of risks and rights, participants were allowed to decline, or to provide written consent and commence with the interview process.

**Data collection**

Data was gathered from participants using semi-structured in-person individual interviews. Interviews were approximately 15 to 40 minutes in length and consisted of 10 open-ended and close-ended questions. All interview questions were written for this

study and were reviewed for clarity and pertinence to the research question in order to ensure their reliability and validity. Interview questions are listed in Appendix C.

### **Data analysis**

Each participant's interview recordings were transcribed word-for-word by the researcher. The transcriptions were then analyzed and coded using Thematic Clustering to reveal emerging themes and sub-themes. The revealed themes and sub-themes are addressed in the findings section of this research.

### **Limitations**

The sample size for this study is a major limitation. Due to resource and time constraints only 10 participants were interviewed. Additionally, participants were recruited via non-probability convenience sampling, so the results are not generalizable to the general population. Additionally, the majority of the social workers interviewed were employed with an educational support program for emancipated foster care youth, thus potentially causing the results of the interviews to be more focused on education, or the pursuit of education, than they might have been if social workers from other types of programming were involved.

Another limitation of this study is that social workers, rather than the youth themselves, were interviewed due to the difficulty of locating emancipated foster care youth, the vulnerability of the population, and time constraints. Thus this study provides information on emancipated foster care youths' experiences with romantic relationships as observed by social workers, who inherently have their own biases and frames of reference.

Researcher bias is also a limitation of this study. A bias of the researcher is the belief that Independent Living Programs (ILPs) are not providing enough relational support to emancipated, foster care youth. Due to the fact that the researcher interviewed ILP staff, this belief may have created bias in the interviewing process. The researcher attempted to keep biases from interfering with data collection by asking interview questions verbatim and minimizing all reactions to participants' responses. During data analysis the researcher used a coding scheme to assist in ensuring that each interview was coded using the same technique.

### **Findings**

Ten social workers who work directly with emancipated foster care youth were interviewed for the study. The average participant had around 5 years of experience working with the population. From the 10 interviews conducted for this study 5 major themes arose. These include: belonging, stability, and security; early pregnancies and domestic violence; influence of past experience on current relationships; and life goals versus romantic relationships. Participants were also asked to compare the romantic relationships of emancipated foster care youth to the romantic relationships of the youths' peers in the general population. Participants perceived emancipated foster care youth as less likely, or equally likely to view romantic relationships positively, more likely to be in a relationship and cohabit with partner, and less likely to marry than their peers in the general population.

The last two questions of the interview addressed who participants believed emancipated foster care youth were going to for advice concerning romantic relationships, and what supports were available for these youths, with regards to romantic

relationships. Participants reported that they believed emancipated foster care youth were seeking romantic relationship advice or support primarily from their peers. The average participant listed 1.4 known resources for romantic relationships available to the youth, with the most common resources listed being individual counseling, classes/groups, health clinics, and domestic violence shelters.

### **Belonging, stability, and security**

The first major theme that arose was that of belonging, stability, and security. All 10 of the participants mentioned that romantic relationships offered, or were sought out by emancipated foster care youth for these attributes. Common words or phrases that appeared throughout the interviews were “filling a void,” financial security, connection, and lack of family or long-term connections. This finding supports former research and policy changes over the past decade, which indicate that emancipated foster care youth are lacking connections to family and community as they exit care (Freundlich & Avery, 2005; MN DHS, Child Welfare Report, 2005; P.L. 110-351; Triseliotis, 2002). This finding also sheds light on how youth themselves are seeking to fulfill their own attachment need for connection to family that has gone unmet while in care (Allen & Land, 1999; Levy-Warren, 1996; Wekerle, et. al., 2009).

Participants frequently described the benefit of romantic relationships for emancipated foster care youth as security through a sense of belonging to someone, as well as more financial security or stability through sharing the burdens of housing, transportation, and food costs. Financial security was often given as a reason that participants believed youth were more likely to cohabit with their significant other than their peers in the general population. Participants also reported that even if a youth's

relationship was not the healthiest they were likely to stay in the relationship due to the security it offered. Tina Nordstrom, a participant who has worked with emancipated foster care youth for the past two years expressed it this way:

*I'm going to say more likely [to cohabitate with a romantic partner than their peers in the general population] because a lot of the time they end up being estranged from their family, or parents' rights were terminated at an early age. Therefore they have nowhere to go. So it's like being homeless, or staying with a person you're in a relationship [with] possibly.*

Participants also reported a lack of long-term or family connections as a reason that emancipated foster care youth sought out or jumped quickly and deeply into romantic relationships, or remained in unhealthy relationships. Participants also reported that youth often had children to fill the void of family connections. Participants described romantic relationships as providing a sense of belonging to someone, a sense of specialness, or a means to become pregnant and establish a nurturing connection with a child in order to have, in some way, what they were not given in their own childhood. Stephanie Smith, a social worker who has worked with foster care youth for the past 21 years said:

*Well I think it [romantic relationships] provides some nurturance to them that they may not have experienced. Stability, again I think for kids in foster care they feel like they've had no control really over being placed and all of those sorts of things. So to them it's like, wow somebody picked me because they really love me!*

Youths' lack of family connections and significant primary attachment relationships appear to be greatly influencing their choices when it comes to romantic relationships. Not only are youth more likely to make quick decisions when it comes to their relationships, but they are also more likely to make life-altering decisions early in adulthood in order to fulfill their unmet needs.

**Early pregnancies and domestic violence early pregnancies.** While emancipated foster care youth were reported by participants to seek out romantic relationships for stability and security, in reality those relationships frequently had the opposite effect.

Relationships were perceived as often leading to incidences of domestic violence and struggles navigating early and single parenthood. Eight of the 10 participants mentioned the trend of youth struggling with domestic violence or becoming pregnant at an early age.

An interesting finding was several participants reports that pregnancies were sought out by female youth more so than the romantic relationships themselves. Sandy Williams, who has been working with emancipated foster care youth for the past three years described this trend among female youth:

*So I see kids filling voids, following in their families' footsteps. It's their family culture to have children at a younger age, and the relationship piece isn't about having a relationship with the father, but having the child. The relationship piece doesn't appear to be as of [much] value to them.*

Stephanie Smith also reported this trend stating that:

*Especially for young women coming out of foster care, I think for them, they so miss having had their own family and their own parenting from their parents that they want to do it. They want to have their own children, and to have that experience of being loved, and being what they would see as better parents than they had.*

While the youth are possibly seeking out pregnancies to provide connections, this avenue for finding belonging and/or attachment is often a difficult road to take as they are left to navigate parenthood with few other connections to family or healthy adults. Their often-limited financial resources are further strained in attempts to support the child, and their academic and career goals frequently fall to the wayside in order to meet the demands of raising a child. This too supports the research that indicates that female foster

youth are at a high risk of becoming pregnant at a young age and becoming a single parent, and perhaps indicates a reason why these youth are seeking pregnancies or failing to protect against pregnancies at a young age (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

**domestic violence.** Participants also reported a theme of domestic violence in the lives of the youth. This finding supports the previous research that found emancipated foster care youth were at greater risk for domestic violence than those in the general population (Johson-Reid, et. al., 2007; Wekerle, et. al., 2009). Domestic violence, as well as pregnancy, was reported to take place outside of the romantic relationship, as well as within the romantic relationship. An interesting observation by Smith, who has worked with this population for the past 12 years, was that pregnancy and domestic violence have increased with female emancipated foster care youth with the decline of the economy around 2009 due to fewer available healthy distractions such as building a career.

*...a few years ago where girls were really concentrating on going to school. They weren't getting pregnant. They were, you know, pretty independent. Had, you know, romantic relationships but weren't really closed in them the way they had been before, but for the last I'd say three years, since the economy started getting really bad, no jobs, I've seen a trend of more girls getting pregnant. More girls being in relationships that are violent or that they're not really happy with but they're afraid to be alone, they're afraid ah to do anything else but that. So we still have, I think I have five young women on my caseload who are pregnant or having children, so that's a trend I've seen.*

Smith also reported specifically that she saw a decline in early pregnancies and domestic violence and more of focus on education for female emancipated foster care youth from 2003 to 2009. She stated that before that time there was not a lot available to either males or females in terms of post-secondary educational opportunities, so they were more invested in romantic relationships. Smith's observation could provide an

explanation for the change in marriage trends discussed in the literature review among emancipated foster care youth around 2000 (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stalling, 1996; Buehler, et. al., 2000; Cook, 1994; Courtney, et. al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch, & Courad, 1997; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1990; Festinger, 1983; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Rest & Watson, 1984; Stein & Carey, 1986; Triseliotis, 1980; Zimmerman, 1982).

Participants also stated that youth were more likely to remain in abusive romantic relationships out of a need for belonging and connection, that they had a lack of understanding of what healthy relationships looked like, and lacked an understanding that abuse is not a normal part of relationships. Deb Anderson, a social worker who has worked with emancipated foster care youth for six years put it this way:

*I think it's not going to apply to the entire population but the domestic violence is, I think, the one that I see youth struggling the most with when they do have that. It's very, very hard to break that cycle. Of course everyone knows that. When you see it, its, you know, the inability for them to recognize what's normal and not normal anymore. I think that that's the biggest struggle that they have because it's just, you know it's hard to convince somebody; it's hard to convince somebody that something is wrong when that's their normal. And so it's just going to, and then they may end up pregnant as a result of that and it's just going to replicate over and over.*

Both the prior research and these findings reveal that emancipated foster care youth are struggling with the issues of early pregnancy and domestic violence within romantic relationships. These struggles also appear to be tied into the youths' search for meaningful and lasting connections, whether through a romantic partner or through parenthood.

### **Influence of past experience on current relationships**

Participants reported that recognizing what is a healthy versus unhealthy relationship is a challenge for emancipated foster care youth due to past family experiences and a lack of positive role models. Participants reported that they saw youth unable to form realistic expectations for romantic relationships. Youth were reported to either have too high of expectations for their romantic partner, or more frequently too low of expectations, often putting up with abusive and destructive behaviors by their partners.

Nordstrom described the biggest struggle for emancipated foster care youth as, “Knowing what’s healthy and what isn’t on the whole spectrum, from sex all the way through the emotional/physical stuff.”

Participants reported that youth had a lack of knowledge of healthy versus unhealthy relational behaviors due to observing destructive relationships in the past, direct past experiences of abuse or neglect, and a lack of healthy adults modeling healthy relational behaviors. Smith believed emancipated foster care youth were less likely to view romantic relationships positively or value committed relationships due to lack of exposure to healthy relationships and lack of role models. When asked what she believed the biggest struggle for emancipated foster youth in romantic relationships was Smith stated:

*I would say navigating the relationship, navigating any relationship. I see more in our population than the non-foster care population the LGBTQ...I believe that [they] are learning how to navigate relationships, and they're not sexually driven by one gender or another. So I think that we see a lot more experimenting. Again, I just don't think that they've had the opportunity to navigate relationships, so they are going trial by fire.*

Other participants described past abuse and neglect making it difficult for youth to trust in current relationships, or attach in typical ways to others. They also described past

abuse or neglect as creating struggles that kept youth emotionally immature compared to their peers, and therefore affected their ability to commit or maintain a healthy romantic relationship. Smith, again, reported that youth, "...don't value committed relationships. Lack role models, lack of family values." She also described youth as lacking knowledge of how to navigate their romantic relationships emotionally and as much more experimental as far as their sexuality. She attributed this to a lack guidance and role modeling as to how a romantic relationship should look. Perhaps this is evidence of what attachment research suggests: when there are issues with primary attachment structures there is often struggle with conflict management, emotional regulation, and commitment to a romantic partner (Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2012; Simpson, et.al., 2007; Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010).

While participants reported that youths' pasts affected their present experience with romantic relationships, the romantic relationships in the present were also described by participants as a means of learning to overcome the past. Participants described youth benefiting from their romantic relationships through learning how to navigate relationships in general, learning how to communicate and share, finding belonging, and building the ability to trust, sometimes for the first time in their lives. Georgia Paton, a social worker with six years of experience working with emancipated foster care youth described the benefits she saw youth receiving from romantic relationships:

*Well, I think that those who are in negative romantic relationships, if they've gotten out receive the benefit of learning, and kind of the learning that comes from any relationship that you're in about yourself. I've seen a lot of, well I had one girl in particular that, who was abused sexually when she was younger. And so that really, her romantic relationship she is in now has kind of had a lot of things from her past come up where she is, where she is getting the help she needs for it. So I guess I see a lot of like growing, emotional growing.*

This too shows evidence to support research on attachment in romantic relationships that suggests that insecure attachment styles can be improved upon by learning how to navigate romantic relationships in adulthood (Simpson, et. al., 2007).

### **Life goals versus romantic relationships**

An interesting theme was that of participants describing female emancipated foster care youths' romantic relationships, in particular, as being in competition with their life goals, particularly education goals. Five of the 10 participants in some manner attributed independence from romantic relationships as an attribute of youth who were able to be successful in achieving or working towards their educational or career goals. Participants believed that youth had difficulty managing a balance between their romantic relationships and the rest of their life. Paton stated:

*I think that, especially for females, I have seen relationships kind of take a front seat over schooling, and any kind of thing that, I was, I always just kind of compare it to maybe when I was that age and people that I knew, my friends. We were still able to maintain what we had going on, whereas I feel that the kids that we work with, they don't have the ability to juggle everything.*

Smith observed that, female youth struggled with working towards schooling goals and instead chose romantic relationships or parenthood.

*The, on my caseload the young women that I'm working with it seems like just as they get to a point where they're about to be living on their own they get pregnant or they want to move in with their boyfriend and his family. So I think their, and I'm not including boys in this because I just don't see it in the young men as much, but I think that there's just a fear that goes with, you know, being alone and them becoming independent. And sometimes they're really the first ones in their family to have graduated high school and be going to college, doing all those things. So, so I think they feel it's a lot of pressure and they kind of end up kind of saying well I'll go, I'll live with my boyfriend or, yeah.*

Perhaps emancipated foster care youths' struggle with balancing life demands with romantic relationships is explained by Jones' (2011) research which found foster youth

were leaving the system ill prepared to navigate many aspects of young adulthood, and with little support from healthy adults. Additionally, with a lack of meaningful connections, and difficulties navigating entry into adulthood it appears that youth may be seeking to fill the void of connection and escape from the overwhelming responsibilities of independence through romantic relationships.

### **Emancipated foster care youth compared to the general population**

Participants were asked to compare their observation of emancipated foster care youth with the youths' peers in the general population in four different areas concerning romantic relationships. These included the likelihood of foster care youth having a positive view of romantic relationships compared to their peers, being in a romantic relationship, cohabitating with a romantic partner, and being married by the age of 21.

**positive view of romantic relationships.** Participants were asked if they believed emancipated youth were more likely, less likely, or equally likely, to have a positive view of romantic relationships as their peers in the general population. Five of the 10 participants believed emancipated foster care youth were less likely to view romantic relationships positively than their peers in the general population. All five of the participants expressed that they believed this to be true due to youth having a lack of positive examples or role models concerning romantic relationships. Nina August, who started working with emancipated foster care youth within the past year put it this way:

*I would probably say less likely. I don't think they've seen examples of what a healthy romantic relationship looks like. There's a few, but I think in the big picture they don't see it, so they don't know what it is, and we don't, they don't get it discussed with them, but that will be changing.*

Three of the 10 participants believed emancipated foster care youth were equally likely to have a positive view of romantic relationships as their peers in the general

population, and two believed they were more likely. Those who believed they were equally likely stated they saw that “kids were kids,” and were looking for romantic relationships no matter their life circumstances. Those who believed youth were more likely to have a positive view of romantic relationships believed it was due to a stronger need for connections, or being more impoverished and therefore having fewer distractions such as post-secondary schooling.

**being in a romantic relationship.** Participants were asked if they believed emancipated foster care youth were more likely, less likely, or equally likely, to be in a romantic relationship as their peers in the general population. Interestingly, despite the majority of participants believing emancipated foster care youth were less likely to have a positive view of relationships, they believed the youth were more likely to be in romantic relationships than their peers. Five of the 10 participants stated that the youth were more likely to be in romantic relationships. Participants' believed this was the case because emancipated foster care youth had fewer distractions such as schooling, were more likely to jump into relationships, felt a need to normalize themselves, or a desire for connectedness. Paton responded:

*I say more likely, I think...youth in that 18 to 21 year-old range are in college, and you know a lot of our youth aren't, or they're working. So they have, I think that they don't have the distractions maybe, the positive distractions.*

Four of the 10 participants believed the youth were equally likely to be in romantic relationships, and one believed they were less likely. The majority of participants who believed youth were equally likely to be in romantic relationships as their peers stated that it was just the age, and that all youth were seeking romantic

relationships. The practitioner who believed they were less likely thought it was due to foster care youth struggling with more complex issues than their peers.

**cohabitating with a romantic partner.** The next question participants were asked was if they believed emancipated foster care youth were more likely, less likely or equally likely, to cohabit with their romantic partner as their peers in the general population. Six of the 10 participants believed that emancipated foster care youth were more likely to cohabit with their romantic partner than their peers, with the majority believing it was due to a lack of resources. Frank Johnson, a social worker who has worked with the population of emancipated foster care youth for the past two years stated that emancipated foster care youth were:

*Probably more likely [to cohabit]. I just see a lot of my clients live with significant others. I think more as like either stability for them, for their relationship, or the fact that it costs a lot more. So they move in together to make, like the costs go down.*

Three of the 10 participants believed youth were equally likely to cohabit with their romantic partner as their peers, and one believed they were less likely. Reasons for believing youth were equally likely were, again, that all youth at that age responded the same to the desire for romantic relationships. The participant who believed youth were less likely to cohabit believed it was due to youth being more interested in parenting than maintaining a relationship.

**marriage.** Participants were asked to consider whether emancipated foster care youth compared to their peers were more likely, less likely, or equally likely, to marry by the age of 21. Six of the 10 participants believed that emancipated foster youth were equally likely to marry as their peers due to very few people in general getting married

before the age of 21. Rick Tanner, a social worker who has worked with foster care youth for the past eight years put it this way:

*I think equally as likely [to marry before 21]. I don't know that there's, I don't know, it's just that I don't know many of our clients that have gotten married. I know many of them talk about it, but then I've heard that discussion from non-clients too. I don't know that there's any visible benefit that they see to marrying right away.*

Three of the 10 participants believed emancipated foster care youth were less likely to marry by the age of 21 as their peers in the general population, one believed they were less likely, and one declined to respond. Those who responded that youth were less likely believed that they were not interested in committed relationships, they were not in a stable enough place to consider marriage, or their emotional maturation was lagging behind their peers, and therefore they were less ready to consider marriage.

Participants' observations on emancipated foster care youths' marriage trends appear to generally be in line with what current research is reporting. Research, as discussed in the literature review, found that the overall marriage rate in the United States for those 21 and younger is declining, and emancipated foster care youths' marriage rates are following that trend (Buehler, et. al., 2000; Courtney, et. al., 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

### **Seeking Advice**

Participants were asked who they believed emancipated foster care youth went to for advice concerning romantic relationships. The most frequent response was peers or friends, with eight of the 10 participants reporting this observation. Other common responses included family, foster parents, therapists, and social workers.

**Available resources**

At the end of the interview process participants were asked if they were aware of any available resources for romantic relationship support for emancipated foster care youth. This was perhaps the area with the most astonishing findings. The average participant listed about 1.4 specific resources. The range in the number of resources reported was the most surprising; some participants were not able to think of any resources, while others were able to list up to five or six, despite most of the social workers coming from the same program.

In total 13 different resources were cited. The listed resources fell into four main categories: individual counseling, classes/groups, health clinics, and domestic violence shelters. Only one resource cited by a participant was specifically targeted at romantic relationship support. The participant who listed the resource reported that she was part of a pilot program for the county. The pilot program was aimed specifically at assisting emancipated foster youth to make healthy choices in relationships and was scheduled to start at the beginning of 2013. Participants listed multiple programs that offered classes or small group discussions on the topic of healthy relationships. However, these were classes that covered many topics, and also briefly covered the area of romantic relationships. The rest of the resources, such as community health clinics and individual therapy, provided support in the area, but were not directly aimed at assisting youth with romantic relationships.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications for social work practice**

It is evident that emancipated foster care youth are exiting foster care with few meaningful connections, particularly family connections. The basic human need for belonging and love is often unfulfilled for these youths while they remain in care, and therefore, it appears that youth are seeking out their own means of connection through romantic relationships and parenthood.

There is a tendency to view the romantic relationships of young adults as trivial, or even as negative distractions. However, for emancipated foster care youth these relationships may be the first opportunity they have had to feel a sense of family, belonging, and specialness. It is often easier as social workers to see the negative impact of romantic relationships such as early pregnancy or domestic violence, or to dismiss them as trivial compared to completing schooling. Instead, the social work community could look to meet emancipated foster care youth where they are, and seek to come alongside youths, helping them to develop the family they were not fortunate enough to have in their childhood. Perhaps by helping youth in this area social workers can better help them achieve their academic and vocational goals and find balance in their lives.

This research found that there is also a need for social workers to share their knowledge of available resources with each other. While it seems that there are options for support with romantic relationships for youth, there is an inequality of knowledge, even within programs. Through sharing knowledge of available resources social workers will be better able to offer options for support to their clients. Additionally, there is a need for the social work community working with emancipated foster care youth to

address the topic of romantic relationships with sensitivity, while also supporting their client's right to self-determination rather than doubting or negating their relationships.

### **Implications for future research**

There is awareness in the community of social workers of a need for more support for youth concerning romantic relationships with classes, groups, and counseling available. However, few of these classes are solely devoted to relational support, and it is doubtful that any are specifically targeted at assisting youth in rebuilding their ability to form healthy attachments within their relationships. Future research should be done to determine the effectiveness and depth of support available to emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships.

Future research should also focus on attachment styles and struggles of emancipated foster care youth and the implications for future relationships. While research has been done on attachments and adoption, few studies, if any, have focused on how youths' attachments affect their adult relationship choices and the development of their own families. Perhaps with more knowledge in this area social workers can approach assisting youth with romantic relationships with a deeper understanding of their needs and the reasons for youths' behaviors and choices.

### **Implications for policy**

While current policies have focused on increasing soft-skill development and relational support there is still a substantial need for more meaningful connections among foster care youth. Future policy should focus on offering youth more stability so that they may remain in the same communities for longer periods of time and have more of an opportunity to develop long-term connections. Additionally, increased support is needed

to providing youth with more opportunities to work through attachment difficulties and build trust within families, either through successfully returning them to their families of origin or providing more opportunities for successful adoptions.

### **Strengths and limitations**

This study was able to focus on an area that has been the subject of little prior research in order to provide a more accurate picture of the experiences of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships. However, it was limited by a small sample size and is not generalizable to the general population. Additionally, it only captures the observations of a small group of social workers. More research should be done to obtain a clearer and better-informed understanding of emancipated foster care youths' experiences with romantic relationships so that this vulnerable population can be better served in their transition to adulthood.

### **Conclusion**

The struggles facing emancipated foster care youth can seem daunting. High rates of mental illness, substance abuse, early pregnancies, and domestic violence, as well as past experiences of abuse and neglect leave youth struggling to find their footing as they enter into adulthood. Research shows that youth are lacking meaningful long-term connections to adults and communities, and that the foster care system is struggling to meet these needs for the youth (Courtney, Cusick, & Keller, 2007; Jones, 2011).

The youth themselves are appearing to meet their need for connection through romantic relationships. Youth were found to be seeking to fill a void for connection and support through romantic relationships and parenthood. However, their romantic relationships were also found to be riddled with difficulties including domestic violence

and a struggle to gain understanding of healthy versus unhealthy relationship behaviors. While resources are continuing to grow in the area of romantic relationship support for emancipate foster care youth there is still a lack of informed and intensive supports for youth to rebuild their ability to healthily attach within primary relationships.

Perhaps with more in-depth and informed support youth can rework past issues with attachment within their romantic relationships, and learn to establish healthier and more trusting relationships. These supports could be a means to help emancipated foster care youth fulfill their need for meaningful connections, and enable them to build their own families without repeating the often destructive patterns of abuse and neglect of their families of origin.

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APPENDIX A

December 11, 2012

Kelsey Hanson

IRB#12-N-57 The Experiences' of Emancipated Foster Care Youth with Romantic Relationships as Observed by Social Workers

Dear Ms. Hanson:

Thank you for your reply to the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB) letter of 12-10-12 outlining the stipulations required for approval of the research project listed above. You have addressed all concerns and clarifications as requested. As a result, your project is approved.

Please note that all research projects are subject to continuing review and approval. You must notify the IRB of any research changes that will affect the risk to your subjects. You should not initiate these changes until you receive written IRB approval. Also, you should report any adverse events to the IRB. Please use the reference number listed above in any contact with the IRB. At the end of the project, please complete a project completion form, available on the St. Catherine University IRB website.

If you have questions or concerns about these stipulations, please feel free to contact me by phone (X 7739) or email (jsschmitt@stkate.edu). We appreciate your work to ensure appropriate treatment of your research subjects. Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Schmitt".

John Schmitt, PT, PhD  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Cc: Richa Dahnju

**APPENDIX B****Consent Form****Emancipated Foster Care Youth and Romantic Relationships  
INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM****Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the experience of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships. This study is being conducted by Kelsey Hanson, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Richa Dhanju, a faculty member in the Department of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you work closely with “aging out” foster care youth through the [REDACTED]. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate in this study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived experience of emancipated foster care youth with romantic relationships. Approximately 8 to 10 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, which will be recorded. You will be asked 10 open and close-ended questions. The interview will be approximately 30 minutes in length.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

The study has minimal risks. The study will consist of interview questions related to your observations of “aging out” youths’ experience with romantic relationships. The interview questions will also gather brief information on you experience working with “aging out” foster care youth.

There are no direct benefits to participation in this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that could be used to identify you will be disclosed only with your permission; the information you provide during the interview will be kept confidential.

In any written reports or publications participants will not be identified, or identifiable, and only group data will be presented. Your coworkers and supervisors will not be given access to audio recordings or transcripts of your interview, and any identifying information will not be revealed in the final research paper.

I will keep the audio recordings and transcripts of the interview in a locked file on my personal computer. Only I will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 2013. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the Hennepin County ETV Program or St. Catherine

University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Kelsey Hanson, at [REDACTED]. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Richa Dhanju [REDACTED] will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board at [REDACTED].

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision about whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and that your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from this study at any time.

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I consent to participate in this study, and I agree to be audio recorded.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

**APPENDIX C****Interview Schedule**

1. How long have you worked with youth who are aging out of foster care?
2. What trends do you notice in 18-21 year old “aging out” foster youths’ romantic relationships?
3. In your opinion are 18-21 year old “aging out” foster youth you work with more likely, less likely, or equally as likely to have a positive view of romantic relationships?
  - Why do you think this is?
4. In your opinion are 18-21 year old “aging out” foster youth you work with more likely, less likely, or equally as likely to be in a romantic relationship as their peers in the general population?
  - Why do you think this is?
5. In your opinion are 18-21 year old “aging out” foster youth more likely, less likely, or equally likely to cohabitate with their romantic partner than their peers in the general population?
  - Why do you think this is?
6. In your opinion are “aging out” foster youth more likely, less likely, or equally likely to marry by 21 than their peers in the general population?
  - Why do you think this is?
7. What benefits have you observed “aging out” foster care youth receive from romantic relationships?
8. What do you see as the biggest struggle for “aging out” foster youth in romantic relationships?
9. Who do “aging out” foster care youth go to for advice concerning romantic relationships?
10. Do you know of any services providing romantic relationship support available to “aging out” foster care youth?