

“Everything started when...”: Illuminating Rupture as a Sensemaking Catalyst in Formerly Fostered, Emerging Adults’ Narratives

Dr. Lindsey J. Thomas
Illinois State University

Abstract

Fostered youth likely must make sense of transition, uncertainty, and disruption in the (culturally expected) life course in order to integrate these experiences into their life story and move forward. Yet, little is known about whether and how (formerly) fostered youth talk about their experiences and salient life course disruptions. Thus, the present study takes a narrative approach to examining emergent themes across semi-structured, life story interviews, with the goal of illuminating the types of rupture events and experiences that permeate these stories. Formerly fostered, emerging adult (18-30 years old) participants (N=32) from the Midwest (Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin) were recruited and interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed four rupture types that emerge as salient in stories of foster care: rupture in the family of origin, rupture through relational separation, rupture in “The System,” and rupture created by stigma. Descriptions, examples, and implications of each of these themes are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Emerging adults, life course, life story interviews, narrative, rupture

Introduction

Experiences of foster care are marked by transitions, many of which likely violate cultural expectations of childhood and family. Indeed, fostered youth are removed from those who are typically expected to raise children into adulthood (i.e., members of the family of origin) and are placed in kinship care (i.e., placement with relatives to the family of origin), foster care (i.e., placement with non-relatives, often strangers), and/or institutional care (e.g., placement in a group home or shelter). In addition to initial upheaval associated with removal from one’s family of origin, foster placements are intended to temporary solutions; thus, those within the foster care system experience ongoing shifts in living arrangements and lifestyle as they await permanent placement (e.g., reunification; adoption). Even after foster care, emerging adults face a multitude of negative outcomes at higher rates than their peers, further highlighting the potential prevalence of ongoing transitions and even turmoil (e.g., Bowen, Ball, Jones, & Miller, 2021; Courtney et al., 2016).

Taken together, these transitions likely mark disruptions, or ruptures in the (culturally anticipated) life course, which fostered youth must make sense of to integrate these experiences into their life story and move forward (see Becker, 1997). Yet, little is known about whether and how fostered youth narrate their experiences and construct potential life course ruptures. Thus, the goal of the present study is to illuminate what types of rupture events and experiences, if any, permeate stories of (formerly) fostered youth. The present study works to accomplish this goal by taking a narrative sensemaking approach to examining emergent themes across semi-structured, life story interviews with adult, former foster children (AFFCs). Given that the U.S. foster care system provides the overarching context for the study, the author provides an overview of the U.S. foster care system, including data and extant research that highlight the transitions/turmoil within, in the following Literature Review section, before turning to a discussion of the narrative framework, presentation of findings, and implications of the study.

U.S. Foster Care: Transition and Turmoil

On September 30, 2017, approximately 442,995 children resided in foster care in the U.S. (Children’s Bureau, 2019). This seemingly precise number from a specific date is still an estimate of the number of children in foster care, pointing to the impossibility of determining exactly how many children have been impacted by the foster care system as well as the instability and uncertainty likely experienced by those affected by the foster care system. Exemplifying the aforementioned transitions and associated uncertainties, during the same year (2017), nearly 270,000 children entered the foster care system, and approximately

248,000 children exited, over half of whom had been in foster care for a year or longer at the time of exit (Children’s Bureau, 2019). Among the nearly 6% of U.S. youth (newborn to 18-years-old) who are at some point involved with the foster care system, approximately half are given a primary case goal of reunification, which is the term for returning children to the care and residence of the family of origin (i.e., parent[s] or primary caregiver[s]), many children’s cases also include concurrent planning (e.g., more than one permanency goal is considered and worked toward), and more than 100,000 children currently await adoption out of foster care and into “permanent families” (Children’s Bureau, 2019; Samuels, 2012; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Taken together, the policies and statistics of the U.S. foster care system point to a likelihood that hundreds of thousands of children in the U.S. experience, and must make sense of, foster care and its associated transitions and uncertainties.

Guiding these experiences are numerous federal-level resources. Although foster care system structures and policies are determined at the state-level and thus vary from state-to-state, the federal government funds and publishes resources such as policy guidelines and demographic information, as well as original research and suggestions aimed toward increasing (former) fostered youth’s wellbeing via promoting the “best interests of the child” (see Thomas, Zompetti, & Jannusch, 2020). Such resources are generally engaged by state-run foster care systems across the U.S., leading to general commonalities of policy and practice among states. For example, across the country, out-of-home care generally occurs when children cannot live safely with their families of origin – usually, but not always, “due to abuse or neglect in the family home” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, henceforth DHHS, 2005). Children can also be removed from their homes due to ongoing conflict in the home or physical or behavioral healthcare that “cannot be addressed in the family [of origin]” (DHHS, 2012). While federal resources emphasize disruptions of abuse and neglect as playing a crucial role in the decision to remove a child from her/his family of origin, published statistics also highlight goals of reunification: Indeed, in 2017, further exemplifying the pervasive cultural expectation that children (will/should) be raised by their families of origin while simultaneously pointing to the transitions and potential turmoil that mark foster care-related experiences.

Although much extant literature focused on fostered youth examines outcome statistics surrounding placements in and exits from the foster care system, researchers have also begun investigating more emergent data that highlight perceptions and constructions of events and experiences, especially among emerging adults. For example, although fostered youth have been long suspected to be subject to negative experiences and events, scholars relatively recently examined the specifics of what might constitute the “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs, that are prevalent among fostered youth and how (formerly) fostered emerging adults might speak to these experiences (e.g., Bowen et al., 2021; Turney & Wildeman, 2017). In light of the historical foci on risk and adversity, a burgeoning body of scholarship has also focused on how some (formerly fostered) emerging adults have better outcomes – or illustrate resilience – despite, or in the face of, adversity (e.g., Carroll, 2022; Hokanson, Neville, Teixeira, Singer, & Berzin, 2020; Neal, 2017). Such work sheds light on the plight and persistence of fostered youth, yet little is known about whether/how adverse experiences/events – or ruptures – might be constructed and emerge as salient in the narratives of (formerly) fostered youth. Indeed, whereas existing studies help to identify prevalence of (a priori) types of adversity and transitions and the ways that youth can emerge from turmoil with better/worse outcomes, little work has examined whether/how such events and experiences might manifest in stories about foster care, highlighting the catalysts for sensemaking by (formerly) fostered youth, in their own words.

(Life Course) Rupture & Narrative (Sensemaking)

Given that residing with and being cared for by individuals outside of the family of origin embodies an inconsistency with cultural expectations of children and families, placement in foster care exemplifies what Becker (1997) calls a (life course) disruption. Disruptions, or rupture events and/or experiences, embody a deviation from what is considered to be “normal.” Foster care-as-disruption is further evidenced in the data illuminating adversity and risk among (formerly) fostered youth. From a discursive sensemaking lens, Becker further argues that such rupture experiences are rendered meaningful through narrative tellings, in which “the conflict between the desire for normalcy and the acknowledgment of difference [is] enacted over and over again” (Becker, 1997, p. 16). Becker (1997) contends that in narrative tellings, narrators have the opportunity to share with an audience the portrayal of their experience as well as construct meanings of rupture in ways that make sense to the narrator. Therefore, narratives of fostered youth are likely a fruitful site for both exploring the experience of foster care and increasing understanding of which, if any, moments emerge as salient rupture and/or adversity events that likely require further sensemaking.

Indeed, narrative theorists argue that narratives, or the stories that people tell and/or perform, help individuals to construct, with an immediate or imagined social audience, identities and to make sense of their

worlds and experiences (Becker, 1997; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Riessman, 2008). In discussing the sensemaking function of narratives, Riessman (2008) posits, "When biographical disruptions occur that rupture expectations for continuity, individuals make sense of events through storytelling" (p. 10). Langellier and Peterson (2004) extend this argument, stating that personal narratives also shed light on culturally constructed meanings; thus, examining (formerly) fostered youth's narratives not only sheds light on the foster experience, providing insight into practices that might be particularly damaging or helpful, such examinations can also uncover the cultural norms and expectations that, when unmet or outright countered, create disruption.

Indeed, numerous experiences before, during, and after residing in foster care likely signify ruptures from the culturally-expected life course in which biological/legal families of origin provide continued care and support for their children. Furthermore, although statistics abound about fostered youth, including demographics and wellbeing outcomes, little extant work examines how (formerly) fostered youth perceive cultural norms and/or describe/construct ruptures (i.e., salient life course disruptions). To work toward filling these gaps in the literature, the present study aims to take a first step toward unpacking sensemaking by answering the following research question:

RQ: What types of ruptures, if any, emerge as salient in formerly fostered, emerging adults' narratives about their foster care-related experiences?

Methods

Participants

With IRB approval, participants (N=32) were recruited through email listservs, social media posts, and word-of-mouth. Participants were emerging adults, 18-30 years of age ($M=23.4$; $SD=3.6$). Participants resided in Iowa, Illinois, or Wisconsin during their time in foster care and reported spending an approximate total of 2.5 months to eighteen years in the foster care system ($M=6.2$ years; $SD=4.5$ years). Participants reported an estimated range of one to 33 placements while wards of the state (median=4 placements; $M=7.2$, $SD=7.4$), including foster homes, kinship care, youth shelters, treatment facilities, group homes, and independent living arrangements. Women comprised approximately two-thirds of the participants ($n=22$), and men constituted the rest of the participant sample ($n=10$). Participants reported varied educational backgrounds of: did not complete high school or equivalent ($n=2$), earned high school diploma or equivalent ($n=7$), attended some college ($n=12$), earned associate degree ($n=3$), earned bachelor's degree ($n=6$), and completed some graduate education ($n=2$). In conversation with the interviewer, participants described varied backgrounds and identities pertaining to race/ethnicity, nationality/citizenship, socioeconomic status, familial/cultural background(s), and physical/mental/emotional/social health/illness and (dis)ability.

Data Collection

To better understand how, if at all, formerly fostered youth tell narratives that make sense of rupture experiences, the author conducted narrative interviews (Riessman, 2008). A primary interview goal was to collect and examine participants' whole stories, in their own words, to garner a better understanding of their foster care-related experiences. Thus, participants were prompted to share their story, uninterrupted and in their own words, including experiences before, during, and after foster care (Riessman). Participants were then prompted with open-ended questions as part of a life story interview (McAdams, 2006). After the narrative interview, participants were asked to provide elaboration and clarification via the guidance of a semi-structured interview protocol. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed in full by the author. To protect participants' confidentiality, during the transcription process all other identifying information (e.g., dates, geographic locations, individuals' names) was replaced with pseudonyms or deleted. Some participants requested specific pseudonyms, while others requested "cool" or "unique" monikers. For the latter, the author employed an online name generator to create an alphabetical list of uncommon names/spellings, with the goal of capturing participants' unique personalities and fulfilling pseudonym-related requests.

Data Analysis

To answer the research question and explore themes/types of ruptures constructed within narratives, Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis guided analysis of the data corpus. The author first became familiar with the data and then coded segments of text which helped to answer the heuristic question: "What (experiences/differences/ruptures) characterizes the foster child/care experience?" Each relevant segment of text was assigned a code; the next segment was given the same code or assigned a new code if it did not align with an extant code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This iterative process continued until all relevant segments were coded. Similar codes were grouped into thematic categories that were labeled and

illustrated with exemplars. Saturation (Strauss & Corbin) was retrospectively identified in story 11 after analyzing the twelfth story. To perform validation procedures, data collection continued to (more than) double the data set. The data that were not yet analyzed upon reaching saturation (interviews 13-32) were temporarily archived before being examined using the same thematic analysis process to safeguard analytic validation (i.e., referential adequacy; see following paragraph). Each identified theme, or rupture type, was labeled, defined, and illustrated with exemplars (as seen in the Findings that follow).

Verification of Findings

Referential adequacy, negative case analysis, peer debriefing, and member checking (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were employed to verify the findings. Referential adequacy was claimed when the post-saturation portion of the data set (interviews 13-32) was thematically analyzed independently from, and found to confirm the findings of, the first portion of the data (interviews 1-12). Negative case analysis involved ensuring that the entirety of the data corpus was accounted for in the findings. In the peer debriefing process, two graduate students who were familiar with qualitative research read through the data corpus and confirmed that the author's findings were representative of participants' talk. Member checking ensured data triangulation among the data, the researcher/author, and the participants: four participants read through summaries of the rupture types and exemplars and confirmed that the findings captured their experiences and the realities of others' experiences, as individuals who lived in foster care. Throughout the analysis process, the author also kept an audit trail of detailed notes that could be referenced to explain decisions and track findings back to the data.

Findings

Becker (1997) argues that storytelling, or narrative, is a meaning-making process in which individuals engage to make sense of rupture events in particular. It is unsurprising, then, that the AFFC participants in the present study told narratives that pointed to different types of rupture experiences, in which unanticipated, often negative, events took place and were positioned as catalysts for potential subsequent sensemaking. All of the participants reported disruptions in their lives, often detailing times when they experienced striking deviations from the culturally anticipated life course and the expected treatment of children. Thus, these events and experiences of rupture emerged as salient in foster care-related narratives across the story corpus. Indeed, rupture experiences were the impetus for sensemaking in each narrative. In the present study, rupture was marked by events and experiences that created disruption(s) to the expected life course. Talk about ruptures was often present at the beginning of participants' stories, as rupture events/experiences were the catalyst for participants' subsequent experiences, but talk about rupture also continued throughout participants' interviews. Rupture experiences were presented as prominent facets of what it means to experience foster care and manifested in four different ways: (1) *rupture in the family of origin*; (2) *rupture through relational separation*; (3) *rupture in "The [Foster Care] System"*; and (4) *rupture created by stigma*. Each of these rupture types, or themes, is described and illustrated with exemplars in the following section. Of note, although the exemplars come from interviews with nine participants, the themes can be found throughout the 32-interview data corpus and were confirmed by participants not quoted in the present study as well as some whose excerpts appear below. In addition, because rupture experiences can overlap in both lived experiences and narratives, some quotes also exhibit more than one type of rupture; in light of this, parts of several exemplars have been italicized (marked with "[emphasis added]") to more directly point to talk related to the theme under which it is presented as an exemplar.

Rupture in the Family of Origin

The theme of rupture in the family of origin was constituted by talk in which participants described negative experiences prior to entry into the foster care system, that occurred while in the care (or lack thereof) of family members. Many of these descriptions included: living in an unsafe and unstable environment; emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse; and neglect. Rupture experiences in the family of origin were not everyday happenings that a child might simply find upsetting; rather, they were reported as risking participants' health, safety, and even lives. Furthermore, maltreatment leading to the AFFC participants' removals from their original homes took place under the watch of, and often at the hands of, their family members. Thus, this maltreatment constitutes a rupture in the expected life course, in which family members are expected to provide care and protection for their children.

Many stories opened with a recounting of the need for a participant to be removed from her/his family of origin. For example, Questa described the rupture event involving her biological mother that led to Questa's removal from her family of origin:

OK well, um, everything started with me when I was [age], my mom was schizophrenic and she drowned my little brother, on the day of [date], um my mom had believed that god told her to do things like kill her kids so she was gonna come after me and my brother next. (Questa, p. 225)

Questa's introduction clearly illustrates rupture in the family of origin through unsafe conditions and harm; further, by stating that "everything started" with her biological mother's mismanaged mental health issues (i.e., "my mom was schizophrenic") and her brother's drowning, these experiences are explicitly marked as sensemaking catalysts (i.e., the story to come manifests from this rupture).

While some participants, like Questa, described profound and abundant abuses, some participants also discussed experiencing rupture(s) that stemmed from general lack of care, instability, and safety issues within their families of origin. Although some of these events might not be as extreme as, for example, a parent drowning a child, they are nonetheless deviations from the caring, stable, and safe environments that parents are expected to provide for their children. Notably, almost all participants reported that at least one of their biological/legal parents had a mental illness and/or emotional instability that was negatively impacting their ability to parent. As Becker (1997) argues, illness and instability are deviations from the expectation that minds and bodies are healthy. Thus, participants' reports of parental emotional instability and mental illness regularly manifested as a rupture experience in the family of origin, as can be seen in the following excerpt, in which Felicity pinpointed a parent's, her mother's, mental illness as a source of family instability and one of the reasons for Felicity's removal:

Alright. um, I guess you kinda do need the beginning. Uh, cuz that led to foster care, but um, basically, like, my mom and dad were in [Country], and my dad was serving in the [military branch] when I was born, and then, um, they had marital problems for basically all their marriage, but when we moved to [State], he left the [military branch] to go to this church cuz evangelists came over and were like, oh, you need to be part of this church, so they moved to [State] to go to that church and, um, it was kinda like cult-y and was like very controlling, and that just further kinda, my mom actually had mental issues her entire life, like, bipolar, uh, even like a suspected mix of schizophrenia, but she wouldn't go to therapy and stuff and so we never really were able to discover what everything was. Um, and so she was kinda like losing control of her mind like when that was going on because of the way that they treated everybody, and so she and dad were fighting more and more. (Felicity, p. 22)

In this opening excerpt, multiple family of origin-related factors, especially (biological) parental issues, including her mother's untreated mental health issues, her parents' marital problems, and her family's new church community's controlling and "cult like" behavior, emerged as catalysts for Felicity's parents' divorce and, eventually, Felicity's placement in foster care (i.e., it is all "the beginning" of her foster care-related story).

In addition to possible mental health issues, participants' stories contained depictions of parental substance abuse and criminal behavior, including incarceration, that deviate from the behavior that one would expect from a parent. For example, Helen recounted her mother's and stepfather's activities prior to her foster care placement:

[M]y mom was a young mother, and, she struggled during the beginning of my childhood, she was addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, and um, she'd been married three times [...] and she, got married again for the third time when I was six years old, and he had similar problems, and um, he was arrested a few times for DUIs, he ended up um, going to jail after the third time, for three years I think it was or supposed to be but it was a work release program so he ended up not returning to work release and was on the run, and I was ten and we started moving around, and, um we moved to different states. (Helen, p. 73)

Helen did not report experiencing early physical abuse or emotional abuse that she marked as such, yet the portrait of her childhood emerged as unstable at best. Parental addiction, criminal behavior, and other environmental instability mark the beginning of Helen's early narrative, painting a picture of the family of origin as providing hardship rather than care. Even Helen's statement that her "mom was a young mother" calls up expectations about the culturally appropriate age to become a parent, which is generally when one is "mature" rather than "young." Indeed, her mother's age constituted an almost immediate catalyst for sensemaking, and taken together, the portrait of Helen's childhood and family of origin emerged as marked by rupture experiences.

Overall, a variety of events and experiences in the family of origin emerged as salient sites of rupture that necessitated further sensemaking in AFFCs' narratives. Given that children are removed from their family of origin due to safety issues, perhaps it is unsurprising that almost all of the participants reported rupture experiences prior to their removal, while in the care of their parent(s). Because the goal of foster care is to provide children with safety, one would hope that participants experienced less disruption when removed from their family of origin and placed in foster care. Unfortunately, this was far from the case for many of the AFFC participants.

Rupture through Relational Separation

Participants also described rupture experiences involving relational separation while in foster care. AFFCs described continually being separated from individuals, such as siblings, with whom one might expect they would maintain contact, in addition to relational separation due to multiple placements. For example, some participants, like Lina, were separated from siblings when the participant was the only child placed in the foster care system:

I talked to my sister Heather about going in and turning [our mother] in with me, and she said she would, and we went to home[room]s and we went and talked to Mr. Harper [a school teacher], and told Mr. Harper [about the abuse], and so then we kept like we went home and we packed bags cuz we were sure we were leaving, and waiting for like the social workers to come. Well they didn't come for several days... excuse me and when they did they only took me and my mom I remember screaming get her the fuck out of my house I don't fucking want her here, and my sister didn't go. Well I didn't know, but my brother had told my sister to deny [the abuse] happened because um, my mom said that if she lost all of her kids that she would kill herself, and, we're still like [young ages], we're still little kids, and, so he talked her into you know basically saying that I was lying. So they took me out of the house. (Lina, p. 151)

Although Lina stated that she and her sister, Heather, had discussed reporting their mother's abuse together, only Lina was removed from her family of origin, separating her from not only her abusive mother but also her siblings. Lina understood this only later, when she realized why and how her siblings denied the maltreatment and stayed with their biological mother.

Other participants reported being removed and initially placed together with their siblings from their family of origin, only to be separated from siblings over time, as they all moved through placements in the foster care system. For example, Jemma was initially placed with all of the siblings with whom she had shared a family of origin household, as well as a mother. However, she was eventually separated from all but one of her biological siblings as she was moved through multiple foster homes. Jemma described how, in a meeting with her case worker, biological sister, and potential adoptive parents, after deciding that she would like to be adopted, she realized that this meant she would be separated from her sister, Faye, the only family-of-origin member with whom Jemma had always lived:

*I'm like, so wait, if I don't like anybody of any of these families do I have to keep going to different homes, and they're like yeah *laugh* and I just thought no I don't want to do that like I'm tired, like I want a family. I want a mom and I want a dad and, I like I don't want to move anymore like I'm tired of moving, and um, my adopted parents now, they're his brother and his wife a-were doing um foster care, so, those two and then maybe one other family wanted me, and I remember they s-I don't know why they sat me down with my sister at like this big conference table and said well, Jemma three families want you, and Faye we don't have a family for you yet. And I just remember *laughs* being like *excited tone* oh! *voice falls* Oh. Ju-just me? Like it's not gonna be me and Faye? I mean I already had lost everything that I ever knew, and now, I didn't know that was part of it and I was just like, well I thought we were going together and I remember her just sitting there like, just somber like, and I was like I was the one that was like perturbed by it I was like what [emphasis added]?! Like, but I-part of me like my heart fluttered, people want me and I can leave this life. And um... they're like yeah so you need to pick, and, probably one of the most *laughs* one of the few times I admired my sister is she looked at me like, pick one, like I'll get my home. *laughs* *sniff* So... *starts to cry* I picked my parents now. (Jemma, p. 124)*

Although Jemma chose to be adopted because she wanted stability and a permanent family, even her adoption created a rupture event in her separation from Faye.

Some participants also reported relational loss due to placements in the foster care system as well as via

attempts at reunification. As hinted at in the above excerpt from Jemma's story, in addition to rupture experiences consisting of separation from the family of origin, being moved through multiple placements within The System also emerged as ongoing rupture events. These experiences of rupture were reported as particularly upsetting to participants when they had been removed from placements that they deemed "good" or more positive (e.g., safe, stable, caring) than others. As Ezra explained about Anne and Abe Apple, her first foster parents:

*I went with this family, the Apples, and, um, they had done foster care several times with other children, and... they took care of me basically... *sigh* off and on from the time that I was right out of the hospital until I was, I wanna say, 4 years old off and on. Um, but they were basically the ones that I remember raising me pretty much. The young me, and, you know, they were there with the apnea monitors, and they were the ones that, you know, did everything, um, baby-wise for me. They have all my baby pictures, they have, you know, everything that-all the memories, the first words, you know, the first steps, that was all with them. And we still keep in contact, but.... (Ezra, p. 1)*

In the above excerpt, Ezra detailed the ongoing care she received from the Apples. Ezra was with Anne and Abe Apple as soon as she left the hospital after being born, and the Apples were there for milestones, such as when Ezra walked and spoke for the first times. For Ezra, the Apples have not only her baby pictures but also "all the memories" of her first years of childhood. Although they maintained contact into the present time of telling, the state removed Ezra from the Apples' care, separating them, as described in the following excerpt:

*[State] being the state that it is wants to put the child back with the birth parents, and my father was, my biological father, was *sigh* kind of a car stealing carnie *laughs* - not a stable person *laughs* that you would want raising a child. Um, but, he claimed he wanted to be a part of my life, and he was kind of around, off and on, and my mother definitely wanted me, and then she would go manic, where, she would, you know, think she could care for me, you know, with this, and she would get me back, and then she would either go, you know, very manic and go on, I don't know if it was like a drug binge, or an alcohol binge, and then the depressive times where she would completely, like, not care for me. So, I mean, it was like, the back and forth with that [emphasis added]. (Ezra, p. 1)*

As evidenced in this passage, Ezra's state of residence, like all states, tended toward placing children (back) with their biological parent(s). This privileging of biological family ties created what Ezra marks as "back and forth" relational instability through continued attempts at reunification. Not only were the multiple placements unstable, Ezra described the (biological) parents with whom she was being reunified as an unstable "car stealing carnie" father and "manic" mother who abused substances. This "back and forth" rupture continued in Ezra's story until she described suffering an injury and sexual abuse:

*So I'd go back with [birth mother], my biological mother, and then I would go back with Anne and Abe [Apple] when that wouldn't work out, and I'd go back with [biological mother], so that went back and forth a couple of different times, and, um, occasionally my biological mom would drop me off directly at Anne and Abe's, er the Apples, and, um, would go on her, you know, week long vacations to do I don't know what *laughs* but, then [emphasis added]... My father's parents wanted custody of me because my father was living with them at the time, and I think I was about two, like eighteen months, two, something like that, and, um, that was when the first, like, real abuse case came in. So I had a broken leg, I think, and some, um, ..., um, sexual trauma, and went back in the hospital. (Ezra, p. 1)*

Ezra's "back and forth" rupture experiences continued as she endured cyclical relational separation through continued attempts to reunify her with a biological mother who was unable to provide care. Then, Ezra was again separated from the Apples when The System granted custody to Ezra's biological father and paternal grandparents rather than to her long-term foster parents. For Ezra, relational separation was compounded by "the first . . . real abuse," pointing to another type of rupture, Rupture in "The System," that occurred when Ezra, after being separated from the Apples yet again, endured physical injury and sexual abuse while in her relatives' care.

Severed relational ties with others were not the only relational separation ruptures reported by participants. Participants such as Jemma also described being separated from their own sense of self, especially when moved through multiple placements:

*I kinda felt like you know like I didn't know who I was, because I was being passed around [placements] *sniff* and you feel like you lose your identity in a way, um and I didn't know this, if they did this before but I remember going to a studio and they took pictures of me and my sister, and we were put in this like brochure of children with like a little biography, it's like our picture and then, like it's almost like selling a child in a way, like I know that sounds bad but I saw them after like I had ever been in one, and I was like this is terrible, this is like a pi-pick which child you want to adopt. (Jemma, p. 123)*

As Jemma explained, without a stable family, it was difficult to create and maintain an identity as an individual – a knowledge of and relationship with oneself. In addition to lacking a stable family, participants like Jemma might have been particularly susceptible to identity loss when they were presented as an object rather than an individual (e.g., “we were put in this like brochure... it's almost like selling a child”). Taken together, participants regularly described rupture experiences that involved being separated from members of their family of origin as well as other important individuals (e.g., foster parents) and identities.

Rupture in “The System”

Given the safety and care-oriented goals of the foster care system, it might be expected that, despite experiencing rupture in the family of origin and through relational separation, children residing in The System will be cared for and kept safe. In-home placements are even referred to as foster *families*, reinforcing the expectation that providers will function as (caring and safe) family members. Rupture in The System stands in stark contrast with these expectations: throughout the data corpus, participants marked ongoing instability in The System and placements that were neither safe nor caring as ruptures. Participants, as with the earlier excerpt from Ezra, reported experiencing instability, lack of care and safety, and maltreatment while in placement; these deviations from the expected treatment of (foster) children constituted another type of life course rupture, while AFFCs resided in The System. For example, Wendy described how experiencing not only relational separation but multiple placements and environment changes can be destabilizing and even fear-inducing. After she was removed from the foster home that she “liked the most,” Wendy suffered through multiple placements:

I've been in foster homes for a lot of times, um throughout my whole, uh life, so um, I think being in foster care what-was actually helpful, but at yet, sometimes not helpful, because there's this one place I liked the most, I um my foster home I was around twelve years old at this time, um, I went to this foster home everything was going good and I felt like belonged and, I was happy, they had two daughters of their own um, one was older and then the other one was younger. It was going good for a while and, um some weeks later their older daughter decides to try doing suicide so I had to be transferred out of there, and I was really happy in that place, and after that I told myself each foster home you go to it won't work, you know cuz I was scared, and, each foster home I went to, you know, I was scared but they told me it was OK they'll be there and I would be safe. But, I didn't feel safe [emphasis added]. (Wendy, p. 316)

For Wendy, being transferred into new places created ruptures of discontinuity and discomfort, not only because she had at one time lived with a family where she felt happiness and a sense of belonging, but also because each placement stirred feelings of fear for her safety in an unfamiliar environment. Along with feeling unstable, participants remarked on experiences involving foster parents who did not provide adequate safety, care, and stability. Rather, instead of viewing children as individuals to take care of, some parents seemed to perceive children as a commodity. As Helen and Lina pointed out:

I think there are some people who go into [foster parenting] for the wrong reasons. Like, I think oh I found out how much I was worth a week which was really interesting to me, I think I found out, because like each kid gets an amount based on their story, how much they're worth and like what age I think what they come in too. I was worth I think 24 thousand a year. That's like a salary. So, times seven, um or six or five like, some people can look at it as a profit which I think is dangerous. So I think some people like look at the monetary aspect like here, we'll pay you to take these kids, like please take care of them, but that could be dangerous cuz then, they'll use it and think of it as profit. (Helen, pp. 88-89)

I stayed with them and they, foster kids were money, foster kids were checks, Heidi [foster mother] could be a stay at home mom if she had foster kids, um foster kids did the dishes, um foster kids vacuumed, foster kids, did this foster kids were, there's like no genuine care for us we were just money we were just paychecks. (Lina, p. 151)

Helen, Lina, and others reported feeling as though they lived with foster parents who viewed them as a source of income rather than children who deserved care and support – an issue not only of individual caregivers but of The System as a whole.

Other participants, like Xaver, described in detail severe safety and care-related ruptures that they experienced in several abusive, neglectful, and unsafe foster home placements:

[A] lot of my experiences I try to block out, but, my next house I was um, uh I was, starved, abused, sexually abused, mentally abused, beaten, had to um, fight for my food um, I remember living in um, being left for, three or four days, as my uh my foster parents went to like Disneyworld or somewhere [...] I was left, and, I was drinkin' toilet water and findin' crumbs on the ground to eat... uh I was always locked in my room, never, just bad experiences. (Xaver, p. 327)

Eventually, Xaver was placed in a home in which his foster parents provided care rather than maltreatment. Nonetheless, despite having a “good home,” Xaver still experienced an unsafe and abusive environment at the hands of other youth in the home:

I'm five and I, first time experiencing a good home... a decent home, and this is my first time being able to be with, all, two of my sisters and my brothers [...] me and my brother we were in the same house we got... when we were in the same house together and no one else was, I had to stick up for him and I'm younger than him and we both were locked in a in the bathroom with the two bigger dudes, who lived in the house and we were forced to uh p-put our pants down and uh stuff and, I was like No! and I ran out the bathroom, forgot my brother, and my brother ended up getting raped... (Xaver, p. 328)

Xaver detailed varied and profuse maltreatments in multiple placements, and other participants, too, described experiencing a variety of abuses and unsafe conditions in at least one placement in addition to more general lack of care and instability that mark rupture events. Indeed, as put forth in Xaver's story, even “good homes” held the potential to be sites of rupture, illustrating the systemic peril that stands in stark contrast to stated goals of The System.

Rupture Created by Stigma

Participants also discussed experiences of rupture that were created when participants encountered stigmatization. Many participants reported enduring further rupture experiences, often in the form of interpersonal negativity and structure-based setbacks even after exiting foster care, because they had been victims of maltreatment and/or because they had been in foster care. Thus, AFFC participants reported rupture experiences created by stigma: they continued to be targeted by others in ways that those who have not been in foster care likely never experience. Rupture created by stigma manifested throughout participants lives, when as children and even as adults they were identified as (former) foster children. Specifically, educational setbacks and negative social encounters emerged as stigma-laden ruptures. For example, Wendy described experiencing stigmatization, stating that her peers targeted her due to her residing in foster care:

*It's been a challenge you know um, cuz I was in special ed stuff, so people kinda make fun of me, and, I uh, used to be skinny really skinny anorexic, and people'd say oh look at that anorexic kid over there, and I would hear 'em and I would get so depressed and I would start stuffing my face and stuff, and I think it became a habit and stuff, and most of my life after that I you know people'd be pointing staring you know saying oh she's ugly she's just fat, or, *sigh* she's an orphan or you know, cuz everybody when I was younger, everybody thought because I was adopted I was an orphan, and they'd keep calling me hey orphan! (Wendy, p. 321)*

Wendy endured teasing about her weight and family, or perceived lack thereof due to her placement in foster care, throughout her education. When asked if there were other children who had been in foster care or were adopted who attended her school, Wendy replied:

Yeah they're the ones who made fun of me [...] Because they were ashamed of what happened to them, they were ashamed that they were in foster care too. (Wendy, p. 321)

Wendy described experiencing foster care-related stigmatization at school at the hands of her peers, even those who had also spent time in foster care and/or been adopted. Other participants, too, described difficulty interacting not only with children but with adults, including teachers and social workers. For example, case files and labels related to psychological issues were described as particularly stigmatizing, with partic-

ipants constructing files and histories as incomplete and inaccurate portrayals of a case study rather than providing useful insight into each child as an individual. Psychological labels and the label of “foster child” or “kid in the system,” as Cayden states, were also reported as label-based (i.e., stereotype/stigma-related) decisions rather than judgements based on an understanding of the *child*:

*I feel like, the medical profession, the state, everybody just wants to put labels on [fostered youth] because I went through-I had to go down to [University], I had to go to the University for some testing to make sure I was quote unquote normal or whatever and, *inhale* they label you with everything in the book, take the [diagnostic handbook] or whatever and, go through and they just put labels on you and I don't believe in that cuz it-, they don't see me as a person they see me as a label and a number and, that's basically what I was the judge never even probably even knew my name she just knew me as JVJV so so so so or whatever um it-just oh just another kid in the system. (Cayden, p. 382)*

For Cayden and others, decisions about their lives were based on expected outcomes due to labels rather than an understanding of each child as a unique individual. Thus, participants reported that stigmatizing labels created rupture by influencing decisions that impacted the life course of children in foster care.

Some participants described these difficult and negative interactions as continuing well into adulthood. For example, Imelda, who had built a career working with fostered youth, described continuing to live with the stigma of her own foster care placement when she gave the following account, including an interaction with a foster youth services coworker:

*So like, a lot of people go oh well what did you do to get put in foster care? I didn't do anything. It was after I entered foster care that I started having lots of problems [...] So like if people stopped with that stigma of like, [fostered youth are] broken or damaged or whatever no my mom is damaged, I'm a better person than she is and you'd have known that if you wouldn't have judged me thirty seconds after you met me. I had a DHS [co-]worker I had to cuss out professionally because she told one of her clients, who I was friends with, that she didn't want me around her because I was in foster care as a youth, that I have no business raising kids because I was in foster care [...] I'm like you don't know me and for you to judge me based on one fact of my life like [...] One, [it is] irreversible, I had no control over like one thing [being in foster care], that's what you choose to judge me on? You could've judged *laughs* me on a lot worse. (Imelda, p. 113)*

For Imelda and others, the stigma of having been in foster care is reported as ongoing, leading people – sometimes even those who work closely with fostered youth – to assume that they are “broken or damaged” despite being placed in foster care because of rupture experiences in the family of origin that resulted from the actions or health of their parent(s). In all, rupture created by stigma emerged from participants' narratives as an ongoing issue that individuals who reside(d) in the foster care system experience.

Discussion

Foremost, the present study answers calls for scholars to take seriously the experiences of fostered youth when exploring the foster care system (e.g., Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2009; Whiting & Lee, 2003). The present study answers these calls by illuminating the types of rupture experiences that emerge as salient in the foster care-related stories told by (formerly) fostered emerging adults, in their own words. Across the data corpus, AFFC participants marked four overarching types of rupture: (1) rupture in the family of origin; (2) rupture through relational separation; (3) rupture in “The [foster care] System”; and (4) rupture created by stigma. These findings shed light not only on negative experiences, as ruptures, they also provide insight into what is an (ab)normal life course experience/event that, if not part of a “typical” life, likely requires discursive work to make sense of and incorporate into one's life story. Indeed, Becker (1997) argues that life course ruptures require ongoing sensemaking for integration into life stories, and it is important to illuminate ruptures by engaging individuals' narratives to understand the experience and impact of ruptures. Thus, in gathering, exploring, and presenting rupture experiences that likely act as catalysts for sensemaking, the present study offers insight into facets of emerging adult, former foster children's foster care-related experiences. The present study adds both a narrative-centered communication focus and the voices of (former) fostered youth to the scholarly literature focused on foster care. By focusing on emerging adults' foster care-related life histories and narrative sensemaking, this study also highlights the ongoing struggles and impact related to foster care experiences, rather than treating an individual's removal from her/his family of origin and placement in the foster care system as simply one event that occurred during childhood.

Extant quantitative studies have indicated that individuals who spend time in foster care are at heightened risk for a number of negative outcomes, even after their exit from the foster care system (e.g., Kools & Kennedy, 2003; McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010). Thus, it seems likely that the rupture experiences related to foster care continue to impact participants well into their adult lives. The finding that foster care-related experiences, particularly those of rupture, continue to influence emerging adults' lives also seems to correspond to extant literature centered on childhood adversity more generally. The rupture experiences reported by participants in the present study fall within the realm of adverse events during childhood, or childhood adversity experiences, which "refers to the perception of negative events that have occurred during childhood" (Burgermeister, 2007, p. 164). Indeed, childhood adversity, especially among youth who have experienced involvement with welfare systems, is a burgeoning area of research, with scholars conducting studies to better understand the prevalence and impact of childhood adversity as well as hone theory related to trauma and resilience (e.g., Bowen et al., 2021; Hokanson et al., 2020; Turney & Wildeman, 2017). The present study bolsters extant knowledge of adversity by identifying narrated ruptures (i.e., the emergent interruptions in the anticipated life course, in the participants own words) prevalent among (formerly) fostered youth.

Furthermore, identifying these ruptures supports findings of extant literature by aligning with previously published work on adversity: the negative events that have been positioned as likely impacting emerging adults are identified in the fostered youth's own stories. Such negative events, include maltreatment, trauma, and stressors such as parental substance abuse, incarceration, and/or instability that "cause harm or the potential for harm along with stress and suffering" (Burgermeister, p. 164), are clearly aligned with the rupture experiences and events described by participants that bubble up as salient in the present study. Ruptures are important to understand because (childhood) adversity not only causes (potential) harm, stress, and suffering during childhood; it can also have lifelong effects on individuals' physical and mental wellbeing (Shonkoff, Garner, The Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, & Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 2012). For example, scholars have found that perceived emotional maltreatment in childhood correlates with symptoms of anxiety and depression in young adult college students (O'Dougherty Wright, Crawford, & Del Castillo, 2009).

In addition, adverse experiences in childhood have been found to have a cumulative effect, wherein increased reports of adverse events in childhood are associated with a variety of negative mental, emotional, physical, and social outcomes in adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., Anda et al., 2006; Chartier, Walker, & Naimark, 2010). Keeping this extant literature in mind, the present study, too, provides evidence of the ongoing impact of both foster care-related rupture specifically and adverse experiences during childhood more generally. Indeed, the present study offers evidence of the ways in which foster care-related experiences continue to impact individuals throughout their early years of adulthood.

Limitations and Future Directions

Other constructions related to family, especially members with biological connections, are likely worth exploring as well. In particular, the prevalence of reported rupture experiences involving parental substance use/abuse and mental illness/instability might be fruitfully engaged in future research for a couple of reasons. First, although participants pointed to parental substance use/abuse and mental illness/instability as problematic, further probing these topics might reveal more nuanced views. For example, some substance use (e.g., consuming alcoholic beverages) is prevalent among adults in the United States. In-depth exploration of the problems associated with substance use/abuse that led to a child's removal might more productively inform understandings of rupture experiences. In other words, it is likely an associated lack of care and/or safety rather than the substance use/abuse itself that serves as the catalyst for removal. Similarly, it is likely problems associated with untreated or mismanaged mental illness/instability that lead to a child's removal, rather than the illness/instability itself. Further probing these initial rupture experiences that many AFFCs frame as the reason for removal from the family of origin might assist in the planning and implementation of interventions aimed toward helping individuals to be better parents. In addition, keeping in mind that some of these issues (e.g., mental illness) can be hereditary might help to shed light on fosters' outcomes (e.g., seeking mental health services, substance use/abuse, occurrence of former fosters' children also being placed in foster care, etc.) in future studies. Finally, future research should take a next step by continuing to explore formerly fostered youth's narratives to better understand not only *what* ruptures might spur sensemaking but also *how* ruptures are made sense of and integrated into the life course more broadly.

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About the Author

Dr. Lindsey J. Thomas (PhD 2015, University of Iowa) is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at Illinois State University. Her primary area of scholarship is family/interpersonal communication, and her research focuses on the ways that communication processes (de)construct and (de)legitimate relationships, especially those within the context of foster care.