Will You Stay or Will You Go?:
The Present Day Relationships of Adults who Grew up in Foster Care in British Columbia

by

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B.A. (Psychology), Simon Fraser University, 1998

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in the
Counselling Psychology Program
of the Faculty of Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Spring 2012

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Abstract

In this qualitative study the relationships of seven adults who lived in foster care in British Columbia were explored through questionnaires and interviews. The interviews focused on participants’ relationships with birth parents; social supports; comfort with individuals and groups; perceptions of trust and the impact of foster care on relationships; relationship anxieties and avoidances; and important adult influences. Three themes emerged through analysis: apprehension in getting close to others, awareness of dysfunction, and holding onto specific others. This study contributes to foster care research the much needed perspective of adults who have lived in care, and provides increased understanding of the impact of foster care on relationships. The findings of this study support research advocating for long-term placements; support services for foster children and caregivers; consideration for alternative types of care; and the significant role of “very important persons” in the lives of individuals who grew up in foster care.

Keywords: foster care; attachment; loss; friendship, important other, outcomes
Dedication

To those who grew up without an available mother or father to take them through the journey of childhood. To those who lived in the homes of others, wondering if they were going to get to stay their forever, and found themselves moving. To those who lived their childhood hurt, and are now lessening the pain in others lives. This research was done with the hope of telling some of your story, with the hope of lessening the pain that others might have to go through in the future.
Acknowledgements

The organizations that supported this research: The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, The Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Network, and Westcoast Family Resources Society.

The British Columbia Ministry for Children and Family Development, which seeks to provide all children in British Columbia with a safe home to live in.

The participants in this study, I am thankful for the honour they gave me when they shared their stories with me. My life was changed by the time we spent together.

My thesis supervisors: Dr. Lucy Le Mare and Dr. Patrice Keats, who patiently guided me through this thesis. Dr. Le Mare joined me in a nine year journey through my graduate education. She has generously supervised me with; her vast knowledge of attachment; her passion for vulnerable children; her valuable time; and her immense wisdom about research and writing. From conception to completion Dr. Le Mare provided support for this research. Dr. Patrice Keats enthusiastically supervised this thesis, empowering me with the gifts of motivation and confidence. Dr. Keats led me through the data analyses process, and taught me to be a stronger researcher and writer. Her time, patience, compassion, and wisdom have been greatly appreciated. For the gifts of these two professors I am immensely grateful.

My amazing husband and remarkable children, for understanding the importance of this research, and giving me the time and encouragement needed to see it through to my defense. I wake up each morning feeling overwhelmingly thankful for you.
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MCFD</td>
<td>Ministry for Children and Family Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VInpA</td>
<td>Very Important non-parental Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIP</td>
<td>Very Important Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSS-Fr</td>
<td>Perceived Social Support – Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSS-Fa</td>
<td>Perceived Social Support – Family</td>
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<td>Experiences in Close Relationships Revised</td>
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<tr>
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Introduction

I began my career in counselling 14 years ago, working with youth on Vancouver’s downtown eastside, an area notorious for poverty, prostitution, addictions, mental health problems, and crime. Barely twenty-years-old, my initial job was to help troubled youth, aged 18-26, transition away from the streets into jobs, school, and to living in their own apartments. As these young adults and I came to know one another I learned that many had spent years living in foster care. In addition to attending individual counselling sessions with me, the youth in this group took turns taking responsibility with me for planning and preparing a weekly meal for the whole group who ate together as a family while studying life skills. Although many struggled with regular attendance at their individual counselling sessions and in many other aspects of their lives, they all came regularly to that weekly “family” meeting. Despite challenges in everyday functioning they were committed to engaging as a group; this “family” style gathering appeared to meet a need that these individuals had for nurturing through food, community and learning.

I transitioned from that job to working in a program that served parents whose children had been removed by the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD). These parents were mandated by MCFD to attend this program on parenting skills as part of a process of preparing to have their children returned to them. In the course of that work I came to learn that many of these parents had grown up in foster care themselves, and that many of their parents had grown up separated from their parents in residential schools. I noticed a potential pattern in these two generations of children growing up in the absence of their birth parents. I wondered how this loss in child-parent relationships affected their own knowledge and comfort with parenting, as their own abilities to be emotionally and physically available to their children were limited. For these individuals their ability to manage their children’s behaviours and needs, set boundaries, and be empathic, was challenged.
In British Columbia, the foster care system aims to provide surrogate families for children whose own families are unable to care for them. Foster families are meant to give such children the physical and emotional care they need for healthy physical, cognitive, and emotional development. With healthy development comes the capacity to be productive and form positive relationships. Yet, a commonality among the individuals I worked with appeared to be a lack of these capacities. They had entered into a relationship with me because they struggled to be productive in managing independent living including school and work; forming positive relationships through parenting; understanding their own and others needs; and communicating them effectively. In their formative years they had all been provided with "families" through foster care and yet the benefits of "family care" had not materialized. The skills to form and maintain relationships appeared to have been harmed. My experience working with adults who had grown-up in foster care motivated the present research. In this study, I sought to understand what individuals raised in care believe about being in relationships with others and how those beliefs relate to their experiences with caregivers and friends.

In British Columbia, there are approximately 10,000 children and youth living in foster care (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2007). A recent review of foster care research reveals that for many of these children frequent placement changes are the norm and there is an increased risk that the dependent years will consist of multiple moves and numerous caregivers (Havlicek, 2011). Frequent changes in foster care placement is a primary factor identified as negatively impacting the developmental outcomes for children raised within the child welfare system (Havlicek, 2011; Pecora et al. 2006). As will be discussed in the following review of literature, numerous studies have demonstrated that children in foster care experience more developmental delays, emotional problems, behavioural problems, psychiatric symptoms and have lower health and academic performance than their non-fostered peers (Farrugia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006; Gauthier, Fortin & Jéliu, 2004; Mitic, & Rimer, 2002; Schwartz, McRoy, & Downs, 2004; Stein, Evans, Mazumdar & Rae-Grant, 1996;).

Despite a relatively large literature on the correlates and consequence of foster care, there remains a slow growth in research focused on young adults who have exited the foster care system and few studies have looked at a broad enough range of outcomes to give an indication of quality of life beyond the years in foster care (Harris,
Outcome research on adults who grew up in care has provided some insight into the challenges these individuals face with school; work; emotional and behavioural expression; mental health; and criminal activity but rarely have researchers examined the relationships of these individuals, which constitutes a significant gap. The study of the relationships of individuals who have lived in foster care is of particular importance, as their experience while in care is typically of repeated relationship loss and gain. Unrau’s (2007) review of 43 studies investigating placement moves indicated that for children in care, the difficulty surrounding moving was less about a change in physical location and more about how their connections to people were impacted. The impact these experiences have on individuals’ capacities to form and maintain relationships in adulthood is unknown. As noted above, when working in a field with adults who grew up in foster care in British Columbia, it was apparent to me that their relationships had been deeply impacted beyond the years of provided care.

In the current study I explored the dynamics of important relationships in seven young adults who grew up in foster care.

Foster Care Outcomes Research

A review of literature on foster care outcomes follows to provide a context for the current study. In the following sections, I summarize the research on foster care experiences in relationship to academic performance; employment outcomes; mental health and behaviour; and independence.

Academic Performance

As stated in a recent report on children and youth in foster care in BC, children in care are not academically progressing and graduating at the same rate as children and youth outside of foster care (Representative for Children and Youth, 2009); this was also found in national studies that report a high percentage of youth in care are not completing high school (National Youth in Care Network, 2001). Research in other parts of the world has also shown that individuals in foster care experience challenges with academics. For example, it has been reported that many youth who have transitioned
out of care in the United States are not in school (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In addition, a disproportionately high number of foster care alumni in the United States are completing high school through a GED (Pecora et al. 2006). Similarly, research in France showed that individuals who spent long-term periods in foster care received fewer diplomas than the population as a whole (Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch, & Couraud, 1997). These findings speak to the difficulty that many older youth, who grew up in foster care, have in reaching the cultural standard for education.

This cultural standard often requires the involvement of caregivers to assist with children’s academic growth by managing any behavioural complications, supporting them with homework, aiding them in class selection, and collaborating in educational planning. When children struggle academically their parents are often needed to advocate for their educational needs. In this study I explored how participants experienced academic opportunities while in foster care and how they thought being in foster care impacted their education.

**Employment Outcomes**

Outcomes with regard to employment are also less positive for individuals who grew up in foster care. Four studies offer insight into the employment challenges of adults who have grown up in foster care. Pecora et al. (2006) conducted a study of 659 young adults who grew up in foster care in the United States (U.S.). These authors found many of the alumni in their study in fragile economic situations, with one-third having an income at or below the poverty level, and more than one fifth having been homeless for some time after leaving foster care. Likewise, Courtney and Dworsky (2006) found many youth who had transitioned out of care without work, without basic necessities, and in some cases being homeless. Interestingly, 59 adults in France, who spent long periods of time in foster care, reported having more vocational and occupational training than is found in the population as a whole (Dumaret et al. 1997). However, occupational job figures for these participants did not differ significantly from national norms (Dumaret et al. 1997). These findings suggest that many individuals who grew up in care have low paying jobs, or face unemployment, keeping them at or below the poverty level and further, that individuals growing up in care may need support to guide them through employment related decisions. This process may be a challenge for
many, and may contribute to explaining the employment outcomes for these individuals. In the present study I explored with participants their employment status and the role of supportive figures in their lives, as concerns employment.

**Mental Health and Behaviour**

The rates of mental health and behavioural challenges for children and youth who have grown up in foster care, are also of concern (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Crawford, 2006; Harris et al., 2009; Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Gauthier, Fortin, & Jéliu, 2004; Perry, 2006; Stein et al. 1996). In a Canadian study, Stein et al. (1996) used a psychiatric symptom scale completed by teachers and caregivers with three samples: children in foster care, a community sample and a clinical sample, who were patients at a children’s mental health centre and found that children in foster care had a similar number of psychiatric symptoms as those in the clinical sample. For children in foster care in the U.S., rates of behaviour problems, (measured through a behaviour check-list completed by teachers), and clinically significant symptoms (measured by a semi-structured interview to evaluate psychopathology), have been reported to be up to 2.5 times higher than for those children with similar characteristics who are not in foster care (Lawrence et al. 2006). These severe behaviour problems are often attributed to the repeated multiple home placements common within foster care (Gauthier et al. 2004).

Unfortunately, studies of mental health challenges in adults who grew up in care are not as prevalent as those for children. Three studies allude to the difficulties many older youth leaving care experience with mental health issues. From France, Dumaret, et al. (1997) found that individuals who were reared for long-term periods in foster care experienced more hospitalizations and psychosomatic problems than the population as a whole. In the U.S. many youth who have transitioned out of care have been found to be suffering from mental illness and many have substance use disorders (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Additionally, Anctil, McCubbin, O’Brien, and Pecora (2007) found that unstable U.S. foster care placements were associated with a higher possibility of mental health diagnoses continuing into adulthood.
When individuals experience challenges with mental health it is often the people closest to them who assist them in getting support and help. Under typical circumstances assistance comes from families but for individuals who grew up in care birth families members may not play this role. A question that arises concerns who it is that adult foster children rely on for this kind of support. In this research I address who adult foster children turn to for support and care they may need for mental health challenges.

**Independence**

It is well recognized that a particularly difficult time in the lives of foster youth is when they reach the age of adulthood and are no longer able to stay in foster care; this has become a topic of considerable research interest. For youth in foster care, emancipation from care is complicated by the loss of identity as a foster child, and the onset of physical independence (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Samuels and Pryce (2008) interviewed 44 young people and found a commonality among them concerning their premature conferral of adult status, self-reliance, and independence. These authors suggested that the vigilant self-reliance that many youth develop while in foster care, creates a risk for deteriorating the connections that they have in supportive relationships. Youth think they must be self-sufficient and, therefore do not allow themselves to depend on support people. Similar concerns were raised by Keller et al. (2007) who explored the case records of 732 youth leaving care for indications of their preparedness. Keller, Cusick and Courtney (2007) identified four distinct groups of youth emancipating from care: distressed and disconnected; competent and connected; struggling-but-staying; and hindered and homebound. Youth who were distressed and disconnected were the largest of the four groups comprised of troubled adolescents experiencing difficulties while they were socially disconnected from adults and systems of support. The second largest group of youth, competent and connected, were deemed unlikely to exhibit problem behaviours; delinquent behaviours; or mental health and substance-related disorders; and were likely to indicate feeling close to a relative and various social supports. Youth who were categorized in the struggling-but-staying group, were moving into independence with numerous challenges but appeared to have healthy engagements within the child welfare system. Lastly, of the youth who were hindered and homebound (only 5% of the sample), nearly all lived with relatives and
reported close relationships, high levels of grade retention, and low rates of employment. Keller et al. argue that the delivery of support services should be guided by the knowledge of how youth are managing their transitions (i.e., which group they fit into).

The data of Keller et al. (2007) present an interesting snapshot of the situations of youth transitioning out of care but, as they are based solely on closed ended responses to survey instruments, they provide little information about the circumstances surrounding how or why these situations arose or how they are perceived by the youths themselves. In the present study, I explore with adults who have lived through the emancipation process their transitions into independence and the services and people that assisted them along the way. It is my hope that from the words of individuals who have transitioned from the care of the Ministry into independence we can learn about ways to better support individuals going through this process.

**Relationships**

Research with regard to the relationship outcomes of adults who grew up in foster care is difficult to find and has been identified as a gap in the literature (Anctil et al. 2007; Schwartz et al. 2004). However, the information that does exist suggests individuals who grew up in foster care face challenges in their adult relationships (Dumaret et al. 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Relationship research with children and youth in foster care has reported on relationships with birth parents, and the significant influence of siblings, friends and other social supports (Lawrence et al. 2006; Pecora & Maluccio, 2001; Perry, 2006; Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow, & Brown, 2005). In learning more about these influential relationships beyond adolescence we can learn how to better support children and youth as they transition from care, as well as set up and increase the likelihood of successful relationship outcomes.

The outcome research reviewed above details concerns for the overall well being of individuals who grow up in foster care. Learning more about their relationships in the years that follow emancipation will provide insight into how counsellors, other support workers, and people in the lives of fostered individuals can positively influence later relationship outcomes. Much of the current relationship research is conducted through the perspective of attachment theory. To have a comprehensive understanding of the
complexities of relationships for individuals who grow up in care, it is important to look at the research that has been done specifically from this perspective. A description of attachment theory and related research follows.

**Studying Relationships through Attachment**

A dominant paradigm for understanding relationships across the life span is attachment theory. Attachment theory addresses the adaptive significance of the tendency of individuals to create strong affectional bonds to specific people (Cassidy, 1999). An attachment perspective on the complex relationships of children and parents in foster care has been advocated by many researchers (Adshead & Bluglass, 2001; Gauthier et al. 2004; Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003; Howe & Fearnley, 2003; Lanyado, 2003; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Whelan, 2003).

**The Seeking of Relationship**

Within the attachment literature descriptions can be found of the innate behaviours of infants that promote proximity to their caregivers (Ainsworth, 1985). In addition to proximity seeking behaviours there are three other characteristics that make attachment bonds different from other relationships: using the attachment figure as a “safe haven” when threatened, using the attachment figure as a “secure base” to independently explore from, and experiencing “separation distress” when a disruption in the relationship arises (Allen & Land, 1999; Bowlby, 1979; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). These features characterize attachment relationships with different people, throughout life. When a primary attachment figure is unavailable emotionally or physically (as is the case when individuals are placed in care), children are likely to experience a great deal of distress. When this figure is emotionally unavailable the child is unable to obtain a sense of safety when frightened or a safe base from which they can explore the world. Additionally, when an attachment figure is not available physically, the child no longer has access to the person in who they sought to find safety and security. Emotional unavailability and long-term separation from a primary attachment figure threatens the optimal development of the attachment system and challenges the ability to form and maintain healthy relationships (Albus & Dozier, 1999).
**Attachment Working Models**

During the first year of life infants begin building expectations of how relationships work through their own experiences (Ainsworth, 1985). These expectations become organized internally into what John Bowlby called “working models” (Ainsworth, 1985). Each time a child has an experience it is processed and expectations are formed. These expectations are acted on, and are then confirmed by the responses of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These mental representations of relationships are based on experience and made up largely of unconscious beliefs and expectations about how relationships operate (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999; Maier, Bernier, Pekrun, Zimmerman, & Grossmann, 2004). Part of the process of creating one’s internal working model of relationships involves organizing stressful circumstances and negative emotions (van Izendoorn, Schuengel & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999). For example, infants who cry for food and are responded to by being fed, learn that their cries elicit a response; the next time they are hungry they will cry expecting to be fed. This experience of being responded to and having a need met may transfer into other experiences with communicating a need and expecting it to be met. Alternatively, infants who repeatedly cry with hunger and then are not fed may learn that their cries do not bring food and so may stop crying when they are hungry. This experience may also transfer into an internal working model that contends that others will not meet their needs.

The study of relationships from an attachment theory perspective has revealed differences across individuals in their expectations of relationships. These expectations have been explored through studying patterns of attachment behaviours that individuals exhibit (Crowell et al. 1999). As reported by Crowell and colleagues (1999), and fitting with the suggestion that attachment behaviours stem from internal working models developed through experiences, patterned behaviours of attachment working models do not appear to be strongly affected by temperament or other childhood characteristics. Thus, people’s attachment behaviours are activated by working models that reflect expectations of both personal behaviours and behaviours of others. The organization of these attachment behaviours has been described by researchers in terms of “security” and “insecurity”.
The quality of a child’s developing attachment relationship is affected by both continuity of care and how sensitive and responsive the caregiver is to the needs of the child. As Le Mare (2001) explains, securely attached children have caregivers who respond quickly and with warmth when they are distressed; stimulate them appropriately; show affection; are generally positive with them; and are responsive to their needs and feelings. Conversely, insecurely attached children have caregivers who may be intrusive; excessively stimulating; punitive and controlling; or unresponsive and uninvolved. Insecure attachments are likely to develop when care-giving is unpredictable or disrupted, as is the case with children and youth in foster care (Le Mare, 2001). Over the years attachment security has been studied by numerous researchers and labelled to represent four different types of attachment.

The four attachment types have been defined by researchers in descriptively different terms for children and adults. Through the study of relationships, Mary Ainsworth, in the late 1970s, followed by Mary Main and Judy Solomon in the 1990s, created categories of attachment styles for infants and children. Ainsworth created a well-known measure of attachment called the Strange Situation (SS) to study infants’ responses to stress in their attachment relationship. Infants are placed in an unfamiliar environment in which they are separated and then reunited with their attachment figure. Lyons-Ruth and Jacobvitz (1999) describe how each attachment type is manifested in the SS. Those infants who displayed minimal affect or proximity seeking when reunited with their attachment figure were termed avoidant. Those who mingled proximity seeking with angry behaviour toward their attachment figure, were categorized as resistant/ambivalent. And those infants who sought proximity or contact with their attachment figure, without avoidance or anger were labelled secure. As cited in Lyons-Ruth and Jacobvitz (1999), while studying attachment behaviours in infants Main and Solomon witnessed behaviours that were fearful, odd, disorganized, and overtly conflicted, behaviours undefined by Ainsworth’s styles of attachment. Main and Solomen labelled this attachment pattern disorganized/disoriented (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). It appears that this pattern develops when infants experienced mixed messages to both increase and reduce physical proximity to their caregiver (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999).
The measurement and classification of adult attachment styles is described in Hesse (1999), as having its origins in the mid-1980s when it was discovered that parents’ responses to interview questions about their own childhood experiences with their parents, were associated with their children’s behaviour during the *Strange Situation*. This interview-based method of studying the attachment styles of parents developed into the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996). On the basis of AAI responses adults are categorized into one of four attachment styles, or *states of mind* (George et al. 1996). The four types of adult attachment are: secure, preoccupied, dismissing (avoidant) and unresolved/disorganized. Adults who are primarily secure in their attachments are able to describe “diverse childhood experiences, maintain a balanced view of early relationships, value attachment relationships, and view attachment-related experiences as influential in development” (Crowell & Treboux, 1995, p. 301). Those who are primarily preoccupied “display confusion about past experiences, and current relationships with parents are marked by active anger or with passivity” (Crowell & Treboux, 1995, p. 301). Adults who work from a dismissing (avoidant) model of attachment “deny or devalue the impact of early attachment relationships, have difficulty with recall of specific events, often idealize experiences and usually describe an early history of rejection” (Crowell & Treboux, 1995, p. 301). Lastly, individuals who have a working model that is primarily unresolved/disorganized often report “attachment related traumas of loss and/or abuse which have not been reconciled” (Crowell & Treboux, 1995, p. 301).

While many researchers have sought to understand adult attachment in the context of parenting, others have studied it in the context of romantic relationships. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a model of adult attachment that encompasses both approaches. These researchers systematized Bowlby’s conception of internal working models into a two-dimensional four-category model of adult attachment. The four categories are based on ones’ positive or negative model of themselves, and positive or negative model of others. As can be seen in Table 1, those with positive models of themselves and others are labelled secure. Secure individuals are described as: highly coherent, high in self-confidence, having a positive approach to others, and experiencing high intimacy in relationships. Individuals with a negative model of themselves and positive model of others are described as having a
*preoccupied* attachment. Characteristics of *preoccupied* attachment include: preoccupation with relationships, incoherence and idealizing in discussing relationships, being highly dependent on others for self-esteem, and approach oriented in relationships. Individuals who have a negative model of themselves and a negative model of others have a *fearful* attachment. The *fearful* attachment prototype is characterized by low self-confidence and avoidance of intimacy due to fear of rejection, conflicting motives of both wanting and fearing intimacy and high self-consciousness. Lastly, individuals with a positive model of themselves and a negative model of others have a *dismissing* attachment style. *Dismissing* attachment features low elaboration and coherence when discussing relationships, downplaying the importance of relationships, high self-confidence, avoidance of intimacy, and compulsive self-reliance. In reviewing the adult attachment research Bartholomew and Shaver (1998) concluded that the *avoidant* classification style described in much of the research actually encompassed two of their attachment prototypes. The *avoidant* classification in the adult relationship research was descriptive of their *fearful* prototype and the *avoidant* classification in the parenting research was descriptive of their *dismissing* prototype.

**Table 1: Parallel Attachment Patterns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infant Strange Situation Behaviour (SS)</th>
<th>Adult Attachment State of Mind (AAI)</th>
<th>Bartholomew’s Label (HAI)</th>
<th>Bartholomew’s Model of Self/Model of Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Secure/Autonomous</td>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Positive/Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant/Ambivalent</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Negative/Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Negative/Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dismissing (Avoidant)</td>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>Positive/Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorganized/Disoriented</td>
<td>Unresolved/Disorganized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hesse (1999, p. 399)  

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991)

The attachment challenges that foster children experience include complex living conditions with their birth families that lead to separation. The act of separation from primary attachment figures, through entry into foster care, likely further negatively impacts their sense of security in relationships. In addition, for many foster children the
move from their birth family is followed by continued separations and losses as they move from foster home to foster home.

**The Transmission Of Attachment Style**

Many studies have supported the argument that attachment organization is transmitted from parent, most often mother, to child (Benoit & Parker, 1994; Kretchmar & Jacobvitz, 2002; Peck, 2003; Silverman, 1994; Spieker & Bensley, 1994; Steele, Steele, & Fonagy, 1996; Wakschlag, Chase-Lansdale, & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Ward, & Carlson, 1995). In their study with 55 families, across three generations, Kretchmar and Jacobvitz (2002), suggest that the transmission of caregiving behaviours involves the next generation internalizing the relationship strategies they experience with their caregivers. In measuring the transmission of attachment microanalytically Peck (2003) supports the concept of working models, suggesting attachment working models tend to be transmitted from one generation to the next, through subtle, fine-grained interactive behaviours. For individuals whose caregivers change, potentially numerous times, the transmission of attachment behaviours and expectations becomes very complex and much harder to predict.

Three studies highlight findings with infants and children in foster and adoptive care and the transmission of attachment. Howes and Ritchie (1999) reviewed literature on relationship building in children whose relationship histories were troubled and concluded that, “children with prior relationship difficulties, when moved to settings with sensitive caregivers, appear to be able either to, reorganize their attachment representations when they encounter caregivers who respond sensitively, or to construct independent relationships based on experiences with the new caregivers” (p. 678). Dozier, Stovall, Albus and Bates (2001) reported findings from a longitudinal study that suggested for the first time that fostered infants’ placed within the first 18 months of life, were able to organize their attachments around the availability of their foster caregivers, suggesting that secure attachments could be formed between foster infants and secure foster parents. However, more recent work suggests that fostered infants may actually lead the interactive relationship within foster care (Dozier, 2005). Stovall and Dozier (2000) found that even parents with secure attachment representations responded “in kind” to avoidant and resistant behaviours. For example, avoidant behaviour was
responded to as if the child did not need the caregiver and resistant behaviour was responded to with anger. Howe (2001) recognizes that the attachment histories and internal working models of older fostered children are actively carried from relationships with parents into relationships with new carers. The early attachment relationships and the working models that are created are very strong; research has suggested that the mother-child experiences during infancy appear to be more influential on later attachment than adolescent interaction experiences (Beckwith, Cohen & Hamilton, 1999).

Ainsworth (1985, 1985a) made a compelling argument for attachments across the life span, and in relationships outside of caregiving such as friendships, sibling relationships and intimate relationships. More recent research has indicated that even as individuals grow and move into relationships with intimate partners, their attachments to their parents remain (Schwartz et al. 2004). Other studies suggest that attachment organization tends to be consistent across relationships, from relationships with primary caregivers, to friends and romantic partners (Ainsworth, 1985; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998).

**The Stability of Attachment**

The stability of attachment appears to be influenced by the stability of primary relationships. Many studies have confirmed the stability of attachment style; for example, studies on samples that were primarily Caucasians from stable two-parent, middle to upper class homes, showed that attachment organization tends to be consistent over time (Ainsworth, 1985; Benoit & Parker, 1994, Main & Cassidy, 1988). Other studies looking at attachment from infancy to adulthood indicate that actual experiences with mothers during infancy are associated with attachment representations later in adulthood (Beckwith et al. 1999). Interestingly, in a longitudinal study with three generations, Benoit and Parker (1994) found that attachment stability was high for individuals with secure attachments; however, those with insecure attachment classifications were four times more likely to experience change in their attachment classification. Similarly, attachment does not appear to be stable in “high-risk” individuals. Weinfield, Sroufe, and Egeland (2000) studied the continuity of attachment with a sample of “high-risk” young adults and found no significant continuity between
infant and adult attachment. In addition, research has shown that the stability of attachment in lower-class, high-risk, and clinical samples is significantly weaker (DeWolff, & van IJzendoorn, 1997). It was concluded by Weinfield et al. (2000) and DeWolff and van IJzendoorn (1997) that attachment classifications may change in unstable family situations. In fact, researchers found that discontinuity in attachment was related to negative life events and circumstances such as the death of a parent, foster care, parental divorce, chronic and severe illness, single parent, parental psychiatric disorder, drug and alcohol abuse, and child experience of physical or sexual abuse (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000). Interestingly research has also provided evidence that the presence of strong social support structures might decrease the impact of these negative experiences or events (Waters et al. 2000).

The research on attachment stability, specifically within foster care and adoption, once again appears to be limited to the experiences of infants and children. The studies reviewed here offer insight into the security of attachment for many young individuals who have experienced living in foster care. Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, and Braunwald (1989) found that infants from families receiving protective services were more likely than a matched sample to be insecurely attached to their caregivers. Additionally, in reviewing the few studies looking at the internal models of parents involved in child protection procedures, Adshead and Bluglass (2001a) suggested that insecurely attached parents may relate to their child through an internal working model characterized by hostility and fear, which in the face of an infant’s dependent needs evokes anxiety and anger. Lastly, it has been reported that children who have suffered maltreatment, rejection, and multiple placements are more likely to develop avoidant and disorganized/controlling attachments (Howe, 2001). The experience of secure attachment for children who have experienced negative life experiences and breaches to relationships may be difficult to achieve, particularly for those who have lived in multiple homes.

An exploration of the attachments of grown foster children has yet to be conducted. Given the lasting impact of problematic relationships in the early lives of individuals who grow up in foster care, there may be difficulties with relationships later in life, yet these complexities are as yet undocumented. In the present study I aimed to learn more about the relationships of adults who grew up in unstable family situations.
with the hope that this knowledge would be helpful in informing practitioners of how to assist such individuals in building social support structures which may have the potential to mediate their negative early life experiences.

Friendship

Given that foster children typically grow up in circumstances that do not provide the continuity and sensitivity supportive of secure attachment, and that attachment styles tend to be fairly stable and inform relationships beyond those with caregivers, there is good reason to expect that adult foster children may experience difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships. Even though research has shown that most young adults have numerous attachment relationships with family, romantic partners and friends, within the foster care research attachment relationships outside of the child-caregiver relationship have rarely been explored (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). Developmental theories suggest that as individuals grow they move from a focus on caregivers to a focus on friendship, and their hierarchy of attachment figures changes (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997; Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). This shift signifies a move from experiencing attachment relationships in which the individual is primarily receiving care from attachment figures, to relationships with reciprocity in which the individual is both receiving and giving care (Schwartz et al. 2004, Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997).

Friendship has been described as a medium for getting one’s needs met in the context of a relationship in which the partner has needs of her own that she is trying to gratify as well (Selman, 1980). Inherent in this definition is the existence of a force of closeness, promoting togetherness, (like the need to be in proximity to an attachment figure), and a force of separateness, which keeps individuals aware of their own interests (Selman, 1997). The way this interplay, between the forces of togetherness and separateness, looks for individuals who have had their innate survival need for closeness challenged is not well understood. My research begins to explore this interplay through studying trust, closeness and alienation in relationships.
Friendship Research with High-Risk Children

Smith (1995), studied the friendships of 51 high-risk preschool-aged children, 38 who were in foster care, and 13 who received preventative services with their biological families, and found that the majority of children had developed a close relationship with a non-related peer. However, it was found that foster children, particularly those who were separated from their siblings, directed more negative behaviour toward their friends than the children who resided with their biological families (Smith, 1995).

In a more recent study with older children Burack et al. (2006), assessed the ability of children and youth to understand others thoughts, feelings, and points of view. In this study the researchers compared children and adolescence recruited through social service agencies, group homes and programs for youth with behavioural and emotional problems (the “maltreated group”), with a group of children recruited from a local school (“non-maltreated group”). It was found that the maltreated children and adolescents showed deficits in social perspective-taking skills (Burack et al. 2006). The researchers concluded that the disadvantage in negotiating age-appropriate social-cognitive developmental tasks, could leave these children and youth at a risk for persistent problems in interpersonal relationships (Burack et al. 2006).

The studies of Smith (1995) and Burack et al. (2006) suggest that children in care are at risk for deficits in behavioural and social-cognitive skills that can negatively impact their relationships with peers. In the current study I was interested in learning about the peer relationship histories of my participants, if they had been able to form friendships, and the role that friends played in their lives.

Relationships with Very Important Non-parental Adults

Research suggests that having an influential non-parental adult in one’s life is a very normal occurrence during adolescence (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger,2002). These influential adult figures have been referred to as Very Important non-parental Persons (VinPA; Farrugia et al. 2006) The lack of research on the role of important non-parental figures in the lives of youth growing up in foster care is surprising, especially given the amount of research on the role such figures play in the lives of “typical” adolescents.
The research of Farrugia et al. suggests that foster care youths' well-being, adjustment, and social environment are impacted by their relationships with very important non-parental adults. These researchers compared 163 pre-emancipated fostered youth with a matched sample of 163 youth who did not grow up in foster care. The results indicated that youth in foster care were more likely to have a VInpA, and to receive more support from their VInpAs, than the non-fostered youth. Unlike the non-fostered youth, the fostered youth perceived their VInpAs as more supportive than their parents. The results of this study suggested that more effective support for fostered youth from their VInpAs may have offset the lower support that they received from their parents and highlights the potential importance of VInpAs for youth in foster care.

In a more recent study Greeson and Bowen (2008) gathered exploratory qualitative data on the relationships of foster youth with important non-parental adults, who they termed “natural” mentors. This is one of the only studies I located that examined the relationship experiences of fostered individuals near adulthood. Greeson and Bowen described the relationships of seven females, aged 16 to 20 years, with their natural mentors as entailing child (the youth) and parent-like (the mentor) roles involving trust, love and caring. Youth in the study reported receiving emotional, informational, appraisal and tangible support. Greeson and colleagues (Greeson & Bowen; Greeson, Usher and Grinstein-Weiss, 2010) have called for more research exploring mentoring relationships and the relationship needs of foster children throughout their development. On this basis I felt that examining relationships with VInpAs was an important avenue to include in my own research.

Summary

As this literature review shows, the foster care outcomes research suggests that many adults who grew up in foster care experience challenges with academics, employment, mental health, and independence. Researchers have identified the need for outcomes research concerning the relationships of adults who grew up in foster care. Relationship research is frequently conducted from the perspective of attachment theory. Studies of attachment security for individuals who experience relationship loss and change suggest that finding security in relationships under these circumstances is often
difficult. As individuals move from childhood into adolescence and adulthood, their relationships with peers become increasingly significant. For individuals who have lived in foster care, the presence of a very important non-parental adult into their lives may also be of great significance. My research focuses on the perspectives of young adults who have lived in foster care in British Columbia, with an emphasis on security within their close relationships, their relationships with their parents, caregivers, peers, and VInpAs.
Method

Design

In this study I used a mixed methods approach to learn about relationships from adults who lived in foster care as children. The study was originally designed and undertaken as a quantitative study utilizing questionnaire data. Recruitment of participants resulted in 14 individuals who lived in foster care for five or more years completing the questionnaires, a sample size not large enough to conduct meaningful quantitative analyses. Consequently, a decision was made to shift the focus of the study from a survey to an in-depth analysis of the relationships of a smaller number of adults who lived in foster care as children. The questionnaire data collected on the 14 individuals were used to guide the creation of a semi-structured interview, which is described further in the Measures section that follows. Participants who completed the questionnaires were invited to participate in this open-ended interview. This design is referred to by Cresswell and Zhang (2009), as an explanatory sequential design, as the quantitative data collected in the first phase was used to guide the selection of participants and the interview questions asked in the second phase. Most explanatory sequential designs use the qualitative data to explain and interpret the quantitative findings. In this study the qualitative interview data are the main focus.

Participants

Participants in this study were seven adults who spent five or more years living in foster care in British Columbia. They were recruited through social service agencies and a social network advertisement. I sent proposals to social service agencies in the Lower Mainland, seeking permission to recruit participants. Interested agencies invited me to attend board meetings at which permission was granted for me to recruit participants at
groups for adult foster children. In addition, I created a Facebook group where I outlined the research and requested interested individuals to make contact.

Interested individuals were provided with information about the study including; the design and purpose of the research; possible risks and benefits in participating; and a confidentiality form. Once this information was reviewed and forms signed, participants completed a package containing four questionnaires. Fourteen individuals who lived in foster care for five or more years in British Columbia completed the questionnaires.

At a later date, 11 of the 14 participants were invited to participate in an interview. Three participants were not invited to participate in the interview as they were between the ages of 39 and 61 and may have experienced significantly different foster care experiences than the younger participants. Seven of the 11 invited participants met with me to review phase two study information, complete a second confidentiality form, and participate in an interview. Interviews were held in a variety of locations, chosen by the participants as places where they felt comfortable: coffee shops, homes and a pub.

A demographic description of each of the seven interview participants is provided in Table 2. Participants’ names have been changed to provide confidentiality.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age entered FC</th>
<th>Homes lived in</th>
<th>Current Living Arrangement</th>
<th>Work/School</th>
<th>Childhood Diagnoses</th>
<th>Current Diagnoses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>On the road</td>
<td>Full-time Work/Self-Employed</td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>With Parent</td>
<td>Full-time School</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
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<td>Brenda</td>
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<td>Roommates</td>
<td>Part-time Work</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Part-time School</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures

As mentioned, this mixed methods study included two phases, a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase. In the following paragraphs I describe the instruments used at each phase and explain how the questionnaires were used to inform the semi-structured interview questions.

**Phase I: Closed-ended questionnaires**

At Phase 1 demographic information was collected and four questionnaires were used; the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller & Brennan, 2000); the Inventory of Parent, “Very Important Person” and Peer Attachment (IPvipPA; Gullone & Robinson, 2005); the Perceived Social Support – Friends and Family Scale (PSS-Fr &PSS-Fa; Procidano & Heller, 1983); and the Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire (RPLQ; Hayden, 1989).

The ECR-R questionnaire was designed to measure attachment working models with 36 items comprising two sub-scales: Avoidance (discomfort with closeness, discomfort depending on others) and Anxiety (fear of rejection and abandonment). Participants’ responses to this questionnaire led to the development of open-ended questions about anxieties and avoidances in past and present relationships. Inquiry surrounding experiences with trust also stemmed from this questionnaire. Examples of these questions include: *One of the things that I would like to talk to you about is worry and anxiety in relationship. Some people experience a lot of worry, and others none.*
Can you tell me where you fit in this? How would you describe your experience with trust in relationships?

The IPvipPA is intended to measure affective and cognitive components of attachment. Participants rated statements about relationships with parents, “Very Important Persons” and friends on 5-point scales for how true they were of them. Responses to this questionnaire led to interview questions that probed participants’ close relationships, the thoughts and feelings associated with them, and the value that they found in them. An example of such an interview probe and question is: *Tell me about the person that you are closest to. What do you value in this relationship?*

The PSS-Fr and PSS-Fa each consist of statements about family and friends which participants responded to on a 5-point likert scale as being true: Always, Often, Sometimes, Seldom or Never. This measure is intended to assess the extent to which participants believe that their needs for support, information, and feedback are being fulfilled by friends and family. For all participants this questionnaire revealed that they were more likely to turn to friends than family to have their needs for support, information and feedback met. This led to the following interview question: *Your questionnaire answers suggest that you are more likely to turn to friends for support than family. Can you tell me about that?*

Lastly the RPLQ was used with the intent of learning about participants’ feelings regarding access to close friends and a supportive peer group. This quantitative measure inspired questions about individual friendships and group involvement. An example of such a question is: *Can you tell me about your experience in groups?*

**Phase II: Open-ended interviews**

As just described, participants responses to questionnaires were used as the starting point for a series of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview. The interview questions sought to clarify information about each participants’ relationship with their birth parents while in care; social support systems in their families and amongst friends; comfort with individuals and groups; their perceptions of the impact that living in foster care has had on their relationships; anxieties and avoidances that they may or may not have surrounding relationship; perceptions of trust; and important adult
influences in their lives. Through the interview participants were asked a series of sixteen questions (see Appendix B). Clarification questions were added where needed. The seven interviews ranged in length from 41 to 80 minutes.

With permission, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The confidentiality of participants’ questionnaire data, audio-recorded interviews, and interview transcripts was maintained throughout the research, with paper records being stored in a locked cabinet, and computer records being saved without personally revealing information. All documentation that contains personally identifying information is scheduled to be destroyed following defense and acceptance of this thesis. University ethics approval for this research can be found in Appendix C.

**Data Analysis Process**

The qualitative data analysis process, as described by Cresswell (2009), involves the researcher moving deeper and deeper into the data. The researcher does this through representing the data through inductively built codes, furthering the codes into categories and making interpretations of the larger meaning of the data through themes. Throughout this procedure I continually reflected upon the data, asking questions, and writing memos in order to develop an understanding of what each of the participants had said, as well as to make connections within and between their stories. In the paragraphs that follow I describe; my data organization system; coding procedures; creation of memos; process of categorizing; and the culminating themes.

**Data Organization**

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into qualitative analysis software called MAXQDA (VerbiGmbH, 2011). MAXQDA is a computer software program used by researchers to create an efficient means to store and locate qualitative data (Cresswell, 2009). The transcribed interviews resulted in hundreds of pages of text. MAXQDA provided a framework to organize this information. The software provided me with three working windows at all times: a document system, a code system, and a document browser. The document system stored all the interviews and their memos,
making them easily accessible at all times. The code system allowed me to identify segments of text; create codes; and organize the codes and categories. Finally, the document browser provided easy access to the text of each of the transcribed interviews. MAXQDA also assisted in the creation of charts and tables to organize the analysis process.

**Coding**

To begin the coding process I reviewed all transcribed interviews to provide me with a general sense of the data as a whole. This review also allowed me to reflect on the overall meaning participants described (Creswell, 2009). The interviews were then coded using structural coding. Structural coding is often used in qualitative research that is driven by a specific research topic (Saldaña, 2009). As described by Saldaña, structural coding is particularly helpful for semi-structured interviews and involves attributing content-based, conceptual phrases to the data that can represent the participants’ responses. In order to create these conceptual phrases, each interview was partitioned into excerpts which covered separate subjects or ideas. For each of the excerpts defining words and topics were identified. An example of a partitioned excerpt from one of the interviews is presented here to demonstrate this process. The participant said, “So, I mean, even at 12 years old, a pretty young age, to look around and think, this isn’t normal. And then every time they would try to bring me back, I would leave again. And, finally I found a place, where I was like, this feels like it is normal.” Defining words identified from this excerpt were, “this is not normal” and “this is normal” and were used to create a code that represented the quote. The code created for the above example was: “this is not normal/it’s normal”. As such, I used the language of the participants as a guide for naming the codes that emerged. Each code became a summary of a segment of information. This process was used to thoroughly code each interview. At the end of the coding process I had created over 350 codes.

**Memos**

Two types of memos were created for each participant: descriptive memos and insight memos. Descriptive information not captured in codes was separated into a separate memo for each participant. This information included demographic data that
each participant provided such as: ages, dates, lengths of time, different caregiver situations, and places. A second type of memo was created to capture insights that I had during the coding process. Insights included thoughts, questions, and theories that I had about the excerpts. This information was kept separate from the codes to ensure that the codes reflected the participants’ voices and not mine. The memos provided me with a place to comment and reflect upon how the participants’ data were similar or different; possible reasons for behaviour; or relationship based theory. An example of a memo from the previously quoted excerpt was, “running away as coping?” The codes and memos where used throughout the categorization process.

**Categories**

As I coded the interview segments the MAXQDA software provided a list of my codes and their frequencies. Through the software I was able to easily see the compilation of codes, reorganize them, and retrieve sections of similarly coded data. Segments that were coded with similar concepts were categorized for more detailed analysis. The categories became groups of data with similar, shared characteristics, labelled with phrases. For example, all codes about emotions were categorized together. These codes were further categorized into the specific emotions that the participants spoke of, for example: anger, regret, fear. A total of 23 categories, and 24 subcategories were identified. These categories organized the data in new ways, creating connections between the structural codes.

**Themes**

Through MAXQDA I was able to pull numerous pieces of related data from different interviews onto the screen at the same time. This allowed me to continuously work with the interview transcripts, the codes, the memos and the categories. This continuous consulting with the data at all levels helped me to begin the process of recognizing themes within the data. The categories and memos were used to draw out insights regarding the interview participants and their relationships, for example: patterns of burying emotions, and stories about belonging and connection. The categories were mapped on a large piece of paper to allow for analytic reflection and exploration of how they were related to one another. Each category and its relationship
to the other categories were considered and explored. The themes that emerged were all interconnected and provided insight into the complex relationships of these seven adults.

**Trustworthiness**

It is incumbent on qualitative researchers to demonstrate the validity or trustworthiness of their data, interpretations, and conclusions. With regard to my data, measures were taken to enhance the likelihood that they would be representative of participant’s experiences. These measures included: providing participants with information prior to the study, allowing participants to select a meeting place, and recruitment through a variety of places.

Potential participants in this study were provided with information about the study to ensure that they were informed of the reasons for the study, what they would be required to do, any risks to them as a participant, and the benefits to the study. For example, they were informed the purpose of the study was to “gain a greater understanding of the present relationship dynamics of young adults in British Columbia who grew up in foster care”, with the potential risk that “the questions may require the recollection of uncomfortable childhood or adolescent relationships”. It was hoped that this information would help potential participants to decide whether or not they would be comfortable participating, in addition to encouraging those who did participate to be open and honest with the researcher. In addition, interviews were held in locations chosen by participants, with the aim of ensuring that participants felt comfortable. Lastly, participants were recruited through different types of support services, for example an organization of fostered youth, a parenting support organization, and a community centre, with the hope of gaining a diverse group of individuals.

With regard to validity within the data analysis process, the mixed-methods approach provided for opportunities to check the responses of individuals. Open-ended questions were asked in the interview that expanded upon information provided in the questionnaires. Inconsistencies could be clarified through this process. The questionnaire responses corresponded closely with interview responses, increasing my confidence in the trustworthiness of the data. In addition I received guidance in the
qualitative coding from a supervisory committee member who has expertise in the methods I used. My codes were checked for representation, thoroughness and accuracy. This process of review occurred until we agreed that the structural codes created were representations of the participants’ responses.

In an effort to help readers understand my interpretive lens and what informed my making sense of the interview data, what follows is a brief description of my academic and professional orientation. I entered the Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology Program with an undergraduate degree in psychology. During the course of these degrees I have studied attachment theory and trauma extensively. For the last four years I have been working as a family therapist with families; serving families with children experiencing behavioural and emotional challenges. I assist families in gaining greater understanding of each other, and in learning new ways to communicate and relate to one another.
Results

These results provide a summary of the findings from the data of the seven participants who completed both phases of this research. Greater emphasis is placed on the qualitative interview data. Where helpful the questionnaire data is used to introduce findings, or help describe the qualitative findings. The results are presented in two sections: participant descriptions and themes from the data. Participant descriptions are provided to give the reader a picture of each of the participants including some of their life history and present circumstances. Themes from the data emerged through the data analysis process. The three core themes, and the subthemes that connect them, are explained following the participant descriptions.

Participant Descriptions

With the hope of introducing the reader to the seven individuals I interviewed, I begin with a description of each of them. These descriptions include a summary of each participants’ foster situation; and questionnaire responses about relationships; education, work experience and living situation. The foster situation of each participant provides the age at which they entered care, circumstances surrounding their move into foster care, and the number of foster homes in which they resided. The relationship section reports information from each of the participants’ questionnaires, with some supporting interview quotes about ongoing involvement with birth parents, family, friends and very important persons in their lives. Lastly, as education, work experience, and living situation are reported in previous outcome studies, each participant’s present involvement in these domains is mentioned.
Erin

Foster situation

Erin is a 26 year old who entered foster care at the age of 12. At the time she entered care she recognized how unhealthy her circumstances at home were. Erin shares her thoughts about life in her birth home in the following quote:

I mean even at 12 years old, like, a pretty young age to look around and think, this is not normal. And then every time they tried to take me back I would leave again, and finally I found a place, where I was like, this feels like it’s normal.

Erin fought to stay in foster care, knowing that it was the healthier place to be, but this proved challenging at times. She explains:

Basically people weren’t really supportive of me being in care, or me having an alternate living space, because my family appeared very normal. Like my Mom would come to like meetings with social workers and (name of service), totally wasted and just lie through her teeth. And same with my Dad, and like you know, they had money, they could have quote unquote given me a good life. But, I am the one that was going, you don’t understand, they yell until 4 in the morning, my Mom throws my Dad’s stuff out in the rain at whatever time in the night, it sucks being here, me and my brother cry everyday.

The brother that Erin speaks of in this quote remained in the family home. Erin went on to live in three foster homes and two half-way houses.

Relationships

As with all participants, Erin provided information about her relationships through the questionnaires that she completed in addition to the interview questions. Here some of Erin’s responses to the questionnaire data are shared to help convey the different relationships in her present life. Some of this information is further backed up with quotes from the interview transcripts.

On the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire Erin responded to questions about anxiety and avoidance in relationships. Erin agreed to the statements, “I worry a lot about my relationships” and “I prefer not to be close to others”.

30
This anxiety and avoidance in relationship is evident in her relationships with family and friends.

**Family**

In response to questions on the Perceived Social Support – Family (PSS-Fa) and Inventory of Peer Attachment Erin indicated that her birth family is “seldom” sensitive to her personal needs, and that she can “seldom” rely on them for emotional support. In the interview Erin spoke about her mother and how her relationship with her had changed, which is seen in the following excerpt:

> My relationship with my Mom is great, she basically did the whole 12 step thing and kind of like, I think me moving out of my home and like getting my act together. Like once I finally graduated and that kind of stuff, she I think was sober enough to take a step back and say, “Oh you are actually doing really well and you are not having problems, and like maybe you weren’t the reason that our household was chaotic, because our household is still chaotic now that you are gone.” So, ya she is actually one of my biggest advocates and a really close friend.

Despite this change in relationship, Erin indicated on the PSS-Fa that she “often” wishes that her family were different.

**Friends**

When it comes to relationships Erin stated that she does not feel close to anybody. This was evident in both her questionnaire and interview responses. During the interview Erin describes her relationships in the following way:

> I don’t feel as if I am really close to anybody. I mean, it is funny, every time that I do in any situation, or say there is somebody that I have grown to know really well, and we have an episode where they have discovered something about me, or I, you know have opened up to them about something, I could probably draw a timeline where within a day or two I just like freak out on them. I just push them 20 steps back.

Despite this push, Erin responded on the Inventory of Peer Attachment that her friends “sometimes” understand her and “often” accept her as she is. In addition, on the Perceived Social Support – Friends, she answered that she “sometimes” relies on her
friends for emotional support, and that her friends are “always” sensitive to her personal needs.

**VIP**

On the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment, Erin was the only participant who did not identify a *Very Important Non-Parental Person* in her life. In the following excerpt Erin speaks about the lack of role models she has had:

I actually can’t remember like a positive adult role model. Like honestly, the first one that I can remember is this one person that worked at (name of service). And then he quit, he went away.  (Erin)

The lack of a VIP in Erin’s life is further explored in the Themes section that follows the descriptions of participants.

**Education, Work Experience and Living Situation**

Erin spoke about her experience with school, work and her living situation in the interview. Erin reported doing well in school but leaving her education due to aging out of foster care and moving out on her own. Here Erin describes her experience with University:

I thought it was amazing that I had the opportunity to go to University. But on one hand thank God I skipped a grade because I was able to live in my foster parents house while I was in University for that year, but then as soon as I turned 18 they quickly ushered me out of their house and so it just became impossible for me to support myself and go to school, like you know. And like my grades in my last semester were like ridiculous, because I was working a full-time job, I was trying to go to school, I had just moved out on my own for the first time. And there was no support system.

As can be seen, Erin likely had the skills necessary to continue her education, but the supports that she needed were unavailable. Erin sought to receive financial supports through the government. In the following excerpt she speaks about what it was like for her to try to receive the financial support that she needed to survive as a young adult:

How degrading it is to have to go and stand in the welfare line, when, like, to stand in the welfare line, down by the needle exchange and the food
bank, in (name of city), and be like, “I am here to pick up my school cheque”, and they are like, “Oh no you are still”, and you are trying to say, “no, no, no, I am in school, I am not like these people”, “I am trying really hard to not be like these people”. You get the same amount, you stand in the same line, and they treat you the same. So it is like, what is stopping me from just, this is the easier way. They are getting the same money as I am.

Erin struggled with working hard to stay in school, and being treated the same as individuals on social assistance. Erin was unable to stay in school due to the expense and had to stop attending University. At the time of her interview Erin was working full-time as an artist, travelling alone, and living for long periods of time from her car. She describes her living situation and her relationships in the following quote:

I choose to live today, out of a backpack, and in hotel rooms. Just, unavailable, you know, unavailable to everybody. You can send me an email, you can send me a message, I might get back to you….Everybody in my life knows that, you know I might be here right now, but I am going to leave again. And I might come back and you might see me, or we might go out for dinner, but that is about it. Like, you know, whether it is romantic relationships, or friendships, like I am very come and go. And I don’t really get, even the people that I have known since I was 12, they maybe will see me once a year. I will just catch up and then be on my way.

This quote convey’s something of how Erin operates in relationships, which I elaborated on in the Themes section that follows.

**Jason**

**Foster Situation**

Jason is 24 years of age and was in foster care multiple times as a child, being returned to his mother’s care in between. Jason was informed that he first went into care when he was one and a half years old although his first memory of going into care is when he was seven. Jason went into care with his brother and sister. During his 12 years of living in foster care Jason reported living in seven different homes.
Relationships

Jason’s responses on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised scales suggest that he does not actively feel anxiety in, or avoid relationships. Jason strongly disagreed with the statements “I worry a lot about my relationships”, and “I prefer not to be close to others”.

Family

Jason reported that he “never” relies on his family for emotional support and that his family is “sometimes” sensitive to his personal needs, answering that his mother “sometimes” understands him. Jason answered that he “never” wishes that he had different parents. He has stayed connected to his mother throughout his life and explained during his interview how he worked to maintain a relationship with his mother. For example:

Well, it was weird, because my relationship with my Mom even stands until today. It is again, it is an up and down relationship and I, hhh, it is tricky because I think it is just the fact that she is just my Mom. Right, and nobody could take that away from me, and um, I don’t think she had anything on the foster parents, cause I think the foster parents kind of beat her out, in like relationship skills. But, as much as I hate to say, but, I think it was the fact that my Mom didn’t really have, my Mom didn’t really know how to communicate, and really know how to have a relationship with her kids. Um, that I think was the hard part, but I think it was the fact that me and my siblings, we tried to make it work, and we tried to make it that, we didn’t want our Mom to lose the connection with us.

Jason spoke at length in his interview about his relationship with his mother, and the challenges that he has experienced in understanding the roles one another play in each others’ lives.

Friends

With regard to friends, Jason reported on the Inventory of Peer Attachment that his friends “often” understand him, “always” accept him as he is, and “always” respect his feelings. On the Perceived Social Support – Friends Jason documented that his friends “often” give him the support that he needs and are “sometimes” sensitive to his personal needs. His Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire responses
indicate that Jason has access to both individuals and groups, as he answered that there is “often” a group in which he can do things with and that he “always” feels like there is someone his age that he can go to when he is feeling down.

VIP

Jason’s responses on the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment scale indicate that he has a very important non-parental adult in his life who “always” respects his feelings and accepts him as he is. In describing the role that she plays for him he wrote: “(she is) very concerned, wants to know that I am doing good by me and not holding my feelings or bad thoughts to myself”.

Education, Work Experience and Living Situation

While being interviewed Jason commented briefly on his education, and very passionately about his recent work related experiences. At the time of our interview, Jason was in school full-time. He spoke enthusiastically about advancing his education and gaining experience working with youth who were struggling. While speaking about this work experience Jason excitedly stated:

That now is like a HUGE part of my life, and it is the fact that we are all passionate about like, youth rights, and about um, you know, working with young girls that are working the sex trade, and ah, just working with kids so that they are not getting into trouble. Cause like we were meeting in a location, in a community centre where there are young teenagers, but it is in a location where there are drugs, crime, ah, sexual exploitation on the (name of location), and so it was just the fact that also working with the community centre, and working with the kids there, to make sure that they did get home safely, that, you know they don’t go and explore new things that could potentially bring them down.

Jason’s excitement to be helping youth is not felt by everyone in his family. Jason feels judgement from his brother surrounding his work related decisions. Despite this judgement, Jason continues to pursue his education and work to help youth. Jason explains this here:

Right now what I am doing, it is not really paying me as much, and um, but it is the fact that I do what I do because I love doing what I do, and I get passion out of what I do. And I think that that is something, ah, more than ever, right, so I think it is the fact that I keep telling my brother what I
do but I am not really getting the support, I am not really getting the encouragement.

This is an example of how Jason recognizes his need for encouragement surrounding his decisions regarding his education and work path, but is unable to find that encouragement in his brother. Jason’s relationships with his brother and mother were both discussed in the interview. Jason recently moved in with his mother, making him the only participant living with a birth parent. He and Erin are the only two participants who have regular contact with their mothers.

**Brenda**

**Foster situation**

Brenda is 24 years old, and entered foster care when she was three. Brenda and her sister then lived with their Aunt for a period of time when they were in elementary school. Brenda’s father visited the girls on weekends during some of this time. She described the time when her Aunt was unable to care for both of the girls, and how she was placed in foster care. Brenda said:

> It was my aunt, because she wanted us, but, cause, um, she just couldn’t handle both of us at the same time. So, she needed more help, and the help was me to be put in the foster care.

Brenda went on to live in 16 different homes. She notes how different she felt growing up in foster care, as she describes here:

> I just had different rules to live by than my friends, to live with their parents. . . different, because I couldn’t do things, I had to get permission to go to a friend’s house, or even to sleep over, because, the ministry was my guardian. Like my friends could do whatever they wanted, and I couldn’t . . . different, even to talk about, “why do you not live with your parents”, “because they didn’t know how to take care of me, and so my aunt got custody, but she put me into care”.

During Brenda’s interview she frequently mentioned this feeling of being different and the challenges she experienced in with communicating this difference to others.
Relationships

Brenda’s responses on the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised scales suggest that she experiences anxiety in relationships, but that she does not avoid relationships. For example, Brenda strongly agreed with the statement, “I worry a lot about relationships”, and she agreed with the statement, “I prefer to get close to others”.

Family

Brenda answered the questions on the Perceived Social Support – Family with her Aunt in mind, whom she spoke about in the interview and reported seeing regularly. Brenda’s responses indicate that she can “always” rely on her aunt for emotional support and that her aunt is “sometimes” sensitive to her needs. On the Inventory of Parent Attachment, Brenda indicated that her parents “seldom” understand her, respect her feelings, or accept her as she is.

Friends

Brenda’s responses on the Perceived Social Support – Friends questionnaire indicated that she feels she can “often” rely on friends for emotional support and that her friends are “always” sensitive to her personal needs. On the Inventory of Peer Attachment Brenda responded that her friends “sometimes” understand her, accept her, and respect her feelings. Brenda’s Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire responses indicate that she “often” has a group of friends to do things with and “always” has someone her own age to go to when she is feeling down.

VIP

Brenda answered questions on the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment scale about a close family friend whom she described as being “friendly, kind, nice”. Brenda indicated through her responses that this individual “often” respects her feelings and “always” accepts her as is.

Education, Work Experience and Living Situation

Brenda spoke about the challenges that foster care brought to her schooling, as well as her recent work involvement and living situation. After attending 10 different elementary schools, Brenda worked hard to complete her high school education in the
school in which she started. Brenda describes the commute to get to school in this quote:

   About 40 minutes from (name of city) to (name of another city), and then another half an hour bus ride, to school, on the city bus, to school, and then 6 hour, 6 hours of school, and then come home, and I would get up at 6 and get home at 5:30, do that every day.

Brenda persevered and attended a college program for students with special needs. At the time of the interview Brenda was working part-time at a fast food restaurant and living with roommates in large home.

**Fraser**

**Foster situation**

Fraser is 24 and was a year and a half old when he entered foster care. Fraser lived in care for 13 years. He estimated living in over 40 homes and having approximately 50 different caregivers. Fraser went into foster care with his brother. Fraser talked about his loss of contact with his parents and his connection to his brother during the years in foster care in the following excerpt:

   I had lost contact with my family at an early age. It was maybe a few months into being involved with the courts that my family just stopped coming to see me. So, when I was like 6 years old I, the closest thing I could relate to for family was my brother who was pretty much there throughout my life... there was a couple times when we were separated, because either he or I wanted to go to different homes, because of certain circumstances, but the majority of time we were always together.

Fraser spoke about his brother numerous times during the interview.

**Relationships**

Fraser’s responses on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised indicated that he does not worry a lot about relationships and that he is comfortable being close to others.
Family

On the Perceived Social Support – Family questionnaire Fraser indicated that he can not rely on his family for emotional support and that his family is not sensitive to his personal needs. Fraser responses to the questions on the Inventory of Parent Attachment indicated that he “never” feels understood by his parents. Despite having little contact with his parents during his childhood, Fraser spoke at length about both his mother and his father. He spoke more about them than any of his foster caregivers. Fraser’s mother died four years before our interview; they had been in conflict with one another and had not spoken for quite some time when she passed away. Fraser shared in his interview about how difficult his mother’s death has been for him in the following quote:

That is the one thing that I really, really regret, is you know, not being able to talk to her, and not, you know, apologizing for the things that I said, you know, putting her through all of that hurt. Because, being in, in the system for as long as I was, the only thing, and everyone that knows my mom, that knows me, always tells me that the only thing that she ever cared about, and the only reason why she was doing as good as she was, you know going into rehab., voluntarily, was because she wanted contact with my brother and I... Really broke her heart that night, when I, you know, lashed out at her like that. You know, turned her back to drugs, because she felt that myself and my brother didn’t love her any more. And we didn’t want to have contact with her anymore. And so it is like numbing the pain. She went straight to drugs, and you know, she had passed away, that really was tough on me.

At the time of the interview Fraser was in contact with his father. He had been upset with his father surrounding the events of his mother’s death. As Fraser explains in the following excerpt he has tried to make amends with his father for the sake of a new half-sibling that he is expecting:

The day we had buried our mom, he shows up to the island, drunk as a skunk, he shows up at my uncle’s place, and at this time I was still staying at my brothers place, my uncle calls us up, calls me up, he is like, “your dad is over here, he is really drunk, says he didn’t know that, you know, you guys were burying your mom”….Like I was that is total, pardon my language, “that is total bullshit”, cause I told him, he was the first one that I had called, and said that she had passed away...And my brother has never been able to forgive him ever since, because of how disrespectful he was, and you know, what not. You know, I am trying to like, you know,
I have had a few like visits with my dad, trying to make amends with him… I am slowly starting to talk to him again. I think it is mainly because I know that he is having another kid, and you know for the kids life, I want to be there for the kid. Not so much for my dad, but for the kid.

This quote is an example of Fraser’s desire to be available to his new sibling, despite the fact that both his mother and father were not available to him during his childhood.

**Friends**

On the Perceived Social Support – Friends questionnaire Fraser recorded that he can “sometimes” rely on friends for emotional support and that his friends are “sometimes” sensitive to his personal needs. The Inventory of Peer Attachment documented that Fraser believes that his peers “always” understand him, accept him and respect his feelings. Fraser’s Inventory of Peer Attachment responses were the most extreme of all the interview participants. His responses on the Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire recorded that he “always” has access to a group and that there is “always” someone his age that he can turn to, suggesting that Fraser perceives having access to both types of supports. Fraser spoke highly of his friends throughout his interview. Fraser compares the availability of his family and friends in the excerpt that follows:

Like my friends, have always been there for me. So, like my biological family, my birth family can’t understand why I always go to the aid of my friends, quicker than I would my own family members, because, for the simple fact that my friends have always been there. And it doesn’t matter if it is a friend I just made like a couple of weeks ago, or a friend that I made a couple years ago. Like I will go to them in a heartbeat, and help them out as much as I can. Where as my family members, I am hesitant sometimes, to help them out, or do things for them, because, being put into foster care, and losing contact with them, I felt abandoned, I felt like they didn’t love me anymore.

Fraser talked about his comfort and enjoyment in being with people and making friends in the following quote from his interview:

Maybe it is just my personality, because I really like, I really enjoy being around people, and really like, really like making friendships, and really like getting really close to people and getting to know who they are, you know, building those really strong, lasting friendships. So people can
know, that they can come and, you know, hang out with me, and you know, really enjoy having my company.

These quotes highlight how social Fraser is and how he has embraced friendships to get his relationship needs met.

**VIP**

Fraser listed a friend as the VIP in his life. On the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment Fraser answered that his friend “always” respects his feelings and accepts him as he is.

**Education, Work Experience and Living Situation**

Fraser spoke in the interview about his educational goals, and his living situation. Fraser was not working at the time of interview and employment was not discussed. At the time of the interview Fraser was going to school part-time and living with his Aunt. Fraser spoke about feeling unsupported by his aunt in the following excerpt:

Being put into foster care, and losing contact with them, I felt abandoned, I felt like they didn’t love me anymore and now I am starting to, like, have contact with my family again. And living with my auntie I, am starting to like, feel like she doesn’t really care. The only thing that she cares about is whether or not I am going to be paying her money, for rent. And that is all she really cares about.

Fraser shared a story about being in the hospital for surgery and having friends visit, but not his aunt. For this particular participant it can be seen through his questionnaire responses and his interview that his friendships have become highly important to him.

**Tracy**

**Foster situation**

Tracy is 22 and lived with her grandparents from the age of six months to seven years. Tracy was removed from their home because of an accusation that she was being sexually abused by her grandfather. Tracy reported that this accusation was not true and spoke about how difficult it was to be separated from her grandparents. Tracy
talked about running away from foster care and the frequent moves that followed her removal from the home of her grandparents:

They lived (name of location), but still I would try to run, like, away, a lot, and then, so they moved me to (name of community further away), to a different foster home. I moved around, a different foster home, different foster home, different foster home.

Tracy reported living in 10 homes during her 11 years in foster care. Like Fraser, Tracy spoke about her birth family more than any of her foster care givers. Tracy recalled that as a child, her father lived in another city and that she rarely saw him, remembering one visit while she was in care. More about Tracy’s relationship with her parents is revealed in the following paragraphs about relationships and family.

Relationships

Tracy’s responses to the questions on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised suggest that she experiences anxiety in relationships and avoids relationships. For example, Tracy answered that she: worries that others don’t really love her, worries about being abandoned, finds it difficult to allow herself to depend on others, finds it difficult to get close to others, and does not usually discuss problems and concerns with others.

Family

On the Perceived Social Support – Family and Inventory of Peer Attachment Tracy responded to questions about her parents. Tracy indicated that she “never” relies on her parents for emotional support, and that her parents are “seldom” sensitive to her personal needs. In addition, Tracy’s responses on the Inventory of Parent Attachment indicated that she feels that her parents “never” understand her. At the time of the interview, Tracy reported that she saw her father from time to time as they now live in the same neighbourhood. Tracy spoke about her adult relationship with him in the following excerpt:

My dad, he just lives up the street actually, from where I live right now. But um, we don’t really see each other like on a regular, he is still, he is like an alcoholic, so, that kinda frustrates me, and it doesn’t seem like he puts a lot of effort into it so…if we like bump into each other or like,
obviously we will say like hi and stuff…we don’t really have a relationship, we don’t talk about things, he doesn’t like think he has a problem, or that there is a problem with our relationship, or that he ever did anything wrong, anything.

Tracy is aware that both of her parents struggle with addictions, Tracy indicated that her mother actively used drugs during her childhood and that she did not often see her. Tracy did report that she lived with her mother for one month when she was 11. When Tracy was sixteen her mother moved to another part of the country, and she has not seen her since.

**Friends**

Tracy’s responses on the Perceived Social Support – Friends and Inventory of Peer Attachment conveyed that she “seldom” relies on her friends for emotional support, and that she feels her friends: are “sometimes” sensitive to her personal needs, “often” understand her, “often” accept her as she is, and “sometimes” respect her feelings. Tracy’s answers to questions on the Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire suggest that she “sometimes” feels a part of a group and “often” has a friend to turn to.

**VIP**

Tracy’s answered questions on the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment about her common law partner. Tracy is the only participant who mentioned being in a romantic relationship. Tracy reported that this VIP in her life “often” respects her feelings and “always” accepts her. Tracy shared the following about her partner in her interview:

Um, ya, we have our fights, and like lately, we actually broke up like 6 months ago, we are just kinda starting to work it out now… we are so used to each others like ways and stuff, it really, it really didn’t bother me just to like live with him right. We already knew how each other, like rolled… like he says, I put up with his crap, and I kinda think the same way, he puts up with a lot of my crap. I guess that is kinda give and take, like every relationship.

This excerpt exemplifies Tracy’s choice to continue to live in a relationship because it is what she is “used to”, despite the fact that the relationship is conflictual.
Education, Work Experience and Living Situation

Tracy spoke about her education, briefly about her work, and her present living situation. Her experience with changing schools is seen in the following excerpt:

Every single year, I swear I was in a different school, grade 2, grade 3, grade 4, grade 5, grade 6, all different schools. Grade 6 to grade 8 was the same school, middle school. And then in high school I was in the same, oh no, two high schools, but, it, still, how many schools is that?

Tracy indicated that she wanted to do well in school and continue on with post-secondary education. She speaks about this in the following excerpt:

I realized at a really young age, since I didn’t have my family, and I didn’t really regard the ministry as the best people in the world. So, basically I was alone, at a really young age, and I didn’t like anybody, so I basically knew, like, I didn’t want to be like my parents, and live on the street, or have problems. I knew that they only way that people do anything is to be like, smart, or get an education. So, I basically did that.

Tracy received $20,000 in bursaries and scholarships to help her along the way. She has obtained a diploma in business management, and at the time of the interview was working on the last few classes for her associate’s degree in psychology. Tracy spoke about working part-time using her business management education.

As mentioned Tracy has a common law partner whom she currently lives with in addition to a mutual male friend.

Rebecca

Foster situation

Rebecca is 27 and went into foster care when she was twelve. Rebecca stayed in care for 5 years, during which she reported having 5 different caregivers. Rebecca suggested in the interview that she was glad to have experienced life outside of her home while she was growing up, as recorded in the following excerpt:

I don’t think I was very comfortable when I was at home, and so being in a, going into foster care, I think I lucked out on going into a good home, initially, I have had some bad ones too. But that, I had one really good
one, where it just kinda made me realize that my upbringing wasn’t necessarily normal, and that I had some fun experiences, for the first time. And got to go horse back riding, and do, ya, it kinda opened me up to being with other people, and communicating differently, and being comfortable, and it took me a while, but it definitely showed me things that I had never experienced before, so I am grateful for the good and the bad, but, ya, I am glad I got that experience.

While Rebecca was in care she had contact with her parents but she felt that the relationship was very distant, as she describes here:

Not much of a relationship, seen them every once in a while, but not too often… I would like come across them, if they were like giving me money or something, but other than that it was basically a need to, ya, only if I needed something.

Rebecca no longer has contact with her parents. Rebecca suggests that they prefer it that way, as reported in this excerpt:

It has been about 4 years since I spoke with them, so, I would say, extremely distant. Mmm, ya, I don’t think there is much of a relationship now…. I think we are both quite satisfied.

Rebecca spoke about the fulfillment that she has found through another relationship with a mother figure. More information about this relationship follows.

**Relationships**

Rebecca’s responses on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised suggest that she experiences some anxiety in relationships, but that she does not avoid relationships. For example, she answered that she worries a lot about relationships, but that she finds it relatively easy to get close to others.

**Family**

Rebecca answered the questions on the Perceived Social Support – Family with her extended family members in mind. Her responses indicated that she finds that her extended family gives her the moral support she needs, that she “sometimes” relies on them for emotional support, and that they are sensitive to her personal needs. The
involvement of Rebecca’s extended family in her life is also apparent in the following excerpt from her interview:

My extended family, like my cousins, and my grandma, and ya, a little bit of aunts and uncles and stuff…. My extended family, for the most part, has been very open, and there for me all the time, to talk to, um, definitely, so definitely grateful for my extended family being there when I needed them to be.

When responding to questions about her parents on the Inventory of Parent Attachment Rebecca answered that her parents “never” respect her feelings, understand her or accept her the way that she is.

**Friends**

Rebecca’s responses to the Perceived Social Support – Friends questionnaire indicate that she “sometimes” relies on her friends for emotional support, and that her friends are “often” sensitive to her personal needs. Through the Inventory of Peer Attachment Rebecca indicated that her friends “sometimes” understand her and that her friends accept her as she is.

**VIP**

Rebecca indicated on the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment questionnaire that there is a motherly figure in her life who plays an important role for her. Rebecca answered that this individual “always” respects her feelings, “always” accepts her as she is and “often” understands her. The importance of this relationship in her life can be heard in the following excerpt from her interview:

Well, she is amazing, and just came into my life at a point where, I didn’t realize that I needed somebody so bad, and things have, I didn’t realize how lost I was, at the point that I met her. Um, and how much help she would be, she helped me with one pretty big problem at the time, and now it is just a bunch of little problems, and she still continues to trial through with me I guess. Ya definitely, definitely someone I can count on 100%, to help me sweat the small stuff.
**Education, Work Experience and Living Situation**

Rebecca did not speak very much about her education, work experience, or living situation. She reported finishing grade nine. At the time of the interview Rebecca was living alone, and working full-time in the automotive industry.

**Thomas**

**Foster situation**

Thomas is 25 and entered care when he was five years old. Thomas spent 14 years in foster care, and reported that he had 16 different caregivers and lived in 16 homes. Thomas alluded to some of the trauma that he experienced while in the home of his parents, as indicated in the following excerpt:

Really, I was sexually molested by my parents. That is not something that can be easily forgotten. And when I have a rough day, it is usually me thinking about what happened on a particular day.

Despite the abuse he was subjected to by his parents, as a child Thomas felt that it was his fault he was in foster care, and that he had to move from home to home. Thomas speaks about this experience here:

When I was really young, I attributed it to, like, me. I spent probably half my childhood life thinking that I was the problem, and that I was doing something wrong and that this is my punishment. The whole typical, you know, poor me, poor little me attitude, that most kids have. But, the more I grow up, the more I realize that holy crap, you know it is not me, it is, extenuating circumstance… As a kid it was kind of like, okay why am I moving again, really, this is ridiculous. I have been, I have been in families for ten years, I have been in families for two weeks, everywhere in between. One year, I think I was 8, I moved what was it, 5 or 6 times.

This is an example of Thomas’ awareness surrounding his change of perspective, from feeling as though he was the problem to realizing that all of the moves he experienced were due to factors over which he had no control.
**Relationships**

Thomas’ responses to the questions on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire suggest that he does not feel anxiety in relationships, but that he does actively avoid relationships. For example, Thomas strongly disagreed with the statement, “I worry a lot about relationships”, and strongly agreed with the statements, “I get uncomfortable when someone wants to be very close”, and “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others”.

**Family**

On the Perceived Social Support – Family and Inventory of Parent Attachment Thomas answered that his family “seldom” gives him the emotional support he needs and is “seldom” sensitive to his personal needs. On the Inventory of Parent Attachment Thomas responded to the question “my parents accept me as I am”, with “sometimes”, and “my parents understand me” with “never”. Thomas has not had contact with his birth parents since he was five. He spoke about the presence of his last foster parents in his life, and the distance that exists within this ongoing relationship in the following excerpt:

> They actually reached out and tried to, I don’t know, maybe influence my life, to try and make things better for me, but even that, even that kind of bombed out in the end, like I hit 19 and all of a sudden the contact slowed down, they sort of stopped talking to me, then I had a son, and then all of a sudden they are back in contact again, and then they drifted away again, one of those things. Kind of a hit and miss with them.

**Friends**

On the Perceived Social Support – Friends questionnaire Thomas’ answers suggested that he can “often” rely on his friends for emotional support and that they are “always” sensitive to his personal needs. Thomas’ responses to questions on the Inventory of Peer Attachment indicate that his friends “sometimes” understand him and “always” accept him as he is. The responses that Thomas provided to questions on the Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire suggest that Thomas “often” has access to support from both individuals and groups. For example, Thomas responded that he “often” feels part of a group and “often” has someone his age to turn to.
**VIP**

Thomas listed his roommate and best friend as the VIP in his life on the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment questionnaire and indicated that this individual “always” respects his feelings and accepts him as he is.

**Education, Work Experience and Living Situation**

Thomas did not speak in his interview about his education, but listed completing high school on his questionnaire. At the time of his interview Thomas was living with the above mentioned friend and working full-time.

**Themes Found in the Data**

Once all of the interview data were transcribed, coded, and put into categories, the categories and written memos were used to draw out themes regarding the interview participants’ relationships. The different categories were written on a large map and linked by their connections to one another. The connections were considered in multiple ways, numerous times. The three major themes found to be prevalent throughout the interviews of these seven individuals are all interconnected. The themes presented here are: **apprehension in getting close to others**, **awareness of dysfunction**, and **holding on** to those who unconditionally stay with them. Each of these themes has subthemes, all of which are described through quotes from the participants’ interviews. Within the theme of **apprehension in getting close to others** are the following subthemes: relationship testing, trust, and feeling safest in one to one relationships. The theme of **awareness of dysfunction** includes the following subthemes: parental dysfunction, belonging/connecting, emotional containment, seeking help for self, and giving help to others. Lastly, the theme of **holding on** has two subthemes: VIPs and friends.

**Apprehension in Getting Close to Others**

Throughout the interviews all participants told stories in which they expressed apprehension about getting close to others. This apprehension could be seen within the subthemes of: testing people in relationships, awareness of difficulties with trust, and feeling safety in one to one relationships. Each of these subthemes, and how they are
connected to the larger theme is presented below and illuminated with excerpts from the interviews.

**Relationship Testing**

Across the interviews, participants spoke of numerous ways they test relationships. Interestingly, most of the participants were consciously aware of the processes they use to determine whether or not a relationship is safe. This awareness was apparent in ways that participants tested to see; what others are like; what others can handle; and whether or not others would stay in relationship with them.

The first form of testing highlighted here is the practice of testing to see what others are like. Participants spoke about ways in which they felt the need to learn about people before getting closer to them. An example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from Tracy’s interview:

(I) tend to like read people, and what they are accepting of, ya, and um, ya, I’ve just, it takes me, ah, I need to do a lot of reading. (Tracy)

The example shows Tracy’s “reading” of people to see if they can accept the things she needs them to. Interestingly, Tracy states that she feels the “need” to do this. Tracy further spoke about her apprehension in getting close to others in the way that she takes control of presenting herself so that others will avoid getting close. The excerpt that follows describes this:

I like to be in control, like I said, I don’t like, ya, I definitely have that outer wall, of don’t come near me, that prickly exterior, which is why a lot of people don’t like me, cause they see me that aggressive kind of, which is just my coping mechanism, to make myself, uhhh, not get hurt. Basically I am just trying to scare people off, I guess. But it is funny, cause my friends who know me really well, and know, underneath that prickly, that you are just like, “you know what Tracy you are so soft”, and such a sappy puss. (Tracy)

By keeping people at a distance Tracy suggests here that she using this “coping mechanism” to protect herself from getting “hurt”. Those whom Tracy does not “scare off”, may have passed her test, and gain the privilege of getting to know her and seeing her “soft” side. This control allows Tracy to carefully choose who she gets close to.
Other participants similarly test what other people can manage through their behaviour in relationships and statements that they make. Thomas spoke about “studying” people’s reactions to things that he says in the following excerpt:

I am a big people studier, I study people’s reactions to different things, sometimes I will say something just to get a reaction out of somebody, just to see what they will do. (Thomas)

In addition to “studying” people, Thomas described a process that he uses to vigilantly watch people’s reactions to see if they can handle him, and what he brings to the relationship:

And then I kind of open up to them a little more, and then, as I open up a little more, and I kinda gauge their reactions, that allows me to get more comfortable with opening up a little bit more at a time…. I, I, I am always afraid that somebody is going to walk away, always. (Thomas)

In this second quote Thomas describes how he proceeds slowly in relationships, as he waits to see whether or not the other person is going to stay in relationship with him.

Like the “reading”, “studying” and “gauging” seen in the excerpts above another participant talked about barriers that she puts in place for others to get to know her. One of Rebecca’s barriers, is a test to see whether or not others can acknowledge her concerns. When asked what it takes for someone to break through this barrier, Rebecca spoke about how she slowly opens up, as shown here:

I don’t know, they have just got to confirm that ah, confirm something in my, acknowledge my worry, and as soon as they understand my concern, than I just feel like it is validated, or at least they recognize that that is there, and I feel like I can move on with them. (Rebecca)

In order to pass Rebecca’s test one would need to acknowledge her feelings, helping her to feel understood and validated. Once this happens, Rebecca feels that she can begin to enter into a closer relationship.

As with the previous participants Erin is aware of how she constantly questions people’s motives and agendas and the impact this has on her relationships. Erin stated:
When I actually have time to think about it, or analyse it, it scares the crap out of me. I am constantly almost like destroying my relationships with, are you sure? Like really? You know, like what about…? You know I am always expecting the worst. And it does produce a level of anxiety that is like 0-60 for no reason at all. (Erin)

Erin’s constant questioning within her relationships scares her, as she feels she cannot control it. This is an example of testing within relationship in which the other person may never pass the test, as the questions may keep changing. Interestingly, Erin speaks in her interview about not experiencing closeness with anyone. It may be that the tests she sets up prevent anyone from ever getting close to her.

The final type of testing in relationship seen in the interviews is testing to see if others will stay. Participants reported finding it difficult to allow themselves to get close to others for fear that the other would leave. The fear of someone leaving unannounced is so great for Erin that she tries to take control of the “end” of relationships and make the other person leave. She would rather make the person leave, than live with the anxiety that they might go. Here Erin recognizes that she does this frequently in her relationship with her partner, as she pushes him away:

I think I just pick a fight. I just pick anything that they have quote unquote done, whether they have done it or not, or whether it is a big deal or not in the grand scheme of things, and I make it a big deal, and almost like, you know, almost self-sabotage and actually try to end it, without being brave enough to be like, okay we need to put an end to this. Just like create bickering about nothing. Like, you know, almost instead of withdrawing, almost like pushing the person away and stuff. (Erin)

It is as though this “fighting” gives Erin a tangible reason as to why the relationship is not worth having, something to explain it away when it ends. Without this reason Erin might fear that something more personal was the cause, and this might be too painful.

A second participant, Thomas, acknowledges that he tests a series of commitments to see if someone is worth keeping in his life. This is seen in the following excerpt:

Are you willing to work for me? Are you willing to put in as much effort in getting to know me, as I am in getting to know you? Are you willing to trust me, because if you are not willing to trust me, I can’t trust you. If you
are not willing to work with me, you are just going to work against me….It is either, it is either you work with me, or you let me go now. (Thomas)

This excerpt conveys Thomas’ preference that he would rather have someone leave early in the relationship, than stay, let him down, and leave later once he is invested in it.

The reading, gauging, controlling and questioning in these relationships shows an apprehension in getting close to others. These testing methods all appear to be related to the individuals’ capacities to trust others. Participants’ direct experiences with trust in relationships were prevalent throughout the interview data. The subtheme of trust is also intricately laced through this greater theme of apprehension in relationships.

**Trust**

The participants’ hesitancy in relationships appears to stem from underlying concerns surrounding trust. The participants appear to be testing to see if others can be trusted, trusted with their emotions, trusted to stay in their lives. Their lack of trust interferes with being able to be vulnerable in relationships. The participants’ experiences provide details about their struggles to trust and how it creates apprehension in getting close to others.

Participants acknowledged that it is difficult to trust when one has experienced a pattern of loss in relationship. They shared that “letting people in” and then having those people leave has contributed to difficulties in trusting, in addition to the creation of distance in relationships. The quotes from the interview transcripts describe this experience and it’s long term impact more convincingly than any summation of their words. The following excerpts detail the experience of trusting and losing for two of the participants:

And then like they would be gone. And you would never see them again. And then the next one would show up and you know, wonder why you didn’t like them. And they would try and earn your trust, and then they leave. Then the next one comes in and you hate them even more. (Erin)

Like I really, I don’t really trust anybody, even the people that I should, or could. Like I am always waiting for them to do what everybody else does. (Erin)
That is just a lack of trust, for adult figures. Because I have had so many adults, where I have reached out and tried to trust them, and for whatever reason, they have turned around and walked away. Or, something wasn’t working out, so I had to move. And, building a relationship with somebody, in a authoritative position over me is kind of hard. (Thomas)

I want to try and have more one on one relationships with people, but I don’t trust people very easy, so it makes it a little difficult. (Thomas)

The compound impact of trusting and losing appears to be extreme difficulties in trusting again. These participants both spoke about difficulties with experiencing closeness with others for fear of being hurt. As can be seen through these quotes, and in the information provided about Erin in her participant description, she does not feel as though she is close to anyone now. For Thomas, a few people have stayed in his life and in his interview he spoke about learning to trust them over time. Thomas shared that the person closest to him is his roommate and best friend; he listed her as the VIP in his life. In his interview Thomas spoke about “testing” (the first subtheme reported above), to see if he can trust people. I asked Thomas if he “tested” his roommate in the same way he had previously described. Thomas reported that despite his roommate passing his tests he is still unable to completely trust her. Thomas articulates this here:

That’s part of like a test of whether or not I can actually trust them enough, for example, she knows MOST of what happened to me as a kid…not all of it…99%. (Thomas)

This example highlights the inability for Thomas to completely trust anyone, even the person closest to him.

Experiences with trust came up in numerous places throughout the interview transcripts. Different from the previous two participants who attributed their lack of trust to a history of individuals leaving them, Fraser placed the blame on the system suggesting that his lack of trust stemmed from a failure of the system to provide him with stability. In turn, this prevented him from investing in friendships. Fraser used a common phrase of not wanting to “let these people in” in the following quote, as he shares his apprehension in giving permission for someone to be close to him:

In the beginning of my life, I was a little bit more stand-off-ish, especially in high school, I was really like, you know, I don’t want to let these people in my life, because I bounce around so much right, and I move around, to
a couple of different homes, and you know I might not know this person for so long, so why put out a deep friendship with this person, when I might not even know them for like next year, the following year, right. (Fraser).

Unlike Erin and Thomas who identified the source of their lack of trust in individual people, Fraser appears to have externalized the source of his lack of trust, removing it from himself and others, and instead focusing on “bouncing around”. Fraser appears to have engaged in a cost benefit type of analysis in which he questions whether the benefit of being close to someone is worth the cost of losing them should the placement fail. Both Erin’s and Thomas’ lack of trust in others, and Fraser’s lack of trust in stability lead to apprehension in getting close to others.

In the interviews participants spoke about being suspicious of and having difficulties trusting others’ motives in relationships. An example of this comes from Rebecca’s interview in which she speaks about not trusting people’s objectives in being in a relationship with her:

Over analysing, ya, waiting for the bad to expose itself I guess, but, um, ya, I have definitely learned otherwise, a bit more, but I think just deep down, somewhere else in there, something is telling me there is an objective . . . I think people have to break through the barrier with me. And then, then I will just be comfortable, but I definitely, I definitely think there is a barrier, and once you have broken through I will only trust you so much, but as soon as you go back on something it starts all over again, kind of a cycle. (Rebecca).

In this quote Rebecca recognizes that her lack of capacity to trust causes her to both questions people’s motives in their relationships with her; and to put up barriers to people getting close. She articulates how this lack of capacity to trust, is present after “you have broken through”, as she will still “only trust you so much”. Rebecca’s belief that there is an unknown motive in her relationships has damaged relationships in the past, resulting in the loss of long-term friends. In the following excerpt she explains how the break-down in a close relationship started with a lack of trust:

I just thought there was more going on than there actually was, and I brought that to her attention, and, it just created more distance between us, because she was upset that I didn’t trust her, and then, and then she started giving me reasons, real reasons not to trust her, and it just, made,
my, it made it real, even though it wasn’t when I first brought it up.
(Rebecca)

Rebecca is aware of the challenges she has trusting others, and of the cycle that her
difficulties with trust have created. This cycle started with having trusted and lost, which
developed fears surrounding trust, leading her to apprehension in relationships and in
trusting others. Her lack of trust has damaged relationships, which in turn, has
increased her lack of trust.

Like Rebecca, other participants also recognized that they do trust at times.
Three participants expressed concern that in their trusting moments they might trust too
much, and at other times not trust at all. The following excerpts convey how Rebecca,
Fraser and Tracy all feel extremes when it comes to trusting and not trusting:

If I trust somebody I either trust them 99% or I don’t trust them at all, so it
is kind of, it goes both ways. (Rebecca)

Maybe I am sometimes way too trusting of people, like I will automatically
just trust anyone, right, until they give me reason not to trust them.
(Fraser)

I feel like I am trusting too much because I feel like I, I am putting myself
in that situation again, to be able to get hurt again. (Tracy)

The concern expressed by Tracy is that trusting too much may lead to getting hurt,
again. If trusting has meant getting hurt in the past it makes sense that one would be
apprehensive in getting close to others.

As these participants shared their feelings about trust they spoke of: finding it
hard to trust after experiencing repeated losses, not wanting to expend the energy
needed to invest in a relationship that might not last, using barriers to protect themselves
from others’ potentially harmful motives in relationships, and concern that when they do
trust, they might be trusting too much. These challenges with trust appear to make it
easier for these individuals to manage one-to-one relationships with more comfort than
relationships with groups.
Feeling Safest in One-to-one Relationships

On the Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire, all but one of the interview participants indicated they have greater access to support through individual relationships than groups. Responses to questions in the interview about individual relationships and groups confirmed these findings. With the above mentioned testing in relationships and lack of trust for self and others in relationships, it is fitting that seeking support in individual relationships would feel safer than seeking support from a peer group. Participants shared stories about the preference that they for have found in one-on-one interactions. An example of this perspective follows in an excerpt from Rebecca’s interview:

I would say that I definitely have a preference to be with an individual, rather than a group. I guess it depends on the group. But even as a group I am very one on one I guess, I like to, I feel a lot more comfortable. Talking about things. Whereas in a group, I guess it is more risky, because you can have multiple opinions, it is just safer to debate one on one, because it is 50/50, rather than 75% on one. (Rebecca)

Another participant recognized that individual interactions are easier to control than group situations where multiple unknowns could occur. Tracy explained:

I am always in control of what is going on, or what, how are relationship is, or, so I feel like I have the upper hand, so… like what I decide to do, like, um, ya how vulnerable I decide to put myself in, like I generally don’t go downtown and go partying, because I, I just, I don’t like that situation. I feel like there is too much other stuff that has an influence over what I want. So there are other people going crazy, there is people drinking, if I am going to be drinking on top of that, that is just, and then somebody’s elses BS, and then somebody’s else, like it is too much, so I generally, I generally won’t do that, just because I can’t be in control of it. (Tracy)

Both of these participants appear to perceive less risk in one-to-one relationships; group interaction is described as “risky” and may leave them feeling “vulnerable”.

The sole participant who did not report that they were more likely to have an individual friend to turn to than a peer group, reported equal access to individuals and groups on the RPLQ. In the following excerpt Fraser spoke about the value he finds in
group experiences as they have provided him with opportunities to meet friends and build deeper relationships. Fraser explains:

I value the group dynamics, but through the group dynamics it is where I start to build the stronger, like one on one relationships, with each individual which I hold closest to my heart, right.

For Fraser the value in the group appears to be the individual relationships that it provides. This is consistent with the trend for participants in this study to find greater safety in one to one relationships.

The quantitative data indicated that participants felt a greater degree of comfort with individuals than in groups. Interviews confirmed this finding with participants describing a greater degree of control and less vulnerability with individuals than while in groups. As mentioned, this third sub-theme is linked to the previous two subthemes of trust and testing in relationships as all three influence participants’ capacity to enter into close relationships.

**Awareness of Dysfunction**

Another theme that emerged from the stories told by participants concerned their ongoing awareness of dysfunction in their past and present relationships. Their stories revealed that they wanted to avoid the kinds of relationships they had been exposed to while growing up in care. The following excerpt illuminates this awareness:

I know, I know what I do not want to be, but I don’t know, again, that whole, what am I actually, and what is this a product of what I have seen and what I know, you know what I mean? I know what is right and wrong, but like I have a problem sticking to it sometimes. (Erin)

This excerpt highlights the process that the participants are actively engaged in to understand the dysfunction that they have experienced and its’ impact on who they are and the relationships that they enter. This awareness of dysfunction is evident in the following subthemes: parental dysfunction, belonging/connecting, emotional containment, seeking help for self, and giving help to others. Parental dysfunction is the first subtheme explained here.
Parental Dysfunction

All seven participants described ways in which personal dysfunction affected; their parents’ capacities to act as responsible parents; and have healthy relationships with their children. The participants were aware of their parent’s lack of capacity to parent them, as is seen in the following excerpts.

My Mom just was not fit to be a parent, and um, um, and I, and, and, and I have realized that if I was to still live with my Mom when I was younger then I probably won’t have gone to school, and that I probably would have started to do drugs at a young age, but I didn’t. You know I stuck to school, yes, I did get into the addictions, but it was the fact that I maintained my relationships, I maintained going to school. (Jason)

They birthed me, that is as far as it went, I was born, they screwed up, they didn’t really give me much after that. They gave me a lot of hard lessons that I am still learning, and a lot of skills that I still had to learn, but, a lot of the skills I had to learn, I would have learned either way, they just forced me to do it quicker. The ability to survive, the ability to pick myself when I get knocked down, those are all lessons I learned at an extremely young age, that I would have learned when I hit high school anyway. (Thomas)

In these examples both Jason and Thomas spoke about their parents’ lack of ability to parent them. Jason recognized the benefit of growing up under the care of individuals other than his mother. Thomas spoke about being burdened with life lessons to figure out as a result of the years that he spent in his parents care. These participants share awareness that their parents continued care of them would have brought greater harm.

The theme of awareness of dysfunction also incorporates stories in which participants shared their desires to change their present day relationships with their parents. In the following excerpt Erin indicates that she wants more from her parents, and her relationships with her parents:

I am attached to the notion that I really want them to be like parents. I really want them to be attached, I wanted to have a mom and dad. I want them to act like a mom and dad... I don’t know, I kinda feel like they, basically have been acting like children most of my life, you know, telling me to screw off, and my life is messed up, when I am like you know 12, and then 18 and then 24 and then 28. I don’t know, maybe it is unrealistic, I always hoped that they would be the people that would like, if I would having a bad day, they would come and say sorry, or they would
like try to mend the relationship if we had a fight or something. But it has never been that way, it has been like they were too drunk, or lazy, or like dealing with whatever emotional problems they had to be like actual parents. (Erin)

Likewise, Jason spoke throughout his interview about trying to connect with his mother and his hopes that she could be happy and healthier, as evidenced by the following quotes:

Well, it is the fact that, I worry about her because she, she is going through depression, and she is going through some struggles in her life that date back um, you know, 32 years ago. And fair enough, but it is 32 years later, and there are times when you just need to, you just need to get over it. Um, maybe not get over it, but just, just, let it go. You know, still remember, but you have to move on. (Jason)

For so long I just wanted her to change, but then it was the fact that, you know, over time it was just like, you know, you can’t just change someone. Like they, they want to have to change for themselves. And I learned that personally for myself. (Jason)

In this excerpt Jason expresses his disappointed with the lack of change in his mother’s life. This disappointment in a parent’s failure to change was also discussed by Tracy who explained that she didn’t see her father putting any effort into making positive change:

We don't really see each other like on a regular, he is still, he is like an alcoholic, so, that kinda frustrates me, and it doesn’t seem like he puts a lot of effort into it. (Tracy)

For one of the participants, the desire to communicate with his birth parent, after fourteen years of no contact, was important. Thomas spoke about wanting to reconnect with his mother, who he had not seen since he was five. Thomas talked about taking the risk of contacting her and the opposition that he met:

[I] tried to contact my Mom, when I turned 19, and her Mom freaked out at me, and told me never to call again. (Thomas)
Thomas’ attempt to rebuild a relationship with his mother, and the rejection that he experiences through his grandmother is an example of the intergenerational dysfunction that this participant is aware of. As these participants expressed disappointment and frustration while speaking about the involvement that their parents have had in their lives we see a desire to connect, to be in a relationship. The next subtheme within awareness of dysfunction concerns the desire to belong or connect.

**Belonging/Connecting**

This next subtheme within the awareness of dysfunction is about belonging and connecting with others. Participants recognized relationships in which they have struggled to connect, as well as ones in which they have found belonging or connection. Some of the participants have sought to connect with their birth parents. Over the years they have had a strong desire to have a healthy, supportive and strong relationship with their birth parents. In the following excerpts participants speak about ways in which they try to maintain a connection to their father and mother. For a short time the first participant made attempts to connect with her father through doing something that he loved. He had been involved in an art community and she began to get involved with her own career in the same art form. Erin speaks about this attempt to connect and her father’s resistance, in this quote:

> When I was a kid it was more, “do more as I say, not as I do”. Like he didn’t really want me in (art form). So I think it directly affected it because, you know the fact that he didn’t want me to do it made me even want to do it more. And then in my adult life he became more supportive. Like he thought it was really cool, like I think he was maybe reliving a bit of his past. (Erin)

Despite the challenges in their relationships over the years, Erin notes that she has tried to make her relationship with her parents better:

> I am attached to them, because they are my parents, they are always going to be my parents. You know, have that belief and I always remember that when we were fighting, or whatever, that it was always important to like be the first person to say sorry, or try to cultivate some sort of relationship, regardless of what it was. (Erin)
Interestingly, this quote reveals that Erin takes it upon herself to rectify her relationship with her parents when there is conflict. She took it upon herself to cultivate an open connection. In the next excerpt another participant talks about how important his connection to his mother has been. Like Erin, Jason spoke about efforts that he made, particularly as a child, to “cultivate” a relationship with one of his birth parents. For Erin it was her father, for Jason, his mother. Jason speaks here about the custody battle that occurred when he was a child, and how he and his mother could not be disconnected:

When we were going through the whole custody thing it was a battle, the only thing that was actually really happening was trying to get half custody of us, and that was a struggle, um, from my Mom’s lawyer, and from my Mom’s side, was still have custody of us, and still remaining, and still maintaining that connection to us, but, you know, I think it was the fact that they realized that there was no way that they could disconnect us. (Jason)

Jason and his siblings were only supposed to see their mother on Sundays, but they refused to follow that court order. They were aware of the dysfunction in their family, but refused to let the system that they were involved in keep them from seeing their mother. He recalls this experience in the following excerpt:

I didn’t really care what the court had said, and um, and I think we didn’t even think about the consequences that that would arise, but instead, it was the fact that, okay well now we are all teenagers, and we could all make choices on our own, that, um, we just started going down to our Mom’s house, like first thing after Friday. Like first thing after school on Friday. And we were just going down there for the weekend. (Jason)

Jason and his siblings would not let the law get in the way of their need to be with their mother. In this way these individuals acknowledged that their family was not functioning as it was intended to, yet they worked to stay connected within a situation that kept them apart.

The strong desire to connect to a birth parent was evident in Fraser’s interview as well. Fraser entered into foster care when he as a year old, and reported having little contact with his mother during his childhood. Yet, the desire to have a connection to his mother was strong, this need for connection was particularly evident when he spoke about having lost her to a drug overdose. After losing his mother Fraser recalled some
memories with her as “the best times he remembers”. Interestingly both earlier and later in the interview he spoke about great distances in their relationship. He describes his memory in the excerpt that follows:

I was so close to my mom, and I remember times when she would come and pick me and my brother up for visits. Cause my mom and dad split up at an early age. Um, you know those were like, the best times I remember, you know, one of her boyfriends sitting me on his lap, he let me steer the van all the way back to their place, which was ah, just out in (name of city) somewhere. It was like, those are the kind of memories that I still hold, you know, especially for my mom. And I really loved my mom. (Fraser).

Fraser shared this memory about his mother with tenderness as he states that he was “so close to my mom”, and that he “really loved my mom”.

While being aware of the dysfunction in some relationships, participants still sought connection in others. Some participants found a connection with caregivers. Tracy lived with her grandparents for as long as she could remember before entering care. In this excerpt she recalls the acceptance within this relationship, and how it differed from other relationships she has had:

I have always kinda been close to them, because that is who I was originally um, taken from, so um, I don’t know, there is just a kinda relationship there. But um, they really kept me like, I don’t know, just, they don’t like ridicule me, but they give me, they give me like advise, but they don’t like tell me when I am doing stuff wrong, you know. They listen to me, they don’t like take other peoples, like my foster Mom used to go like go off and say I was drinking all the time, and smoking all the time, like just because I smelt, because my friends would smoke. (Tracy)

This quote exemplifies Tracy’s appreciation for her grandparents’ ability to listen to her, to give her advice, and to believe what she says. In the interview Tracy spoke about weekly telephone calls with her Grandmother and how she can talk to her about almost anything. Unlike in other relationships, with other individuals, Tracy reported that she could be herself with her grandparents. This sense of acceptance, and ongoing connection, was spoken of very fondly by Tracy. Interestingly, while describing the good
qualities in this relationship, she differentiates them from things that others have done that have been hurtful: ridiculing, telling her she is doing stuff wrong, taking other people’s sides, and not believing in her.

A connection was found in some of the relationships that participants had with foster parents. Fraser is an example of one of these participants. Fraser felt welcomed in most of the foster homes that he lived in and the first home has continued to be a connection to him over the years, as seen here in this recollection:

I really, you know, felt welcome in the homes, and like they, really cared about me, and that I didn’t feel like some random person just coming into their home, and you know, just being there, right like, I actually, at times, felt, at times, a part of the family. At, at other times I couldn’t quite understand, like I didn’t feel like part of the family, but, like, now I understand, I kinda understand why I didn’t feel a part of the family. Um, but ya like, still to this day, my first foster mom, I still talk to her, and you know, I go over there for dinner every once in a while, you know her kids, and it is like vice versa, they consider me to be like their brother, and I still consider them to be like sisters. (Fraser)

In this quote Fraser share feeling really cared for and at time a part of a family, “like their brother”, as though he belongs.

Consistent with the subtheme of connecting and belonging, one of the participants’ spoke about finding belonging in the community. In the following excerpt Jason responds to a question from the interviewer about what the community does for him that he has not experienced anywhere else:

I think it, it just, it just brings security, it brings comfort, it just makes me relax, and I think for me to be able to do what it is that I do, um, not only in the (name of area), and not only working with the homeless population, um, and it is weird, cause I should really look at, woaw, what I am doing, because I am doing a lot of things that, in the community, but I think it is the fact that It just gives me such a sense of belonging. (Jason)

In this example Jason contends that he finds “security”, “comfort”, and “belonging” in working with the homeless population. Ironically, it is as though Jason feels at home, among the “homeless”.
These experiences of feeling “close”, “listened to”, “like their brother”, “security”, and “belonging”, showed moments of vulnerability that contrasted with the apprehension discussed in the previous finding. This contrast further exemplifies the awareness of dysfunction that the participants have as they recognize relationships that have been healthy and relationships that have not.

The participants attempts to connect with others, both when it was successful and when it was not, show a continued effort to have one’s relationship needs met, despite adversity, rejection, or repeated loss. These efforts, despite an awareness of dysfunction, shows courage and perseverance. With this capacity and tendency to persevere comes the need for coping strategies. The interviews revealed that multiple participants coped through emotional containment, either burying their emotions, or choosing not to share them with others.

**Emotional Containment: Hiding/Burying Emotions**

The practice of not communicating ones feelings and trying not to acknowledge emotional pain was described by many participants with terms associated with burying emotions. This practice was used by participants so as not to upset others, appear weak, or to cope with a situation. Hiding and burying emotions is included within awareness of dysfunction as the participants recognized their tendency to do this and its cost to them.

The first reason for the practice of emotional containment explored here is protecting oneself from getting hurt. Thomas has found that most people leave his life when he lets them get close, when he “let’s people in”. As a result Thomas “keeps his emotions pretty close”, so that he will not get hurt. Thomas talks about this experience in the following excerpt:

I am considered dark and mysterious by most of my friends, because I generally keep my emotions pretty close to, I play my cards pretty close to my chest. (Hmmm) I don’t let a lot of people in, because, the people that I have, typically, maybe out of every 10 people that hypothetically I have let in, and showed who I really am, my true emotions, 7 of them walked away. (Thomas)
Thomas also discussed how he would rather not acknowledge the painful emotions he experiences. In the following excerpt Thomas talks about protecting himself, and others, from pains from the past:

> It is compound interest. Every time. It goes back to, words are a double edged sword. Yes, what I am telling them hurts them, it hurts me too. And, really it just opening, it is opening wounds that I would rather just leave scabbed over. (Thomas)

Thomas further explains how he sometimes needs to let a little bit of his pain out, for fear of breaking down if he does not. He stated:

> Well, it has been 20 years of burying things. And, just piling on, and keeping adding more to the pile to keep it from exploding. So, if I am going to take a little bit off the top, I have got to make sure it is not all going like a volcano, and then I am left venting on someone, and they are left going, “what do I do”. Cause it is not fair to them. (Thomas)

In this series of quotes Thomas acknowledges the following about his practice of emotional containment: if he communicates emotions to others he risks losing them, it hurts to talk about the past, and if he does not vent just a little bit sometimes, he may react like a “volcano”.

Other participants further shared about their practice of trying to ignore or bury their emotions. Participants spoke about avoiding thoughts and feelings associated with loss. The desire to be strong and not acknowledge hurt is present in the excerpt that follows from Erin’s interview:

> Umm, I obviously need therapy, there has been a lot of stuff, that I guess I am still running from, I don’t know. I try to think it is not affecting me. (Erin)

Here Erin tries to cope by denying that her experiences are negatively affecting her.

The practice of emotional containment through the hiding or burying of emotions, as used by Thomas and Erin, appears to be a coping strategy used to carry on in life without losing control. In the next quote the participant recognizes that he learned burying emotions can be unhealthy. See how he also claims in the last sentence, that it
was right for him when he was younger, that it may have been a needed coping strategy at the time. Jason stated:

Before, I would never, I never used to reach out. And, I used to, um, I used to bottle everything up, and you know, I think it was the fact that, for me that was healthy, for me, it was healthy for me. And it was the fact that I knew what my temper was like, I knew what my adrenaline rush was like, when it decides to all come out. So for me, to bottle it, I think, even though I learned later in life that it was unhealthy to bottle up your emotions and your anger, but I think, I think for younger people, there comes a time, when they are younger, where it is the right time to just bottle it all up. (Jason)

Jason later recognized when it felt safe to let some of these emotions out, as evidenced here, in this excerpt:

In 2002, my best friends Mom passed away. And, so that was another tough thing as well, battling depression and suicide, um, and then battling my best friend’s Mom’s death. Um, it it it really took a toll on me. But, I think it was the fact that I kept so much emotion inside. Um, but, for some reason when I was with this family, and when I was with her, and her daughter, and her sister, it was just, it was just, you know, it was just the fact that I was able to, you know, let go. (Jason)

Jason recognized that there have been times in his life when he has needed to “bottle up” his emotions, and times when he could “let go”. It is possible that this discernment is about safety in relationships. It may be that Jason can “let go” when he feels a relationship is secure.

The subtheme emotional containment is connected to numerous others subthemes identified within the interviews. With fears of losing a connection, due to a lack of trust, Thomas kept his emotions close to his heart. Jason spoke about being able to “let go” when he found a connection. And lastly, while trying to avoid her emotions, Erin recognized that she needs to seek help to experience change in her life. The ability to recognize the need to seek help is the next subtheme in awareness of dysfunction.
Seeking Help for Self

The need to seek help is common for many people. The added challenges in seeking help for the individuals interviewed in this study may be the lack of trust in others, and connections with people able to be supportive in the help-seeking process. Despite these added complexities a desire to move beyond pains of the past is apparent in the stories told within the interviews. The participants acknowledged needing help and support, desires to understand and move forward, fears surrounding changes, or apprehensions around changes that may be occurring.

Experiencing fears surrounding accessing help that could lead to change was evident in the interview findings. An example of this can be seen in Tracy’s interview when she said:

That is what is frustrating with me actually, that is the most frustrating part, is that, um, actually, this is so much harder than words for me. So like, I understand I have a problem, I know I need to deal with it, I know, I almost even know how to deal with it, I know where to go, I mean there is lots of places to go. The thing is actually going. (Tracy)

Tracy acknowledges where this fear comes from as she continues to explain:

Actually doing it. I am really scared, I think that is half the problem. I am really sceptical, because of my past experience, some stupid psychologist is telling me I have been abused when I wasn’t, now what is this other psychologist going to say? (Tracy)

Tracy also recognizes that not getting the help she needs is making her mental health worse, as she describes in this excerpt:

I am just living, kinda trying to, like I said, deal with stuff that I need to, but it doesn’t work, it is just getting worse, little laugh. It is kinda funny how mental health issues do that. (Tracy)

These quotes are examples of how this particular individual is so aware of her need for help, and at the same time is aware that her fear of entering into a relationship with a professional, her lack of trust in psychologists, has prevented her from getting this need met.
Other participants spoke about their need to deal with some of their “issues”, barriers in the way of doing so, and their capacity to overcome these barriers. As an example, Fraser spoke about a barrier to change in his life and how he kept doing what he felt he needed to do to work towards change:

A lot of my other family members were saying, no, you need to go get a job, you need to quit messing around in these programs, and doing nothing with yourself. Yet, at that time, you know, being in those programs, doing nothing with myself, I was you know discovering myself, finding who I was, dealing with some of my issues, and it has led me to where I am today. I mean school, and now I am doing good, and now everyone of my family members have jumped on the wagon, and now are supporting me, in what I am doing. (Fraser)

Fraser’s statement about “discovering” himself, and “dealing” with some of his “issues” despite opposition from his family provides an example of perseverance and determination for seeking and receiving supports. This participant found that he was able to do this without the support of many of his family members.

Others described needing family members to help with this process. At times participants expressed feeling the need for answers before they could understand something in their life and move forward. As an example of this Thomas shared that he wants answers about his past, feeling the need for “closure”, and he knows he can only get them from his birth parents. Here he speaks about trying to get in contact with his mother to gain some insight into his past and begin to experience “closure”:

There are certain answers, that I need for closure, and only they can give them to me, so I am going to start with one, and see how I feel afterwards, maybe try for another one, if that goes well, great, if it doesn’t, I tried. (Thomas)

Thomas’ statement provides an example of courage as he tried to contact his mother once before and was rejected, as described earlier in the parental dysfunction subtheme. This excerpt also captures Thomas’ awareness that he may not make a connection with his mother a second time, with the caveat that if it does not go well, at least he tried. Thomas appears to be willing to take the risk if it may help him find “closure”.

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In addition to recognizing the need for help and the potential barriers surrounding it, experiences of receiving help were also shared by participants. In the following excerpt Thomas reached out to his paternal grandfather and shares the success:

“It was good. It was really good. My grandfather’s exact words were, “what took you so long”. (Thomas)

This success may increase the likelihood that he contacts his mother as mentioned above.

While speaking about seeking and receiving help, participants talked about the outcomes of help in their lives. The receipt of help is celebrated by Fraser as he describes:

“I think, you know, going through the various programs that I have gone through, you know, learning about, you know, my personal triggers, and learning about myself, and, like, who I am, you know, doing the things that I am doing. I don’t think you know, living in foster care, really had an effect on, you know, relationships and what not like, if I hadn’t of done, like, the programs, then maybe I would be a bit more like my brother eh, like he is a bit more stand-offish of people, more than I am, right. Like, I am really friendly, really outgoing, (examples of friendliness)… I think it is because of doing all those programs, and having opportunities for those programs, really helped me, you know be able to, you know, be more open, be more friendly. (Fraser)

Likewise Jason talked about the success he has experienced as a result of supports, and the healthier place that he has found himself to be living in. The positive outcome can be seen in the excerpt that follows from his interview:

“Now lately in the last year and a half, I have been able to actually talk about my feelings. And, um, it is weird, because I know I have talked about my feelings, and talked about my relationships, and I think it is the fact that I have come to a point in my life where, where you know what, I am stable, I do have my life completely under control, and it is where I want to be, and it is the fact that I have been trying to get to this place for the last 6-7 years. (Jason)

Through their stories Fraser, Jason, Thomas and Tracy revealed their processes of seeking, and sometimes finding help. We can see that they are all in different stages of
finding and receiving support. It can be seen that they have an *awareness of the dysfunction* in their lives and want to move beyond it. For some this *awareness* happens not just within seeking help in their own lives, but also in wanting to see help for others, the next subtheme in these findings.

**Giving Help to Others**

Finding strength in oneself and using this strength to help others was salient in the participant interviews. This commonality is encompassed in the theme *awareness of dysfunction*, as these individuals are not only trying to cope with the challenges of their own pasts but are also attempting to help others cope with theirs. In this excerpt the participant talks about his experiences making him stronger:

Me and my friends we we have this one thing that we talk about, and the one thing that we talk about is the fact, and we definitely talk about this with younger people, is that we come into these interactions, is that we are faced with obstacles and barriers, um, that I think come our way for a reason, I think there are reasons why we have these obstacles, these challenges and these issues. That we have to face, or go through, or get over, um, but I think it is the fact that it just makes us stronger, and it makes us better. And it also allows us to find the skills and to find the tools that we can keep in place, so that if anything was to rise again, that we are able to maybe get over the obstacle, with knowing because you have been through it. Or you know an obstacle may come your way that there is no getting over, that you have to go through, but because of the fact that you have gained some tools and gain skills, because of the fact that you have gone through some hardships, ah, that you are able to go through these hardships. (Jason)

Jason is presently studying part-time to work with vulnerable children and youth and he spoke passionately in his interview about helping others in need. When Jason spoke about helping youth his rate of speech would increase and his voice would elevate. The following excerpt was shared with this enthusiastic voice:

I think for me to know that I have experienced, pretty much everything that there is to know about living on the streets, and in foster care, I think it is the fact that now I have the skills, and the opportunity, and the experiences to be able to give back, and to share my tools and the skills that I have learned, and garnered over the years, and be able to give them back. (Jason)
Jason spoke numerous times about “giving back”, and wanting to help youth in troubling situations. Other participants also discussed their hopes to help youth.

Fraser is studying at university so that he can move into a field that helps youth in foster care. In the following excerpts Fraser talks about ways in which he hopes to offer understanding, and create change for the benefit of future children and youth in care:

Going into the field, I know what it is like, you know, for a potential kid, maybe living the same lifestyle as me, being able to say, “hey, I can relate, you know, you can totally talk to me”. You know, at least, you know, somebody, you know, can relate. (Fraser)

It is always hard, knowing the system, you know, knowing that I am not the only one who has gone through a situation like that. But there is more people out there that most likely go through the same situation so, you know, knowing what it was like, you know that is why I am in the field that I am trying to get into, because I want to change it. (Fraser)

These excerpts suggest that Fraser recognizes a need that he had as a child and youth in foster care, a need to be understood. In this quote he spoke about extending that offer of understanding to other children. Fraser also recognizes that the system did not meet all of his needs and for the sake of other children, he wants change to happen.

Tracey discussed another way to help other children and youth in foster care. She acknowledged that many children and youth do not know their rights. Tracy is passionate about making sure that the rights of vulnerable children and youth are not being violated. She talked about a cousin, whom she assisted in maintaining custody of her baby, in the following excerpt:

Like, I heard, like so many times, for my cousin, and it made me so sad, it is like, “oh, well I didn’t know I was allowed to do that”, “oh well I didn’t know that was my right”. You know, they threatened to take her baby away when she was pregnant, well foster, stupid, whatever her name is, the social worker, was putting so much stress on her, while she was pregnant, she could have miscarried, because they were saying they were going to take it from her, when she had it, while she as in the hospital. Right when she was born. And I got so pissed off, I just, that was it, I went, I went, that is why I am like so glad that I know my rights, and I just, just, I went straight to the top. I was like, “screw everyone”,

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and I went to, cause I know the people at (name of advocacy group).
(Tracy)

Through a series of phone calls Tracy successfully advocated for her cousin’s baby to stay in her care. As mentioned earlier Tracy had never wanted to be removed from her grandparents care when she was a child. Here we see her fighting to make sure that this baby is not separated from his/her family. It is possible that Tracy is doing what she wished someone had done for her.

It was recognized by Thomas that he had found healing through helping others. During his interview Thomas shared a couple of stories about helping people in his life and the receipt of feeling helped in turn. An example follows:

I wouldn’t change what happened to me, because I have been able to help a lot of people over it, I, I find that by helping others, I in turn help myself. Because by making someone else feel great about something that they are going through, by helping them get over something, I in turn get over something that I have been going through, that is similar to what they are going through, and it helps me. (Thomas)

In this statement Thomas proclaims that he “wouldn’t change what happened”. Thomas was molested by his birth parents and grew up in 16 different homes, yet here he recognizes that his life experience has enabled him to help others. Thomas provides a strong example here of being aware of dysfunction in both his own life and in the lives of others.

A final example of helping others is the participants’ willingness to engage in this research project. Participants spoke openly about their lives, discussing vulnerable memories. Erin’s communication throughout the research process provided a significant example of this. Erin responded to all messages quickly, and met with me at the earliest times possible. Throughout the questionnaire and interview process Erin communicated her eagerness to help in anyway that she could. In Erin’s interview she stated her desire to help twice, as read in the following two short excerpts:

I have a tattoo that says give back, so I am happy to help. (Erin)

Anything that I could ever do, I would love to help kids like me. (Erin)
This statement indicates Erin’s belief that children like her need help. Erin and many of the other participants so eagerly professed their hopes to help others. Through this offer and practice of helping others they are continuing be aware of the dysfunction that they encounter.

The theme of awareness of dysfunction could be found throughout the interview transcripts. This finding could not be predicted from the questionnaire data. Participants struggles with; parental dysfunction; seeking connection; containing emotions; seeking help; and helping others, were conveyed in their own voices and told through their own stories. Finding that these seven individuals are so aware of the dysfunction in their lives was genuinely surprising. From the final theme I identified in the participants stories, the importance of specific relationships in their lives becomes apparent. The final theme that emerged was holding on.

**Holding On**

This third and final theme captures the participants’ tendencies to hold on to the relationships that meet their attachment and social needs. There are two prominent types of relationships in which these seven individuals get these relationship needs met. The first is with very important people (VIP) in their lives and the second is friendships. The excerpts of participants beautifully capture why they hold onto the people that they do, and the importance that these two types of relationships play in their lives.

**VIPs**

Through all the relationship stories shared it became evident, in the analysis process, that most of the participants in this study had found someone special in their life who they kept close and held onto. Whether referred to as “my mentor”, “my partner”, “my best friend”, or “my aunt”, these individuals have been involved in the participants’ lives and continue to be available to them. Through the questionnaire data, six of the seven participants reported that there is a very important person in his or her life. Of these six participants, four responded on the Inventory of Very Important Person Attachment questionnaire that the support statements were “always” to “often” true of the VIP in their life. The remaining two participants reported that the supportive statements were “often” to “sometimes” true of the VIP in their life. The interviews brought
significant clarity and meaning to these findings and offered a much deeper understanding of these relationships. The findings that follow add to the research on VIPs in the lives of adults who lived in foster care by highlighting some of the important characteristics in these relationships. Participants spoke with excitement about the VIPs in their lives. As detailed by participants, their VIPs have: kept them on the right path, helped them through hard times, been supportive, encouraging, accepting, and nurturing, offered security, and created celebrations and traditions. Here some short excerpts from Fraser’s interview provide examples of what he has received in his relationship with this “mentor”:

She was the only person in my life that saw something in me. Saw you know, what I can do right, and saw the potential, and really offered me so many opportunities. (Fraser)

She is always been really supportive, and really caring, and, you know, really seeing me through the hard times, and you know whenever I have fallen down she has always been there to pick me up, and say, “hey, you know what, don’t worry about it buddy, you know, you are a good guy, keep on doing the things you are doing”. (Fraser)

As long as I do my best, that is enough for her. (Fraser)

As Fraser speaks about this relationship, it can be seen that he feels: believed in, supported, cared for, emotionally supported, and as though he has made someone proud. Fraser mentioned in his interview that he jokingly calls his “mentor” “Mama”, and that she calls him “son” in response. This joking further highlights the needs of Fraser that this woman meets.

Other participants also spoke about figures who came into their lives in the role of a “mentor”. Rebecca did not realize that she was “lost” and needed someone to help her, until she met her “mentor”. She describes this relationship in the following excerpts:

She is a friend of mine’s mother, I guess my old bosses mother, uh, who has really taken me under her wing, and helped me out with a lot of things that I struggled with, initially, and, ah, I don’t know, stuff that you didn’t learn when you were younger I guess, and she really, set me on the straight and narrow. (Rebecca)

She is amazing, and just came into my life at a point where, I didn’t realize that I needed somebody so bad, and things have, I didn’t realize
how lost I was, at the point that I met her. Um, and how much help she would be, she helped me with one pretty big problem at the time, and now it is just a bunch of little problems, and she still continues to trial through with me I guess. (Mmmmm) Ya, definitely, definitely someone I can count on 100%, to help me sweat the small stuff (Rebecca)

These examples show that this participant is fully aware of the needs that this mentor meets in her life. Rebecca also recognizes that she meets a need for the VIP, as described in the following excerpt:

I think that her kids are a little bit older than me, and I think that they kinda, have all grown up, and gone their own ways, and they are all successful, and that she is, she was kinda missing being a mother, and her life was changing, her kids didn’t need her so much, and she needed to be needed. And I, I think I definitely need her. So it is kind of, good timing for both of us, to have met each other and we both seem to take care of each others needs, that neither of us knew we had. (Rebecca)

Interestingly, Rebecca refers to her VIP as playing a maternal role in her life, just as Fraser did previously.

Like Rebecca and Fraser, Jason also spoke about a motherly figure in his interview. Jason identified the importance that emotional safety played in his relationship with his foster mother and her family. Jason was unable to grieve a significant loss in his life until he attended the funeral of someone he did not know with his foster family. He explains the situation in the following excerpt:

My foster Mom at one point, her cousin came up to me and was like, “I am so glad that you are here”. And, you know, “I am so glad that you are part of the family.” And I just burst it out. I just started to cry. And, you know, I heard people that had mixed emotions, like uh, you know, I heard people, like, “why is he crying, he doesn’t even know, he doesn’t know this guy, he just knows, you know, his niece. And, um, I think it was the fact that my foster Mom and her siblings, like her brother and sisters, and, and their nieces and nephews and their kids. They all knew me, because of the fact that they all live in (name of city), right, so we all got together. And, like, I remember my little sister, who I call my little sister now, her cousin, uh, he came over, and like, both of them, they were just like, “what is wrong?” And I was like, “I am finally able to let the emotions out, my best friends Mom’s death, just actually come out. And, I think it was the fact that I had no worry when I was with them, and no anxiety. (Jason)
As described in this quote, through the relationship that Jason had with his foster mother and her extended family he was able to feel emotionally safe enough to express emotions that he had previously buried. As discussed previously emotional containment was also a theme evident in these interviews.

In addition to VIPs helping participants by believing in them, supporting them, caring about them, and helping them with problems, it was suggested by one participant that the VIP in her life also provided her with a routine, and traditions that she valued. The importance of creating traditions, and being celebrated was noted by Brenda as she spoke about her VIP. Brenda talked about her closeness with her aunt, and the celebrations that they had together in the following excerpt:

Me and her, we have been close since I was little. We would always, as a family, we would always go to her house for birthdays and celebrations every, all the, through the year. (Brenda)

The routine connection with family that Brenda had at her aunt’s appears to have provided her with a welcomed predictability surrounding special times of the year.

Not all VIP’s played maternal roles in the lives of participants. Roommates were also listed as being very important people in the lives of participants. Thomas shared in the interview that his relationship with his roommate is unlike any other he has had, describing her as, “the tree that keeps me upright when the wind starts pushing at me”. The following excerpts describe their relationship:

I trust her, almost, almost implicitly, there is, almost a complete blank of trust, if I were on my death bed, right now and medical decisions had to be made, as to whether or not, you know, the plug needed to be pulled, I know that she would make the decision that was the best, I know that. I also know that, if there was nobody else to take care of my son, I would trust her. (Thomas)

The guaranteed fact that she is not going anyway. I mean there is still that little red flag that says, what are you doing, why are you pushing this on her, why are you doing this to her, she is going to walk away from you. But, the more rational side of my brain is telling me that she is not going to go anywhere. (Thomas)
Interestingly Thomas’ description of his VIP alludes to ways in which this individual has addressed his *apprehension in getting close to others* (a previous theme), in that he has learned to trust her “almost implicitly”, and that he is pretty certain that she is going to stay in his life.

Not every participant had such a close and nurturing relationship with the *very important person*, in their life. In the questionnaire data, Tracy’s score on the IVIPA scale was the highest, suggesting that she experiences the least amount of support from the very important person in her life. As can been seen through the interview, and the excerpt that follows, Tracy’s experience of closeness is related both to finances and being needed:

> Ummm, aahhh, well, it makes it a lot easier to live in the city, cause I can’t financially support myself, like fully, with rent and food and like, school, especially, because I am trying to go through school right now…I think um, I’d be kinda crazy if I was alone… I need somebody to take care of, if that makes sense. (Tracy)

In this quote Tracy recognizes the benefits to the relationship that she is in, she finds some physical security, and she gets to take care of someone. While describing this relationships Tracy does not mention ways in which her emotional needs are met.

Each of the participants that discussed a VIP spoke about the needs that the *very important person* meets for them and the continued role that they play in their lives. It was evident in all but Tracy’s relationship, that the participant experienced some trust, acceptance, and emotional safety in their relationship with their VIP. These experiences were also mentioned in the relationships that many of the participants had with their friends.

**Friends**

For some of the participants, friends have become very close supports with who they have found a security that they did not have with their parents or foster care providers. Despite a lack of security in child-parent relationships, the findings in this research suggest that some of the participants have been able to find security in their relationships with their friends. The questionnaire results suggested that all interviewed
participants found their support, information, and feedback needs were better met by friends than by family, with the exception of Brenda whose questionnaire responses indicated that her needs were met equally by friends and family. In addition, all participants’ scores on the Inventory of Peer Attachment and Inventory of Parent Attachment suggested that their attachment needs were met to a greater degree by friends than by parents. The excerpts that follow detail some of the characteristics that participants attribute to their friendships, which include comfort and support; security and trust; closeness; acceptance; availability and dependability; and understanding.

One of the offerings that friendships provided for participants is comfort and support. As shown in Fraser’s individual description, he gets many of his relationship needs met by his friends. Another excerpt below also shows this. A couple of story segments were removed from this excerpt that provided details of the event and not his friendship. Here Fraser speaks about the visitors he received after having surgery:

The only people that were there were a few of my close friends, people who actually cared about me…. I am there for one hour, and my friend, out of nowhere, comes walking into the emerg. And she comes and she is like, and she came, and you know, was with me, like, till as long as she could….. A couple of hours later, four of them come walking in, all friends, and they just waited there for me, till I went into surgery. (Name of Friend), she like stayed with me, right until, like I finally like woke up from my surgery…… And she, like, it really touched me, because like, knowing that my friends were there, for me. That is why like I will always jump, go to like my friends quicker than I would my own family, because of the simple fact that, like even for that one example, it was only friends that came in to see me. (Fraser)

In this example we can see that the support and availability that Fraser’s friends have shown him are highly valued.

Security and trust were brought up by participants as necessary qualities in a close relationship. An example of this can be seen in Thomas’ interview. For Thomas whether or not he gets close to someone depends on if they are willing and able to stay in his life. Thomas has found a few friends who have stayed, and with these friends he experiences some security and trust. Thomas speaks about these friendships in this excerpt:
Oh absolutely, the few that have stuck around, are closer than, for lack of a better description, they are closer than family, but, again, that is just because they haven’t walked away. (Thomas)

Their persistence allows me to trust them more, and more, and more. (Thomas)

Unlike Thomas, Fraser doesn’t fear losing his friends, but he does find it difficult when people who were once close are no longer around. Fraser talked about how much he misses some friends when they are not present in his life:

There are certain people that I get attached to that, you know, when they go away, I, like, a sense of like, wow, I really miss this person, now, cause like they are gone, like even if it is for like, a couple of weeks, it is like wow they are gone, I am not going to see them for a while. I really like, wow, I really, really miss them, right, or like certain people, I haven’t seen in such a long time, I really start to like, miss that, people. I, I don’t know, I kind of like, half way, more leaning towards getting attached to certain people, too much. Um, if that is because of being in foster care, or not, I have no idea. Maybe, maybe it is, maybe it is just my personality, because I really like, I really enjoy being around people, and really like, really like making friendships, and really like getting really close to people and getting to know who they are, you know, building those really strong, lasting friendships. So people can know, that they can come and, you know, hang out with me, and you know, really enjoy having my company. (Fraser)

This excerpt from Fraser’s interview draws attention to the quality of closeness in these significantly important relationships that he speaks of.

Other friendships qualities that participants’ spoke about as important are acceptance and dependability. For the following two participants, friendship offers new and comforting experiences, experiences not present within their families. For Rebecca comfort has been found in the lack of judgement that friends have about her past, which makes her relationship with them feel easier, as described in this excerpt:

It is easier with some friends, because they have just met me, and they are more recent, whereas my family has known me my whole life, and so it is a little bit harder to go to them with some stuff, just because, they make judgements based on things that are like 15 years ago, whereas my friends don’t know a lot about that, so it is a little bit easier to come to them with stuff. (Rebecca)
In this excerpt Erin states that the dependability of friends has been helpful through many years in her life:

I can think of one that I met in grade 8 and one that I met in grade 10, that I know to this day, if at any time I need anything, any time they are moving, it is just sort of, I mean it is kinda the role that a parent would play. I know that if I need a ride at whatever time in the morning I could call them and they would come and get me, sort of thing. (Erin)

In this excerpt Erin states that her friends have played a role that a parent would play. This statement tells us that Erin recognizes that her parents have not fulfilled their role in her life as she would like them to, and that Erin has allowed herself to depend on friends at times to make up for this loss.

This final excerpt about friendship shows how the participant was surprised when he met someone very similar to him, and who could offer understanding in his life. Jason speaks about how quickly they bonded and became good friends in this excerpt from his interview:

We realized that we have A LOT in common, like we have A LOT in common, and you know, we had only met, like I had only known him for like 2 months. And, um, and then it was the fact that within that hour, like, we, just, we just gained a relationship, just like that, and you know now we are best friends. (Jason)

…It is just the fact that I could talk to him about anything. (Jason)

Jason spoke previously about needing to “bottle” things up at different times in his life. Through this quote it can be seen that through friendship Jason has found a place where he can talk about “anything”: in this relationship he has found understanding.

Through the interviews participants spoke about their friends and the relationships that have given them comfort, security, trust, dependability, acceptance, and understanding. Within these relationships it can be seen that these individuals are cherishing what they have found. Like VIPs, these friendships have provided participants with significant relationships to which they are holding on.
In this study I found three prevalent themes concerning relationships of the seven participants; apprehension in getting close; awareness of dysfunction; and holding on. Through the voices of these individuals these themes and the subthemes within them have been presented. Together they suggest a complicated story inclusive of; fearing to be close as a result of past hurts; knowing what has been damaging in life and trying to work beyond it; and holding onto relationships that offer a sense of security.
Discussion

This study offers findings related to the perspectives of adults who lived in the foster care system as children. In responding to questionnaire items and interview questions, participants shared information about their relationships with parents, caregivers, very important people in their lives, and friends. The data analysis revealed three pervasive themes in the relationships of the seven participants: apprehension about getting close to people, awareness of dysfunction, and holding on to those who stay in their lives. The implications of these themes for counselling psychology, the limitations of this study, possible future research needs, and closing remarks follow.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

Apprehension in Getting Close to Others

Apprehension in getting close to others could be seen within the seven participants’ stories as participants described testing relationships, challenges with trust, and finding greater support in individual relationships than from peer groups. The strong prevalence of this theme implies that these individuals’ relationships have been impacted deeply and long-term by their experiences of repeated and significant relationship loss. Although not generalizable to the larger foster care population, based on the tenets of attachment theory, this finding is not a surprise. It may indeed be the case that individuals who have experienced repeated significant losses may need to protect themselves from further hurt by caution and distance in all future relationships. The multiple moves that individuals in care frequently experience make it difficult for them to be vulnerable and open with others; they have difficulty trusting in relationships. For example, participants describe significant people being “taken away,” “would leave,” or “go somewhere else.” They note how this left them feeling “messed up,” “screwed up” and having “no [family] structure at all”. I speculate that the resulting caution they
take in relationships may be a needed coping strategy for someone with a history complicated by relationship loss.

The idea that apprehension in getting close to others may be a coping strategy for those affected by loss, is a new contribution to this literature, which is supported by findings from Samuels and Pryce (2008) that young adults aging out of foster care reported experiencing: early independence, taking oneself through life, vulnerability as posing a risk to independence, and disapproval of dependence. Samuels and Pryce describe this independence as *survivalist self-reliance*. Having heard the seven stories of the participants in this present research I wonder how much of the *survivalist self-reliance* Samuels and Pryce speak of, is rooted in apprehension in getting close to others. For example, are “early independence” and “disapproval of dependence” impacted by the fearing being close to others. Knowing that individuals who have experienced multiple moves may be apprehensive in developing new relationships can assist in encouraging understanding and fostering patience in caregivers and social service providers serving children and youth in foster care. Professionals and foster parents serving individuals whom have lived through multiple moves, may need education, reassurance and support to remain patient when they come up against this apprehension. At present professionals and foster care givers may not understand why children and youth show such apprehension of, or even opposition to, receiving help or support. On this point, Thomas offers some advice to foster parents:

> Foster kids will go into a family, not necessarily hating them, but not liking them, because they are new, they are scary. You don’t know them, they don’t know us. The parents need to understand that. If you are going to be a foster parent, you need to know that they kids are, they are more afraid of you, than you are of them. It is just like a wild animal, you treat them with respect, don’t push, let them come to you, if they come to you great, if they don’t, don’t push them. (Thomas)

With this type of understanding, in addition to skills training surrounding; empathy; engagement; listening; patience; and boundary setting; the break-down of placements, and turn over of caregivers may be less likely to occur.

The understanding that loss of relationships creates apprehension in moving into new relationships can further be used to strongly advocate for long-term placements for
children in care. The recognized need for long-term placements is not new, and the experience of children experiencing multiple moves appears to be common (Havelicek, 2011). New systems of parental support need to be considered and studied. Some other researchers have gone so far as to suggest that we now know what children need in care. Lee and Thompson (2008) have proposed that the only established, evidence-based intervention for out-of-home placement is a structured treatment foster care model. This foster care model provides close adult supervision, fair and consistent limits, predictable consequences, supportive adult relationships and limited exposure to deviant peers by placing youth individually in a specially trained foster family with additional supports, daily phone calls, and 24 hour response availability. The feasibility of providing all children and youth with such a specially trained home may be unrealistic. However, when we see the deep impact of the system that these seven individuals experienced one can not help but feel that such specialized services are necessary.

**Awareness of Dysfunction**

All participants described the dysfunction that they witnessed in their families and subsequently experienced within their own lives. The capacity to know right from wrong or healthy from unhealthy was salient in participants’ stories. Through trying to understand their parent’s lack of capacity to parent, seeking a place of belonging and connection, reaching out to others, or coping through blocking their emotions, these participants showed efforts to cope with their past experiences. It was evident that with the right supports, services, and understanding many of the participants demonstrated growth and change in their stories. Examples of this include: the importance that Fraser placed on programs that have helped him learn about himself and bring him to the place of studying to help vulnerable youth; Jason’s involvement with advocacy and support related groups in the community within which he experienced belonging and an opportunity to serve others; and Rebecca’s telling of the important role that a “mentor” played in her life when she was “lost”, and how her “mentor” helped her get solve “one big problem at a time”.

This research provides evidence for the continued need for support services that reach out to individuals in foster care such as life skills training; educational opportunities; access to counselling services and guidance resources; and opportunities
to connect with others who have grown up in foster care. Participants shared about the importance of these services during their childhoods and youths, and the difference the services made on their journey through care. Disappointment was expressed when individuals lost services such as access to education; support to learn life skills; and opportunities to connect with other individuals with similar life circumstances. If indeed other children and youth in care are similar in their needs, the knowledge of resources and the offering of ongoing services are necessary in creating opportunities for healthy growth and development.

Many of the adults in this study passionately spoke about ways in which they were able to offer support and understanding to children and or youth living away from their parents. The phrase “give back” was used by both Jason and Erin, to describe their experience with wanting to contribute positively to the lives of others. It is not known where this desire comes from. I can speculate that it stems from feelings of appreciation, in which participants recognized the benefit of past help and support received and want to return the favour; a sense of connection and belonging to others with similar losses in life; a desire to advocate for other children who are in their same place; or being empowered in adulthood to make changes for individuals and within the system. The stories participants told highlighted the healing benefits to helping others, and the sense of belonging and connection that could be found in working with children and youth with similar histories. Again, although not generalizable to the greater foster care population, this finding provides reason to encourage youth and adults who experienced alternate care arrangements, to “give back”, to play a significant role in offering understanding or advocacy to others who have not always had accessible parents. Like those in this study found, such a contribution may have great potential to benefit both themselves and others.

**Holding On**

Having experienced relationship losses, and shared about apprehension in relationships these participants went on to discuss relationships in which they have learned to be vulnerable, depend on others, and be depended on by others. The finding that the participants in this study hold onto certain relationships in their lives, shows that despite their very negative relationship histories, these individuals are still seeking
relationship, and holding onto those they perceive to be good. This finding says something about the very strong need of humans to be connected to others persisting; even after repeated negative relationship experiences. This “seeking” and “holding on” are signs of hope for these seven individuals. The finding that they are still reaching out to others, and not completely avoiding relationships, indicates a great possibility for positive growth and change in their lives.

Siegel and Hartzell (2003) see great hope that individuals with insecure attachments can have new experiences that will lead to security in relationships. They state, “that new self-understanding along with new interpersonal experiences that promote a new form of communication and connection can combine to enable one’s state of mind with respect to attachment to develop toward security in adulthood” (p. 148). If new self-understanding and interpersonal experiences have the capacity to change the way individuals perceive security in relationships, it is of little surprise that research has demonstrated that support services, educational support, interventions, and therapies can have a significant impact on the development of secure attachment for infants, children and youth (Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Kretchmar, Worsham & Swenson, 2005; Lyons-Ruth, Connell, & Grunebaum, 1990; Lyons-Ruth & Spielman, 2004; Pickover, 2002). Lyons-Ruth et al. (1990) found that for infants at a severe social risk, home-visiting services which modelled and reinforced interactive and positive exchanges between the mother and infant, had a positive and significant impact on the early development of infants. Howes and Ritchie (1999) found that children with difficult life circumstances were able to construct positive relationships with teachers through educational supports. Lyons-Ruth and Spielman (2004) demonstrated that attachment-related treatment can increase a parent’s security and parent-child attunement. Likewise, Kretchmar, Worham and Swenson (2005) document the impact that providing an attachment-based foster care program had on the relationship of a mother with her child, showing positive changes in the mother’s internal working model. Lastly, Pickover’s (2002) research provides a successful example of treating a youth with an avoidant attachment style from an attachment perspective. These diverse examples of helping insecure infants, children, and youth from an attachment perspective bring hope to those with insecure attachment, hope that security can be learned and experienced. More directly linked to this research, case examples of children who have been adopted
or are in foster care illustrate the types of behaviour associated with attachment challenges and the kinds of interventions used (Howe & Fearnley, 2003). Hughes (2004) describes the process of a psychological treatment, from an attachment perspective, for children and youth who have been placed in foster or adoptive homes. Hughes suggests that through his attachment-based treatment children will have an opportunity to engage safely with both the therapist and their caregiver. This research again recognizes that attachment security, and the working models that underlie this security, can indeed be changed over time.

The findings of the present research are consistent with Farruggia et al. (2006) who describe how Very Important non-parental Adults influence attachment development. As presented here six out of the seven participants identified a person in their lives who at least partially met their attachment needs through: keeping them on the right path, helping them through hard times, being supportive, encouraging, accepting, and nurturing, offered security, and created celebrations and traditions. As the participants discussed the VIPs in their lives they described positive exchanges, safe engagement, attunement, and feeling hope. These relationship dynamics sound similar to some of the elements in the above mentioned therapeutically oriented attachment based relationships (Hughes, 2004; Lyons-Ruth & Spielman, 2004). It appears as though some of these VIP relationships offer the participants an experience in secure attachment.

One participant in this study, Erin, shared a story that was more extreme with regard to avoidance and transience then the others. It is important to recognize that there are likely many more stories like hers that are not heard, or captured in this research. Unlike the other research participants, Erin did not get connected to this study through a support organization, or by referral through a third person. Notably, the six other participants were all connected to supportive relationships. Despite the fact that Erin did not identify a VIP in her life, and spoke numerous times about keeping people at a distance, in addition to pushing people away, she did make a reference to feeling as though she needs relationship sometimes when she said with tears:

If stresses of life compile and it just gets where I feel like I can’t deal with it anymore. Ya, then you just feel like you need some relief, to take the
pressure. Cause there is only so much that you can do by yourself, at the end of the day. Everyone needs something. (Erin).

It is possible that other individuals, who are more similar to Erin would not have participated in this study because it required a vulnerability in communicating; which requires an element of trust; which they may not have been willing to offer. As such, the participant sample in this study may have been biased, as participating in this study required a certain degree of trust that other potential participants may not have felt.

The finding that VIPs and friends play such a central role in the lives of the adults interviewed in this study is encouraging. The “families” that some of these individuals have created amongst their friends are celebrated and appreciated by these participants. It appears as though these individuals felt the need to create a family because they could not get their needs met in the ones that they were born into or placed into by the foster care system. Through experiencing relationships in which they felt loved, nurtured, accepted, and valued, it appears as though they began to create their own “family” members. These stories demonstrate that finding acceptance and belonging can create and foster healing, as evidenced by the excerpts provided.

Previous research has highlighted a self-reliance that youth aging out of foster care may develop (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), which seems somewhat contradictory to my finding that at least some are creating their own “families” in which there is mutual reliance. There are a great number of possible reasons for these apparently discrepant findings. Two reasons are suggested here. First, it is possible that Samuels and Pryce’s research captured a distinctly different group of participants than the seven participants interviewed in this study. As mentioned above, the present study required participants to communicate vulnerable information requiring some trust, which potentially influenced a biased sample. Second, the participants in the Samuels and Pryce study had just emancipated from foster care, making them younger than the participants in this study. With time the participants in this study may have had experiences that have increased the likelihood that they would move into relationship in which they could depend on others. Examples of these experiences, as told by participants in this study, may have been: group contact with others who lived in care that offered understanding, education, encounters with VIPs who offered security, and individual friendships in which they were able to slowly learn to trust.
Limitations and Future Research Considerations

Contributing to knowledge in the areas of foster care, attachment, relationships after loss, VIPs, and friendship; this research gives voice to a largely silent group, that is, young adults who as children lived in foster care. Although the data provided by the participants revealed some important new themes as well as themes that corroborated previous research, the study is not without limitations, which are discussed in this section. Here I also present suggestions for future research including utilizing larger sample sizes, comparison groups, and multiple perspectives (i.e. foster caregivers, the VIPs themselves, social workers). Further exploration of these limitations and considerations follows.

This study is limited in generalizability by the number of participants and the recruitment practices used. The individuals interviewed in this study were invited to further participate after completing a series of questionnaires. Only those who responded to this invitation were interviewed. Those who accepted to be interviewed may be distinctly different from those who declined or did not respond to the invitation. It is not known how those who did not accept the invitation may be characteristically different from those who accepted. This is noteworthy as we can not assume that the findings are indicative of all adults who lived in foster care.

The findings of this study are limited to these seven participants who were all interviewed at one point in time. This approach enabled me to explore in some depth the relationships of my participants, something that is difficult to do in a large N study. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know, how representative the questionnaire responses of my participants were. A limitation of much of the research in this area has been a failure to assess the direct perspective of individuals who have lived in foster care (Unrau, 2007). The current study addressed this shortcoming of the literature. Moreover, very little research has been done that captures the experiences of adults who have experienced the foster care system. This study made a contribution in this area. Berrick, Frasch, and Fox (2000) remark that barriers of: administration, politics, legalities, and pragmatics interfere with access to and contact with this population. I attempted to overcome much of this interference by recruiting adults who have lived in care; a population that is often been difficult to engage as research participants.
In addition to working to improve the above mentioned short-comings in foster care research, research in this area would also benefit from the combination of multiple perspectives within the same foster care placement. This research contributes to the voice of fostered individuals, and other research has recently provided insight into thoughts of foster care givers (Brown & Campbell, 2007; Daniel, 2011); however, we do not know how these perspectives relate, and what combined reality they offer. The collaboration of these life stories would greatly add to the research on foster care relationships.

The potential impact of multiple moves has been noted in both this and other research (Havelicek, 2011). In knowing that individuals living in foster care are experiencing such challenging outcomes, researchers such as Havelicek (2011) have deemed that substitute care contexts have not been thoroughly considered. This study has reinforced the need to consider alternative services. Options for alternatives to care such as mentor homes for parents and children to live with experienced parents, therapeutic homes to mentor foster care givers, and group care facilities with trained therapeutic parental figures, need to be thoroughly explored. We need to know what services might drastically decrease the potential for multiple moves and losses in relationships for children and youth in foster care by providing consistent and nurturing care, or services that can teach children and youth life skills to aid them in the transition into adulthood. This, and other outcomes research, signify the need for a drastic change in the provision of care for children and youth requiring parental intervention, a finding that needs to be acknowledged by service providers.

Closing Remarks

I was especially touched by how the research participants in this study showed great humility; as they told their stories of strife and struggle; explored their battles with change; and were vulnerable with a researcher that they likely will never see again. Such an offering cannot be valued enough. When individuals who have experienced such relationship strife offer their stories and experiences, they need to be honoured. There has indeed been a great honour extended to me in hearing the relationship stories
of these seven individuals. Each of participants sought, and most have found, survival
determinants, as described by Perry and Szalavitz (2006), someone to stand by them
with love, support and encouragement.

Ultimately, what determines how children survive trauma, physically,
emotionally, or psychologically, is whether the people around them –
particularly the adults they should be able to trust and rely upon – stand
by them with love, support and encouragement. Fire can warm or
consume, water can quench or drown, wind can caress or cut. And so it
is with human relationships; we can both create and destroy, nurture and
terrorize, traumatize and heal each other. (p. 5)

With the ideal of being a warm, quenching, and caressing influence in the lives of
individuals who have experienced relationship trauma and loss, I present this work with
hope. Hope that it will make a healing impact on the lives of children who spend time in
foster care. Hope that with time and increased knowledge and advocacy, children in
foster care will increasingly find caregivers and supports that they can trust and rely on,
who will stand by them with the love, support, and encouragement they need throughout
their childhoods.
References


Appendices
Appendix A: Questionnaires

Demographic Information:
Your participation in this study and the responses that you provide are confidential (as outlined in the consent form you signed). The following demographic information will help the researcher ensure that the results of this study are accurately represented and that comparative data are matched based on important factors.

1. How old are you:

2. What is your gender:  Male  Female

3. Did you live in Foster Care in British Columbia:
   Yes  No - please skip to question 9

4. How old were you when you first entered foster care:

5. How many years did you live in foster care?

6. Including your birth parents, how many different caregivers have you lived with (please count a couple as 1):

7. While in foster care did you remain in touch with your birth family:
   Yes  No

8. Are you currently in touch with your birth family:
   Yes  No

9. How many homes did you live in prior to 19 years of age:
   in your life:

10. How many schools have you attended:
    Elementary:
    High School:

11. Have you ever been diagnosed with:
    (please indicate all that apply)
    □ Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder
    □ Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)
    □ An Anxiety Disorder
    □ Bi-Polar
    □ Depression
    □ Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
    □ Other:

12. Do you presently have any of the following diagnoses:
    (please check all that apply)
    □ Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder
    □ Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)
    □ An Anxiety Disorder
    □ Bi-Polar
    □ Depression
    □ Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
    □ Other:

Please continue onto second page...
13. What is your present living situation:

- With birth parents.
- With other caregivers.
- With roommates.
- No consistent home at this time.
- In group housing.
- In student housing.
- Living alone.
- Living with partner.

14. What is the highest level of education that you have completed:

- Elementary school - To what grade?
- Highschool - To what grade?
- GED
- College certificate
- College diploma
- College/University degree

15. What is your ethnic background:

16. What is your current work/school involvement:

(please check all that apply)

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Not presently employed
- Student full-time
- Student part-time

17. What is the source of your current financial support:

(please check all that apply)

- Employment
- Government Assistance
- Student Loans
- Parental/Caregiver Support
- Other:

18. My current income level is:

- up to $15,000/year
- up to $22,500/year
- up to $30,000/year
- up to $45,000/year
- more than $45,000/year

19. The current total income level of the household that I live in is:

- up to $15,000/year
- up to $22,500/year
- up to $30,000/year
- up to $45,000/year
- up to $60,000/year
- up to $85,000/year
- more than $85,000/year

Please continue on with the 2nd set of questions, THANK YOU!
**PSS-Fr and PSS-Fa Scales**

Directions: The statements which follow refer to feelings and experiences which occur to most people at one time or another in their relationships with friends. Respond to each statement by circling the number that indicates how true each statement is for you.

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1. My friends give me the moral support I need.  
2. Most other people are closer to their friends than I am.  
4. Certain friends come to me when they have problems or need advice.  
5. I rely on my friends for emotional support.  
6. If I felt that one or more of my friends were upset with me, I'd just keep it to myself.  
7. I feel that I'm on the fringe in my circle of friends.  
8. There is a friend I could go to if I were just feeling down, without feeling funny about it later.  
9. My friends and I are very open about what we think about things.  
10. My friends are sensitive to my personal needs.  
11. My friends come to me for emotional support.  
12. My friends are good at helping me solve problems.  
13. I have a deep sharing relationship with a number of friends.  
14. My friends get good ideas about how to do things or make things from me.  
15. When I confide in friends, it makes me feel uncomfortable.  
16. My friends seek me out for companionship.  
17. I think that my friends feel that I'm good at helping them solve problems.  
18. I don't have a relationship with a friend that is as intimate as other people's relationships with friends.  
19. I've recently gotten a good idea about how to do something from a friend.  
20. I wish my friends were much different.
Directions: The statements which follow refer to feelings and experiences which occur to most people at one time or another in their relationships with their families. When you hear the word "family," who do you think of: and what is their relationship to you?

The following questions are about the family that you have just defined.

Respond to each statement by circling the number that indicates how true each statement is for you.

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1. My family gives me the moral support I need. □ □ □ □ □
2. I get good ideas about how to do things or make things from my family. □ □ □ □ □
3. Most other people are closer to their family than I am. □ □ □ □ □
4. When I confide in the members of my family who are closest to me, I get the idea that it makes them uncomfortable. □ □ □ □ □
5. My family enjoys hearing about what I think. □ □ □ □ □
6. Members of my family share many of my interests. □ □ □ □ □
7. Certain members of my family come to me when they have problems or need advice. □ □ □ □ □
8. I rely on my family for emotional support. □ □ □ □ □
9. There is a member of my family I could go to if I were just feeling down, without feeling funny about it later. □ □ □ □ □
10. My family and I are very open about what we think about things. □ □ □ □ □
11. My family is sensitive to my personal needs. □ □ □ □ □
12. Members of my family come to me for emotional support. □ □ □ □ □
13. Members of my family are good at helping me solve problems. □ □ □ □ □
14. I have a deep sharing relationship with a number of members of my family. □ □ □ □ □
15. Members of my family get good ideas about how to do things or make things from me. □ □ □ □ □
16. When I confide in members of my family, it makes me uncomfortable. □ □ □ □ □
17. Members of my family seek me out for companionship. □ □ □ □ □
18. I think that my family feels that I'm good at helping them solve problems. □ □ □ □ □
19. I don't have a relationship with a member of my family that is as close as other people's relationships with family members. □ □ □ □ □
20. I wish my family were much different. □ □ □ □ □
Relational Provisions and Loneliness Questionnaire

Please rate how true you feel each statement is for you, using the following rating scale.

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<td>Always True</td>
<td>Often True</td>
<td>Sometimes True</td>
<td>Seldom True</td>
<td>Never True</td>
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</table>

1. I feel part of a group of friends that do things together. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
2. There is someone my age I can turn to. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
3. I have a lot in common with other people. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
4. There is someone my age I could go to if feeling down. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
5. I feel in tune with others my age. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
6. I have at least one really good friend I could talk to when something is bothering me. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
7. I feel like others my age want to be with me. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
8. I have a friend who is really interested in hearing about my private thoughts and feelings. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
9. I feel that I usually fit in with those around me. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
10. I have a friend I can tell everything to. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
11. When I want to do something for fun I can usually find a friend to join me. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
12. There is someone my age who really understands me. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
13. When I am with other people I feel like I belong. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
14. There is a friend that I feel close to. □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5
Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R) Questionnaire
Fraley, Waller and Brennan (2000)

The statements below concern how you feel in relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current romantic relationship. Respond to each statement by circling a number to indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Not sure Agree Strongly Agree

1. I’m often afraid that I will lose the love of others. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
2. I often worry that others will not want to stay with me. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
3. I often worry that others don’t really love me. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
4. I worry that others won’t care about me as much as I care about them. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
5. I often wish that others’ feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for them. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
6. I worry a lot about my relationships. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
7. When others are out of sight, I worry that they may become interested in someone else. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
8. When I show my feelings for others, I’m afraid they will not feel the same about me. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
9. I rarely worry about others leaving me. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
10. The people close to me make me doubt myself. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
11. I do not worry about being abandoned. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
12. I find that others don’t want to get as close as I would like. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
13. Sometimes others change their feelings about me for no apparent reason. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
14. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
15. I’m afraid that once someone gets to know me, he or she won’t like who I really am. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
16. It makes me mad that I don’t get the affection and support I need from others. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
17. I worry that I won’t measure up to other people. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
18. The people in my life only seem to notice me when I’m angry. □1 □2 □3 □4 □5
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<td>19.</td>
<td>I prefer not to show how I feel deep down.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>I am very comfortable being close to others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>I don’t feel comfortable opening up to others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>I prefer not to be close to others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>I get uncomfortable when someone wants to be very close.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>I find it relatively easy to get close to others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>27.</td>
<td>It’s not difficult for me to get close to others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>28.</td>
<td>I usually discuss my problems and concerns with others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>It helps to turn to others in times of need.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>30.</td>
<td>I tell others just about everything.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>31.</td>
<td>I talk things over with those who are close to me.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>32.</td>
<td>I am nervous when others get too close to me.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>33.</td>
<td>I feel comfortable depending on others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>34.</td>
<td>I find it easy to depend on others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>35.</td>
<td>It’s easy for me to be affectionate with others.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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<td>36.</td>
<td>Those close to me really understand me and my needs.</td>
<td>![Rating](1 2 3 4 5)</td>
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THANK YOU – LAST one coming up…!
### Inventory of Parent, Very Important Person, and Peer Attachment

Indicate whether the following items are: Always True, Often True, Sometimes True, Seldom True, Never True.

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<td>Seldom True</td>
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**Parent Attachment Items:**

Please answer the following questions regarding your birth parents. When was the last time you saw your birth parents?

1. My parents respect my feelings.
2. I feel my parents are successful as parents.
3. I wish I had different parents.
4. My parents accept me as I am.
5. I have to rely on myself when I have a problem to solve.
6. I like to get my parents’ point of view on things I’m concerned about.
7. I feel it’s no use letting my feelings show.
8. My parents sense when I’m upset about something.
9. Talking over my problems with my parents makes me feel ashamed or foolish.
10. My parents expect too much from me.
11. I get upset easily at home.
12. I get upset a lot more than my parents know about.
13. When we discuss things, my parents consider my point of view.
15. My parents have their own problems, so I don’t bother them with mine.
16. My parents help me to understand myself better.
17. I tell my parents about my problems and troubles.
18. I feel angry with my parents.
19. I don’t get much attention at home.
20. My parents encourage me to talk about my difficulties.
21. My parents understand me.
22. I don’t know whom I can depend on these days.
23. When I am angry about something, my parents try to be understanding.  
24. I trust my parents.  
25. My parents don't understand what I'm going through these days.  
26. I can count on my parents when I need to get something off my chest.  
27. I feel that no one understands me.  
28. If my parents know something is bothering me, they ask me about it.

Part II  
Important Non-Parental Adult

Is there a very important non-parental adult in your life?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

If so please describe the role that this person plays in your life:

Please answer the following questions with this important person in mind, putting their name into the question when you read it:

1. ________ respects my feelings.  
2. ________ accepts me as I am.  
3. I have to rely on myself when I have a problem to solve.  
4. I like to get ________'s point of view on things I'm concerned about.  
5. I feel it's no use letting my feelings show.  
6. ________ senses when I'm upset about something.  
7. Talking over my problems with ________ makes me feel ashamed or foolish.  
8. ________ expects too much from me.  
9. I get upset easily when I am with ________.  
10. I get upset a lot more than ________ knows about.  
11. When we discuss things, ________ considers my point of view.
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12. ___________ trusts my judgment.
13. ___________ has their own problems, so I don’t bother them with mine.
14. ___________ helps me to understand myself better.
15. I tell ___________ about my problems and troubles.
16. I feel angry with ___________.
17. I don’t get much attention from ___________.
18. ___________ encourages me to talk about my difficulties.
19. ___________ understands me.
20. I don’t know whom I can depend on these days.
21. When I am angry about something, ___________ tries to be understanding.
22. I trust ___________.
23. ___________ doesn’t understand what I’m going through these days.
24. I can count on ___________ when I need to get something off my chest.
25. I feel that no one understands me.
26. If ___________ knows something is bothering me, they ask me about it.
Part III
Friends

Please keep your friends in mind when you answer these last questions.

1. I like to get my friends' point of view on things I'm concerned about.
2. My friends sense when I'm upset about something.
3. When we discuss things, my friends consider my point of view.
4. Talking over my problems with my friends makes me feel ashamed or foolish.
5. I wish I had different friends.
6. My friends understand me.
7. My friends encourage me to talk about my difficulties.
8. My friends accept me as I am.
9. I feel the need to be in touch with my friends more often.
10. My friends don't understand what I'm going through these days.
11. I feel alone or apart when I am with my friends.
12. My friends listen to what I have to say.
13. I feel my friends are good friends.
14. My friends are fairly easy to talk to.
15. When I am angry about something, my friends try to be understanding.
16. My friends help me to understand myself better.
17. My friends are concerned about my well-being.
18. I feel angry with my friends.
19. I can count on my friends when I need to get something off of my chest.
20. I trust my friends.
22. I get upset a lot more than my friends know about.
23. It seems as if my friends are irritated with me for no reason.
24. I tell my friends about my problems and troubles.
25. If my friends know something is bothering me, they ask me about it.

THANK YOU
Please save your questionnaires and return them via email to rnmadu@sfu.ca
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Individuals who grew up in Foster Care

Questions about Demographics:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your parents when you were in foster care? For those who reported contact.

2. From your perception, was a relationship with your birth parents made available to you while you were in care?

3. How would you describe your relationship with your parents now?

4. How did your experience with foster care affect your educational opportunities?

Questions about Social Supports:

5. Your questionnaire answers suggest that you are more likely to turn to friends for support than family (all respondents).
Tell me about that?
May use for further exploration: (Tell me about a time when you needed to depend on someone in your life.) (Tell me about a time when someone needed to depend on you.)

Questions about Individuals and Groups:

6. One of the questions on the survey you responded to asked about relationships with specific individuals, and feelings about being in groups.
   a) Can you tell me about your experience with individual friendship?
   b) Can you tell me about your experience in groups?

Questions about Experiences with Close Relationships:

7. Do you think living in Foster Care has had an effect on your relationships? Can you tell me more about that?

8. One of the things that I would like to talk to you about is worry and anxiety in relationship. Some people experience a lot of worry, and others none. Can you tell me where you fit in this?
Tell me about a time when you worried about a relationship? Would you say that this is a common experience for you?

Only if trust doesn't come up somewhere else:

How would you describe your experience with trust in relationships? Would you identify with trusting others?

How would you describe your ability to trust yourself? Do you trust your own judgment?

9. Some people avoid getting emotionally close to others and others find that they just can not get close enough. Can you tell me about your experience with getting close to others?

Tell me about a time when you avoided a relationship? Would you say that this is a common experience for you?

Questions about Parents, Very Important People and Friends surrounding Attachment:

10. You indicated on your questionnaire that you do/do not (based on questionnaire answer) feel attached to your parents.
   a) What does that mean to you?
   b) Are you able to tell me more about this?
   c) Has your family offered you anything with that no one else has?

11. Tell me about the person that you are closest to.
   a) What do you value in this relationship?
   b) What needs does this person meet for you?
   c) What needs do you meet for them?

12. Do you feel like you have a peer network?
   a) If so, what do they offer you that your family does not?

13. How do you feel about the foster care system?

14. How do you feel the relationships provided served you?

15. If you could change something about the foster care system what would it be?

16. Is there anything that you feel I have not asked about that would be important for me to know?
Appendix C: Ethics Approval
Dear Ms. Madu:

Re: The present day relationships of adults who grew up in foster care - Appl. #: 38852

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research has been approved on behalf of the Research Ethics Board. This approval is in effect until the end date September 22, 2011, or only during the period in which you are a registered SFU student.

The Office of Research Ethics must be notified of any changes in the approved protocol. Request for amendments to the protocol may be requested by email to dore@sfu.ca. In all correspondence relating to this application, please reference the application number shown on this letter and all email.

Your application has been categorized as "minimal risk" and approved by the Director, Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board in accordance with University policy R20.01, http://www.sfu.ca/policies/research/r20-01.htm. The Board reviews and may amend decisions or subsequent amendments made independently by the Director, Chair or Deputy Chair at its regular monthly meetings.
“Minimal risk” occurs when potential participants can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms incurred by participating in the research to be no greater than those encountered by the participant in those aspects of his or her everyday life that relate to the research.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the researcher, or the responsibility of the Student Supervisor if the researcher is a graduate student or undergraduate student, to maintain written or other forms of documented consent for a period of 1 year after the research has been completed.

If there is an adverse event, the principal investigator must notify the Office of Research Ethics within five (5) days. An Adverse Events form is available electronically by contacting dore@sfu.ca.

All correspondence with regards to this application will be sent to your SFU email address.

Please notify the Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca once you have completed the data collection portion of your project so that we can close this file.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

c: Dr. Lucy Lemare, Supervisor

/jmy
February 4, 2010

Rachel Madu
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University
Dear Rachel:

Re: The present day relationships of adults who grew up in foster care - Appl. #38852

Amendment

In response to your request, I am pleased to approve, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board, the following amendment in the research protocol of the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research originally approved on September 23, 2008.

In accordance with correspondence request of 7 January 2010 the following amendments are approved as minimal risk:

- Include in protocol semi-structured interviews that are audio recorded.
- Participants payment for interview be $20. Amended consent for interviews

If there is an adverse event, the principal investigator must notify the Office of Research Ethics within five (5) days. An Adverse Events form is available electronically by contacting doc@sfu.ca.

All correspondence with regards to this application will be sent to your SFU email address. Please notify the Office of Research Ethics at doc@sfu.ca once you have completed the data collection portion of your project so that we can close this file.

Best wishes for continued success in this research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

C: Dr. Lucy Lemare, Supervisor

Simon Fraser University