Defining Success: The Perspective of Emerging Adults with Foster Care Experience

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The University of Southern Mississippi

DEFINING SUCCESS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF
EMERGING ADULTS WITH FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE

by

Brianna Lynne Anderson

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
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for the Degree of Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

DEFINING SUCCESS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMERGING ADULTS WITH FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE

by Brianna Lynne Anderson

August 2015

Youth with experience in the foster system are often more susceptible to negative outcomes in adulthood due to their high levels of cumulative risk. The present study sought out to re-define the concept of “success” from the perspective of emerging adults with experience in the foster care system and to identify patterns among the characteristics and behaviors of foster families that promote success as these young adults transition out of the foster care system and into adulthood. Participants most frequently defined “success” as achieving personal goals. Additionally, Support and Positive Identity were found to be the most influential Developmental Assets® promoted by family characteristics and behaviors. A greater awareness of the family factors emerging adults perceived to contribute to their success can be used to advise agencies, advocates, and parents, permitting them to be more intentional in promoting success, and maximizing opportunities for successful development in foster youth.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Youth enter the foster care system for a number of different reasons and stay in the system for an indefinite period of time. Some youth enter and exit multiple times during their childhood, and others may only have one placement. While the experience of living in foster care may differ significantly for each child, one commonality exists—when a youth in the foster system reaches the age of emancipation, they transition out of the custody of the state and are considered legally independent adults. The age of emancipation ranges from 18 and 21, depending on the state in which the child resides (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012).

Youth in foster care are leaving the custody of the state and foster parents at an increasing rate. Of the 241,254 children that exited the foster care system in 2012, 10% of them were emancipated (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). This number is 2% higher than in 2003 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Such an increase demands that more attention be directed to assisting youth as they transition from life within the foster care system to independence in adulthood.

Unlike many of their peers in the general population, foster youth have a unique living situation and frequently lose contact with their support system once they reach the age of emancipation. Former foster parents of the children are not legally mandated to provide continued care or support, and participation in transitional living programs is optional. As a result, many foster youth find themselves alone and struggling to succeed in their first attempts on their own. Many become involved in drug or alcohol use, battle mental health complications, experience homelessness, or have difficulty securing and

While scholars, theorists, advocates, and others viewing the foster care system from an external perspective readily identify the disproportionate number of risk factors present in the experiences of foster youth as leading to negative outcomes in adulthood, the perception of the individuals in consideration can play a major factor in the actual outcomes they experience. The power of perception has been observed among various populations to influence attitudes and outcomes, regardless of the actual circumstance (Henry, Merten, Plunkett, & Sands, 2008; Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). An understanding of the way in which individuals with experience in the foster care system define “success,” using resilience theory as a theoretical framework, can provide valuable insight and lead to improvements within the foster care system.

Additionally, there are ways in which the risk of negative outcomes for emerging adults with experience in the foster care system can be minimized. Several factors have been identified to promote resiliency and success as these individuals enter adulthood, including support from transitional living programs and placement stability while in foster care (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012; James, Monn, Palinkas, & Leslie, 2008; Jones, 2011; Youth Villages, 2012). Foster care agencies, advocates for foster youth, and foster care legislation have made efforts to increase the presence of these promotive factors in the lives of foster youth. There are also a number of factors within the family relationship that have been found to be significant in promoting resiliency. While youth
in the foster care system often have broken relationships with their birth parents, it is possible that the same promotive factors frequently found in the family-of-origin can also exist in foster families. A greater emphasis on the positive impact certain characteristics and behaviors of foster families can have on foster youth resiliency is necessary to ensure the best possible outcomes for a highly vulnerable population.

Problem Statement

Research surrounding the foster care system has traditionally focused on the risks and unfavorable outcomes that youth most frequently experience both while in the system and once they have exited it. This approach is not completely unjustified; studies have consistently found experience in the foster care system to be associated with an elevated risk of negative outcomes later in life, such as drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, homelessness, and mental health complications (Courtney et al., 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013; Hallett, 2010; Salazar, 2013). Such a pessimistic approach to studying foster care can cast a negative light on the system as a whole and create a sense of hopelessness for the children and families the system serves. A resilience approach, on the other hand, emphasizes positive outcomes. Focusing on the successes of emerging adults with experience in foster care can provide greater insight and lead to improvements in the foster care system for everyone involved.

Purpose and Importance

While youth in the care of foster parents disproportionately encounter difficulties later in life, many exhibit a high level of resiliency in the face of such adversities. In fact, over one-third of former foster youth in a recent study on resiliency could be classified as accelerated adults, meaning they were making adequate progress in their adjustment to
adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012). Additionally, studies by Jones (2011; 2012) revealed that, while at a lower rate than the general population, many emerging adults with experience in the foster care system were furthering their education and had established a positive, supportive relationship with an adult. Rather than focusing on the risk factors contributing to adverse outcomes, the present study seeks to reveal the behaviors and characteristics of foster parents that contribute to higher levels of successful transitions to adulthood. Additionally, previous research has found perception to be significant in predicting life satisfaction and outcomes. The current study aims to identify patterns in the way in which young adults transitioning out of the foster care system define “success,” allowing providers to also focus on the milestones and achievements most important to the foster population. An awareness of their perceptions, along with the family factors they perceive to contribute to their success, will allow foster care agencies, advocates, and foster parents to be more intentional in promoting resiliency and maximize opportunities for successful development in foster youth.

A healthy family situation can be one of the strongest factors in promoting resiliency (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012). Emerging adults with experience in the foster system often lack the stability and security provided to many by their birth parents, as they are bounced around from home to home, unable to form proper attachments, and are exposed to additional risk factors. This study aims to re-define the construct of success from the perspective of former foster youth as well as to identify concepts of foster family resilience that are central to fostering their successes. In considering the perspective of foster youth, “success” can be re-defined to reflect the milestones and characteristics of development most significant to the population.
Much of the legislation impacting the foster care system is child-focused. A child-focused perspective is not an unjustified approach, but such legislation can completely circumvent the importance of family. A positive relationship with family members can lead to increased resiliency, greater life satisfaction, and overall higher levels of wellbeing, and most of these behaviors are found in the everyday practices of families (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Courtney et al., 2012; Kranstuber et al., 2012; Masten, 2001). With such a strong potential to positively influence development, requiring little more than “ordinary magic”, foster families simply should not be overlooked (Masten, 2001). The findings of this study can be used to advise foster parent training, recruitment, and policy to ensure the best chances of successful development among foster youth.

Definitions of Key Terms and Processes

The following definitions are provided to give clarity to key terms and processes that will remain central to the study:


2. *Developmental Assets®:* Forty assets, identified by Search Institute®, that are central to promoting resiliency and healthy development in children and
adolescents (Benson, 1990; Search Institute®, 2006). The level of accumulation of Developmental Assets® is often used as a measure of success.

3. **Emancipation**: Release from the foster care system due to reaching the age of 18, or 21 in some states (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Upon reaching this age, youth are legally considered adults and no longer in the custody of the state or foster family.

4. **Family factor**: Any characteristic or behavior of a family that influences the overall development of a child (Orme & Buehler, 2001). These can be either promotive factors or risk factors. This study will focus on promotive factors in families.

5. **Foster youth**: Children who have been removed from their family for an indefinite period of time due to inability of family to provide adequate care. Reasons for removal may vary, but can include parental illness, neglect, or criminal offenses (Arnett, 2007). These children become wards of the state and are in the custody of the state or foster families until they are reunited with their birth family or age out of the system.

6. **Linear definition**: The classical view of defining a concept. This approach requires all elements of the definition to be present for the concept to exist (Kearns & Fincham, 2004).

7. **Promotive factor or asset**: Factors that predict positive outcomes (Wright et al., 2013). Promotive factors, or assets, contribute positively to an individual’s resiliency.
8. **Prototypic structure**: An alternative approach to defining a concept. This approach maintains that some concepts are more appropriately defined by a number of different thoughts, feelings, and features that differ in terms of centrality to the concept (Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987; Rosch, 1975). Additionally, all features of the concept do not have to be present for the concept to exist (Fehr, 1988).

9. **Resiliency**: The cumulative ability of an individual to persevere in times of risk and to recover from misfortunes (Wright et al., 2013). Promotive factors add to an individual’s level of resiliency, whereas risks lower it.

10. **Transitional living program**: Programs available to help recently emancipated foster youth adjust to adulthood and independence (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). These programs may offer financial guidance, assistance in finding jobs, and help in coping with mental health complications. Participation in these programs is voluntary and they may be residential or non-residential.

Guiding Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the construct of success from the perspective of emerging adults with experience in the foster care system. The primary question that guided the research was:

- How do emerging adults with foster care backgrounds define “success?”

Additionally, several secondary research questions were considered to further identify patterns in the perceptions of youth with foster backgrounds, including:

- Does the concept of “success” have a prototypic structure?
• What promotive factors in foster family relationships do emerging adults perceive to lead to resiliency?
• What risk factors in foster family relationships do emerging adults perceive to inhibit resiliency?
• To what degree do former foster youth perceive themselves to be successful?
• Is this mixed-method approach an effective way to capture the perceptions of the target population?

These research questions were used to guide the demographic questionnaire, prototype analysis, Developmental Assets® assessment, and focus group discussion. The mixed method approach of the study provided valuable insight into the perceptions and experiences of emerging adults who have spent time in the care of foster families.
CHAPTER II
MANUSCRIPT

Individuals with experience in the foster care system are frequently the subjects of research surrounding the definition of success, but rarely are their perspectives of success considered. Positive perceptions of a situation have been found to act as promotive factors in otherwise negative situations (Henry et al., 2008). The present study focused specifically on the perceptions of youth with experience in the foster system in defining success and identifying significant family factors that promote their definition of success. Knowledge of foster youth’s perceptions can advise foster family recruitment and training and future legislation by incorporating the factors youth in the foster care system perceive to be most significant in promoting their successes.

Youth enter the foster care system for a number of different reasons and stay in the system for an indefinite period of time. Some youth enter and exit multiple times during their childhood, and others may only have one placement. While the experience of living in foster care may differ significantly for each child, one commonality exists—when a youth in the foster system reaches the age of emancipation, they transition out of the custody of the state and are considered legally independent adults. Youth in foster care experience disproportionate risks and negative outcomes and a great deal of research focuses on the unique hardships of foster youth. The present study took a different approach, using a resilience framework to consider foster family relationships in a positive light and focusing on the factors at the family level that promoted a successful transition to adulthood.
The age of emancipation ranges from 18 and 21, depending on the state in which the child resides (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012), and youth in foster care are leaving the custody of the state and foster parents at an increasing rate. Of the 241,254 children that exited the foster care system in 2012, 10% of them were emancipated (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). This number is 2% higher than in 2003 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Such an increase demands that more attention be directed to assisting youth as they transition from life within the foster care system to independence in adulthood. The present study aimed to identify the ways in which positive relationships between foster families and children can ease this transition.

Unlike many of their peers in the general population, foster youth have a unique living situation and frequently lose contact with their support system once they reach the age of emancipation. Former foster parents of the children are not legally mandated to provide continued care or support, and participation in transitional living programs is optional. As a result, many foster youth find themselves alone and struggling to succeed in their first attempts on their own. Their susceptibility to risk and poor outcomes is the result of cumulative risks they experience while in the foster care system.

Family instability, which can result in attachment issues and the return to unhealthy home environments, the release of children from the system before they are developmentally prepared for independence, and legislation that fails to include a family focus all contribute to the cumulative risk of youth in the foster care system (Dworsky et al., 2013; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Jones, 2012). As a result, foster youth experience higher levels of negative outcomes than their peers in the general population. Among the
most frequently experienced outcomes for foster youth who are not able to overcome the adversities are homelessness, unemployment, limited education, drug and alcohol use, and mental health complications (Courtney et al., 2012; Havalchak et al., 2009). While not all foster youth struggle with these outcomes, the population as a whole is much more susceptible to them.

In order to overcome the multitude of risks that foster youth encounter, and decrease the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes in adulthood, youth must develop resiliency. Resiliency promotes perseverance in times of struggle and allows for successful development and adjustment to adulthood, despite the risks faced while living in the foster system (Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013). Previous research has already identified several external factors that promote resiliency in foster youth. Placing siblings in the same household, as well as minimizing placement changes, can promote stability in relationships and increase the likelihood of proper attachment (James et al., 2008; Linares, Li, Shrout, Brody, & Pettit, 2007). Once youth are released from the foster care system, transitional living programs can provide continued support and resources needed by newly independent individuals (Jones, 2011). Both factors aid in the adjustment to adulthood for foster youth.

Factors promoting resiliency are not limited to external sources and can also be found within the foster parent-child relationship. A healthy parent-child relationship, perceived parental support, and opportunities provided to children to grow in independence can all promote resiliency during the transition to adulthood (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Kranstuber et al., 2012). A key component of resilience theory is the notion promotive factors can also be found in the everyday practices and behaviors of
families. Termed “Ordinary Magic” by Masten (2001), resiliency can be promoted by factors as simple as dining together as a family, or having reliable source of support in times of need (Courtney et al., 2012). While youth in the foster system may not experience these factors from their birth parents, there is potential for foster parents to provide the same benefits, leading to healthy adolescent development. To promote resiliency in foster youth, nothing extraordinary needs to happen.

At 18, foster youth are not only released from the custody of the state, but also enter a new developmental stage, “emerging adulthood.” This stage occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 and is marked by five distinct behaviors, 1) exploration of one’s identity; 2) consideration of work, love, and ideology; 3) a period of instability or transience; 4) increased concern with oneself; and 5) feeling in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008). An individual’s ability to adapt to the changes he or she inevitably encounters in adulthood has been linked to the degree to which he or she was successful in adolescent development (Benson, 1990). The definition of success has been widely debated by theorists, researchers, and practitioners. While no one definition has been established, some researchers have found that the definition can vary among different populations (Enke & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). One of the most widely recognized measures of success in children and adolescents is Search Institute's® Developmental Assets®. These assets serve as promotive factors in an individual’s resiliency (Benson, 1990; Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998; Search Institute®, 2006). There are 40 different Developmental Assets®, organized into four categories of external assets and four
categories of internal assets. These assets are used to assess an individual’s personal level of development and preparedness to enter adulthood.

Literature Review

The unique home life situations of foster youth often expose them to higher levels of risk than adolescents in the general population. These risk factors compile and interact, leading to a greater cumulative risk of encountering adversities, including homelessness, unemployment, drug and alcohol use, teen or unintended pregnancy, and mental and physical health complications. As a result, negative outcomes are disproportionately observed among youth with experience in the foster system.

Housing Instability

At some point in their lives, many youth with experience in the foster care system find themselves in an unstable housing situation after exiting the system. Instability in housing can be defined to include homelessness, residency in a shelter, or “couch surfing” in others’ homes (Courtney et al., 2012). Homelessness in adulthood is especially prevalent among individuals with a higher number of placements or a history of running away from their foster homes (Dworsky et al., 2013). An analysis of The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth revealed that as many as 46% of former foster youth experience homelessness as they transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013). Unlike their counterparts in the general population, youth in the foster care system experience several abrupt severances from their family life, culminating in a final release from all support systems upon emancipation from the foster system. With limited to no continued support from their parents, birth or foster, these youth are also more likely to encounter financial difficulties.
They are less likely to know how to access financial aid resources and manage any money they have, especially when pursuing postsecondary education (Hallett, 2010). Inability to manage money and use available resources can make it difficult to secure stable housing in adulthood.

**Education and Job Attainment**

There is no significant difference observed in the rate of employment or level of income among foster youth with college degrees and the general population (Salazar, 2013). However, foster youth encounter a number of barriers when it comes to attending and graduating from college. Even though a substantial percentage of foster youth may start postsecondary programs, they are at high risk of withdrawing and only between 1-11% of foster youth successfully earn bachelor’s degrees (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Havalchak et al., 2009). In a study of foster youth attending Michigan State University, Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, and Damashek (2011) found their dropout rate to be 16% higher than other university students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Youth with experience in the foster system often lack instrumental support both in preparation for and upon enrolling in postsecondary education, increasing the likelihood of withdrawal.

**Delinquency**

Upon exiting the foster system, youth are faced with the demands of adulthood and often have not fully developed the skills necessary to cope with such a significant amount of stress. During childhood, response to stress can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including disruptive behavior, violence, or criminal activity (Farruggia & Germo, 2015). Patterns of substance abuse and criminal offenses, more common among foster
youth than their peers, can continue into adulthood. Within six years after they are emancipated, up to one-fourth of youth with experience in the foster system will be convicted of a crime and one-third will struggle with substance abuse (Courtney et al., 2012; Jones, 2012). Criminal offenses, drug abuse, and alcohol problems pose a serious threat to the individual’s transition from foster care to adulthood and can result in other negative outcomes, such as difficulty completing a postsecondary education program or inability to maintain a job.

**Pregnancy**

Higher rates of teen pregnancy have been consistently observed among youth with experience in the foster care system. The pregnancy rate among teenage girls in the foster system has been found to be around 50% (Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013). This rate is significantly higher than the general population (20%) and represents an extreme vulnerability of foster youth (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Svoboda, Shaw, Barth, & Bright, 2012). While teen pregnancy is common among the foster youth population as a whole, some factors are more strongly associated with the risk of pregnancy. The highest occurrences of teen pregnancy have been observed among youth with a high number of placements, a history of running away, and experience with neglect (Putnam-Hornstein & King, 2014). The experiences of foster youth, and the decreased likelihood of successful attachments, may limit their exposure to pregnancy prevention information (Svoboda et al., 2012). Additionally, foster youth who become pregnant as teenagers are at an elevated risk of a repeat pregnancy. Studies have found that teen motherhood increases the risk of a second pregnancy for foster youth anywhere from 40% to 81% (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Putnam-Hornstein, & King, 2014).
Early motherhood can also act as a risk factor, interfering with the pursuit of higher education or employment, further increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes for foster youth.

*Health Complications*

Individuals with experience in the foster care system are also at an elevated risk for mental health disorders. Among the general population, the rate of mental health problems is around 20%; however, among former foster youth that rate is closer to 30% (Jones, 2012; White et al., 2011). Among these mental disorders are anxiety, depression, hostility, somatization, and post-traumatic stress disorder (White et al., 2011). Improper attachment at early ages, sudden release into independence, and traumatic experiences during childhood are all factors that can contribute to increased mental health complications and difficulty adjusting to adulthood.

Physical health complications are also more frequently observed among adults who spent part of their childhood in foster care. The 2003-2005 California Health Interview Survey data revealed a significant increase in the likelihood of reporting poor physical health in the month prior to the study for individuals with experience in the foster system (Zlotnick, Tarn, & Soman, 2012). Additionally, adults with experience in the foster care system reported higher levels of chronic illness, including asthma, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, epilepsy, and were more likely to smoke (Woods, Farineau, & McWey, 2013; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Such health complications can be the result of abuse or neglect in childhood and worsened by frequent stress during adolescence and the transition into adulthood.
Resilience Theory

Resiliency, as defined by Wright, Masten, and Narayan (2013), is the ability of an individual to persevere in times of risk and to recover from misfortunes. An individual’s vulnerability, or likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes, is the cumulative measure of risks and assets that they possess (Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013). By increasing the opportunity for greater asset accumulation, resiliency can be promoted and the overall vulnerability to negative outcomes can be reduced.

Promotive assets and protective assets are the two primary types of assets have been identified in resilience theory. Protective factors are significant in improving outcomes in the moment in which a negative outcome is threatened, such as immediate access to medical care when needed (Wright et al., 2013). Promotive factors, on the other hand, predict better outcomes overall, regardless of whether or not the individual encounters adversity (Wright et al., 2013). These factors, including healthy parent-child relationships, strong parenting practices, and financial stability, do not necessarily act at a specific moment, but rather build an overall resilience. The current study focuses specifically on the promotive factors found in foster families. A focus on promotive factors frames foster family relationships in a positive light and emphasizes the potential for resilience among a population exposed to an elevated risk of negative outcomes in adulthood.

There are two models that studies using resilience theory generally use in analysis of assets and risks. One of these models is a person-focused approach and the other is variable-focused (Masten, 2001). This study utilizes a variable-focused approach to understanding resiliency. Rather than emphasizing differences in resilient and non-
resilient foster populations, the present study takes a different approach and focuses on individual and family factors that affect resiliency, highlighting the potential for successful development in foster youth. Targeting promotive factors is especially important in working with the foster youth population. Due to the instability in their family lives, and a number of other possible risk factors, foster youth are often exposed to a higher level of cumulative risk than their peers. Family factors, such as those the present study aims to understand from the perspective of former foster youth, can act as promotive assets reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes during the transition into adulthood.

The Construct and Measures of Success

Success can be defined in many different ways, and different definitions of success may be more significant to different populations. Researchers often approach defining “success” using linear definitions—definitions that seek to explain a complex subject in one, all-inclusive descriptions. This can be done using measurable milestones like some researchers, such as independent living, educational and employment attainment, and creating a family, that mark resiliency in the transition to adulthood, or a more internal perspective used by other researchers, which includes markers such as sentiments of transition into adulthood, a focus on one’s identity and self, and an exploration of love and ideology (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). This study will focus on a combination of external and internal assets that act as promotive factors to create a more prototypic, comprehensive definition of the construct of success. Search Institute®, an agency focused on child development research, has identified 40 Developmental Assets® that have been accepted
to act as promotive factors central to promoting resiliency and healthy development in children and adolescents (See Figure 1; Benson, 1990).

*Developmental Assets®*

Search Institute has identified 40 Developmental Assets® that have been observed to act as promotive factors and improve outcomes as adolescents transition into adulthood (Benson, 1990; Leffert et al., 1998; Search Institute®, 2006). While few youth possess every single asset, the number of assets attained is linked to the resiliency and successful development of the individual (Leffert et al., 1998). Each of Search Institute's® Developmental Assets® falls into one of two major categories, external assets and internal assets. External assets are attained through the involvement of sources in the environment, such as family, friends, and community forces (Benson, 1990; Leffert et al., 1998; Search Institute®, 2006). External assets are divided into four subcategories: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, and Constructive Use of Time. Internal assets differ from external assets in the sense that they are related to the changes and growth within the individual. These too are divided into four subcategories, Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity, reflecting the broad characteristics of self-development. Promoting these factors in high-risk populations, such as foster youth, can increase the opportunities for successful development and resiliency. The current study sought out to identify which of these assets were most prevalent in foster family relationships and which assets were perceived by foster youth to be the most significant in promoting success.
Figure 1. Search Institute's® Developmental Assets®. The figure above shows the Search Institute’s® 40 Developmental Assets® for adolescents age 12-18. Greater accumulation of assets is associated with an easier transition to adulthood and fewer negative outcomes (Benson, 1990; Search Institute®, 2006). Reprinted with permission.
Many researchers have found family to play a vital role in promoting the successful attainment of Developmental Assets® in adolescence and achievement of milestones in emerging adulthood. Healthy parent-child relationships, perceived parental support, and developmentally appropriate parenting have been linked to higher levels resiliency in the transition to adulthood (Kranstuber et al., 2012). These factors may help build confidence of success in youth as they become independent, while at the same time, reassuring them that they have someone to turn to in times of need.

The relationship between a parent and his or her child begins with attachment formation in infancy. A healthy parent-child relationship has been found to have many benefits for children, beginning in childhood and translating to healthy relationship formation in adulthood (Kranstuber et al., 2012). Secure parent-child relationships can also promote resiliency as children transition into adults. The structure, cohesion, and interactions between parents and their children all contribute to resiliency (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Kranstuber et al. (2012), found that the positivity of the relationship between the parents and children was the strongest predictor of successful transition for youth in their first year of college. A healthy parent-child relationship may provide youth with the confidence that they have a reliable source of support to return to in the event they encounter difficulties.

In addition to healthy parent-child relationships, perceived parental support as youth make the transition into adulthood generally results in a more successful transition. A study of 14-17 year old students from South Carolina found perceived parent support
to be the most significant in predicting overall life satisfaction and other studies have found parental support to be critical in promoting success (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2009). As youth transition to independence, feeling supported and receiving supportive messages from parents may build confidence in the ability to succeed (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). Feeling supported by parents and important adults can translate to feeling successful in personal endeavors.

The way in which parents approach parenting their children can be significant in promoting resiliency and success. By providing a stimulating home environment and encouraging appropriate character development, parents can increase the likelihood that their children will find success (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). This specifically applies to the development of independence. When children are allowed to practice skills in independence and responsibility, at developmentally appropriate levels, they gain a foundation for their transition to adulthood while learning under the supervision of their parents (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Building the skills necessary for independence prior to entering adulthood can ease the transition.

*Family and Foster Youth*

Due to the frequent disruptions in their family life, foster youth may not have the opportunity to form healthy relationships with their birth parents. In these cases, foster youth need the support of other, caring adults to substitute and provide the benefits that healthy parent-child relationships can in the transition to adulthood. Research has shown that foster youth can receive the same support from foster parents that youth in the general population receive from their birth parents and oftentimes highly value the
relationship with their foster parents (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Pecora, 2012). Such support is associated with higher educational attainment, lower levels of unexpected pregnancy, higher resiliency levels, and an easier transition into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Jones, 2012; Pecora, 2012). It is evident that family factors can be significant and recognized as important among foster youth, but as the foster care system is so child-focused, little attention has been given to the potential impact of these factors as they contribute to resiliency and success of foster youth.

Significance of Foster Youth’s Perception

Previous research on measurements of success has been based on the perspective and definition of theorists, practitioners, and scholars. Success, however, has been found to be defined differently by different populations and by individuals within the same population (Enke & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). While definitions of success may have similarities across populations, success is an internally defined construct and can vary from person to person.

Perception can play a significant role in the way individuals respond to a given life situation. In a study of 502 Latino youth in immigrant families, Henry, Merten, Plunkett, and Sands (2008), found higher levels of academic achievement among youth who perceived their neighborhood to be safer, regardless of the actual level of safety present. The findings of this study speak directly to the significance of perception in shaping outcomes for individuals living in higher-risk situations, such as the foster care system.

The perception of foster youth is rarely including in defining success in studies related to outcomes for foster youth. Due to the increased levels of vulnerability in the
foster youth population, achieving “success” may be defined differently than in the general population. While it is important to consider the perspectives of highly qualified individuals, youth with experience in the foster care system represent a distinguishable population that encounters barriers and challenges unique to their population. What youth with foster care experience consider to be successful may vary from the previously established and accepted definitions. In addition, the perceived role of foster families in youth achieving self-defined “success” is virtually unknown.

Current Study

Research surrounding the foster care system has traditionally focused on the risks and unfavorable outcomes that youth most frequently experience both while in the system and once they have exited it. This approach is not completely unjustified; studies have consistently found experience in the foster care system to be associated with an elevated risk of negative outcomes later in life, such as drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, homelessness, and mental health complications (Courtney et al., 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013; Hallett, 2010; Salazar, 2013). Such a pessimistic approach to studying foster care can cast a negative light on the system as a whole and create a sense of hopelessness for the children and families the system serves. A resilience approach, on the other hand, emphasizes positive outcomes. Focusing on the successes of emerging adults with experience in foster care can provide greater insight and lead to improvements in the foster care system for everyone involved.

While youth in the care of foster parents disproportionately encounter difficulties later in life, many exhibit a high level of resiliency in the face of such adversities. In fact, over one-third of former foster youth in a recent study on resiliency could be classified as
accelerated adults, meaning they were making adequate progress in their adjustment to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012). Additionally, studies by Jones (2011; 2012) revealed that, while at a lower rate than the general population, many emerging adults with experience in the foster care system were furthering their education and had established a positive, supportive relationship with an adult. Rather than focusing on the risk factors contributing to adverse outcomes, the present study seeks to identify patterns in the way in which young adults transitioning out of the foster care system define “success.” An awareness of their perceptions, along with the family factors they perceive to contribute to their success, will allow foster care agencies, advocates, and foster parents to be more intentional in promoting resiliency and maximize opportunities for successful development in foster youth.

A healthy family situation can be one of the strongest factors in promoting resiliency (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012). Emerging adults with experience in the foster system often lack the stability and security provided to many by their birth parents, as they are bounced around from home to home, unable to form proper attachments, and are exposed to additional risk factors. This study aims to re-define the construct of success from the perspective of former foster youth, as well as to identify concepts of foster family resilience that are central to fostering their successes. In considering the perspective of foster youth, “success” can be re-defined to reflect the milestones and characteristics of development most significant to the population.

Much of the legislation impacting the foster care system is child-focused. A child-focused perspective is not an unjustified approach, but legislation tends to completely circumvent the importance of family. With such a strong potential to
positively influence development, foster families simply cannot be overlooked. The findings of this study can be used to advise foster parent training, recruitment, and policy to ensure the best chances of successful development among foster youth.

Guiding Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the construct of success from the perspective of emerging adults with experience in the foster care system. The primary question that guided the research was:

- How do emerging adults with foster care backgrounds define “success?”

Additionally, several secondary research questions were considered to further identify patterns in the perceptions of youth with foster backgrounds, including:

- Does the concept of “success” have a prototypic structure?
- What promotive factors in foster family relationships do emerging adults perceive to lead to resiliency?
- What risk factors in foster family relationships do emerging adults perceive to inhibit resiliency?
- To what degree do former foster youth perceive themselves to be successful?
- Is this mixed-method approach an effective way to capture the perceptions of the target population?

These research questions were used to guide the demographic questionnaire, prototype analysis, Developmental Assets® assessment, and focus group discussion. The mixed method approach of the study provided valuable insight into the perceptions and experiences of emerging adults who have spent time in the care of foster families.
Method and Results

The present study, with institutional review board approval, aimed to identify patterns in how emerging adults with foster care experience define success and what family factors they perceive to promote resiliency through a mixed-method approach. A prototype approach methodology was used to collect and analyze data from emerging adults recently emancipated from foster care and currently enrolled in transitional living programs. Following a review of the informed consent form, participants attended a focus group during which they completed the following: 1) a demographic questionnaire, 2) prototype activity on the construct of “success,” 3) Developmental Assets® assessment, and 4) group discussion of family factors promoting and inhibiting success.

Emerging adults with foster care backgrounds were recruited from transitional living programs (TLPs) to participate in one of three focus groups lasting approximately one hour. Although it reduces generalizability, TLPs are ideal recruitment targets as program participants have already reached some level of “success” by proactively seeking services to aid in the transition to adulthood. Each focus group contained six participants, was facilitated by the author, and was held in a private meeting room at a foster care agency. Participants were seated at a large conference room table, close enough to permit interaction during the discussion, but far enough apart that it was not possible to view each others’ written components of the study. The study consisted of a brief demographic questionnaire, a modified prototype analysis of “success,” a Developmental Assets® assessment, and a semi-structured discussion consisting primarily of open-ended questions about the prototype analysis and the role of foster families in promoting resiliency. All questions were designed to support the primary
research question: How do emerging adults with foster care backgrounds define “success?” This process guided the study in efficient and ethical research. To ensure all participants were fully aware of the intentions of the study, participants were given a copy of the consent form upon arrival. After reviewing the information about the study verbally, participants were asked to sign the consent form, indicating their understanding of the study and willingness to participate.

The results from this study are presented from three different analytical perspectives based on the portion of the study from which they were derived; a modified prototype analysis of the features of success, descriptive statistical analysis of the Developmental Assets® assessment, and thematic analysis of the focus group discussion. The mixed-methodology approach in this study presents a holistic understanding of the dynamic construct of “success” from the perspective of the study’s participants and the complex relationship between these young adults and their foster parents. The analysis from each perspective serves to validate the other approaches.

*Phase 1 Demographic Questionnaire: Method*

*Measures.* Demographic information, using a combination of free-responses and multiple-choice questions, was collected for all participants. Age, race/ethnicity, age at first entry to the foster care system, age at last placement, total time spent in care, and total number of placements were measured using a free-response format. Multiple-choice style questions were used to collect information on participant gender (male/female), education status (grade school or less/some high school/completed GED/graduated from high school/some college/associates degree/four year college degree), and types of foster placements they experienced (family foster care/group home care/residential
care/kinship care with relatives/emergency care/other). Demographic differences can be the source of differential outcomes in adulthood. For example, a study of racial and ethnic differences in family life revealed that racial minorities are more likely to reside in disadvantaged areas, regardless of the extent to which they successfully achieved the milestones of emerging adulthood (Swisher, Kuhl, & Chavez, 2013). In addition to demographic information, participants were also asked to respond to the following: “In your own words, define ‘success.’” This questions required participants to attempt to form a linear definition of success, prior to further exploration of the complexity of defining the construct.

**Procedure.** Participants each received an individual questionnaire booklet. To protect participant confidentiality, each booklet was a different color and participants were instructed not to write their name anywhere on the document. The first section of the booklet contained the demographic questionnaire. The instructions for completing the questionnaire were reviewed orally with the group and participants were asked to complete the questionnaire independently. Participants were asked to wait for further instruction after completing the first phase of the study.

**Analytic approach.** A descriptive statistical analysis, using IBM SPSS 22, was used to determine the characteristics of the sample. Descriptive statistical analysis not only provided the demographic characteristics of the sample, but was also be used in crosstabulations to reveal the relationship between experiences with foster parents and overall Developmental Asset® attainment, as well as internal and external assets. An understanding of the relationship between these characteristics can provide insight to the
promotive factors in foster families that predict higher levels of Developmental Asset®
attainment in emerging adults with experience in the foster care system.

*Phase 1 Demographic Questionnaire: Results*

Eighteen participants were recruited from two different transitional living
programs via flyers posted at the organizations to participate in one of three focus groups.
The participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, with the majority of participants being 18
\((n = 7)\) or 19 \((n = 6)\) years old. One participant did not provide his or her age \((M_{\text{age}} =
19.7, 12 \text{ female, 6 male})\) and the most commonly represented racial group was
black/African-American \((n = 16)\). One participant identified as white and one chose not
to respond. Level of education was also measured. All but two of the participants
graduated from high school \((n = 16)\) and one earned a four-year college degree. See
Table 1 for demographic information.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male ((n = 6))</th>
<th>Female ((n = 12))</th>
<th>Total ((n = 18))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>18-24*</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at First Placement (years)</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>3-16</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Stay (months)</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>12-48</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Placements (months)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: One male participant did not report his age and one female participant did not report her length of stay. These participants
were excluded only from statistical analysis of the corresponding item.
Participants spent an average of 58.67 months in various foster care placements \((SD = 60.6)\) and among the types of placements experienced were family foster care \((n = 18)\), group home care \((n = 6)\), residential care \((n = 8)\), kinship care with relatives \((n = 4)\), and emergency care \((n = 1)\). At the time of the study, 44.5% were living on their own or with another adult, 33.3% were living with foster parents, 11.1% were living with relatives, 5.6% were living with their birth mother or father, and 5.6% were living in a residential transitional living program.

**Phase 2 Modified Prototype Analysis: Method**

*Measures.* With origins in cognitive psychology a prototype analysis approach allows traditional definitions of a construct to be expanded to include an association of ideas that exist on a continuum, as opposed to an exclusive or linear definition (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Rosch, 1975). With this approach, participants create a free-response list of all the words and phrases they perceive to be related to the construct of interest. After a comprehensive list of all reported associated ideas, also called linguistic units, is compiled, participants determine the centrality of each to the overall definition of the construct, ranking the linguistic units numerically based on their level of relatedness (Rosch, 1975). A mean centrality score for each feature can then be calculated and a new list can be created, based on the relatedness of each feature to the concept. Finally, recall activities are used to test the way in which the construct affects cognitive thought processes and participant responses are compared to the centrality rankings collected in the previous step. Items that were ranked as more central to the definition of the construct are expected to be more easily recalled. The data collected in a prototype
analysis can be used to advise the overall conclusions in providing an alternative, expanded definition for the construct (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Rosch, 1975).

Participants in this study were asked to define the construct of “success,” using a slightly modified version of prototype analysis. Prototype analysis is used to identify concepts that are central to the meaning of a word, though not necessarily present in every instance of the word; rather, they are identified as central to the definition (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Rosch, 1975). To determine the participants’ perception of success, they were first asked to list all concepts they believe to be related to the construct of success. Participants were next asked to evenly divide only the words or phrases they listed into three categories based on their centrality to the construct of success; strongly related, moderately related, and weakly related. This modification ensured that the individual perceptions of each participant were maintained while data was collected. Identifying the concepts central to the construct of success help highlight any differences between the perceptions of success in foster youth and those of the general population, researchers, and theorists.

After ranking the centrality of each of their words or phrases to the idea of “success,” the participants began the focus group discussion component of the study. The words and phrases listed in each category (strongly related, moderately related, and weakly related) were shared with the group. Participants were encouraged to discuss their reasoning for how they ranked each word or phrase, permitting them to explore the construct of “success” further in depth and from the perspective of their peers.

_Procedure._ When all participants completed the demographic questionnaire, they began the first step in the modified prototype analysis. Participants each received a large
stack of post-it notes, color-coded to match their booklet. The instructions were once again delivered orally, asking participants to list the all of the words and phrases that they believed to be related to the idea of "success" on the post-its, writing only one word or phrase per post-it. They were told that there was no right or wrong amount, but to list as many as they could think of without repeating. Participants were also reminded to complete the activity independently.

After all participants finished writing the features of “success” on individual post-it notes, they were asked to consider the degree to which each word or phrase was related to the idea of "success." There were three posters on the wall around the room. These posters were labeled "strongly," "moderately," and "weakly." Instructions were given verbally for participants to put each post-it note onto the corresponding poster without talking to each other. Participants were again reminded that there was no right or wrong answer, but they should place the post-it notes where they personally believed was best fit.

Analytic approach. The modified prototype analysis involved reviewing the exhaustive list of words associated with “success,” combining terms deemed to represent the same idea and then coding features with a numerical value based on degree of relatedness to the concept of success (1 = Weakly Related and 3 = Strongly Related), used to calculated a mean value of centrality ($M_{Centrality}$). Terms were then weighed based on frequency and participant-reported centrality to identify the comprehensive meaning of the construct, using the formula $M_{Centrality} \times frequency = \text{Strength}$ (for complete explanation of this approach, see Rosch, 1975).
Phase 2 Modified Prototype Analysis: Results

Participants produced an initial total of 96 features related to the construct of “success.” Of these features, 65 were placed in the “strongly related” category, 21 in the “moderately related” category, and 10 in the “weakly related” category (see Table 2). The average number of features listed per participant was five, with zero being the fewest features produced by a participant and 15 being the most features produced by a participant. After related and duplicate terms were condensed, the attribute list contained a total of 39 unique features. Fifteen of these features were listed by multiple participants (see Figures 2-5).

Table 2

Complete Listing of Words Identified by Participants as “Strongly,” “Moderately,” and “Weakly” Related to “Success”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Centrality Rating of Features Moderate</th>
<th>Weak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salmon</td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Pink</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Car</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jobs/Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Centrality Rating of Features</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Weak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Graduating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking for help</td>
<td>Standing up for what you believe in</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Living by self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>Learning new things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trying new things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Believing in yourself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My babies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastel Green B</td>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastel Blue</td>
<td></td>
<td>“The promise land”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>Accomplished</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Tunnel visions”</td>
<td>Achieved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Developed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange B</td>
<td>Investments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastel Green Blue B</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green B</td>
<td></td>
<td>Goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sacrifices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workaholic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastel Pink</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 (continued).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Weak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot Pink B</td>
<td>Goals, Completed College, Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow B</td>
<td>Accomplishment, Determination</td>
<td>Reward, Triumph, Goal, Happiness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple B</td>
<td>Determination, Motivation, Dedication, Positive Attitude, Hard Work, Goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastel Yellow</td>
<td>School, Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Participants are referred to by color code to protect confidentiality. Blank spaces in the table indicate no response from the participant in the corresponding rating.
Figure 2. Features of “success” word cloud. The image above was created using a comprehensive, unedited list of all of the features of success identified by participants in the study. The size of each feature reflects its prominence in the attribute list.

Figure 3. Features related to “success.” The image above shows the features that were identified as being related to success by participants and the corresponding centrality rating. There were a total of 96 features listed by participants; 65 were listed as strongly related, 21 as moderately related, and 10 as weakly related.
In order to determine the strength of each feature, the frequency at which it appeared was multiplied by the mean centrality rating to produce a strength rating. “Money” appeared a total of 11 times and received an average rating of 2.82, making it the strongest attribute on the list of prototype terms related to the idea of “success” (strength = 31.02). Other strongly rated terms included “education” (strength = 25.02), “goals” (strength = 20.02), and “accomplishment” (strength = 16.02). “Clothes,” “fame,” and “people,” were the three lowest rated terms, receiving a strength rating of 1.00 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participants’ Free Listing and Mean Centrality Ratings of Features of Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Centrality</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Strength Rating</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31.02</td>
<td>61.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25.02</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25.02</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.02</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living by self</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.99</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for help</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunnel Vision</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>$M_{Centrality}$</th>
<th>$f$</th>
<th>Strength Rating</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacrifices</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attitude</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing up for what you believe in</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning new things</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying new things</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believing in what you do</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The promise land</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triumph</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Centrality was measured on a scale of 1 (weakly related) to 3 (strongly related) and the centrality of each feature is reported as the mean level of centrality. The strength rating was calculated using the mean centrality rating of each feature multiplied by the frequency at which it appeared on participants’ lists.

Phase 3 Developmental Assets® Assessment: Method

*Measures.* The Search Institute® established eight categories of Developmental Assets® that reflect the 40 characteristics most commonly found among adolescents who have successfully transitioned into adulthood (see Table 1; Benson, 1990). Presence of these characteristics was evaluated using an assessment based on the Developmental Asset® Profile that reflects the role of foster families in promoting each of the unique assets, rather than assessing the individual’s development. For example, an item in the
*Developmental Asset® Profile* used to measure an individual’s development of Positive Identity that read, “*I feel in control of my life and my future.*” The item was modified to read, “*My foster parents made me feel in control of my life and my future,*” in the current study’s *Developmental Asset® Assessment*. Similarly, an item used to measure the foster family’s role in promoting Constructive Use of Time read “*My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in a sport, club, or other group,*” rather than “*I am involved in a sport, club or other group,*” as it was originally written. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in foster care and respond to each of the 36 items using a 5-point lykert-type scale (1 = *Never* and 5 = *All of the time*), to report how often their relationship with foster parents promoted these assets.

**Procedure.** Once all post-it notes were placed onto the posters, participants were asked to return to their booklet and individually complete the Developmental Assets® assessment. The Developmental Assets® assessment contained questions derived from Search Institute's® *Developmental Assets® Profile* that were modified to specifically reflect the role of the foster family in the participant’s attainment of each of the Developmental Assets®. Instructions were given verbally for participants to complete the assessment independently. Participants were again asked to wait for further instruction after completing this phase of the study.

**Analytic approach.** The Developmental Assets® assessment was used to measure the role of participants’ foster families in promoting each of the following Developmental Assets® categories related to family involvement. Descriptive statistical analyses, using IMB SPSS 22, were first used to determine the average ratings of individual items, revealing the highest and lowest rated items. Next, items that were used to assess the
presence of the same Developmental Assets® category were combined into a mean value to represent the overall presence of each of the eight focal asset categories—Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Constructive Use of Time, Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity. Finally, a Cumulative Mean was calculated for each participant. This was calculated using the participants’ mean value for each of the eight Developmental Assets® categories, ensuring each category was given equal weight.

Phase 3 Developmental Assets® Assessment: Results

A descriptive statistical analysis revealed the highest rated individual item to be “I had to take responsibility for what I did in my foster home” (\(M = 4.89, \text{SD} = 0.32\)), found in the Positive Values asset category (see Table 4). Additionally, two statements from the Boundaries and Expectations were also highly rated. These statements were “I had a foster family that provided me with clear rules” (\(M = 4.72, \text{SD} = 0.57\)) and “my foster parents urged me to do well in school” (\(M = 4.72, \text{SD} = 0.75\)). The lowest rated items were both in the Constructive Use of Time. These statements were “my foster parents encouraged me to become involved in a religious group or activity” (\(M = 2.65, \text{SD} = 1.62\)) and “my foster parents encouraged me to become involved in creative things such as music, theater or art” (\(M = 2.89, \text{SD} = 1.64\)).

A descriptive statistical analysis was used to determine the categories most and least promoted by foster parents. The mean score reveals how often foster parents were reported to promote the category, with higher mean values corresponding to more frequently promotion of the category. The category that was most strongly promoted by participants’ foster parents was Boundaries and Expectations (\(M = 4.70, \text{SD} = 0.44\)) and
the category least promoted was Constructive Use of Time ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.27$). The Cumulative Mean among participants ranged from 2.13 to 5.00, with an average score of 4.06 ($SD = 0.97$) (Table 4).

Table 4

*Average Rating of Foster Family Role in Promoting Development Assets*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sought advice from my foster parents.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had foster parents who tried to help me succeed.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a foster family that gave me love and support.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had foster parents who were good at talking with me about things.</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empowerment</strong></td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt safe and secure in my foster home.</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was included in family tasks and decisions in my foster home.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lived in a safe neighborhood with my foster parents.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boundaries and Expectations</strong></td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a foster family that provided me with clear rules.</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents urged me to do well in school.</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster family knew where I was and what I was doing.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructive Use of Time</strong></td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in a religious group or activity.</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in a sport, club, or other group.</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in creative things such as music, theater or art.</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed spending quality time at home with my foster family.</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commitment to Learning</strong></td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to do my homework.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was actively engaged in learning new things with my foster parents.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to try things that might be good for me.</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was given useful roles and responsibilities in my foster home.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 (continued).
### Positive Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to stand up for what I believe in.</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to stay away from tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had to take responsibility for what I did in my foster home.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents helped me develop good health habits.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I served others in my community with my foster parents.</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Social Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents wanted me to avoid things that were dangerous or unhealthy.</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to build friendships with other people.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was able to express my feelings in a proper way in my foster home.</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned to plan ahead and make good choices in my foster home.</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to resist bad influences.</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents encouraged me to resolve conflicts without anyone getting hurt.</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned to accept people who are different from me from my foster parents.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Positive Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents made me feel in control of my life and future.</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents made me feel good about myself.</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents made me feel good about my future.</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned to deal with frustration in positive ways from my foster parents.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned to overcome challenges in positive ways from my foster parents.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents helped me develop a sense of purpose in my life.</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cumulative Mean**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Foster family promotion of assets was measured on a scale of 1 (least frequent promotion) to 5 (most frequent promotion) and the reported value represents the mean level of promotion among all participants.

Frequency analyses were then used to explore the relationship between mean values in each of the Developmental Assets® categories and the demographic characteristics of the participants. In all categories except Boundaries and Expectations...
female participants reported higher levels of asset promotion by foster families. Additionally, female participants reported an overall mean value of 4.21 in cumulative measures of Developmental Assets® ($SD = 0.83$), whereas male participants reported a mean cumulative value of 3.75 ($SD = 1.22$) (see Table 5). Chi-square analysis showed these gender differences were significant in terms of foster parents promoting Empowerment ($\chi^2 = 14.00$, $df = 5$, and $p< 0.05$; $p = 0.016$) and their overall Cumulative Developmental Assets® promotion ($\chi^2 = 18.00$, $df = 7$, and $p> 0.05$; $p = 0.012$).

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Asset</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment*</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries and Expectations</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive Use of Time</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to Learning</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Values</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competencies</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Identity</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative Development*</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Foster family promotion of assets was measured on a scale of 1 (least frequent promotion) to 5 (most frequent promotion) and the reported value represents the mean level of promotion reported by all participants. *Indicates $p < 0.05$; chi-squared analysis reveals statistical significant.

Phase 4 Group Discussion: Method
Measures. In order to determine which factors participants perceived to be significant in their relationships with foster parents, open-ended focus group questions focused on identifying which foster family characteristics they believed to be most important in promoting their self-defined level of success. Participants were also prompted to discuss a series of open-ended questions focused on characteristics of their foster families that inhibited success or resiliency. The present study is limited to the three questions most relevant to foster families and their role in promoting or inhibiting success. The questions included:

- How did your foster parents make you feel successful or capable of success?
- Was there anything your foster parents did that made you feel like you weren’t or couldn’t be successful?
- Do you consider yourself successful so far? Why or why not?

These questions were asked in the order above and used to reflect the family’s role in prohibiting successful attainment in each of the eight categories of Developmental Assets® and the participants’ perceptions of their personal successes.

Procedure. Next, the focus group portion of the study began. The focus group discussions were audio and video recorded with a Surface Pro 3 tablet. An additional audio recording was taken by an iPhone 4 (using the iTalk app) to capture all spoken discussion. To protect confidentiality, participants received a blank color-coded badge to wear that matched the color of their booklet and post-it notes. The recording started once all participants sorted their post-it notes and concluded at the end of the study. All recording devices were password protected.
The focus group discussion included the following three components: 1) a review of the placement of the words and phrases related to “success,” 2) a discussion of why words and phrases were placed in each category, and 3) an exploration of the role foster families play in promoting or inhibiting resiliency. The researcher maintained a neutral, moderator presence and participants were able to openly discuss their thoughts without interruption from the interviewer. The group discussion progressed at a pace set by the participants. Because of the “success” focus of the discussion, no significant participant discomfort was anticipated, nor did any occur. Participants received pizza and a $10 gift card for their participation.

Analytic approach. Focus group discussions about foster families were analyzed using a six-phase thematic analysis which is a qualitative approach useful for identifying broad themes that exist within a data set after a focused, in-depth coding process of collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes are discovered when a researcher carefully analyzes data through transcription and note taking, actively coding, searching for, reviewing, and naming themes that exist across the entire data set. The process is often used in conjunction with other methods of data analysis, as it is in the present study integrating thematic results with results from demographic and prototype analysis.

Data in this study was analyzed consistent with the approach established by Braun and Clarke (2006) in thematic analysis. Thematic analysis consists of six phases. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), successful thematic analysis consists of six phases of analysis: 1) familiarizing with data; 2) generalizing initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing a
The guidelines provided for analysis are not necessarily a step-by-step process, but remain key to successful thematic analysis.

The first phase, familiarization with the data, involved a focused, in-depth review of the collected data. Verbal data was transcribed and reviewed, and notes were re-read, prior to beginning a formal coding process and allowing for the preliminary themes to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The familiarization had substantial benefits in subsequent stages of analysis.

In the second phase of thematic analysis, an initial list of codes was determined. For this study, the developmental asset categories were used to guide the coding process, serving as the foundation for grouping data into meaningful units that were more specific than overall themes. In general, there is no limit to the number of codes that can be found in any given dataset and data that does not specifically fit into the coding process should was kept to maintain the context in which each of the coded ideas arose (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The next phase was to search for themes in the data by organizing codes into larger groups. During this stage, the thematic analysis table was created to organize codes into themes and capture all data collected during the study. This phase was critical in gaining a larger understanding of the data collected from the study and provided the foundation for identifying the overarching themes that emerged from the research.

Reviewing themes, the fourth phase in thematic analysis, consisted of revisiting codes to ensure they align with the identified themes and revisiting themes to ensure they represent the whole dataset. During this phase, adjustments were made if codes or
themes did not fit into the thematic table (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After making all necessary adjustments, a relatively clear picture of the different themes became evident.

At this point, the themes were again revisited to ensure they reflect the true meaning of the data. Themes were not renamed, but sub-themes were identified during the fifth phase. A detailed analysis was also written for each theme prior to moving into the final phase of thematic analysis.

Finally, a written report detailing the findings of the thematic analysis was produced. The report shares the ways in which the themes were interrelated in a concise and logical manner and connects the findings to the initial research questions. Producing a coherent report with solid examples provides strong support for the findings of the study.

**Phase 4 Group Discussion: Results**

The first focus group question analyzed for themes focused on the characteristics and behaviors of foster families that promoted the successes of the participants. As expected, participation levels varied from person to person, and five participants did not contribute to the focus group discussion. Each of the participants’ responses was coded for references to characteristics or behaviors that reflected the Developmental Assets® categories (refer back to Table 1 for Developmental Assets®). After each individual response to the question “What characteristics or behaviors of your foster families promoted your success?,” was coded for references that reflected the Developmental Assets® categories, responses from the group as a whole were considered (see Table 6). The most frequently referenced asset category during focus group discussions was Support. For example, participant Orange B said, “then she'd motivate me. You know,
telling me I can do this, I can do that, Basically just followed my path, telling me the right thing,” revealing a way in which that particular foster mother promoted Support within their relationship. Another participant, Blue, shared how some foster families aided in promotion of Positive Identity, the second most frequently referenced category, by stating, “some of [my foster families], they helped me succeed because without my mom in there, I had family…I had [some] telling me you want to rise above everything that happened.” Participants did not mention behaviors demonstrating the promotion Positive Values and Social Competencies during the focus group discussions.

A second, similar analysis was used to discover the themes consistently present in the characteristics and behaviors of foster families that participants perceived to inhibit their successes. Each individual response was again coded for references to characteristics or behaviors that reflected the Developmental Assets® categories. Rather than reflecting the presence of these Developmental Assets® categories, responses to this question reflected the absence of characteristics or behaviors that promote the asset categories. After each individual response to the question “What characteristics or behaviors of your foster families inhibited your success?,” was coded for references that reflected the Developmental Assets® categories, responses from the group as a whole were considered. The most frequently referenced asset category was once again Support. The Salmon participant referenced the lack of Support in one foster family relationship, saying, “I had foster parents who really didn’t care. It wasn’t you cant or you should, just like a whatever.” The lack of supportive behavior was perceived by this participant to inhibit the likelihood of success. Additionally, the absence Positive Identity was frequently discussed as a strong inhibitor of success. The Pastel Pink participant had a
negative experience with a foster mother that did not promote Positive Identity. The participant reported that, “basically, it's like [she talked] down on me, like ‘what makes you feel so important?’…Basically that's what she made me feel like. She'd talk crap to me but cause basically you need--well I needed--her because basically I had no place to go.” Participants did not mention the lack of behaviors related to Positive Values and Constructive Use of Time as inhibiting resiliency.

The third question focused on the degree to which each participant considered him/herself to be successful. These results were coded for references to features of success that were identified in the prototype analysis. Many of the participants that considered themselves successful indicated a degree of pride in what they had accomplished so far. The Yellow B participant stated, “I feel as though I’m successful in my short term goals, like graduating high school and doing certain things that I wouldn’t imagine doing on my own, like graduating top of my classes and making, well proving, certain people wrong that I could make it on my own, so yeah.” This statement, for example, was coded for references to education (“graduating high school”), hard work (“top of my classes”), and accomplishment (“proving certain people wrong”). Among the participants that considered themselves to be successful, the most frequently referenced features were “accomplishment,” “education,” and “hard work.” Six different participants referenced each of these features. Only two participants responded that they did not consider themselves successful. Both participants’ responses as to why they did not consider themselves to be successful were related to goals and accomplishment. Participant Green B, for example, said “I’m not successful because I haven’t done everything I’ve sought out to do.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Foster Family Characteristics Aiding Success</th>
<th>Foster Family Characteristics Inhibiting Success</th>
<th>Do you consider yourself successful?</th>
<th>Linear Definition of Success</th>
<th>Participant Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pastel Yellow</td>
<td>Commitment to Learning, and the development of Positive Identity from foster families are the most important factors in making foster children feel as though they are successful. Positive Values and Social Competencies have the least influence on their perception of success.</td>
<td>A lack of characteristics contributing to the attainment of Support and Positive Identity are the most inhibitive factors in the perception of success in foster youth. The absence of Positive Values and Constructive Use of Time do not appear to have a lasting impact on their perception of success.</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>Most consider themselves successful because they overcame the expectations or limitations that people considered them to have. The ones that did not feel successful did feel as though they were on the right path and identified the lack of accomplishing goals as the reason they were not successful.</td>
<td>[no code]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Foster family characteristics inhibiting success are represented in parentheses to indicate references to the absence of these asset categories. Numbers in parentheses refer to the frequency of an asset in the participants' responses.
The linear definitions of “success,” provided by participants in the final question of the demographic questionnaire, were also coded for references to features of success that were identified in the prototype analysis (Table 8). Thirteen of the 39 prototype features appeared in the linear definitions of “success.” The most frequently referenced features were “accomplishment” and “goals,” referenced by 11 and 9 participants, respectively. All coded responses were compiled into a thematic table for review and comparisons across participants and across themes.

As a final step, the cumulative responses for each question and each participant were considered to discover themes consistent across all responses. The most common theme was the notion that accomplishing personal goals is a primary measure of an individual’s level of success. “Money” was the strongest feature of success in the prototype analysis, but appeared very infrequently in reflections of personal success. Support and development of Positive Identity from participants’ foster families were the most important promotive factors and lacking either within their foster family substantially hurt youth’s perceptions of personal success. It was also important that foster family characteristics and behaviors worked in favor of developing the asset category of Commitment to Learning. The lack of this asset also hurt perceptions of success. Overcoming expectations of others (i.e., society, family members) was also a strong indicator of success among participants. Positive Values and Social Competencies had the least influence on the perception of success.

Discussion

The information collected in this study points to four main findings. First, the concept of “success” appears to be complex and possibly has a prototypic structure rather
than a linear definition. Second, perceived Support and Positive Identity within foster families relationships was related to feelings of success among participants as they transitioned into adulthood. Similarly, the absence of behaviors promoting either of these inhibited feelings of success for participants. Finally, although “money” was the most frequently listed attribute of “success,” participants more often felt successful when they accomplished personal goals.

A substantial amount of research focuses on ways to promote successful transitions into adulthood for youth in the foster care system. The Search Institute® has identified 40 Developmental Assets® for adolescents that have been found to consistently improve the chances of positive outcomes in adulthood (Benson, 1990). Numerous studies have supported the potential of these Developmental Assets®. This research, while extremely valuable, is often from the perspective of theorists, scholars, and practitioners, has focused disproportionately on the development of the child, and diminishes the importance of the family context. The present study took a new and exploratory approach to understanding development in foster children and considered the role of the foster family in promoting resiliency - all from the youth’s perspective.

Analyses in the current study revealed two primary patterns. The first supports the assertion that “success” is a complex idea that cannot be confined to a strictly linear definition; analyses indicate that the concept of “success” likely has a prototypic structure. The prototype analysis approach is designed to determine conceptions of a specified concept, in this case “success,” from the perspective of the target population. The first two steps of a standard prototype analysis, as completed in this study, provide valuable insight into the complexity of the construct of “success” and the differences in
the definition of “success” from the perspective of participants and social science professionals, such as researchers and theorists. Some researchers have identified milestones that are more measurable, such as independent living, educational and employment attainment, and creating a family, that mark the successful transition to adulthood (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). Other researchers focus on an internal perspective, which includes markers such as sentiments of transition into adulthood, a focus on one’s identity and self, and an exploration of love and ideology (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008). The participants of the study, however, primarily identified achieving personal goals as the strongest measure of success.

The second pattern was discovered in the thematic analysis of the characteristics and behaviors of participants’ foster families that promoted and inhibited success. Participants consistently identified Support and Positive Identity as the two most influential Developmental Assets® categories. These findings are consistent with the work of Kranstuber, Carr, and Hosek (2012), who found perceived parental support to be associated with higher levels of resiliency in the transition to adulthood, as well as with overall life satisfaction and success (See also Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Valois et al., 2009). The perceived presence of these Developmental Assets® categories was instrumental in promoting resiliency among the study participants.

The most frequent and central item appearing on the prototype analysis was “money.” The feature existed on the lists of 11 of the 18 participants and was rated as “strongly related” to success by all except one who felt it was only moderately related. This is an interesting circumstance, however, as only one participant referenced “money” in his or her linear definition of success and none mentioned money in their explanations.
of why they considered themselves to be successful or not yet successful. A high prevalence of extrinsic values, such as materialism, has been found to be more prevalent among emerging adults with poorer parent-child relationships and materialists have often been found to connect wealth and success (Kasser et al., 1995; Richins, 2004). However, the disagreement between the linear definition of success and the features listed in the prototype analysis further supports the assertion that “success” is a construct with a prototypic structure, whose definition cannot be confined to a linear, all-inclusive definition.

Despite the high percentage of participants that considered “money” to be strongly related to success, the features most frequently referenced by participants in their personal accounts of success were “goals” and “accomplishments.” These intrinsic features appeared in both the linear definition of success and the personal accounts of success, highlighting the level of personal importance and value of accomplishing goals. Rather than measuring their level of success by “money,” participants perceived themselves to be successful because they overcame expectations others had for them, met their personal goals, and/or experienced measurable accomplishments (i.e., graduated high school, secured employment). These findings can be compared to those of Beutler (2012), who observed that emerging adults to be essentially divided on the way in which they measured their success (intrinsic measures vs. extrinsic measures). Beutler (2012) proposed further investigation into the family factors that lead to these differences; the findings of the current study support his proposal. Those from foster care system experience variation in their family relationships, which could lead to the conflict in the way in which they defined success.
Another explanation may be that the differences in the way success was defined reflect societal perceptions of who or what constitutes “making it.” Individuals successful in their fields are often rewarded with money; the top athletes receive the highest contracts, top employees are given bonuses or salary increases, and top performers earn thousands of dollars every time they make an appearance (Merton, 1968; Richins, 2004). Since money was included in the definition of “success,” but not in the personal accounts of success, it is possible that participants see money as key to being successful in the eyes of the rest of the world, but not necessarily vital to being successful on a personal level. This suggests it may be important for professionals working with foster youth to explore how they think society views the achievement of “adulthood” and independence compared to what is important for them in their day-to-day experiences.

The results of the Developmental Assets® assessment also provide insight into the role of foster families in promoting resiliency. While considering these results, it is imperative to note that the Developmental Assets® assessment did not measure the degree to which participants successfully attained each of the included assets, but rather the degree to which their foster families promoted attainment of each asset. One asset category, Constructive Use of Time, was reportedly present in the foster family relationships of participants only “half of the time,” revealing a potential gap in the characteristics and behaviors of foster parents that led to successful development. Two items in this asset category, encouraging involvement in the arts or other creative activities and encouraging involvement in religious groups, were rated the lowest of all items in the Developmental Assets® assessment. It is interesting that participants’ foster families rarely encouraged involvement in these extracurricular activities, as Tennessee’s
Department of Children’s Services’ current policies do not restrict or prohibit the promotion of religion in any way and opportunities for involvement in the arts are often available free of charge or at low cost through community centers or schools.

Participation in extracurricular activities has been linked to positive outcomes, including increased leadership skills and higher levels of self-esteem, which can lead to an easier transition into adulthood (Busseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2009; Hancock et al., 2012). These patterns present an area for further investigation to determine if gaps in these categories of Developmental Assets® exist consistently in foster parent-child relationships.

Despite the research-supported assertion that Social Competencies and Positive Values are two asset categories that contribute to successful development, the findings of this study indicate that participants’ perceptions of their success were not affected by the presence or absence of these asset categories. This is interesting, given that parents have been identified as a primary source of influence in terms of behaviors associated with Social Competencies and Positive Values (i.e., avoiding risky behaviors, making moral decisions) (Ali & Dwyer, 2009; Smetana, 2001). With the exception of one reference to the negative influence that a lack of assets from the Social Competencies category had on an individual’s perceptions, neither category appeared in the thematic analysis. This may be connected to the findings that while parents can have a strong influence on their children’s beliefs, they have a tendency to remain relatively passive in their influence on moral development, generally intervening only after a mistake or decision that conflicts with family values (Smetana, 2011). The Developmental Assets® assessment revealed that participants’ foster families were promoting both of these categories “most of the time.” Another possible explanation for this finding is that these two asset categories do
not have as strong of an impact on perceptions of success. Further investigation is needed to determine the exact explanation.

It is also important to note the gender differences in the degree to which Developmental Assets® were promoted by participants’ foster parents. Unlike the findings of Farruggia and Germo (2015), who found similar levels of positive parent-child relationships between male and female foster youth, statistical analyses revealed that males in this study consistently reported lower levels of mean values in asset promotion. This held true for all asset categories except Boundaries and Expectations. Further analysis showed that only two of these differences, Empowerment and Cumulative Developmental Assets®, were statistically significant. These differences may be rooted in the tendency for males to exhibit more frequent problem behavior, or in fathers’ lower levels of tolerance for misbehavior from boys (Farruggia & Germo, 2015; Wright, Parent, Forehand, Edwards, Conners-Burrow, & Long, 2013). Further exploration is needed into the reasons why these males perceived lower levels of Developmental Assets® promotion from their foster parents than their female counterparts.

Consistent with previous research, this study found participants’ perception of their situation had the potential to influence their outcomes (Henry et al., 2008; Kranstubert et al., 2012; Zepke et al., 2011). The majority of participants reported that they perceived themselves to be successful, regardless of the degree to which societal standards may consider them to be. This is evident in the contrast between the features of success identified in the participants’ definitions of success and the features present in their explanations of why they consider themselves to be successful. While their
definitions and prototypic features of success may reflect a societal influence on how success is perceived, the personal accounts of measures of success provide support for the assertion that perception of a situation can influence outcomes.

*Study Strengths and Limitations*

One of the major strengths of this study is the use of a mixed-methodology approach to understanding the perceptions of success among emerging adults with experience in the foster care system. The quantitative-based prototype analysis and Developmental Assets® assessment provided a springboard for the collection of qualitative data, as well as a comparative base for a holistic analysis. Rather than strictly numerical or qualitative responses, the result of this approach was a rich dataset with quantitative support for qualitative findings and qualitative support for quantitative findings. Another strength of the study was its use of a thematic approach to qualitative analysis. The thematic approach consists of a flexible procedure to data analysis that allows for identification of both similarities and differences in the data. This approach permitted a clear identification of themes and revealed patterns that can be further investigated using a more complex method of qualitative data analysis.

Despite the strengths, there were several limitations to the current study. As with most qualitative studies, a restricted sample size of the target population leads to findings that may not be broadly applicable and all data and results should be reviewed with this in consideration. For example, the participants in this study were all enrolled in a transitional living program. Since enrollment in these programs is optional, it is possible that a self-selection bias may have influenced the results in a way that was adequately measured. To offset this bias, future researchers may consider expanding the study to
include former foster youth that are not enrolled in transitional living programs. Furthermore, data in this study was collected retrospectively and only from the perspective of foster youth. While perception of the participants was the focal point of the study, the perspective of the foster parents could provide information that fills current gaps (i.e., why participants reported little encouragement to participate in religious or arts-based activities) and lead to a greater understanding of precisely which behaviors and Developmental Assets® contributed to resiliency in the participants. Finally, there were a total of five participants that did not contribute to the group discussion. All but one of the participants in the first focus group knew each other prior to the study. The participant that was unfamiliar with the group did not participate, possibly due to slight personal discomfort. Similarly, participants in the second and third focus groups did not know each other prior to the study, possibly causing the four participants that did not contribute to feel uncomfortable during the study. Additionally, it is possible that the participants who did not contribute felt as though they would be judged, either by their peers or by the researcher.

*Implications for Practice*

Knowledge of both the promotive and prohibitive factors can be used to advise foster parent recruitment and training, as well as legislation related to foster youth. Behaviors and characteristics that contribute to the development of Support and Positive Identity, the two asset categories found to be most important in developing feelings of success among foster youth, can be incorporated into training. While many of these characteristics may be difficult to teach, a preliminary assessment of potential foster parents’ ability to promote these assets, or openness to improving that ability, can be
included in foster parent recruitment. Emphasizing the importance of developmental assets early in the process of foster parenting can ensure that they remain a central concern of both the foster parents and the agency.

Foster parent trainings can also improve the presence of Support and Positive Identity in the foster parent-child relationship. In order to promote Support, foster parents can present themselves as a reliable source of advice, help foster youth succeed, give love and support, and simply talk to youth about things (Benson, 1990). These behaviors should be stressed as crucial for positive youth development during foster parent training sessions. To increase Positive Identity in foster parent-child relationships, parents can consider the behaviors that lead to a greater perception of its presence, including making children feel in control of their lives, good about their lives, and good about their future, teaching them how to deal with frustration and overcome challenges positively, and helping them develop a sense of purpose. Promoting Support and Positive Identity can lead to a greater likelihood of a successful transition from adolescence into adulthood. While working with foster youth, it is important to maintain a child-centered approach, but incorporating a family-focus has many benefits.

Conclusion

The present study revealed numerous patterns and themes related to success and the role of foster families in promoting Developmental Assets®. The most important finding of this study is that success is a complex construct, one that may have a different meaning when applied to societal standards compared to on a personal level. When working with foster children, caseworkers, therapists, advocates, and foster parents should promote the definition of success on a personal level, rather than using societal
standards, effectively increasing the degree to which emerging adults with experience in the foster care system perceive themselves to be successful.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Summary of Major Findings

The information collected in this study points to four main findings. First, the concept of “success” is complex and likely has a prototypic structure rather than a linear definition. Second, perceived Support and Positive Identity within participants’ foster families relationships was related to feelings of success. Similarly, the absence of behaviors promoting either of these inhibited feelings of success. Finally, although “money” was the most frequently listed attribute of “success,” participants in this study reported feeling more successful when they accomplished personal goals.

Discussion

A substantial amount of research focuses on ways to promote successful transitions into adulthood for youth in the foster care system. The Search Institute® has identified 40 Developmental Assets® for adolescents that have been found to consistently improve the chances of positive outcomes in adulthood (Benson, 1990). Numerous studies have supported the potential of these Developmental Assets®. This research, while extremely valuable, is often from the perspective of theorists, scholars, and practitioners, has focused disproportionately on the development of the child, and diminishes the importance of the family context. The present study took a new and exploratory approach to understanding development in foster children and considered the role of the foster family in promoting resiliency - all from the youth’s perspective.
How do emerging adults with foster care backgrounds define “success”?  

The present study used two approaches to capturing participants’ definitions of success; a linear definition in the demographic questionnaire and a modified prototype analysis and each approach yielded different patterns. When asked to provide a strictly linear definition, participants focused on two main features, “goals” and “accomplishments.” These results aligned with the findings of the modified prototype analysis, where “goals” and “accomplishments” had the third and fourth highest strength rating, as well as with patterns found in the group discussion as many participants reported feeling successful because they overcame expectations others had for them, met their personal goals, and/or experienced measurable accomplishments (i.e., graduated high school, secured employment). These findings are consistent with previous research that measures resiliency in the transition to adulthood by external, measurable milestones (Settersten et al., 2005). External measures can often be obtained through exclusively quantitative approaches.

Although external markers were most often mentioned as a measure of resiliency, some participants also identified an internal component as well. These participants emphasized the feelings of transitioning into adulthood, such as independence, hard work, and determination, rather than specific, measurable milestones. Each of these feelings is consistent with previous research that has identified internal sentiments of transition as a marker of resiliency in adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Internal measures are much more difficult, though not impossible, to obtain though the use of quantitative methods alone. This study, utilizing a mixed method approach, was successful in capturing both internal and external measures of success from participants.
While the data collected in this study provided valuable insight into the perception of emerging adults with experience in the foster care system, it is impossible to conclusively answer the primary research question. Participants provided unique personal definitions of success and although analysis revealed some preliminary patterns, variation among responses still existed. The present study supports the work of Enke and Ropers-Huilman (2010), further strengthening the claim that success is defined both internally and individually and can vary among individuals with similar experiences.

*Does the concept of “success” have a prototypic structure?*

Prototypically structured concepts are comprised of different thoughts, feelings, and ideas that do not have to exist all-inclusively for the concept to apply to a given situation (Fehr, 1988; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Rosch, 1975). These concepts can not be defined solely by one linear phrase, but rather need an abundance of features, each differing in the degree of relatedness, to provide a full understanding of the concept. While the present study did not conduct a full, four-phase prototype analysis of the concept of “success,” the results of the modified version used support the possibility of “success” to be more accurately considered as a prototypically structured concept.

Other prototypically structured concepts (i.e., love, forgiveness, intimacy) share several commonalities with the concept of “success.” For example, the variation in the participants’ definitions of success, mentioned previously, demonstrate the difficulty in confining the definition to one, complete thought. When attempting to define a prototypically structured concept, the same difficulty is encountered (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Additionally, the two approaches used to capture participants’ definitions of success yielded different results. While “goals” and “accomplishments” were common to
both the linear definition and the modified prototype analysis, “money,” which was the highest rated feature in the prototype activity, was rarely mentioned in the linear definitions. Such a variation further supports the notion that “success” is better defined as prototypically structured.

*What promotive factors in foster family relationships do emerging adults perceive to lead to resiliency?*

Support and Positive Identity were consistently identified by participants as the two most influential Developmental Assets® categories. When behaviors or characteristics that reflected these asset categories were present in participants’ relationships with their foster parents, they were perceived to work as promotive factors, leading to higher levels of resiliency among the participants. These findings are consistent with previous research identifying Support and Positive Identity as two categories significant in promoting resiliency (Benson, 1990; Kranstuber et al., 2012; Search Institute®, 2006). Additionally, perceived support from parents has been connected to higher levels of life satisfactions and most positive outcomes in the transition to adulthood (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Valois et al., 2009). Other factors perceived to be present in foster family relationships, but less frequently connected to participants’ feelings of resiliency, included Commitment to Learning, Constructive Use of Time, Empowerment, and Boundaries and Expectations. Each of these assets has previously been found to contribute to resiliency in the transition to adulthood (Benson, 1990; Search Institute®, 2006). The variation in frequency of reference to each asset can likely be attributed to the participants’ perceived importance of each.
What risk factors in foster family relationships do emerging adults perceive to inhibit resiliency?

The Developmental Assets® have been found to act as promotive factors in the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Benson, 1990; Search Institute®, 2006). When asked about the risk factors present in foster family relationships, participants referenced the absence of characteristics or behaviors reflecting two of the developmental asset categories, Support and Positive Identity, as the most inhibitive to their successes. These preliminary patterns again support the work of Kranstuber, Carr, and Hosek (2012), who found perceived parental support to be associated with higher levels of resiliency in the transition to adulthood, as well as with overall life satisfaction and success (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Valois et al., 2009). The perceived absence of these assets was especially harmful in participants’ perceptions of their resiliency. Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Commitment to Learning, and Social Competencies were other factors perceived to be absent from foster family relationships, but less frequently connected to participants’ feelings of inhibited resiliency.

To what degree do former foster youth perceive themselves to be successful?

The majority of participants reported that they considered themselves to be successful by their own standards. These participants reported positive feelings toward their individual levels of success, regardless of the perceptions of others. Previous research has emphasized the importance of an individual’s perception of their situation in predicting higher levels of resiliency (Henry et al., 2008; Kranstuber et al., 2012; Zepke et al., 2011). The definitions and prototypic features of success reported by participants in this study may reflect a societal influence on how success is perceived, however, their
personal accounts of measures of success provide support for the assertion that perception of a situation can influence outcomes. While the findings of this component of the study reflect high levels of resiliency among participants, they unfortunately cannot be generalized to the entire foster population. Further investigation is necessary to better answer this research question.

*Is this mixed-method approach an effective way to capture the perceptions of the target population?*

The present study approached studying resiliency in emerging adults with experience in the foster care system using a new and innovative approach, blending quantitative and qualitative methods and using a modified version of a prototype analysis. The mixed-method approach allowed for data collection that yielded a more comprehensive, richer dataset than either approach would have yielded independently. The approach was engaging and participant attention appeared to be maintained throughout the duration of the study.

As with any new approach, there are improvements that can be made to the study design. If the study was to continue, or a similar study was to be used in the future, there are several modifications that can be made to improve the process. First, rather than a group discussion, a one-on-one interview can be used. While this is both time consuming and costly, the data is likely to be much more in depth and reflect more personal experiences. While participation was overall high, there were five individuals that did not participate in the discussion at all. A one-on-one private interview may be a more comfortable setting for these participants and may have elicited more in-depth responses from other participants.
The current approach can also be expanded to include the use of a comparative sample. Rather than comparing perceptions only to research-based measures of success, valuable insight could be gained from comparing the perceptions of the foster population to the non-foster population. Many of the outcomes for foster youth are already measured in comparison to the “general population” and understanding differences in perception and the role of foster parents in promoting resiliency can be used to reduce the disproportionate negative outcomes.

Finally, the study can be expanded to use a full prototype analysis. While the modified version was an appropriate way to measure the construct of success, it is not necessarily the most practical way to do so using a large sample size. The full analysis would require a four-part study and an expanded timeframe would also make this more feasible.

Study Strengths and Limitations

One of the major strengths of this study is the use of a mixed-methodology approach to understanding the perceptions of success among emerging adults with experience in the foster care system. The quantitative-based prototype analysis and Developmental Assets® assessment provided a springboard for the collection of qualitative data, as well as a comparative base for a holistic analysis. Rather than strictly numerical or qualitative responses, the result of this approach was a rich dataset with quantitative support for qualitative findings and qualitative support for quantitative findings. Another strength of the study was its use of a thematic approach to qualitative analysis. The thematic approach consists of a flexible procedure to data analysis that allows for identification of both similarities and differences in the data. This approach
permitted a clear identification of themes and revealed patterns that can be further investigated using a more complex method of qualitative data analysis.

Despite the strengths, there were several limitations to the current study. As with most qualitative studies, a restricted sample size of the target population leads to findings that may not be broadly applicable and all data and results should be reviewed with this in consideration. For example, the participants in this study were all enrolled in a transitional living program. Since enrollment in these programs is optional, it is possible that a self-selection bias may have influenced the results in a way that was adequately measured. To offset this bias, future researchers may consider expanding the study to include former foster youth that are not enrolled in transitional living programs.

Furthermore, data in this study was collected retrospectively and only from the perspective of foster youth. While perception of the participants was the focal point of the study, the perspective of the foster parents could provide information that fills current gaps (i.e., why participants reported little encouragement to participate in religious or arts-based activities) and lead to a greater understanding of precisely which behaviors and Developmental Assets® contributed to resiliency in the participants. Finally, there were a total of five participants that did not contribute to the group discussion. All but one of the participants in the first focus group knew each other prior to the study. The participant that was unfamiliar with the group did not participate, possibly due to slight personal discomfort. Similarly, participants in the second and third focus groups did not know each other prior to the study, possibly causing the four participants that did not contribute to feel uncomfortable during the study. Additionally, it is possible that the
participants who did not contribute felt as though they would be judged, either by their peers or by the researcher.

Implications for Future Research

While it is believed that the approach used in this study provided valuable insight to the perceptions of success among emerging adults with experience in the foster care system, it is a new and innovative approach that has not yet been widely utilized. As with any new or modified approach, it is difficult to find the most effective procedure on the first attempt. The biggest challenge of this approach appeared in the focus group discussion, as there was variability in participants’ levels of engagement and contributions. This is a common drawback to group discussions where not all voices are equally presented. While it is unlikely that the questions themselves made participants feel uncomfortable, it is possible that a degree of discomfort speaking in front of a group about their experiences resulted in limited participation. Future researchers can further modify the study to include the same questions in a one-on-one interview, or form focus groups of participants that already know each other. Each modification presents its own benefits and challenges, and it is up to the researcher to determine which one will be most effective.

Implications for Practice

Knowledge of both the promotive and prohibitive factors can be used to advise foster parent recruitment and training, as well as legislation related to foster youth. Behaviors and characteristics that contribute to the development of Support and Positive Identity, the two asset categories found to be most important in developing feelings of success among foster youth, can be incorporated into training. While many of these
characteristics may be difficult to teach, a preliminary assessment of potential foster parents’ ability to promote these assets, or openness to improving that ability, can be included in foster parent recruitment. Emphasizing the importance of developmental assets early in the process of foster parenting can ensure that they remain a central concern of both the foster parents and the agency.

Foster parent trainings can also improve the presence of Support and Positive Identity in the foster parent-child relationship. In order to promote Support, foster parents can present themselves as a reliable source of advice, help foster youth succeed, give love and support, and simply talk to youth about things (Benson, 1990). These behaviors should be stressed as crucial for positive youth development during foster parent training sessions. To increase Positive Identity in foster parent-child relationships, parents can consider the behaviors that lead to a greater perception of its presence, including making children feel in control of their lives, good about their lives, and good about their future, teaching them how to deal with frustration and overcome challenges positively, and helping them develop a sense of purpose. Promoting Support and Positive Identity can lead to a greater likelihood of a successful transition from adolescence into adulthood. While working with foster youth, it is important to maintain a child-centered approach, but incorporating a family-focus has many benefits.

Conclusion

The present study revealed numerous patterns and themes related to success and the role of foster families in promoting Developmental Assets®. The most important finding of this study is that success is a complex construct, one that may have a different meaning when applied to societal standards compared to on a personal level. When
working with foster children, caseworkers, therapists, advocates, and foster parents
should promote the definition of success on a personal level, rather than using societal
standards, effectively increasing the degree to which emerging adults with experience in
the foster care system perceive themselves to be successful.
APPENDIX A

THESIS PROPOSAL

INTRODUCTION

Youth enter the foster care system for a number of different reasons and stay in the system for an indefinite period of time. Some youth enter and exit multiple times during their childhood, and others may only have one placement. While the experience of living in foster care may differ significantly for each child, one commonality exists—when a youth in the foster system reaches the age of emancipation, they transition out of the custody of the state and are considered legally independent adults. The age of emancipation ranges from 18 and 21, depending on the state in which the child resides (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012).

Youth in foster care are leaving the custody of the state and foster parents at an increasing rate. Of the 241,254 children that exited the foster care system in 2012, 10% of them were emancipated (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). This number is 2% higher than in 2003 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Such an increase demands that more attention be directed to assisting youth as they transition from life within the foster care system to independence in adulthood.

Unlike many of their peers in the general population, foster youth have a unique living situation and frequently lose contact with their support system once they reach the age of emancipation. Former foster parents of the children are not legally mandated to provide continued care or support, and participation in transitional living programs is optional. As a result, many foster youth find themselves alone and struggling to succeed in their first attempts on their own. Many become involved in drug or alcohol use, battle
mental health complications, experience homelessness, or have difficulty securing and maintaining jobs (Dworsky et al., 2013; Havalchak et al., 2009; White et al., 2011).

While scholars, theorists, advocates, and others viewing the foster care system from an external perspective readily identify the disproportionate number of risk factors present in the experiences of foster youth as leading to negative outcomes in adulthood, the perception of the individuals in consideration can play a major factor in the actual outcomes they experience. The power of perception has been observed among various populations to influence attitudes and outcomes, regardless of the actual circumstance (Henry et al., 2008; Kranstuber et al., 2012; Zepke et al., 2011). An understanding of the way in which individuals with experience in the foster care system define “success” can provide valuable insight and lead to improvements within the foster care system.

Additionally, there are ways in which the risk of negative outcomes for emerging adults with experience in the foster care system can be minimized. Several factors have been identified to promote resiliency and success as these individuals enter adulthood, including support from transitional living programs and placement stability while in foster care (Courtney et al., 2012; James et al., 2008; Jones, 2011; Youth Villages, 2012). Foster care agencies, advocates for foster youth, and foster care legislation have made efforts to increase the presence of these promotive factors in the lives of foster youth.

For youth in the general population, family factors have been found to be significant in promoting resiliency. While youth in the foster care system often have broken relationships with their birth parents, it is possible that the same promotive factors frequently found in the family-of-origin can also exist in foster families. A greater emphasis on the positive impact certain characteristics and behaviors of foster families
can have on foster youth resiliency is necessary to ensure the best possible outcomes for a highly vulnerable population.

Problem Statement

Research surrounding the foster care system has traditionally focused on the risks and unfavorable outcomes that youth most frequently experience both while in the system and once they have exited it. This approach is not completely unjustified; studies have consistently found experience in the foster care system to be associated with an elevated risk of negative outcomes later in life, such as drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, homelessness, and mental health complications (Courtney et al., 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013; Hallett, 2010; Salazar, 2013). Such a pessimistic approach to studying foster care can cast a negative light on the system as a whole and create a sense of hopelessness for the children and families the system serves. A resilience approach, on the other hand, emphasizes positive outcomes. Focusing on the successes of emerging adults with experience in foster care can provide greater insight and lead to improvements in the foster care system for everyone involved.

Purpose and Importance

While youth in the care of foster parents disproportionately encounter difficulties later in life, many exhibit a high level of resiliency in the face of such adversities. In fact, over one-third of former foster youth in a recent study on resiliency could be classified as accelerated adults, meaning they were making adequate progress in their adjustment to adulthood (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012). Additionally, studies by Jones (2011; 2012) revealed that, while at a lower rate than the general population, many emerging adults with experience in the foster care system were furthering their education and had
established a positive, supportive relationship with an adult. Rather than focusing on the risk factors contributing to adverse outcomes, the present study seeks to identify patterns in the way in which young adults transitioning out of the foster care system define “success.” An awareness of their perceptions, along with the family factors they perceive to contribute to their success, will allow foster care agencies, advocates, and foster parents to be more intentional in promoting resiliency and maximize opportunities for successful development in foster youth.

A healthy family situation can be one of the strongest factors in promoting resiliency (Kranstuber et al., 2012). Emerging adults with experience in the foster system often lack the stability and security provided to many by their birth parents, as they are bounced around from home to home, unable to form proper attachments and exposed to additional risk factors. This study aims to re-define the construct of success from the perspective of former foster youth, as well as to identify concepts of foster family resilience that are central to fostering their successes. In considering the perspective of foster youth, “success” can be re-defined to reflect the milestones and characteristics of development most significant to the population.

Much of the legislation impacting the foster care system is child-focused. A child-focused perspective is not an unjustified approach, but legislation tends to completely circumvent the importance of family. With such a strong potential to positively influence development, foster families simply cannot be overlooked. The findings of this study can be used to advise foster parent training, recruitment, and policy to ensure the best chances of successful development among foster youth.
Definitions of Key Terms and Processes

The following definitions are provided to give clarity to key terms and processes that will remain central to the study:

11. **Cumulative risk**: The additive effects of multiple adversities experienced in childhood and adolescence, which increases likelihood of negative outcomes in adulthood (Wickrama et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2013). Adversities experienced in early life can contribute to unhealthy development in adolescence, subsequently increasing likelihood of negative outcomes in adulthood, acting as a chain of risk (Wickrama et al., 2012).

12. **Developmental Assets®**: Forty assets, identified by Search Institute®, that are central to promoting resiliency and healthy development in children and adolescents (Search Institute®, 2006). Greater accumulation of Developmental Assets® is often used as a measure of success.

13. **Emancipation**: Release from the foster care system due to reaching the age of 18, or 21 in some states (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau et al., 2012). Upon reaching this age, youth are legally considered adults and no longer in the custody of the state or foster family.

14. **Family factor**: Any characteristic or behavior of a family that influences the overall development of a child (Orme & Buehler, 2001). These can be either promotive factors or risk factors. This study will focus on promotive factors in families.

15. **Foster youth**: Children who have been removed from their family for an indefinite period of time due to inability of family to provide adequate care. Reasons for
removal may vary, but can include parental illness, neglect, or criminal offenses (Arnett, 2007). These children become wards of the state and are in the custody of the state or foster families until they are reunited with their birth family or age out of the system.

16. **Promotive factor or asset**: Factors that predict positive outcomes (Wright et al., 2013). Promotive factors, or assets, contribute positively to an individual’s resiliency.

17. **Resiliency**: The cumulative ability of an individual to persevere in times of risk and to recover from misfortunes (Wright et al., 2013). Promotive factors add to an individual’s level of resiliency, whereas risks lower it.

18. **Transitional living program**: Programs available to help recently emancipated foster youth adjust to adulthood and independence (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). These programs may offer financial guidance, assistance in finding jobs, and help in coping with mental health complications. Participation in these programs is voluntary and they may be residential or non-residential.

**Guiding Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the construct of success from the perspective of emerging adults with experience in the foster care system. The primary question that will guide the research is:

- How do emerging adults with foster care backgrounds define “success?”

Additionally, several secondary research questions will be considered to further identify patterns in the perceptions of youth with foster backgrounds, including:

- To what degree do former foster youth perceive themselves to be successful?
• How well does the definition of “success” among youth with foster care backgrounds align with the definition of “success” according to the Developmental Assets®?

• What family factors do youth with foster backgrounds perceive to lead to resiliency?

• What family factors do youth with foster backgrounds perceive to inhibit resiliency?

• Is this mixed-method approach an effective way to capture the perceptions of the target population?

These research questions will be used to guide the demographic questionnaire, Developmental Assets® assessment, prototype analysis, and focus group discussion. These four components of the study are expected to provide valuable insight into the perceptions and experiences of emerging adults who have spent time in the care of foster families.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Foster youth disproportionately find themselves encountering negative outcomes as they transition into adulthood. Their susceptibility to these outcomes is the result of cumulative risks they experience while in the foster care system. Family instability, which can result in attachment issues and the return to unhealthy home environments, the release of children from the system before they are developmentally prepared for independence, and legislation that fails to include a family focus all contribute to the cumulative risk of youth in the foster care system (Dworsky et al., 2013; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Jones, 2012). As a result, foster youth experience higher levels of negative outcomes than their peers in the general population. Among the most frequently experienced outcomes for foster youth who are not able to overcome the adversities are homelessness, unemployment, limited education, drug and alcohol use, and mental health complications (Courtney et al., 2012; Havalchak et al., 2009). While not all foster youth struggle with these outcomes, the population as a whole is much more susceptible to them.

In order to overcome the multitude of risks that foster youth encounter, and decrease the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes in adulthood, youth must develop resiliency. Resiliency promotes perseverance in times of struggle and allows for successful development and adjustment to adulthood, despite the risks faced while living in the foster system (Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013). Factors promoting resiliency can be found in the everyday practices and behaviors of foster families. Previous research has already identified several factors that promote resiliency in foster youth. Placing siblings in the same household, as well as minimizing placement changes, can
promote stability in relationships and increase the likelihood of proper attachment (James et al., 2008; Linares et al., 2007). Once youth are released from the foster care system, transitional living programs can provide continued support and resources needed by newly independent individuals (Jones, 2011). Both factors aid in the adjustment to adulthood for foster youth.

One of the most widely recognized measures of success in children and adolescents is Search Institute's® Developmental Assets®. Developmental Assets® serve as promotive factors in an individual’s resiliency (Leffert et al., 1998). There are 40 different Developmental Assets®, organized into four categories of external assets and four categories of internal assets. These assets are used to assess an individual’s personal level of development and preparedness for adulthood.

Family has been found to play a significant role in the successful development of adolescents. A healthy parent-child relationship, perceived parental support, and opportunities provided to children to grow in independence are all family factors that promote resiliency during the transition to adulthood (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Kranstuber et al., 2012). While youth in the foster system may not experience these factors from their birth parents, there is potential for foster parents to provide the same benefits, leading to healthy adolescent development.

Theorists, researchers, and practitioners have established a definition of success, however, this definition can vary for different populations (Enke & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). The present study will focus specifically on the perceptions of youth with experience in the foster system in defining success and identifying significant family
factors that promote their definition of success. Knowledge of foster youth’s perceptions can advise further legislation and foster family recruitment and training.

Sources of Risk

Frequent disruptions in family relationships and home life result in unique challenges for youth with experience in the foster care system. These challenges often expose foster youth to higher levels of cumulative risk, making them more vulnerable population than their peers. The type and severity of risk can vary from youth to youth, but several trends exist in the literature surrounding the sources of risk for individuals with experience in the foster care system.

Family Instability

Youth with experience in the foster system have a home situation unique to their population. They may enter and exit the foster care system multiple times in their childhood, returning to their birth families only to be removed and taken into custody of the state again. Such instability in both birth and foster family life is associated with three major risks—residence in unhealthy home environments, instability in foster placements, and insecure attachment formation.

Unhealthy Home Environments

Children in the foster care system have been removed from their birth families because the parents, for one reason or another, have been deemed unable to adequately care for the family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The reasons why children are taken into the custody of the state vary significantly, but can include abuse, neglect, substance abuse, and mental health complications (Jones, 2012). In 2012, 51% of youth exiting the foster care system were reunited with their birth families (Children’s
Defense Fund, 2014). Children returning to these unhealthy home environments are exposed to more risk factors, in addition to the instability in their placement. Reunification with birth families, especially those struggling with addictions, abusive relationships, and mental illness, has been found to negatively impact resiliency among foster youth (Dworsky et al., 2013; Jones, 2012). Reunification is generally the highest priority for foster youth, however, doing so when the home environment is not stable can be have detrimental effects on the development of the child.

*Placement Instability*

Placement instability is another major source of concern in the proper development of youth living in the foster system. There are several different types of placement for children in the custody of the state, with two most common being nonrelative foster homes (47%) and relative foster homes, or kinship care (28%) (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). Other children are placed in institutional care, group homes, preadoptive homes, or returned to their parents on a trial basis (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). Children may switch home within their placement or switch between different types of placement multiple times while in the foster care system, depending on their needs and unique situation.

Frequent placement changes are not uncommon for foster youth. According to data collected by the Children’s Bureau (2014), longer periods of stay in the foster care system are found to be associated with more placement settings. In 2012, youth exiting the foster care system spent, on average, 22.7 months in substitute care and between 23.8% and 54% of these children experienced three or more placement settings (Children’s Bureau, 2014; Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). Instability in placement
setting, coupled with the possibility of returning to unhealthy home environments, poses a substantial risk to adolescent development.

**Attachment Issues**

According to attachment theory, proper attachment between an infant and a caregiver is critical to successful development (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982). When the bond is not allowed to form properly, as in the case with children removed from their parents at an early age, children struggle with their own attachments later in life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The more frequently a child moves from home to home, the fewer opportunities that child has to bond with a consistently present caregiver, severely limiting the likelihood of the two attaching properly (Dworsky et al., 2013). As a result, foster youth with multiple placements are at an elevated risk of attachment issues throughout adolescence and into adulthood, and an overall distrust of foster parents and other supportive resources.

**Early Emancipation**

At 18, many youth leave their family to pursue education or enter the workforce. They may be living on their own, paying their own bills, and solving the problems that life throws their way. The preparation for the transition to independence begins in developing assets at an early age, and once released, youth in the general population usually have their family to return to in times of need. Unfortunately, this is not often the case for youth in the foster care system. Current foster care legislation in most states establishes 18 as the age at which individuals are emancipated, or released from the custody, of the foster care system. While a few states allow care to be expanded to 21 or offer transitional living programs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau et
al., 2012). The option to remain in foster care until 21 is often left up to the child, who may not recognize the benefits of extended care. Upon emancipation, foster youth are suddenly forced to become independent and, at 18, demonstrate lower levels of resiliency than those who remain in the system longer (Jones, 2012). Studies have found a number of risks associated with exiting the foster care system at such an early age, and many foster youth admit to feeling unprepared to enter adulthood independently at this age (Geenen & Powers, 2007). This developmental stage, frequently referred to as “emerging adulthood,” occurs between the ages of 18 and 25. Emerging adulthood is marked by five distinct behaviors, 1) exploration of one’s identity; 2) consideration of work, love, and ideology; 3) a period of instability or transience; 4) increased concern with oneself; and 5) feeling in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Being forced into adulthood without adequate support can trouble foster youth, and, when coupled with other risk factors, lead to drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, and other developmental complications.

Child-Focused Legislation

While the wellbeing of children should undoubtedly remain the central focus of legislative efforts, failing to recognize the importance of including family can contribute greatly to the cumulative risks of foster youth and increase their vulnerability to negative outcomes in adulthood. Foster youth often vary significantly in those they define as their family. For some, family is considered to be biological family members only, while others expand their definition to include foster families, mentors, and group home staff (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier, & Hummer, 2014). Such a broad definition of family makes it difficult to determine how exactly to incorporate a family focus into
legislation. Legislation is focused primarily on the wellbeing of the child, and in doing so, indirectly emphasizes independence of the foster youth as they enter adulthood. Legislative efforts to help foster youth establish policies, programs, and other forms of assistance that seem to assume that families will not be present in supporting foster youth after emancipation (Svoboda et al., 2012). As a result, legislation focuses primarily on the child, emphasizing their independence and doing little to promote family resiliency.

Outcomes for Former Foster Youth

The unique home life situations of foster youth often expose them to higher levels of risk than adolescents in the general population. These risk factors compile and interact, leading to a greater cumulative risk of encountering adversities, including homelessness, unemployment, drug and alcohol use, teen or unintended pregnancy, and mental and physical health complications. As a result, negative outcomes are disproportionately observed among youth with experience in the foster system.

Housing Instability

At some point in their lives, many youth with experience in the foster care system find themselves in an unstable housing situation after exiting the system. Instability in housing can be defined to include homelessness, residency in a shelter, or “couch surfing” in others’ homes (Courtney et al., 2012). Homelessness in adulthood is especially prevalent among individuals with a higher number of placements or a history of running away from their foster homes (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013). An analysis of The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth revealed that as many as 46% of former foster youth experience homelessness as they transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2012; Dworsky et al., 2013). Unlike their
counterparts in the general population, youth in the foster care system experience several abrupt severances from their family life, culminating in a final release from all support systems upon emancipation from the foster system. With limited to no continued support from their parents, birth or foster, these youth are also more likely to encounter financial difficulties. They are less likely to know how to access financial aid resources and manage any money they have, especially when pursuing postsecondary education (Hallett, 2010). Inability to manage money and use available resources can make it difficult to secure stable housing in adulthood.

*Education and Job Attainment*

There is no significant difference observed in the rate of employment or level of income among foster youth with college degrees and the general population (Salazar, 2013). However, foster youth encounter a number of barriers when it comes to attending and graduating from college. Even though a substantial percentage of foster youth may start postsecondary programs, they are at high risk of withdrawing and only between 1-11% of foster youth successfully earn bachelor’s degrees (Day et al., 2011; Havalchak et al., 2009). In a study of foster youth attending Michigan State University, Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, and Damashek (2011) found their dropout rate to be 16% higher than other university students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Youth with experience in the foster system often lack instrumental support both in preparation for and upon enrolling in postsecondary education, increasing the likelihood of withdrawal.

*Delinquency*

Upon exiting the foster system, youth are faced with the demands of adulthood and often have not fully developed the skills necessary to cope with such a significant
amount of stress. During childhood, response to stress can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including disruptive behavior, violence, or criminal activity (Farruggia & Germo, 2015). Patterns of substance abuse and criminal offenses, more common among foster youth than their peers, can continue into adulthood. Within six years after they are emancipated, up to one-fourth of youth with experience in the foster system will be convicted of a crime and one-third will struggle with substance abuse (Courtney et al., 2012; Jones, 2012). Criminal offenses, drug abuse, and alcohol problems pose a serious threat to the individual’s transition from foster care to adulthood and can result in other negative outcomes, such as difficulty completing a postsecondary education program or inability to maintain a job.

**Pregnancy**

Higher rates of teen pregnancy have been consistently observed among youth with experience in the foster care system. The pregnancy rate among teenage girls in the foster system has been found to be around 50% (Oshima et al., 2013). This rate is significantly higher than the general population (20%) and represents an extreme vulnerability of foster youth (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Svoboda et al., 2012). While teen pregnancy is common among the foster youth population as a whole, some factors are more strongly associated with the risk of pregnancy. The highest occurrences of teen pregnancy have been observed among youth with a high number of placements, a history of running away, and experience with neglect (Putnam-Hornstein, & King, 2014). The experiences of foster youth, and the decreased likelihood of successful attachments, may limit their exposure to pregnancy prevention information (Svoboda et al., 2012). Additionally, foster youth who become pregnant as teenagers are at an elevated risk of a
repeat pregnancy. Studies have found that teen motherhood increases the risk of a second pregnancy for foster youth anywhere from 40% to 81% (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Putnam-Hornstein, & King, 2014). Early motherhood can also act as a risk factor, interfering with the pursuit of higher education or employment, further increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes for foster youth.

Health Complications

Individuals with experience in the foster care system are also at an elevated risk for mental health disorders. Among the general population, the rate of mental health problems is around 20%; however, among former foster youth that rate is closer to 30% (Jones, 2012; White et al., 2011). Among these mental disorders are anxiety, depression, hostility, somatization, and post-traumatic stress disorder (White et al., 2011). Improper attachment at early ages, sudden release into independence, and traumatic experiences during childhood are all factors that can contribute to increased mental health complications and difficulty adjusting to adulthood (Jones, 2012; White et al., 2011).

Physical health complications are also more frequently observed among adults who spent part of their childhood in foster care. The 2003-2005 California Health Interview Survey data revealed a significant increase in the likelihood of reporting poor physical health in the month prior to the study for individuals with experience in the foster system (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Additionally, adults with experience in the foster care system reported higher levels of chronic illness, including asthma, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, epilepsy, and were more likely to smoke (Woods et al., 2013; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Such health complications can be the result of abuse or neglect in
childhood and worsened by frequent stress during adolescence and the transition into adulthood.

Resilience Theory

Resiliency, as defined by Wright, Masten, and Narayan (2013) is the ability of an individual to persevere in times of risk and to recover from misfortunes. An individual’s vulnerability, or likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes, is the cumulative measure of risks and assets that they possess (Masten, 2001; Wright et al., 2013). By increasing the opportunity for greater asset accumulation, resiliency can be promoted and the overall vulnerability to negative outcomes can be reduced.

Two primary types of assets have been identified in resilience theory; promotive assets and protective assets. Protective factors are significant in improving outcomes in the moment in which a negative outcome is threatened, such as immediate access to medical care when needed (Wright et al., 2013). Promotive factors, on the other hand, predict better outcomes overall, regardless of whether or not the individual encounters adversity (Wright et al., 2013). These factors, including healthy parent-child relationships, strong parenting practices, and financial stability, do not necessarily act at a specific moment, but rather build an overall resilience. The current study will focus specifically on the promotive factors found in foster families.

There are two models that studies using resilience theory generally use in analysis of assets and risks. One of these models is a person-focused approach and the other is variable-focused (Masten, 2001). This study will utilize a variable-focused approach to understanding resiliency. Rather than emphasizing differences in resilient and non-resilient foster populations, the present study will focus on individual and family factors
that affect the level of resiliency in foster youth. Targeting promotive factors is especially important in working with the foster youth population. Due to the instability in their family lives, and a number of other possible risk factors, foster youth are often exposed to a higher level of cumulative risk than their peers. Family factors can act as promotive assets, reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes as youth with experience in the foster care system transition into adulthood.

Sources of Resiliency for Foster Youth

A key component of resilience theory is the notion that promotive factors can be found in the typical characteristics and everyday behaviors of people. Termed “Ordinary Magic” by Masten (2001), resiliency can be promoted by factors as simple as dining together as a family, or having reliable source of support in times of need (Courtney et al., 2012). To promote resiliency in foster youth, nothing extraordinary needs to happen.

Youth with experience in the foster care system encounter a disproportionate level of risk as they transition into adulthood. However, despite their circumstances, many persevere in the face of adversity. While risk factors may predict otherwise, many foster youth successfully establish relationships with other adults, pursue higher education, and can otherwise be classified as successfully adjusted adults (Courtney et al., 2012; Jones, 2011; Jones, 2012). Several factors have already been identified as significant in promoting resiliency and further research on promotive factors in foster youth can be used to increase the likelihood of their success in adulthood.
Placement while in Foster Care

While many factors related to the placement of a foster child can promote resiliency, there are two, more controllable factors that emerge as trends in the literature. Longer placements with fewer placement changes and placing children in homes with their siblings can both significantly influence resiliency among foster youth. Since these factors are controllable, they should be considered in all decisions concerning foster youth.

Placement with Siblings

Siblings can provide support to each other during times of trauma and difficulty as children adjust to the foster care system. A review of the research on sibling placement in foster care reveals that maintaining continuity in sibling relationships presents a number of benefits, including a decrease in behavioral issues, improvement of mental health, and maintenance of healthy relationships between siblings (Washington, 2007). Placement in the same foster home can promote family stability and a continuation of traditional family roles, even when the rest of the family living situation may be disruptive (James et al., 2008). Separating brothers and sisters, except in the instance of negative sibling relationships, can have negative effects on the development of youth living in the foster system, including emotional difficulty and trouble forming attachment relationships (James et al., 2008; Linares et al., 2007). When possible, foster agencies should aim to place siblings with positive relationships in the same foster home to promote resiliency.
Placement Stability

Longer-term placements and fewer placement changes allow foster youth more time to adjust to living with their foster family. Placement stability has also been linked to better outcomes in adulthood and acts as a promotive factor in the resiliency of foster youth. For example, female youth with fewer placement changes and longer placements are at a much lower risk of pregnancy than those with more than five placement changes (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Stability in placement may allow youth an opportunity to form a stronger relationship with their foster families, and result in decreased risky behaviors. Additionally, placement stability is associated with a higher rate of high school graduation. Compared to youth with more than one placement a year, youth in more stable placement situations were found to be twice as likely to graduate high school (Pecora, 2012). Minimizing changes in foster care placement can help promote resiliency and a successful transition to adulthood for foster youth.

Support Networks

Once discharged from the foster system, foster youth are legally considered adults and many find themselves completely on their own for the first time ever. Some states have expanded foster care to youth until the age of 21 and many offer transitional living programs for youth over 18 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Unrau et al., 2012). These programs are designed to support foster youth as they transition into adulthood by providing financial guidance, assisting in job searches, and helping youth cope with mental health complications. The youth who choose to participate in transitional living programs demonstrate lower levels of incarceration, unemployment, and homelessness than foster youth who did not receive transitional living support (Jones,
2011; Jones 2012; Youth Villages, 2012). Additionally, Jones (2011; 2012) found participation in a transitional living program to be linked to higher levels of resiliency than other factors. Participation in a transitional living program may provide the extra support foster you need to successfully make the transition to adulthood.

The Construct and Measures of Success

Success can be defined in many different ways, and different definitions of success may be more significant to different populations. Some researchers have identified milestones that are more measurable, such as independent living, educational and employment attainment, and creating a family, that mark the successful transition to adulthood (Settersten et al., 2005). Other researchers focus on an internal perspective, which includes markers such as sentiments of transition into adulthood, a focus on one’s identity and self, and an exploration of love and ideology (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008). This study will focus on a combination of external and internal assets. Search Institute®, an agency focused on child development research, has identified 40 Developmental Assets® that have been accepted as central to promoting resiliency and healthy development in children and adolescents (See Figure 1; Benson, 1990).

Developmental Assets®

Each of Search Institute’s® 40 Developmental Assets® falls into one of two major categories, external assets and internal assets. External assets are attained through the involvement of sources in the environment, such as family, friends, and community forces (Leffert et al., 1998). External assets are divided into four subcategories: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, and Constructive Use of Time. Internal assets differ from external assets in the sense that they are related to the changes and
growth within the individual. These too are divided into four subcategories, Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity, reflecting the broad characteristics of self-development. While few youth possess every single asset, the number of Developmental Assets® attained is linked to the resiliency and successful development of the individual (Leffert et al., 1998). Promoting these factors in high-risk populations, such as foster youth, can increase the opportunities for successful development and resiliency.
**Figure 1.** Search Institute's® Developmental Assets®. The figure above shows the Search Institute's® 40 Developmental Assets® for adolescents age 12-18. Greater accumulation of assets is associated with an easier transition to adulthood and fewer negative outcomes (Benson, 1990; Search Institute®, 2006). Reprinted with permission.
Family Factors in the Success of Emerging Adults

Many researchers have found family to play a vital role in promoting the successful attainment of Developmental Assets® in adolescence and achievement of milestones in emerging adulthood. Healthy parent-child relationships, perceived parental support, and developmentally appropriate parenting have been linked to higher levels of resiliency in the transition to adulthood (Kranstuber et al., 2012). These factors may help build confidence of success in youth as they become independent, while at the same time, reassuring them that they have someone to turn to in times of need.

Parent-Child Relationship

The relationship between a parent and his or her child begins with attachment formation in infancy. A healthy parent-child relationship has been found to have many benefits for children, beginning in childhood and translating to healthy relationship formation in adulthood (Kranstuber et al., 2012). Secure parent-child relationships can also promote resiliency as children transition into adults. The structure, cohesion, and interactions between parents and their children all contribute to resiliency (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Kranstuber et al. (2012), found that the positivity of the relationship between the parents and children was the strongest predictor of successful transition for youth in their first year of college. A healthy parent-child relationship may provide youth with the confidence that they have a reliable source of support to return to in the event they encounter difficulties.
Parental Support

In addition to healthy parent-child relationships, perceived parental support as youth make the transition into adulthood generally results in a more successful transition. A study of 14-17 year old students from South Carolina found perceived parent support to be the most significant in predicting overall life satisfaction and other studies have found parental support to be critical in promoting success (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Valois et al., 2009). As youth transition to independence, feeling supported and receiving supportive messages from parents may build confidence in the ability to succeed (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Zepke et al., 2011). Feeling supported by parents and important adults can translate to feeling successful in personal endeavors.

Opportunities for Independence

The way in which parents approach parenting their children can be significant in promoting resiliency and success. By providing a stimulating home environment and encouraging appropriate character development, parents can increase the likelihood that their children will find success (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). This specifically applies to the development of independence. When children are allowed to practice skills in independence and responsibility, at developmentally appropriate levels, they gain a foundation for their transition to adulthood while learning under the supervision of their parents (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Building the skills necessary for independence prior to entering adulthood can ease the transition.

Family and Foster Youth

Due to the frequent disruptions in their family life, foster youth may not have the opportunity to form healthy relationships with their birth parents. In these cases, foster
youth need the support of other, caring adults to substitute and provide the benefits that healthy parent-child relationships can in the transition to adulthood. Research has shown that foster youth can receive the same support from foster parents that youth in the general population receive from their birth parents and oftentimes highly value the relationship with their foster parents (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Pecora, 2012). Such support is associated with higher educational attainment, lower levels of unexpected pregnancy, higher resiliency levels, and an easier transition into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Jones, 2012; Pecora, 2012). It is evident that family factors can be significant and recognized as important among foster youth, but as the foster care system is so child-focused, little attention has been given to the potential impact of these factors as they contribute to resiliency and success of foster youth.

Significance of Foster Youth’s Perception

Previous research on measurements of success has been based on the perspective and definition of theorists, practitioners, and scholars. Success, however, has been found to be defined differently by different populations and by individuals within the same population (Enke & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). While definitions of success may have similarities across populations, success is an internally defined construct and can vary from person to person.

Perception can play a significant role in the way individuals respond to a given life situation. In a study of 502 Latino youth in immigrant families, Henry, Merten, Plunkett, and Sands (2008), found higher levels of academic achievement among youth who perceived their neighborhood to be safer, regardless of the actual level of safety present. The findings of this study speak directly to the significance of perception in
shaping outcomes for individuals living in higher-risk situations, such as the foster care system.

The perception of foster youth is rarely including in defining success in studies related to outcomes for foster youth. Due to the increased levels of vulnerability in the foster youth population, achieving “success” may be defined differently than in the general population. While it is important to consider the perspectives of highly qualified individuals, youth with experience in the foster care system represent a distinguishable population that encounters barriers and challenges unique to their population. What youth with foster care experience consider to be successful may vary from the previously established and accepted definitions.
METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to identify qualitative patterns in how emerging adults with foster care experience define success and what family factors they perceive to promote resiliency. A prototype approach methodology will be used to collect and analyze data from 15-30 emerging adults recently emancipated from foster care and currently enrolled in transitional living programs. Following a review of the informed consent form, participants will complete a demographic questionnaire, Developmental Assets® assessment, prototype analysis of the construct of “success,” and focus group discussion.

Prototype Approach Methodology

The prototype analysis approach allows traditional definitions of a construct to be expanded to include an association of ideas that exist on a continuum, as opposed to an exclusive definition (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Prototypic analysis first emerged in cognitive psychology, as Rosch (1975) explored the way in which the mind internally structures a given construct beyond the rigidly structured concept definitions historically used to provide meaning to these constructs. In a prototype analysis, participants create a list, in a free-response format, of all the words and phrases they perceive to be related to the construct of interest. After a comprehensive list of all reported associated ideas, also called linguistic units, is compiled, participants determine the centrality of each to the overall definition of the construct, ranking the linguistic units based on their level of relatedness (Rosch, 1975). Finally, recall activities are used to test the way in which the construct affects cognitive thought processes and participant responses are compared to the centrality rankings collected in the previous step. Items that were ranked as more
central to the definition of the construct are expected to be more easily recalled. The data collected in a prototype analysis used to advise the overall conclusions in providing an alternative, expanded definition for the construct (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Rosch, 1975).

Thematic Analysis Methodology

Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that can be used to identify broad themes that exist within a data set after a focused, in-depth coding process of collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes are discovered when a research carefully analyzes data, searching for themes that exist across the entire data set. The process is often used in conjunction with other methods of data analysis and, at times, can be overlooked due to its flexible nature. Thematic analysis is an active approach to seeking out themes that involves organizing data into thematic maps, charts, or tables through a six phases process. The six phases are not necessarily linear, but all six must successfully be completed before thematic analysis is complete (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher familiarizes himself with the data set by revisiting the data, transcribing, or taking additional notes on what was collected. The next steps involve generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing themes. Once these themes have been reviewed, they can be defined and named in the fifth phase. The sixth and final phase is to produce a report sharing the findings of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

The target population for this study will be emerging adults, ages 18-25, who have prior experience in the foster care system. Focus groups of 5-10 participants will be held until the study has reached a maximum of 50 participants or saturation is reached,
whichever occurs first. The sample will be drawn from 5 different transitional living program sites. In order to be eligible for the study, interested participants must have spent a minimum of 12 consecutive months in foster care and be released from state custody at the time of the study. Additionally, they must be participating in a residential or non-residential transitional living program. Participation in the study will be open to all individuals who meet these criteria, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.

Recruitment Methods

A number of foster care agencies in the West Tennessee/Western Kentucky area offer transitional living programs for individuals who have recently been emancipated from the foster care system. These agencies include: Youth Villages in Dyersburg, TN, Agape in Jackson, TN, Monroe-Harding and Tennessee Department of Children’s Services in Nashville, TN, Camelot in Covington, TN, and Necco in Paducah, KY. Flyers will be delivered to each of these agencies, encouraging interested individuals to contact the researcher. Additionally, the primary researcher will visit these agencies to explain the nature of the study, the requirements for participation, and invite those meeting the criteria to participate. Those interested will be reminded that participation in the study is completely voluntary and any involvement with the study will have no impact on their relationship with the agency. Those who are eligible and participate in the study will receive a $10 gift card and pizza as compensation for their time.

Measures

Prior to starting any data collection, participants will be reminded that participation in the study is voluntary and all data collected will remain confidential.
Participants will also be asked to sign an informational consent form (see Appendix), ensuring that all participants meet the aforementioned requirements of participation. Any participants that do not meet the criteria will be released from the study at this point.

**Demographic Information**

Demographic information, including age, race/ethnicity, education/employment status, and foster experience, will be collected for all participants (see Appendix). Participants will be asked specifically about their age at first entry to the foster care system, age at last placement, types of placements they experienced, their total time spent in care, and their total number of placements. Family life can differ greatly for individuals of different demographic backgrounds. For example, a study of racial and ethnic differences in family life revealed that racial minorities are more likely to reside in disadvantaged areas, regardless of the extent to which they successfully achieved the milestones of emerging adulthood (Swisher et al., 2013). Demographic differences can be the source of differential outcomes in adulthood. Collecting demographic information will provide greater insight into each youth’s experience, as well as allow for possible confounding variables to be identified.

**Perception of “Success”**

Participants in this study will be asked to define the construct of success, using a slightly modified version of prototype analysis. Prototype analysis is used to identify concepts that are central to the meaning of a word. These concepts are not necessarily present in every instance of the word, but rather are identified as central to the definition (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). To determine the participants’ perception of success, they will first be asked to list all concepts they believe to be related to the construct of success.
Rather than creating a comprehensive list of responses, participants will be asked to evenly divide only the words or phrases they listed into three categories based on their centrality to the construct of success; highly central, moderately central, and minimally central. This modification ensures that the individual perceptions of each participant are maintained while data is collected. Identifying the concepts central to the construct of success will help highlight any differences between the perceptions of success in foster youth and those of the general population, researchers, and theorists. The responses collected from the participants in this study will be compared to the established definition of Developmental Assets® central to success as defined by Search Institute®.

After ranking the centrality of each of their words or phrases to the idea of “success,” the participants will begin the focus group discussion component of the study. The words and phrases listed in each category (highly central, moderately central, and minimally central) will be shared with the group. Participants will be encouraged to discuss their reasoning for how they ranked each word or phrase, permitting them to explore the construct of “success” further in depth and from the perspective of their peers.

Family Factors Promoting Resiliency

In order to determine the family factors contributing to foster youth success, open-ended focus group questions that center around identifying which foster family factors they believed to be most significant in promoting their self-defined level of success and resiliency will be used. The responses to these questions will guide further research and help identify patterns as the most significant factors contributing to success, from the perspective of the foster youth. Additionally, participants will have the
opportunity to discuss a series of open-ended questions that focus on the factors of their foster families that inhibited their resiliency. These questions will reflect the family’s role in prohibiting successful attainment in each of the eight categories of Developmental Assets®. Knowledge of both the promotive and prohibitive factors can be used to advise foster parent recruitment and training, as well as legislation related to foster youth.

Procedure

The study will consist of a brief demographic questionnaire, a modified prototype analysis of “success,” a Developmental Assets® assessment, and a semi-structured focus group discussion consisting primarily of open-ended questions about the prototype analysis and the role of foster families in promoting resiliency. The study will take place in a private or semi-private location where the participants feel comfortable meeting, such as a conference or meeting room at the foster care agency. Participating agencies will not have access to any of the data collected during the study and the relationship between foster care agency and young adult will not be affected by the study, regardless of whether the individual decides to participate or not. All questions will be designed to support the primary research question: How do emerging adults with foster care backgrounds define “success?” This process will guide the study in efficient and ethical research.

Consent Procedure

Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher will review the study’s consent form with participants. Participants will be required to sign the consent form. At this time, participants will be reminded that participation is completely voluntary and that participants are not required to answer any questions that cause discomfort. In the event
of extreme participant discomfort, the participant will be permitted to leave the focus group and will be referred to counseling resources within the foster care agency.

*Demographic Questionnaire Procedure*

After signing the consent form, participants will begin with an individual questionnaire booklet (see Appendix). The booklet will be color-coded and participants will not write their name anywhere on the document to protect confidentiality. The first section of the booklet will contain the demographic questionnaire with questions about age, race/ethnicity, gender, education/employment status, and foster experience. Participants will be instructed to independently complete the first section and, upon completion, to wait silently until given further instruction.

*Prototype Analysis Procedure*

When all participants have completed the demographic questionnaire, they will be instructed to begin the first step in the modified prototype analysis. Participants will each receive a large stack of post-it notes, color-coded to match their booklet. They will be asked to write all of the words or phrases they believe are related to the idea of “success” on the post-its, writing only one word or phrase per post-it note.

Upon completion of the first task, participants will then be asked to consider the degree to which each word or phrase they wrote is related to the idea of “success.” There will be three posters on the walls around the room. These posters will be labeled “strong,” “moderate,” and “weak,” to reflect the degree of relatedness. Participants will be asked to divide their post-its evenly among the three categories and put them on the corresponding posters.
**Developmental Assets® Assessment Procedure**

Once all post-its are added to the posters, participants will be asked to open their booklet and individually complete the Developmental Assets® assessment. The Developmental Assets® assessment will contain questions derived from Search Institute's® Developmental Assets® Profile that have been modified to specifically reflect the role of the foster family in the participant’s attainment of each of the Developmental Assets®. Participants will be asked to wait silently when they have completed the second portion of their booklet.

**Focus Group Discussion Procedure**

The focus group discussion will consist of three main components; a review of the placement of the words and phrases related to “success,” a discussion why words and phrases were placed in each category, and an exploration of the role foster families play in promoting or inhibiting resiliency (see Appendix). During the focus group, participants will reflect on the words and phrases they selected, discuss any conflicting ideas about "success" that arise, and share how their experiences with different foster families affected their successes or their definition of success. Because of the optimistic, success-based focus of the discussion, no significant participant discomfort is anticipated. At the conclusion of the study, or as needed, participants demonstrating a need for counseling or additional resources will be referred to a contact within their agency.

All focus group discussions will be audio and video recorded on password-protected devices and, to protect confidentiality, participants will receive a blank color-coded badge to wear that matches the color of the questionnaire booklet. Participants will also be assigned identification numbers and pseudonyms for data analysis. No
names will be recorded or retained and any personally identifiable information shared will be deleted from audio and video tapes and all tapes, along with all other data collected, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

**Ethical Treatment of Participants**

As with all research on human subjects, there are a number of ethical considerations. In order to protect the privacy of participants disclosing information of a sensitive matter, there will be no identifying information disseminated to the public or recorded on the audiotapes. All responses will be kept confidential and participation in the study will not be extended to minors. Study participants will be briefed prior to beginning the survey of the intent of the study, anticipated outcomes, and their right to withdraw at any point. No deception will be necessary for the successful collection of data in this study and the study does not pose any immediate threat of physical harm to participants.

Maintaining confidentiality of study participants is of the utmost importance. Due to the sensitive nature of this study's questions about experiences in the foster care system, participants may be at a minimal risk of psychological or emotional discomfort during participation. In order to mitigate this risk, participants will have the opportunity to skip any question they feel uncomfortable answering, including demographic questions. Resources for counseling and additional support will be provided to participants at the conclusion of the study to mitigate the risk of continued psychological or emotional stress. Additionally, all ethical guidelines of the University of Southern Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be strictly adhered to and the study will not begin until approval has been granted by the IRB.
All data collected during the study will be kept completely confidential. The demographic questionnaire, Developmental Assets® assessment, and prototype analysis will be paper-based. This data will not contain any personally identifiable information and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office and destroyed at the completion of the study. Pseudonyms will be given to any participants referenced in written reports of the study.

Focus groups will be audio and video recorded, transcribed, and coded. A visual recording of the focus group is necessary to connect discussion with responses from questionnaires. During focus groups discussions, participants will be asked to wear blank name badges that are color-coded to match their information booklets. This will help connect the data collected during the focus group with the corresponding booklet and post-it notes. Tapes will not be reviewed by anyone other than the primary investigator. Immediately following the study, the audio files will be exported to an external hard drive as mp3 files and the video files will be exported to an external hard drive as mp4 files. The audio and video files will then be access from a computer without internet connection, and transcribed. Upon completion of transcription, the audio and video tapes and files will be erased. All other data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and digital data will be stored on an external hard drive. Participants will be assigned identification numbers and given pseudonyms for data analysis. No personally identifiable information will be recorded.

Analysis of Data

The data in this study will be analyzed using a mixed methodology approach to data analysis. The quantitative findings of the prototype analysis will be supported using
both quantitative data, using descriptive statistical analysis, and qualitative data, analyzed from a thematic approach. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data will add clarity and wholeness to understanding the construct of “success.”

Prototype Analysis

Analysis of data in this study will be based on the established, four step procedure of a standard prototype analysis, but modified to reflect the changes made to the data collection procedure. This analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of success to emerging adults with experience in the foster care system.

The first step of data analysis will be to compile all linguistic units identified by each participant and condense redundant units into the same attribute category. If units contain the same base word (e.g., accomplish vs. accomplishment), are emphasized or modified by an adjective (e.g., determined vs. very determined), or are determined to communicate the same meaning (e.g., education vs. school), they will be grouped into the same attribute category (Fehr, 1988). Participant’s individual lists will then be compared to other lists generated by participants, as well as to the Search Institute's® list of 40 Developmental Assets®, and analyzed for similarities and differences in identified attributes.

During the study, participants ranked their own list of features as either strongly, moderately, or weakly related to the idea of “success.” Each feature will be assigned a value on a scale of 1 (weakly related) to 3 (strongly related). For units that were combined into the same attribute category, a mean value will be calculated. The centrality rating of each attribute category will then be compared to the frequency that attribute appears to determine if any correlation exists. Finally, a comprehensive list of
the features of “success” and the mean centrality ratings will be calculated. This data will highlight the features most central to defining the construct of success and can also be used to complete a full prototype analysis in future studies.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis will be used in reviewing data from both the demographic questionnaire and the Developmental Assets® assessment. Prior to any statistical analysis, items from the Developmental Assets® assessment that measure the same asset will be combined into a mean value to represent the overall role of foster parents in promoting the successful attainment of each asset category. Mean values will range from 1.00 to 5.00, with 1.00 reflecting the lowest level involvement in asset promotion and 5.00 reflecting the highest level of involvement.

Descriptive statistical analysis will not only provide data on the demographic characteristics of the sample, but can also be used in crosstabulations to reveal the relationship between experiences with foster parents and overall Developmental Asset® attainment, as well as internal and external assets. An understanding of the relationship between these characteristics can provide insight to the promotive factors in foster families that predict higher levels of Developmental Asset® attainment in emerging adults with experience in the foster care system.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach to understanding data that yields the identification of themes within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach will be used in the present study to identify themes in foster family characteristics that are
perceived to contribute to the successes of young adults with experience in the foster care system.

Data in this study will be analyzed consistent with the approach established by Braun and Clarke (2006) in thematic analysis. Thematic analysis consists of six phases: According to Braun and Clarke (2006), successful thematic analysis consists of six phases of analysis: 1) familiarizing with data; 2) generalizing initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing a report. The guidelines provided for analysis are not necessarily a step-by-step process, but remain key to successful thematic analysis.

The first phase, familiarization with the data, involves a focused, in-depth review of the collected data. This can involve re-reading the data, taking notes, or transcribing verbal data, prior to beginning a formal coding process and allows for the preliminary identification of themes to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The familiarization stage may be time consuming, but has substantial benefits in subsequent stages of analysis.

The second phase of thematic analysis occurs when an initial list of codes has been generated. The process of coding involves grouping data into meaningful units that are more specific than overall themes. There is no limit to the number of codes that can be found in any given dataset and data that does not specifically fit into the coding process should be kept to maintain the context in which each of the coded ideas arose (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The next phase is to search for themes in the data by organizing codes into larger groups. During this stage, tables, maps, and other visual representations can be used to organize codes into themes. This phase is critical in gaining a larger understanding of the
data collected from the study and provides the foundation for identifying the overarching themes that emerge from the research.

Reviewing themes, the fourth phase in thematic analysis, consists of revisiting codes to ensure they align with the identified themes and revisiting themes to ensure they represent the whole dataset. During this phase, adjustments can be made if codes or themes do not fit into the thematic map, chart, or table (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After making all necessary adjustments, a relatively clear picture of the different themes should be evident.

At this point, the themes should be revisited again to ensure they reflect the true meaning of the data. Themes can be renamed and sub-themes should be identified during the fifth phase. A detailed analysis should also be written for each theme prior to moving into the final phase of thematic analysis.

Finally, a written report detailing the findings of the thematic analysis can be produced. The report should share the ways in which the themes are interrelated in a concise and logical manner and should connect the findings to the initial research questions. Producing a coherent report with solid examples will provide strong support for the findings of the study.
## PROJECT TIMELINE

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STUDY RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear [AGENCY],

I am conducting graduate research on the resiliency of youth with experience in the foster system. The study has been developed so we can learn more about the way in which foster youth define the construct of success and the factors in their foster families that they perceive to contribute to their success.

I would like your permission to recruit participants from your transitional living program. The study will consist of a 30-45 minute questionnaire, followed by a 45 minute-1 hour definition activity and focus group discussion. Participants will receive a $10 gift card as compensation for their time and pizza and drinks will be provided to the focus group for the evening.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and all data collected during the study will remain confidential. Participating in the study should neither be encouraged nor discouraged by the agency and the decision to participate should not affect the relationship between your foster care agency, transitional living program, and the individual receiving the services. Additionally, data collected during the study will not be released to your agency.

The Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Mississippi has just approved the study and I have attached their approval to this email. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me by phone (847-648-6606) or email (brianna.anderson@eagles.usm.edu), or contact my thesis committee chair, Dr. Amanda Williams at Amanda.l.williams@usm.edu.

Thank you very much for your support.

Brianna Anderson    Amanda Williams, Ph.D.
Graduate Student    Assistant Professor
Child and Family Studies, MS    Department of Child and Family Studies
University of Southern Mississippi    University of Southern Mississippi
STUDY RECRUITMENT FLYER

YOU can help!

Join us for a pizza night and share your experiences in the foster care system.

To participate, you must be between the ages of 18 and 25 and be enrolled in a transitional living program. The study will include a questionnaire, definition activity, and a focus group discussion.

If you are interested, please contact Brianna.

Call or text: 847.648.6606
Email: brianna.anderson@eagles.usm.edu.

The survey and focus group discussion will last between 1.5-2 hours and will be kept completely confidential. You will receive $10 for your participation and free pizza!
INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY AND CONSENT FORM

**Project Title:** Defining success: The perspective of emerging adults with foster care experience

**Investigator:** Brianna Anderson, Graduate Student in Child and Family Studies in the College of Education and Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi. Email: Brianna.anderson@eagles.usm.edu, Phone: 847.648.6606.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the way youth with experience in the foster care system define the construct of success and to further explore the role of foster families in promoting resiliency.

**Procedures:** You will also be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and development assessment in which you provide information about yourself and your background. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in activities to help us gain a better understanding of your perceptions of resiliency and share your experiences in a focus group discussion. The focus group discussion will be audio and video recorded, but all information will remain confidential. It is anticipated that this study should take no longer than 1.5 to 2.0 hours to complete.

**Risks of Participation:** Questions asked during the interview may remind you of your history and there is a chance you may become uncomfortable or wish to keep certain information private. In the event that you are uncomfortable answering a question, you may choose not to respond and we can move on to the next question.

**Benefits:** You may benefit from the opportunity to talk to someone about your experience in the foster care system. Additionally, the information you provide could help advise foster parent recruitment and training methods and foster care legislation to improve the foster care experience for youth in the future.

**Compensation:** You will receive $10 and free pizza as compensation for your time for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** All study records are kept private and confidential and all data are kept on a password-protected database or locked filing cabinet during the conduct of the research study. This study will be videotaped, however, data will be transcribed and tapes will be destroyed immediately following transcription. Any personally identifiable data collected will be omitted. Additionally, your information will not be shared with anyone in the foster care agency or transitional living program. The only time that your privacy cannot be protected is if you tell me someone is going to be hurt.
Contact: Please feel free to contact Brianna Anderson if you have questions or concerns about this research project. Email: Brianna.anderson@eagles.usm.edu, Phone: (847) 648-6606.

Research Advisor: Dr. Amanda Williams, 129 OMH 118 College Drive #5035, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406; 601-266-6108; Amanda.l.williams@usm.edu

Participant’s Assurance: This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations.

Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the IRB at 601-266-5997. Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.

Any questions about the research should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above.

Participant Rights: Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. Your choice will not affect your standing or relationships with your transitional living program.

By signing below, you state that you have read and fully understand this permission form and that you are at least 18 years of age.

You sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to you. This form explains the nature, demands, benefits and risk of the project. You may choose not to participate. You may also choose to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time.

By signing below, you consent to participate in this research project.

____________________________________   ______________________
Participant Name (printed)             Date

____________________________________   ______________________
Participant Signature              Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting the participant to sign.

____________________________________   ______________________
Researcher’s Signature             Date
Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this study. My name is Brianna and I will provide you with the directions today. The purpose of this study is to learn more about your past experiences in the foster care system and how you define the idea of success. You will begin by answering a survey with questions about your personal history and foster family relationships. Then, you will complete a brief interactive activity. After that, you will complete another brief questionnaire about your development and characteristics and we will conclude with a group discussion about what we did. Your participation is voluntary and if at any point you are uncomfortable, or do not want to answer, you can skip the question. Does everyone understand?

Before we start, each of you will need to sign the consent form. This is the same form you received earlier but I wanted to let you take another look over it. [Allow time to review]. Does anyone have any questions? [Answer questions]. Please print and sign your name on the bottom of the form where it says “Participant Name and Signature.” The last line is for me to sign. [Collect consent forms].

1. **Demographic Questionnaire:** The booklet on your desk contains the survey form. Please do not begin until I have read through all of the instructions. This survey will allow us to know more information about your background. Your answers will be anonymous and you can skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering. When you have completed the first part of the survey, please stop and wait silently until everyone else has finished. Are there any questions? [Answer questions]. You may begin. [When everyone is finished, move on to Prototype Analysis].

2. **Prototype Analysis:** The next part of the study is designed to help you explore the way in which you define the idea of success. I’d like you to list all the words or phrases you can think of that are related to the idea of “success.” Please use the sharpie marker and write one word or phrase per post-it note. Take your time—there are no right or wrong answers. When you are done, put your marker down and wait silently until everyone is finished. [Permit sufficient time to answer]. Now, I want you each to think about which words strongly relate to the idea of success, which are sort of related, and which are weakly related. Place each post-it note on the labeled posters on the wall. Please divide the words as evenly as possible into these three categories: **strong, moderate, weak**. Please do not talk during this portion of the activity. Are there any questions? [Answer questions]. When you are finished, please return to your seat. You may begin. [When all post-it notes have been added to posters, begin Developmental Assets® Assessment].

3. **Developmental Assets® Assessment:** The next part of the study focuses on your development and begins on page #3 of your booklet. You will see a list of positive things that you might have in yourself, your family, friends, neighborhood, school, and community. For each item that describes you **now or within the past 3 months**, check if the item is true: **Not At All or Rarely, Somewhat or Sometimes, Very or Often, or Extremely or Almost Always.** If you do not want to answer an item, leave it blank. But please try to answer all...
items as best you can. When you have completed this part of the survey, please stop and wait silently until everyone else has finished. [When everyone is finished take pizza break].

4. Pizza Break: We are going to take a 20-minute break. Please help yourself to pizza and drinks. I will let you know when there are 5 minutes left. [At 5 minutes left in break, make announcement]. Please finish your pizza and start to clean up. We will start with the second half of the study in 5 minutes. [Wait 5 minutes, then begin Focus Group Discussion].

5. Focus Group Discussion: Before we begin, I would like to establish some group norms. The purpose of this group is to learn about everyone’s experiences. Everyone has different experiences and may have different opinions about success. Be sure to listen when others are talking and be respectful of others at all times. I will facilitate and manage the discussion. Anyone who is disruptive or disrespectful will be asked to leave and will not receive the $10 gift card. Does anyone have any questions?

6. We are going to start off by talking about the words that were strongly associated with the idea of “success.” [Verbally review the words that were placed on the “strongly associated” poster without revealing the color of the post-it note]. If any words repeat, the word ________ appears on this list more that once. Why did you feel this word is “strongly related” to the idea of success? [Repeat for other words listed more than once, or work through words if no duplicates exist].
   a. PROBE: What makes this word more related to the idea of success than others?
   b. PROBE: Does anyone think this word should be moved to “moderately related?” Why or why not?

7. Now let’s take a look at the words that were moderately associated with the idea of “success.” [Verbally review the words that were placed on the “moderately associated” poster without revealing the color of the post-it note]. If any words repeat, the word ________ appears on this list more that once. Why did you feel this word is “moderately related” to the idea of success? [Repeat for other words listed more than once, or work through words if no duplicates exist].
   a. PROBE: What makes this word more related to the idea of success than others? What makes it less related to the idea of success than others?
   b. PROBE: Does anyone think this word should be moved to “strongly related?” Why or why not?
   c. PROBE: Does anyone think this word should be moved to “weakly related?” Why or why not?

8. We are going to move on to the words that were weakly associated with the idea of “success.” [Verbally review the words that were placed on the “weakly associated” poster without revealing the color of the post-it note]. If any words repeat, the word ________ appears on this list more that once. Why did you feel this word is “weakly related” to the idea of success? [Repeat for other words listed more than once, or work through words if no duplicates exist].
   a. PROBE: What makes this word less related to the idea of success than others?
b. PROBE: Does anyone think this word should be moved to “strongly related?” Why or why not?

9. The foster parents you’re with can really affect how you feel about yourself and your future. Did you have any parents that made you feel like you weren’t or couldn’t be successful?
   • PROBE: What were they like?
   • PROBE: Was there anything specific they did that made you feel like you weren’t or couldn’t be successful?

10. How did your foster parents make you feel successful or capable of success? Tell me more about that.
   • PROBE: What were they like?
   • PROBE: Was there anything specific they did that made you feel successful?

11. How did being in foster care affect your ability to be successful?
   • PROBE: How did it help? OR What made it hard to be successful?
   • PROBE: Do you consider yourself successful so far? Why or why not?

12. Let’s take one more look at the poster and the words and phrases that describe success. Were there any that your foster parents contributed to directly?
   • PROBE: Can you remember specific things they did to help you be successful in this way?

13. Is there anything else anyone would like to share about their background or how they define success? Does anyone have any questions?
   • PROBE: Thank you so much for your participation. Before you leave, please complete the form I am passing out [pass out receipt of payment form]. Hand the form to me on your way out and I will give you the $10 gift card.
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

We would like to ask you some questions about your background. This will allow us to know more information about the population participating in the study. Your answers will be anonymous.

Please mark the appropriate choice or write in the answer for the following questions:

1. Gender:  □ Male    □ Female

2. How old are you?    __________

3. Education:
   Please select your highest grade of school completed
   □ Grade school or less
   □ Some high school
   □ Completed GED
   □ Graduated from high school
   □ Some college
   □ Associates degree
   □ Four year college degree

4. How would you identify your race/ethnicity?
   ________________________________

5. What are your current living arrangements?
   □ Living with birth mother or father
   □ Living with other relatives
   □ Living on my own or with friends
   □ Living with foster parents
   □ Living with adoptive parents
   □ Living with another adult as a married couple
   □ Living with another adult as an unmarried couple
   □ Living in a residential transitional living group home
   □ Other ________________

6. At what age were you first placed into care?    __________

7. How old were you at your last placement?    __________
8. What are the different types of placements you experienced?
   - Family foster care
   - Group home care
   - Residential care
   - Kinship care with relatives
   - Emergency care (please only check this if you returned home immediately following the emergency placement)
   - Other________________

9. Approximately how many total months did you spend in care?  
   _________

10. How many different placements did you have in foster care?  
    _________

11. How many months have you been in the transitional living program?  
    _________

12. Why did you decide to join the program?

13. What has been the biggest benefit of the program?

14. What has been difficult about being in the program?

15. In your own words, define “success.”

Thank you for completing this form. Please stop here and wait for everyone to finish.
DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS® ASSESSMENT

INSTRUCTIONS: Read each of the following statements and think about your experiences with foster families. Select the best answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not At All or Rarely</th>
<th>Somewhat or Sometimes</th>
<th>Very or Often</th>
<th>Extremely or Almost Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If you do not want to answer an item, leave it blank. But please try to answer all items as best you can.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Half of the Time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I sought advice from my foster parents.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had foster parents who tried to help me succeed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a foster family that gave me love and support.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had foster parents who were good at talking with me about things.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empowerment</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Half of the Time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt safe and secure in my foster home.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was included in family tasks and decisions in my foster home.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lived in a safe neighborhood with my foster parents.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boundaries and Expectations</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Half of the Time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had a foster family that provided me with clear rules.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster parents urged me to do well in school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My foster family knew where I was and what I was doing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Constructive Use of Time
- My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in a religious group or activity.
- My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in a sport, club, or other group.
- My foster parents encouraged me to become involved in creative things such as music, theater or art.
- I enjoyed spending quality time at home with my foster family.

### Commitment to Learning
- My foster parents encouraged me to do my homework.
- I was actively engaged in learning new things with my foster parents.
- My foster parents encouraged me to try things that might be good for me.
- I was given useful roles and responsibilities in my foster home.

### Positive Values
- My foster parents encouraged me to stand up for what I believe in.
- My foster parents encouraged me to stay away from tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.
- I had to take responsibility for what I did in my foster home.
- My foster parents helped me develop good health habits.
- I served others in my community with my foster parents.
### Social Competencies

- My foster parents wanted me to avoid things that were dangerous or unhealthy.
- My foster parents encouraged me to build friendships with other people.
- I was able to express my feelings in a proper way in my foster home.
- I learned to plan ahead and make good choices in my foster home.
- My foster parents encouraged me to resist bad influences.
- My foster parents encouraged me to resolve conflicts without anyone getting hurt.
- I learned to accept people who are different from me from my foster parents.

### Positive Identity

- My foster parents made me feel in control of my life and future.
- My foster parents made me feel good about myself.
- My foster parents made me feel good about my future.
- I learned to deal with frustration in positive ways from my foster parents.
- I learned to overcome challenges in positive ways from my foster parents.
- My foster parents helped me develop a sense of purpose in my life.

*Thank you for completing this form. Please stop here and wait for everyone to finish.*
APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 15040606
PROJECT TITLE: Defining success: The perspective of emerging adults with foster care experience
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Brianna Anderson
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Child and Family Studies
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 04/08/2015 to 04/07/2016

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board
APPELLIX C

TN DCS APPROVAL LETTER

STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN’S SERVICES
7th Floor, Cordell Hull Building
436 6th Avenue North
Nashville, TN 37243

April 27, 2015

Brianna Anderson
Graduate Student, Department of Child and Family Studies
University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #5035
Hattiesburg, MS 39406

Dear Ms. Anderson,

We are pleased to inform you that your research proposal “Defining success: The Perspective of Emerging Adults with Foster Care Experience” has been approved by the Department of Children’s Services. All previously agreed upon conditions (full disclosure, releases, etc.) and protocols must be strictly adhered to, and the Department must first approve any changes to the research effecting agreed upon terms.

As required by DCS policy and the ACA standards, you are required to submit a copy of your final results or reports prior to their publication or dissemination. This does not mean you need DCS’ permission to publish or disseminate your results, or that we would attempt to censor any findings. The standard only states that the effected administrators have an opportunity to first review and comment on the results.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require additional assistance at (615) 532-7332

Sincerely,

Eric Henderson

Executive Assistant, Department of Children’s Services

cc: Debbie Miller, Assistant Commissioner
APPENDIX D

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REFERENCES


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About Campus, 15(3), 11-16.


