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# From Foster Care to Becoming a Family Member

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From Foster Care

Western Michigan University

Lee Honors College

# From Foster Care to becoming a Family Member

The transition from being in foster care to becoming adopted

Zachary Henderson

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### Acknowledgements

*First and foremost I would like to thank God for giving me strength and perseverance to complete this project. Second I would like to thank my Mother for her willingness to invest everything she has (not only into me but also my four siblings) to raise respectable successful children. My Grandmother is another player on my team who has been pushing me to the finish line since I was a young child.*

*Dr. Angela Moe served as my committee chair. She has truly been great! Anytime I had a question about where to start or what to do, she was there for me & offered some of the most valuable feedback. Thank you for your mentorship. It has been an honor being mentored by such an outstanding advocate for children's protection. Without Dr. Moe's help this project would not have been nearly intriguing.*

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*-Zachary*

### Intro

When a young person experiences abuse, neglect, or the termination of their parental rights, that child may become a ward of the state which may require them to enter a foster home. The objective of a foster care home is to provide a temporary safe haven for the child along with supplementing for the absence of their parents by offering to nurture the minor as the biological parent would that should be of assistance while making the journey through the foster care system. Bethany Christian Services for instance, has made it clear in their program statement that “being a foster parent is not a passive act of opening one’s home and providing food, clothing, and shelter. It is a proactive statement of nurturing, advocacy, and love” (Foster Care Adoption Program Statement, n.d.). Reuniting children with their birth families is the overall focus of the foster care system, but there are instances in which the parents are terminated by the court system. This results in an older child (between the ages of three and eighteen) who is eligible for what is simply known as older child adoption.

Older adoptions are interesting because the adoption candidate must transition from one environment to the next, which can be difficult. A positive aspect of is that the child will finally have a permanent home. Home studies are completed prior to

adoptions. These studies consist of detailed information about the potential home. It is my belief the information obtained should include more cultural aspects about each home. This may possibly make a smoother transition from the foster care system into becoming a family member.

Dave Ziegler offered interesting insight as to how a traumatized child may feel. “For traumatized individuals, emotions have lost their usefulness in providing important information to the reasoning centers of the neocortex, and emotions become a runaway train that catapults the child into the past and face-to-face with previous traumatize experiences. It is not effective to say to a traumatized child, “Calm down, you are overreacting.” You might as well be saying this to the passenger on a plane that is coming in for an emergency landing. Who are you to decide what is overreacting?” (Ziegler, 2002). This excerpt was chosen because it encourages readers to step into the experience of a child who has been separated from their family. Being torn away from a familiar environment can result in trauma. Dr. James Henry states:

[a]Overwhelming event or events that render a child helpless, powerless, creating a threat of harm and/or loss [b] Internalization of the experience that continues to impact perception of self, others, world, and development (personal communication, March 1, 2014).

My question is as follows: What steps are needed for a youth to transition smoothly into a late adoption? I chose to conduct in-depth interviews to create cases (please refer to Appendix III for reflection of the method). The cases examined feature two children who were placed in permanent homes at young ages. I must make clear that Katie and Carmelo are two individuals who experienced quite diverse transition periods (they chose their own nicknames –they are not their real names, however I created pseudonyms for city names for confidentiality). I met Katie on a campus bus

that was making its way to the loading zone. I was talking about the planning of my research, and she almost immediately offered to tell her story. I met Carmelo during a summer program also while in the planning stages of my research and I told him I would definitely be interested in studying his experience.

Katie was unexpectedly forced into the foster care system at the age of seven, and Carmelo had contact with his biological mother until he was three years old. His mother was fifteen years old, and pregnant with no way to protect Carmelo. Katie was adopted by family members at the age of twelve, and Carmelo was adopted by an American family at the age of seven. Carmelo's adoption was sorted out through Bethany Christian Services with the aid an adoption magazine. Katie's adoption was managed through Catholic Social Services.

### Systems Involved

There are multiple systems involved which could positively influence the child's transition. Agencies such as Bethany Christian Services, Catholic Charities, Family and Children Services, Lutheran Social Services and Department of Human Services are key organizations which work with a large proportion of youth in the foster care system. Social workers, lawyers, foster families, teachers along with the prospective adoptive families comprise the many people involved in the adoption process.

Traditional transitions from a foster placement into an adoptive home begin when a prospective family is identified for a possible permanent placement for that youth. Katie and Carmelo were placed into foster care. One may believe that Carmelo experienced a more traditional experience than Katie in some instances. One may note

that Katie encountered more traumatizing events than Carmelo. Allow me to introduce Katie and Carmelo. As Katie explained,

Starting from the beginning I was separated from my brothers...it was really hard being separated...kind of alone in it, by yourself...it was some rough experiences.” Katie didn’t like the “certain times you [had] to spend...in your bedroom all by yourself.” While interviewing Katie I quickly realized how much being separated from siblings can impact the whole experience of foster care itself. Interestingly enough, Katie’s brothers were allowed to stay together. Katie states, “My parents were like ‘they’re (the two brothers) abusing her.’” She pointed out, neither her, or her two brothers were asked about what allegedly occurred. “When I went through I was about 7 or 8...

Carmelo has a much different story. Carmelo began,

I came from Colombia, in South America...I had everything I needed...the necessary things I needed to survive.” Carmelo was placed into foster care at a much earlier age than Katie. When I asked Carmelo how long he had been in foster care he stated, “I was in foster care about one until seven and a half. So about six and a half years.” Intrigued, the next question for Carmelo was “Did your foster parents tell you why you were placed in foster care?”

He quickly said,

Oh yeah! They told me that my biological mom was fifteen...she didn’t have enough money. She couldn’t possibly support two or three people. They told me that they saw this woman carrying something...I remember that they told me she was pregnant and couldn’t take care of me so they stepped in...and took me off her hands so that she could get her life back on track or at least get a job so that she could provide for me, but she never came back to reclaim me. So that’s when they had the choice to take care of me...It’s was kind of like “It’s our little baby...”

Last year there were about 650,000 children that were placed into foster care. . During this year it is estimated that over 170,000 children from ages 6-15 were in the child welfare system. Approximately 15,000 children were removed from foster care system and placed into adoptive homes. Jamie Crandell shared these statistics from a

handout from [www.childrensrights.org](http://www.childrensrights.org). Katie and Carmelo were fortunately to be placed into adoptive homes.

Katie and Carmelo offered suggestions about areas which could improve the adoption transition. Throughout my reporting I will explore the themes which were evident while transcribing their interviews. A few themes which emerged include the importance of acceptance, the impact of separation, the need to feel welcomed along with others. As a final note, cultural humility will be promoted.

### Foster Care Culture

One may conclude that the culture of foster care includes experiences which lead to topics such as instability, education, or even disempowerment. There are many factors which contribute to the culture of foster care. This section will focus on highlights from Katie and Carmelo's cases looking in depth at culture shock, educational factors, and some of the results of emotional instability.

The following comes from the interview with Katie:

(Z)How many foster homes were you in? (K)-Only two and then my grandparents, so I guess 3 altogether. (Z)- Can you describe what those houses were like? (K)-The first one was really clean. Like we cleaned, we had chores, and we did everything. I remember having to set the table. It was really nice because she was strict on you to finishing your homework before you go to bed, but I was still crying myself to sleep. The second home I went to they had like five kids before I even lived there. Then they were fostering other people too. It was messy and ugh (noted visible disgust)! I remember having to babysit their little two year old son; I had to change his diapers...Oh it was soo gross...

Katie continued to tell to describe some of the experiences she had while in her first foster home:

Yeah, it was dirty...there was laundry all around. They didn't really look after their own kids very much. Kind of felt like you were looking after yourself and everybody else... I had to watch the kids so they didn't fall in the pool.

This may stuck out to me as the interviewer because Katie was not used to watching numerous children. She was not exposed to child care prior to being in this house. The culture of placing an adolescent age child in charge may result in culture shock. Katie readily described going in and out of homes "...kind of a rollercoaster...going in and out of homes all the time."

It seemed that Katie's biggest culture shock occurred when she began to live with her grandparents. When asked how to describe the adjustment to her new family, Katie said,

It was kind of hard because they didn't have kids for so long. So throwing two kids into that home is going to be a culture shock...I remember them laying down what was supposed to be expected. They were kind of old school too, that was kind of different too. Normally it would be different if you have parents that were closer to your age, but living with Grandparents...I think they could have used more of a hand in knowing how to go about talking to a kid at that age, and not just going back to old school time. They definitely could have used more parenting skills to fall back on.

Carmelo experienced culture shock later in his journey considering all he was familiar with was his foster home in Colombia. "I didn't know anything about America, or any other countries, all I knew was Colombia." As time went on, Carmelo revealed that the family who had been saying they wanted to adopt him sent videos for the four years they were waiting for the adoption to be finalized. This helped Carmelo at least get a preview of things such as the house, people who will be in his life but didn't really give insight about the people. "Just the things they did."

Carmelo continued,



I can't even tell you how hard it was. So there I was with my parents and my siblings, and they were hugging me but they couldn't speak Spanish... We went back to the hotel. It was the first time I swam. I swam for a bit, floated around which was nice. It was kind of therapeutic.

Swimming was an experience that can be seen as part of a culture shock, even though it was therapeutic for Carmelo. But he also pointed out,

It's not just something you can transition into... It's earth shattering. I was from Colombia like I said and here I am... It's a different culture, a different everything. It's totally different language, food, styles of dressing...It's just crazy, it was just so much –just so much... I have had time to adapt...So yeah that's kind of my experience in general.”

Indeed, much of Carmelo's culture shock occurred when he moved to the United States, he was not equipped with coping skills that might have helped him as he was transitioned into the United States. This makes clear to readers that the culture shock is part of the foster care culture and the child needs time to adapt.

Prior to completing this study, I believed that truancy was a huge factor in most cases. Contrary to this belief, I found that the effects of switching schools are phenomenon that should be looked at more closely. Carmelo began going to a public school in Colombia when he was three, until he moved to the United States and then he was homeschooled at the age of seven. He offered his experience with the education system in Colombia:

I didn't play sports...I didn't participate in anything. When I was in school they would always put me on the sideline and they would play soccer or other games. Nobody did anything to help me feel included.

One may not be able to imagine this happening but Carmelo continued:

Yeah... my experiences were not positive at all. They were pretty horrible. The way the school treated me... They constantly physically and verbally abused us. They were yelling at me. They didn't make me feel welcome, they never encouraged me.

Carmelo explained how the caseworker had no interest in how school was going for him, “but in her defense,” Carmelo stated “She did her job. She was great!” It is my belief that Carmelo being switched to homeschool was an improvement to his situation.

Carmelo and I moved to the part of the interview discussing the benefits of staying at one school, or moving schools only once. Carmelo shared the following perspective:

I guess one benefit would be...there were certain friends that I made at that public school that I really wanted to keep. I think for me friendship is very important. Like I said every day I would have people yell at me and call me names... I was wondering all the time when am I going to keep friends...I think staying at the public school there was one or two good relationships that I kept throughout my whole four years at the public school. Changing location where you lived, I think that would have probably ruined those relationships.

Katie experienced a much different transition. When I asked Katie “Did you have to switch schools and what was it like?” She replied,

Yes I did. It was kind of hard but I mean when you are elementary or middle school age it's easy to make friends because they are all like this is the new girl introduce her. I was a super shy person: I didn't really want to talk to anybody, so it was kind of interesting. Public schools I think were a lot easier to transition into. I went to a private school and that was something else because everybody already knew each other and had deep connections... That was a lot more difficult. The last school I transferred to was the school I graduated from actually. I have a friend who I have known for over twenty years or how ever old I am, so we knew each other. Then she had friends and she introduced me to them...it was a lot easier.

One may be curious as to whether the number of school changes has an impact on the child. Katie did not attend school consistently until she lived with her grandparents. Truancy was not an issue in this case because the reasons were legitimate for her absenteeism. Katie then was asked about the relationships with teachers,

Your teachers get a lot more personal with you; they are on a more personal level. So they are going to help you. Katie made clear that she felt she “was actually

going to be somewhere permanent, so I didn't have to keep on making new friends or wondering if I am going to school because I am switching.

A professional who is working with a child needs to take into account the perspective of the child. When was the last time you felt vulnerable, as if you had no power? It is hard to imagine feeling powerless when are in a position of power.

Margaret McKee wrote an excellent article highlighting the benefits of stepping outside of your frame of mind, in order to gain a new perspective. "The problem is not the diversity of our ways of looking per se, but the difficulty we experience when we try to excavate them" (McKee, 2003). By thinking outside of the box, one is able to brainstorm solutions which can prevent the feeling of being disempowered.

Disempowerment or the feeling of powerlessness can be seen with Katie's case. This will be brief considering disempowerment is normally seen as a systemic issue, but Katie showed how one can feel vulnerable, or even powerless in their home situation. Some individuals may believe that the home environment cannot a player in disempowerment. During our interview Katie told me of some ways that she felt vulnerable or weak when living with her grandparents.

Obviously they are going to remind me of my dad and my mom. Just trying to listen to someone that has been bounced around and then finally you are placed. You are in a set place, now they are trying to tell you what to do.

Katie later revealed that restriction orders had to be put on her own parents "because they kept on coming, and being creepy people as they were." She was able to feel safe eventually, because she was placed "with some people that actually care for you and are actually trying their best."

Turning to the instability which is part of the foster care culture, Katie noted that having to move homes along with schools made it difficult for her to establish a sense of

permanency. When the sense of permanency was established Katie's was moved into yet another home. The instability which Katie experienced is minor compared to cases Ziegler's book (2002). One may agree that the severity of the instability is a factor in the child's ability to cope with the instability. Coping skills would have been helpful if they were introduced much earlier. Katie mentioned a guidance counselor at school but she was not provided a personal counselor. The constant relationship between her and a personal counselor would have improved as time goes on, and Katie would have a stable relationship with a professional that could benefit her greatly.

When a youth is involved with the child welfare system, it has a lasting impact. "It was one of the hardest experiences I've gone through." There are many people who have entered and exited the child's life throughout the journey (Soule, 1999). Carmelo gave great insight to what it felt like for him to part with life as he knew it in the context of family and friends:

Got a little story for you, when I was seven and a half, that was when I was adopted. I had a party, it wasn't my birthday yet so I wasn't sure what this party was about. They didn't tell me all that. All they told me was "all your friends are going to come over and we are going to have a party you know." Obviously for a kid having a party that's great, you don't care what it's about. So we had a party it was great...It was the best thing that happened in a while and I figured out that same night why this party was taking place and I went from being on top of the clouds to being depressed and sad. What ended up happening was it wasn't my birthday party. I was told it was just a party and it didn't mean anything.

Carmelo's demeanor changed noticeably at this point. From the start of the interview up until this point Carmelo's posture was upright implying that he was feeling confident, but when he started talking about his party, his confidence level seemed to dwindle. He began to slouch, and his voice went from being enthusiastic to somewhat

shaky. I wrote a note to myself regarding his behaviors because at this point it was very easy to transcend into his experience simply by listening to him and letting his body language explain what it was like to part with the people he knew as friends and family.

I was told it was my going away party. The next day I woke up and I thought it was going to be like any other day. Had breakfast, was going to go to school then my foster mom was like “you have to call everybody you know”, so I did... When I called I couldn’t speak so it was really hard to say bye to everybody you knew. Like can you imagine that, saying bye to everything you knew, culturally, like everything. That’s what I had to do. I called everybody, I couldn’t tell ‘em. It was such an emotional rollercoaster. It was horrible; I had no idea where I was going.

Before going to the adoption agency he shared another vivid memory about his experience:

I just remember walking up and down my neighborhood saying bye to everybody. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was the hardest experience I could ever go through. I would just break down because I knew I was leaving everybody behind. I loved those people.

Carmelo shed light on a very important issue regarding the transition period from foster care into the permanent home. Carmelo’s foster mother promised to stay in contact with Carmelo’s family via telephone. Carmelo verified that receiving phone calls from foster family inquiring about his well-being was assuring and showed they still cared about him. Carmelo’s going away party could have been improved if his adoptive parents had been made a part of it. Their presence could have been reassuring for Carmelo. Carmelo did not have problems forming attachments when permanently placed. This could be largely due to his adoptive siblings “constantly asking if I wanted to talk, or if I needed anything...they were so helpful when it came to my comfort.” Other studies confirm this claim “...the number of moves in care were not associated with subsequent poor relationships...” (Rushton, p. 393, 2003).

However one may believe the result of having a going away party for the child may be a wall which the child constructs to avoid getting attached to another person who will leave them like the other adults resulting in trust issues. The youth may be able to form attachments, but they may not be secure. Upon arriving in the United States Carmelo quickly began meeting his family members. Carmelo remembers thinking “Oh hey! I have another uncle now.” This shows that Carmelo accepted new family members, but does not verify the attachments were secure. It seems that attachments can be made with a lot of reassurance, support, and a welcoming atmosphere.

Things were done in both cases which created a welcoming atmosphere. This atmosphere was founded on reassurance, support and many hugs. Katie shared the following information from her experience:

I remember I got to paint my room, whatever I wanted. We went and picked out what I wanted to put in my room, on my bed, clothes shopping, just bonding at the same time. They wanted to make me feel comfortable in the home, and not like it's just another home. That was the most fun...and the best...painting...it was awesome.

The bonding time allowed for Katie to receive support from her grandparents:

They see that you have been through so much and they just want to hug you and cuddle you, but you are like I don't want to be touched and hugged all the time. I am glad they were affectionate towards me!

Katie was asked about the finalization of her adoption, the dialogue was as follows:

(K)It happened in August, in downtown Grand Blanc; I don't remember what building it was. It was a very small room; there was a judge, me, my grandparents, my brother, and a few of my external family that was there. Wasn't very big, but I remember it being really sunny that day. It was so nice outside. There was like a celebration type deal. (Z)- Did you all celebrate afterwards? (K)- Yes. We went back to my grandparents and had pizza. I got a Bible from my aunt and uncle and an adoption gift. It had what my favorite verse was, and my favorite food. It was all written in there. Then my brother got the same thing, it was a very religious and exciting moment!

However, events the minor has survived may distort and impair their ability to view reality. The acceptance and the response to these distortions may be the beginning steps of a smoother transition for youth. One particular story stuck out from Carmelo's interview:

We got a dog, oh yeah...for my eighth birthday. We got a German Shepard. We named him Mateo. He was such a good dog. I loved that dog to death, but he had to go to the pound because apparently he escaped...or something... it was a long story. It was really upsetting to me. I think that dog really helped me, he just calmed me down. I did everything with this dog they got me. I think that was one of the things they did to make me feel welcome, they got me a dog...So that first year that's when I got my dog, I don't know what it did, but just took away all my worries.

Carmelo's love for the dog was shown as he told of his furry best friend:

Just briefly, I feel like I should share this story. One of the reasons that dog was so big when I was eight... the biggest thing in the world to me was because in Colombia my uncles owned dogs but they were the meanest dogs ever. I have a funny story about that. The dogs I knew were always grouchy and grumpy dogs. They never licked me or anything. They never wagged their tails...they never licked me so they couldn't have been happy. I felt so sad for them. So I started to wag their tails for them. I have like three scars, they are still here. I have one on my arm (as Carmelo felt the raised scars on his left forearm). So my perception of a dog is something that symbolized for me was hatred. All the dogs that I had were grouchy; they were mean all the time. They hated me...Every dog I ran into in Colombia was horrible. When I was adopted, that's why I wanted a dog because they symbolized hate. But when I got my dog, it was the nicest thing. It was the nicest thing even when I did something dumb to it, it never bit me. It was my perception of my new family...I got this dog and it loved me unconditionally... and I was like wow, they love me!

His parents had a huge role in helping Carmelo feel empowered:

The first thing they did when we got to the new house was they took me on a tour obviously. Not only did they take me on a tour, they let me ask questions, they let me explore by myself what their home was like. They assured me that everything in the house was safe, that I could use anything in the house. Another way was showing me my room and just letting me sit on the couch/chairs, just letting me go off on my own not saying "Carmelo, I don't think you should go there...You are not ready to go here..." They gave me the option of "you can stay here or you can go explore the place by yourself. All of the exploring that I did, gave me the

feeling of independence that I didn't have. I never allowed to just go off and explore. They asked me what I wanted for my birthday, and that was something I had never been asked before. The agency would just get me things they *thought* I would like, or my foster mom. But I never had the luxury of being asked "What do you want? What do you want for your birthday? What do you want for Christmas?" Those are some of the things which my parents did that were part of the process that made me feel empowered.

Katie's shares how she began to feel empowered:

I changed my middle name, because I don't like to be associated with my mom. It was kind of a pride and shame type of deal. I felt like I needed to be someone different than who I was known as. So just changing that made me feel more comfortable with myself. Being given the choice to change my name made me feel like I had strength, like my voice mattered.

This is important for all foster children, not just those who have found a permanent home. Making youth feel empowered should allow for a decrease in the dependence on the child welfare system.

Katie's case included a laying down of a "commandment" like set of rules, however more research could be done to see if the adoptive parent should include the child in the creation or modification of rules, and if so to what extent. Katie stated:

I remember them laying down what was supposed to be expected type deal. They were kind of old school too, that was kind of different too. It was weird having them as parental figures for a little while

Having a set of parental figures that are not so close in age can result in expectations which may be difficult for that child may not be able to meet, due to some of the events they have survived.

Changing unrealistic expectations of the child into reasonable expectations, possibly even allowing the youth to participate in creating or modifying expectations will allow the youth feel more involved (Ward, 1997).

These expectations can be altered based on the child. As mentioned earlier cultural humility is a very important.



## Cultural Humility

In the previous section (trying to decide rules) one may consider asking the child what their foster parents did, instead of just simply reading information from a binder. Cultural humility is a paradigm which encourages asking questions which results in some privilege on behalf of those who are usually oppressed. Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) make clear:

In no way are we discounting the value of knowing...Rather it is imperative that there be a simultaneous process of self-reflection...and commitment to a lifelong learning process (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 119).

During the last year I learned of this new paradigm shift, and it is my belief that cultural humility really encourages the professional to learn more about their client. Working from this perspective a professional should be able to advocate better because they took the time to learn how the person has been affected by their experiences. I really am passionate about cultural humility, please look into the paradigm shift and compare with the current paradigm which is cultural competence.

The privilege of input will be confiscated when the parent simply creates rules based on what is competently placed in a binder. How can rules be made without over-restricting the child while being firm enough for some order? Adoption agencies should educate themselves of the many benefits that come with cultural humility. Working with children that have lived through situations that most adults in their life time won't see, it is nearly impossible to generalize claims. Each case is different. A humble case worker will learn about the individual and the experiences that make up that child's culture in hopes this will help accommodate the child.

Robert Ortega and Kathleen Faller wrote an excellent article titled “Training Child Welfare Workers from an Intersectional Cultural Humility Perspective: A Paradigm Shift.” To be a culturally humble person you must be able to practice using the four components which are openness, intersectionality, transcendence, and epistemic privilege. These four components of cultural humility would help bring out the best qualities in professionals working with youth that must go through the foster care system. If the professionals involved in Katie and Carmelo’s cases knew how positively cultural humility would have impacted their transition, I believe they would have worked through the cases with this paradigm. Ortega and Faller state:

Openness implies an appreciation of the fact that people do not and cannot expect to know all there is to be known especially about the world, including the individuals with whom they interact...Cultural humility in this regard is an acknowledgement that the experiences of others, outside of themselves, require them to be open to their experiences, from their perspective” (Ortega & Faller, 32)

Being open to learn about the world of your client, including their experiences requires the professional to look beyond what the file says. One should realize that openness is focused on learning about the world of their client, instead of just what the file says. Book knowledge is absolutely great, but one book does not encompass the how diversely every case which can be addressed. Working to get to know the client will allow an even more customized plan for success. “An intersectionality perspective asserts that people simultaneously occupy multiple positions” (Ortega & Faller, 31). This can be seen when a professional works with a client to for a success plan. It is clear that the client or the child needs to have input on their future. What this means is that

someone who has influence over the child's near future should include the child in decision making, or at least ask for their ideas on solutions to problems.

Transcendence is realizing that there are transitions in the client's life in which you have only a small part. "People must embrace the reality that the world is far more complex and dynamic than perhaps they can imagine." (Ortega & Faller, 2011). Finally epistemic privilege is sitting back and allowing the client to tell you about themselves. Epistemic privilege is knocking down the "professional barrier" and switching roles with the client. Instead of always having a solution or idea, let the client come up with ideas. It is best to let the client be the expert and offer knowledge to you. These are the four components of cultural humility, it is my belief each agency should require their employees to be informed about cultural humility and insist on practicing. I compared Katie and Carmelo's cases and the agencies could have been culturally humble, and may have helped smoothen out their transitions.

The transition from a foster home into an adoptive home can be a challenge for youth. Let's examine possible factors that could have caused challenges in Katie and then Carmelo's transition into a permanent adopting home. During the interview I asked Katie, "Can you explain to me what your thoughts were about the events surrounding your separation?" "I remember, being taken in a cop car and the social work lady was like... 'Come on we're taking you away from your parents, because we got a phone call from someone anonymous and we have to take you away because it is unfit here.'" It is my belief the relationship between Katie and her caseworker would have had a more solid foundation had the case worker imagined herself as the child being taken away from her family. Being placed in a cop car in order to be transported could

leave an image frightening for any child. This event could possibly raise some ethical concerns. While Katie let her story unfold, it was as if I could feel the weight that she felt when the case worker said that her home environment was unfit.

The period of interest in this project was one year before the placement, when a permanent placement may seem imminent, to the 1-2 years afterwards. This period should consist of finding a home that will best suit the cultural needs of the child, and adequately preparing the child for the placement. The minor is shaped by previous experiences which may have been traumatic, which makes it difficult for social workers to gauge how the child will react to the new family and vice versa. There is a great chance that the trauma will result in a child who is unpredictable. Professionals along with adopting families need to take this into consideration. A social worker evaluates the adoption in different ways. A child making the journey through the child welfare system may experience extreme feelings of being deserted as demonstrated by Katie. Although having stable contacts for support would allow the child to discuss problems which are being experienced. This possibly would prevent problems in the future.

When the home is permanent and stable, it allows the child to develop better relationships with the important people involved in their success. Furthermore having a stable home allows for the adopting parents to serve as psychological parents for the child as they continue to mature. Jamie Crandell believes:

When the child welfare system constantly makes decisions without including the youth, it can produce a sense of uncertainty within that youth and also subliminally promotes reliance on such a system (personal communication, November 3, 2013).

### Families & Fit

Studies show that matching, which “refers to the fitting of parents’ strengths to the needs of children awaiting placement” (Ward, 1997), is risky, but when completed correctly it increases the likelihood of a successful outcome. Both Katie’s and Carmelo’s adoptions were successful. However Carmelo’s adoption was an agency adoption and Katie’s was a relative adoption. Ideally, matching the child’s temperament to the family’s expectations and ability to parent that particular child will allow for a thriving relationship. However, assumptions that the child will be open and ready to form new relationships is a misconception. As shown previously, the events which led up to the placement are huge factors regarding relationship building. “Active rejection appeared to have had repercussions on their ability to form attached relationships with their new parents.” (Rushton, 394, 2003). Aside from this, the child must be capable of forming relationships and is assessed before placement.

Even if the child has difficulties forming relationships, a placement can still be identified, but the parents must be able to work with this idiosyncrasy (Rushton, 2003). There are times when adoption workers fail to record and discuss an attribute about a child which may result in a disrupted adoption. Katie stated, “I don’t think medical records should be included beyond physicals! If the child needed tests done because of reported abuse the poking and prodding reports should not be included, just the necessary information.” Katie made clear some records should not be included but she did not say what *should* be included:

(Z)Is there something you wish they (her grandparents) had not been told? (K) Yeah, some of my doctor’s things I went to. I feel like they should not have known what went on, or what my result were for it. Because then it gets spread through the whole chain of family, then everybody knows then everybody knows about it until they ask you. My grandma doesn’t know how to keep her mouth shut. I think that just should have been left out. (Z) So don’t include medical

records? (K) I don't think they should...more of check-ups...I don't know this is so weird. When you are being poked and prodded I guess. I don't think those... Normal things like your heart, and blood-work...Then everybody is like I want to be there for you, and I'm like I don't even want you to know. I'd be perfectly fine if you didn't know about it.

### Family System

Family systems are usually in place when a child comes from a foster home into the adoptive home, and is illustrated in both the cases of Katie and Carmelo. The adoptive family has already established its norms and the expectations of the members. This set of expectations and rules allows for the family to be cohesive. To successfully add a new member to the system, the new family must be able to adapt, while helping the child adapt (Ward, 1997). Learning the child's past may offer some insight on how to help the child adjust as well. This could be done using components of cultural humility.

A youth that comes from a foster home into an adoptive home is different than a child adopted into a relative's home, not only because blood ties the biological family together, but the new family member must find their place within the family and learn their, and possibly the surrounding, culture. Upon analyzing Carmelo's case, I realized that it would have been interesting to get Carmelo's perspective on what it means to be related to someone, taking into consideration his history. At the time of the interview I did not think to ask this question. Interestingly enough Carmelo's story implied that blood relation was not needed to feel like part of the family. Carmelo's parents did "a wonderful job" engaging in the heritage of Carmelo. What this means is Carmelo's mother learned Spanish to help communicate with Carmelo, she also learned some recipes for dishes.

One may be under the assumption that children who travel through the child welfare system are at a much higher risk of experiencing trauma. I was enrolled in Child Abuse at Western Michigan University. I learned that some of the results of trauma can be defiance, lying, temper tantrums, being withdrawn, or having issues with attachment. This is a very brief mention of the many issues that can be a result of trauma. Many believe these individuals are more prone to having difficulty in school and with the law. Thankfully such symptoms were not seen with Katie or Carmelo.

Possible solutions or corrective actions that can be taken to make a smoother transition include starting counseling or therapy sooner for the child, in an attempt at learning more about the child's background, and maybe the child will be able to offer insight about what would allow them to learn coping skills which will help them with the transition. Being open to the child's suggestion might help allow the youth to feel empowered. The preparations should also be applied to those looking to adopt (Clinical Child Psychology, 396). Practicing from a cultural humility perspective will improve the transition of youth. I anticipate that the impact of more humble actions done will greatly improve the transition from being a foster child to becoming an adopted member of a family. This research will be continued in hopes to gain more specific knowledge about improving the transition.

### Discussion and Conclusion

There are many things which can influence a foster child's ability to transition into an adoptive family. Reviewing the child's past, along with assessing the prospective family's strengths would, accordingly, allow a more accurate placement. Modifying expectations may be crucial in some cases of older adoption. After completing more

research, I would like to use my findings to help improve programs in different agencies, while making suggestions on different policies that could change, and benefit the child. With further research it is my hope that I will be able to pinpoint implications within policies, and take the correct action steps to improve that situation.

While in the beginning stages of this project it was easy for me to think that I would be able to change a policy with this single project, I was wrong. However it is my hope, that with persistence and further research on this topic I will be able to change how some professionals view the transition from foster care to adoption. With this shift in perspective it is also my hope that agencies would look into their policies which could potentially be preventing the child from experiencing the smoothest transition as possible.

Katie and Carmelo made it very clear that cultural humility should be practiced when working with children who pass through the foster care system. There were themes in each case which complimented each other, but there are also themes which were evident with Katie and not Carmelo and vice versa. Some of the themes which complimented each other were the need to feel as if they belong to a family, the importance of consistency and how easy a child can feel vulnerable or powerless during this whole ordeal. Katie and Carmelo, along with other children, have unique experiences which make up their culture. The child's culture needs to be looked at carefully when seeking a new home for this individual. It seems like quite the burden to decide what about a child's most recent experience should and should not follow them. By asking instead of assuming, the caseworker or other professionals involved have a



much higher chance of creating a better success plan for that child. This is a topic which could benefit from future research.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix I – Interview Questions**

#### Questions about Foster Care

- ✓ Tell me about your foster care experience...
- ✓ Can you describe your feelings when you were separated from your original family? Friends?
- ✓ What were your thoughts about what the events surrounding your separation?
- ✓ How long were you in foster care?
- ✓ What was your foster care home like?
- ✓ Can you describe your experience with the child-welfare system overall?
  - What could have been done differently to improve the experience?
- ✓ Could you tell me what it was like to meet the various social workers and other professionals involved in your case?
- ✓ Did you have to switch schools? If so, what was this like?
  - How many schools did you attend?
  - What was the shortest and longest period of attendance at any one school?
  - How did changing schools affect how you felt about moving from foster care to adoption?
  - If you stayed at the same school, or only moved once, can you tell me some benefits of staying at the same school (or at least not having to change schools a lot) during this period?
- ✓ How much, and by whom, were you told about your case?
  - What specifically were you told about your placement into foster care?
  - When you had an appointment with social workers, or others involved in your case, were you told any details about your ongoing case (e.g., your original parents' involvement, the search for a new permanent home, etc.)?

#### Questions about Adoption Process

- ✓ Tell me about your adoption experience...
- ✓ When did you first hear of the adopting family?

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- At what point were you given information that adoption was being considered?
- Who provided this information and what all was provided?
- What input were you allowed to give?
- Was information provided to your adoptive parents and by whom (e.g., biological family history, medical information, educational information, likes, dislikes, etc.)?
  - Do you know if any information was left out that should have been included?
  - Do you feel this information was helpful in the transition?
- What information about yourself would you have offered to your adoptive parents to help produce a better transition? Is there something you wish they had not been told?
  - Do you think the sharing of this type of information would have made your adoption experience better?
  - Do you think it would make others' adoption experiences better?
- ✓ When did you meet your adoptive family?
  - What was this experience like?
  - How you felt about it?
- ✓ Was there a transition period when you and your new family were given a chance to “get to know each other” (e.g., planned activities, short visits, overnights, etc.)?
- ✓ How long after meeting your new family did you move in to their home?
- ✓ What support did your foster family give you during the transition?

## Questions about Adjustment to Adoptive Family

- ✓ How would you describe the adjustment to your new family?
  - What could have been done differently to enhance the transition?
- ✓ What did your adoptive parent(s) do to help you feel welcome into their home?
  - How was the extended family?
- ✓ Could you tell me what your first day/week/month was like?
- ✓ Can you describe your feelings once the adoption was finalized?
  - How, when and where did this finalization occur?
- ✓ Do you think that your adoptive parents immediately accepted you as their child or was there a process that they went through to reach that point?
- ✓ When did you feel like you were a member of the family?
  - Was it a process or a significant event?
  - Can you describe the process or tell me about the event?
- ✓ Given so much change during this period of your life, did you feel any pressure to maintain to change your identity (however defined)?
  - Did you try to hold on to some aspects of your old identity?
    - Do you think kids in similar experiences should try to retain some sense of their former identity?
    - Should memorabilia from one's biological home be kept for a child even if he/she experienced trauma there?
  - Did you feel like your identity changed within the foster home?

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- Did you feel like your identity changed after adoption?
- ✓ Do you have any other thoughts or suggestions on what could make the transition from foster care to adoptive better?

## **Appendix II - Mental Health Services in Kalamazoo**

### Community Healing Center

2615 Stadium Dr.  
(269) 343-1651

### Desert Streams Christian Counseling

2019 Rambling Rd.  
(269) 345-0909

### Kalamazoo Psychology

122 W. South St.  
(269) 349-4219

### Kalamazoo Community Mental

3299 Gull Rd.  
(269) 553-8000

### Family & Children Services

1608 Lake St.  
(269) 553-8000

### Corner Stone Christian Counseling

1090 N. 10<sup>th</sup> St. Suite 110  
(269) 375-4363

## **Appendix III**

### Methodology

For the focus of this research, I utilized a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach allowed an in-depth examination of the phenomenon. I chose this approach because I was able to have an “exchange of ideas” (Kvale, 124, 1996), and discover different aspects of the transitions which Katie and Carmelo experienced. I collected data through in-depth interviews which seemed to be comfortable for Katie along with Carmelo. By asking open ended questions an atmosphere was created which promoted conversations to develop, I also took a few notes on behavior or jotted down topics that needed method to

be revisited. Although conversation developed, the dialogue did not focus on my experience, but instead the experiences of the Katie and Carmelo.

Instead of viewing the general adopted population, I chose to focus on those moving from foster care to adoption, considering this is the population I plan to serve. It is my belief that qualitatively researching this subject resulted in a different perspective on the transition while offering insight on a smoother transition. Although I had access to files of children who visited the Children's Trauma and Assessment Center, I did not use this to my advantage.

### Interviews

I became acquainted with Katie on a bus ride back to campus. I was talking about my research as it was in the planning stages and to my surprise she quickly volunteered her experience with foster care and adoption. I met Carmelo during a summer program and I learned he was adopted and he told me bits and pieces of his story and I told him I would definitely be interested in studying his experience. As the interview schedule along with other formalities was developed, I was able to offer more information regarding the study to these two individuals. The interviews which were conducted were in-depth interviews.

Before I conducted the interviews I created a consent form per HSIRB which I reviewed with Katie and Carmelo before the interview. The consent form clarified what the purpose of the study was, and what they would be asked to do; this allowed Katie along with Carmelo to weigh the benefits or possible costs related to participation. While reviewing the consent forms with Katie and Carmelo I was sure to let them know they were not mandated to answer any questions, and could withdraw from the interview without any penalties. I also reassured them choosing not to answer was an option throughout the interview if it seemed as if they were hesitant to answer.

Before interviewing, I imagined the interviews lasting up to an hour and a half after reviewing the consent form. However this was not the case for Carmelo as his interview continued for about two hours. Katie was much closer to this estimated time. Before conducting the interviews I thought I would need to extensively debrief, but that was not necessary.

First I introduced myself, and then told Katie and Carmelo I was genuinely interested in learning from their experience. If more time were allotted for research, additional text from the transcripts would have been used. The more I dug into the cases, I realized this experience is the foundation for my research in the future. While introducing myself and going through the formal motions, I asked if there were any questions, neither had questions at this time. Even though asking open ended questions related to the theme

of my research allowed me to ask brief and simple questions which focused on important issues, I quickly realized that these conversations would lead to new topics, which should have been discussed during the interview even though not directly focusing on social work. Overall the atmosphere was quite comfortable. To get a better idea of the structure of the interview please refer to Appendix I.

There were a number of unexpected answers. Thankfully I chose a semi-structured interview allowing me to probe with follow-up questions or get a better understanding with clarifying questions. Asking questions like “how did that make you feel” or, “would you be willing to tell me more about that?” seemed to be very generic probes which were used very minimally to avoid Katie and Carmelo feeling as if they are part of an experiment. The questions I asked were similar but had a more personable feel.

Before completing the interviews I felt that Katie or Carmelo might be hesitant to answer some questions and in the event this occurred I was prepared “not to follow up and ...[attempt at making]a consoling remark” (Kvale,1996, 128). Finally I got to ask Katie, and Carmelo if they had any suggestions for professionals in the adoption system or if in the position to help young people what they would do to help? They both offered suggestions. Interestingly enough the suggestions offered could be a research topic of their own. Like what other information could be gathered about the home environment which could help the child in their next placement?

When debriefing I went over some main points that were covered during the interview and highlighted some of what I learned. The last question which was asked was “Do you have anything more you want to bring up, or ask about, before we finish the interview?” (Kvale,1996, 128). After each interview, I should have taken the time to take notes on each interview about things which stuck out to me. This may have given better insight while coding the transcripts.

After conducting the interviews, it is still my belief that interaction was very important. I used a digital-audio recorder to record the data, instead of constantly taking notes. Future interviews will be recorded using a cassette recorder for easier transcribing. This is because while transcribing having to use a touch screen to mark where I would like to play on such a large file was difficult. I did not have the software to look at the audio file more closely, and be able to rewind and fast forward precisely. A cassette would have offered that luxury. Not being able to pause and play where I needed exactly made the transcription process a much more tedious process. Recording instead of concentrating on what I am writing showed Katie and Carmelo that I was interested in their experience rather than just collecting data. I was able to pay attention to body language during the interview since I was not constantly taking notes. Although I jotted a word or statement down while Katie and Carmelo let their story unwind this served as a reminder to revisit a

specific topic for clarity or understanding. Making sure I understood the subject or answer given was crucial if I wanted to conduct a successful interview. Repeating statements in my own words showed that I have an accurate understanding of information presented. The topic of my research may be emotional for some, which is understandable. A list of resources was provided (see Appendix II).

After Katie and Carmelo agreed to take part in this research, I presented them with different options to meet. Katie chose a library, and Carmelo chose a coffee shop. Katie's choice of meeting in a library resulted in a crystal clear recording with very few distractions. Carmelo's choice of a coffee shop was a good idea, until I tried to transcribe. Every so often Carmelo's voice had to compete with a blender mixing a frozen coffee beverage, along with customers talking, and the "welcome bell" of the establishment. Although it did not seem very busy while the interview was happening, it sounded like a very eventful day in the coffee shop. It will be in my best interest to never record an interview that needs to be transcribed in a coffee shop again. A much quieter place would have allotted me the ability to record a much clearer and which would have made transcribing much less of a hassle.

Transcribing the interviews myself was hell. "To transcribe means to transform, to change from one form to another" (Kvale, 1996, 176). While listening to the recordings I often had to "re-listen" to words which not only caught my attention, but also I had to pause the recording many times in order to type what was said, and then rewind it to make sure what I had was accurate. One issue I did not plan on encountering with the digital recording device used was rewinding. This was an issue because unless I knew exactly where to rewind to it would start the whole recording over. This was very frustrating after about 3 hours of transcribing –hence the cassette.

Active listening during my interview will allowed me to clarify things which in-turn decreased my chance of error during transcription. Kvale gives different examples of transcription styles and shows the format influences how the data is relayed. This author uniquely explains how interview questions soon become data. I anticipated transcribing each one hour interview will take about four to five hours. This estimate is very close to hours spent transcribing Katie's interview, Carmel's interview took much longer, closer to about nine or ten hours.

The information which I gathered enabled me to locate common themes from the interviews. After I analyzed the data, I first offered my analysis to my committee chair and she suggested changes. Next the data went to my committee members for reassurance that I teased out the correct themes, which I did. It is my hope that my results have been delivered with a thorough narrative report. Utilizing some quotes from those whom I interview gives readers a more personal feel instead of the feeling of sterile research.

From Foster Care

*\*This research will serve as the foundation for my Master's work. Thank you Mom for all you do for me! I love you!*