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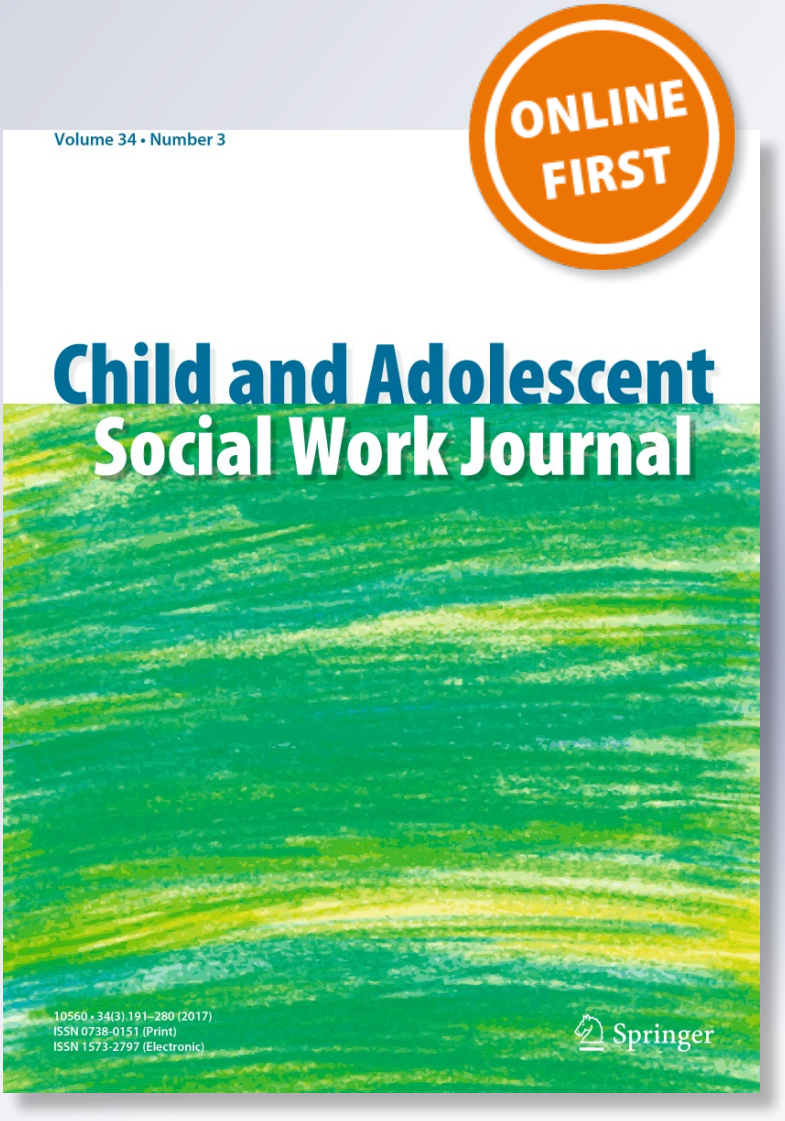

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"No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt": Non-death Loss, Grief, and Trauma in Foster Care

Monique B. Mitchell[1]

Abstract How do youth in foster care experience non-death loss? Drawing upon the theories of ambiguous loss, symbolic loss, and disenfranchised grief, this applied theoretical article integrates research findings to address how youth experience loss, grief, and trauma in foster care. Youth's reports illustrate experiences of non-death loss, the impact of non-death loss on psychological and emotional well-being, and how non-death losses are disenfranchised and enfranchised within the foster care system. Recommendations are made that child welfare agencies consider how their practices and policies can be enhanced to meet the needs of grieving youth in foster care.

Keywords Ambiguous loss · Children and youth · Disenfranchised grief · Foster care · Non-death loss · Symbolic loss

Introduction

Every year, more than 250,000 children enter the foster care system nationwide (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The majority of these children are removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016) and are placed into foster care with little to no advance notice (Horner & Gale, 2010; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). Although the transition into foster care is a significant life transition that is accompanied by trauma, loss, and grief (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010), relatively little has been written on children's experiences of non-death loss in foster care. In addition to experiencing trauma from abuse and/or neglect, children may experience additional trauma when they are separated from parents, siblings, and friends (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Mitchell, 2016a). This article contributes to the existing literature by addressing the lived experience of children and youth from a loss and grief framework. Drawing upon the findings from a longitudinal research study involving more than 200 youth transitioning out of foster care (Mitchell, Jones, & Renema, 2015; Mitchell & Vann, 2016), this applied theoretical article provides practical applications of grief and loss theories within a foster care context. Specifically, youth's experiences of non-death loss and disenfranchised grief within the foster care system will be explored through the theoretical frameworks of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), symbolic loss (Rando, 1984) and disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989).

Study Background

A longitudinal research study examining the outcomes and experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care was conducted between 2010 and 2015. Data was collected from more than 200 participants during three waves of data collection; at the ages of 17 (n = 294), 19 (n = 223), and 21 (n = 212). This article applies the findings from one section in the third, and final, wave of data collection, which asked youth to reflect upon experiences of loss and transitions while entering and during foster care. The primary questions posed to youth in this section of the study were: Were you separated from any people who were important to when you entered or while you were in foster care? and Could you tell me about the first time someone acknowledged a loss you experienced after you entered foster care?

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All of the quotes provided in this article are responses provided by participants to either of these questions. Because this article is based on youth's reports and youth were not asked to discuss their experiences of loss prior to entering foster care, non-death losses which occurred prior to a youth's placement into care will not be addressed in this article.

The majority of the interviews were completed over the telephone (>90%) by research staff who had received intensive training on conducting interviews with youth. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy and analysis. All 212 interviews were coded using MAXQDA, a qualitative software, and were analyzed using initial codes based on youth's reports and constructs that emerged from the data. Upon further analysis, similar codes were grouped together to identify emerging themes that were elicited from participants' reports. Particular attention was paid to the people, things, events, emotions, and experiences reported by participants when discussing self-identified losses. These findings provide greater insight into how youth in foster care experience non-death loss. The research study was granted ethical approval by a university institutional review board in the Southeastern United States. For a more detailed description of the study methodology, please see Mitchell and Vann (2016).

Theoretical Insights and Practical Applications

Minimal research exists on youth's experiences of non-death loss in foster care. Many of the youth's reports in this study deeply reflected experiences of non-death loss (i.e., ambiguous loss and symbolic loss) which were often unacknowledged or unattended by the people in their lives (i.e., disenfranchised grief). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the gap in existing child welfare literature by integrating youth-centered research findings with grief and loss theories (i.e., ambiguous loss, Boss, 1999; disenfranchised grief; Doka, 1989) to illustrate how youth experience and discuss an under-researched phenomenon; non-death loss in foster care. The names of all of the youth have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

Non-death Loss

Unlike bereaved children who grieve the death of their parents, children in foster care grieve non-death losses of parents, siblings, and other loved ones. Specifically, as a result of their "temporary" placement in foster care, children experience multiple non-death losses: ambiguous loss of family and friends (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Mitchell, 2016a), the loss of community (Kools, 1997), the loss of identity (Kools, 1997; Mitchell, 2016a, b), and the loss of normalcy (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). As Bobby explains, non-death loss can be equated to death loss by youth in foster care. He states:

> I've had plenty of emotional deaths and you know the funerals aren't planned. Even though luckily for me I can say that I haven't had too many people that died or having grieved over like who have passed and moved on but I had a lot of emotional burials, so in that way it's hard. (Bobby, male participant)

Bobby uses language that is typically associated with death-losses (e.g. death, funeral, and burial) to describe his experience of non-death loss. He discusses how his being in foster care has resulted in "emotional deaths" and that there was no preparation to memorialize or grieve his non-death losses. Therefore, it is important to consider how youth in foster care are impacted when they are separated from their living loved ones and how youth's psychological and emotional well-being are impacted when youth's losses are not recognized or acknowledged. To address these considerations, I will first explore the theories of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) and symbolic loss (Rando, 1984) and then will apply the theory of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) to provide greater insight into youth's lived experience of loss, grief, and trauma in foster care.

Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss, introduced by Pauline Boss in the late 1970s, refers to conditions in which a family member [or loved one] is psychologically present and physically absent (e.g. losses due to divorce or foster care), or psychologically absent and physically present (e.g. losses due to dementia or mental illness; Boss, 1999). Research suggests that ambiguous loss is a common experience for young children, ages 8–15, in foster care (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Mitchell, 2016a). Youth in foster care can experience the ambiguous loss of parents, siblings, grandparents, and friends. Of all the losses, the ambiguous loss of siblings was identified and discussed most frequently by youth participants. This finding supports previous research which identifies the sibling relationship as one of the most significant relationships in the lives of youth in foster care (Herrick & Piccus 2005; Mitchell et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2016b). Similarly, practice reports indicate that children who are grieving the loss of their parents often perceive being separated from their siblings as a negative experience (Schuurman, 2003). The following statements by youth participants provide further insight into how youth in foster care are impacted when they are separated from their siblings in foster care. For example, Ebony discusses how being separated from her siblings left

her heartbroken and consumed with feelings of fear, isolation, and a lack of companionship. She states:

> At the beginning of going into the system, it was hard. I was like eight years old and heartbroken…You miss fussing with your [siblings] and when thunderstorms come you go run, you get in their bed cause you're scared and it's just like, it's not a good feeling at all. It tore me down and I end up getting shipped off by myself and I just started to have to learn life by myself at eight. And so it was just kinda, it was, it was heartbreaking. (Ebony, female participant)

Beverly also addresses how she was impacted when she and her sister were separated. Beverly reports:

> My sister was taken away…she was at a friend's house and all of a sudden she was picked up by a social worker and has no idea of what was going on. When we finally were able to talk on the phone with each other, separated hundreds of miles away, you know I felt her strength not in just her tone of voice and everything; I felt her strength, I felt her love everything. And even though that was wonderful to feel it, it also was like a reminder that she wasn't there. (Beverly, female participant)

Beverly's report demonstrates the importance of sibling relationships and, despite being physically absent, her sister was very much psychologically present. For Beverly, even though she could still feel her sister's strength from "hundreds of miles away", it was a constant reminder that her sister "wasn't there." While many participants discussed how they experienced ambiguous loss of parents, siblings, or other loved ones upon entry into foster care, other youth, such as Larson, revealed how they were impacted by ambiguous loss due to the separation from siblings and loved ones while in foster care. Larson explains:

> It was traumatic. I mean not really having them by my side because my whole life I was used to having my parents mostly and then I was used to having [my sibling] by my side 24/7 through every experience. We were together for the first couple of years while we were in [the Department of Social Services] together but then eventually we were separated….I kinda felt like I had lost the other half of my life because me and my whole family, we were so close…and when we got separated it almost felt like having a leg broken off and pretty much walking on crutches. (Larson, male participant)

Ambiguous loss is identified as one of the most traumatic types of losses but is often overlooked as a source of trauma (Boss, 2006). Expressions such as "heartbroken", "traumatic", and "felt like having my leg broken off" suggest that the ambiguous loss is an emotionally painful experience for some youth in foster care. As illustrated by Bobby, a non-death loss can evoke emotional deaths that lead to grief and mourning. These non-death losses can evoke turmoil, trauma, and confusion for youth in foster care and, if left unattended, can result in loneliness, hopelessness, depression, and despair (Mitchell, 2016a, b).

Symbolic Loss

Symbolic loss, also a non-death loss, refers to an individual's psycho-social losses (Rando, 1984). For example, the loss of a "future" and the loss of "stability" are types of losses that an individual can experience in tandem with physical losses (e.g. the loss of a home, the loss of a person, etc.). The theory of symbolic loss provides another important lens through which to explore the grief and loss that youth in foster care may experience. Youth who enter foster care can experience various types of symbolic and intangible losses: for example, a loss of parental fidelity (Leathers, 2003), a loss of identity (Kools, 1997; Mitchell, 2016a), a loss of normalcy (Unrau et al., 2008), and a loss of beliefs (Mitchell, 2016b). Youth discuss the implications of experiencing symbolic loss in foster care. Jasper discusses the loss of independence and self. He states:

> I had so many losses, man. I felt like my life was tooken away, I felt like I didn't have no freedom, no independence, it was, to be completely honest with you really, it was one of the worst experiences in my life, going on 21 years that I've been on this Earth that was definitely one of the worst experience in my life, right there…. You know, it was terrible. You know, I, I lost my strength, I lost my life, I lost myself. It was, it was, it was hell man. (Jasper, male participant)

Similarly, Carly also discusses the loss of self as a result of entering foster care. She reports:

> I felt like I lost myself when I went into care. If you really wanna know the truth, I think I felt like I had lost myself. Like I felt like I had just lost this me as a person because my family is just like we can't deal with you anymore and they just gave me up. And like a big part of me it…it wants my family. Like I love my family. We don't talk to the same or have a relationship. We don't get along. It's never gonna work but like when I went into care I really felt like I had lost myself because like I kinda at that time defined myself by my family if that makes any sense. (Carly, female participant)

Wendy identifies how being a youth in foster care can result in a loss of community. She explains:

> I guess [I lost] like the community in general and just like having to bounce from like one school to another you do lose like a lot of friends and it's hard to like find new people that you can hanging around 'cause you're…like you're always moving like I've been to like five different high schools. (Wendy, female participant)

As illustrated by these reports, being in foster care can challenge a youth's sense of self, strength, belonging, and self-worth. As Kanisha states, "My loss was more lack of self-preservation and self-worth. I feel as if this could only happen to someone no one cares about." When considering the psychological and emotional well-being of youth in foster care, it is critical that their experiences of relationship loss *as well* as symbolic loss are identified and cared for. Youth who experience symbolic losses (e.g. loss of perceived worth, loss of perceived strength, loss of perceived identity, loss of purpose, and loss of belonging) deserve to be reassured that they are worthy, have personal agency, have purpose, and belong. Without this acknowledgment, confirmation, and assurance, youth may spiral into a world of despair that fails to address their grieving needs which can, ultimately, catalyze negative outcomes.

Disenfranchised Grief

Grief, a natural response to loss, is considered disenfranchised when it is not acknowledged or attended to by society (Doka, 1989, 2002). Disenfranchised grief can occur when (i) the loss is not acknowledged as significant (e.g. the loss of an animal/pet), (ii) the relationship is not recognized (e.g. the loss of a mistress), (iii) the griever is excluded (e.g. a child's "inability" to grieve), (iv) the loss is disenfranchised (e.g. suicide), and (v) the grieving style is considered socially unacceptable (e.g. a female who is an instrumental griever). This theory sheds light on previous research which suggests that children's experiences of ambiguous loss in foster care are not adequately acknowledged or attended to by the child welfare system or society (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Mitchell, 2016a, b). In this section, the theory of disenfranchised grief will be used to illustrate the various ways that youth's losses may be disenfranchised by the foster care system.

The Loss Is Not Acknowledged

One occurrence of disenfranchised grief, when a loss is not acknowledged as significant, is characterized by society's disenfranchisement of non-death losses. That is, losses that are death-losses receive far more attention and enfranchisement by society than do non-death losses. With death-losses, children may have the opportunity to attend a memorial service, speak with a therapist, or participate in grief groups. Some scholars suggest that we live in a death-denying society (Johnson, 2004; Walsh, 2012); similarly, I argue that we live in a grief-denying society. That is, the "hierarchy of loss" in corporations (Reynolds, 2002) and the hegemony of death-loss in society dictate that non-death loss is not as valued or deemed as significant by society. For example, organizational policies across the country provide paid leave to employees for bereavement (death-loss) but not divorce or separation (non-death loss), although both events are considered significant life transitions that can result in grief, depression, isolation, and trauma (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Furthermore, national research grants focused on grief (which can result from death and non-death loss) clearly stipulate that death-loss is a required criterion for funding consideration (e.g., Granting, 2016; Grief Reach Grant Opportunities, 2016). Ultimately, society's position on non-death loss at the macro level influences how grieving children in foster care are impacted at the micro level. That is, if society minimizes non-death loss then the losses experienced by children in foster care, which are mostly non-death losses, are also minimized. When one youth participant was asked how he felt when no one acknowledged the non-death losses he experienced in foster care, Lionel replied, "[I felt] basically the world was colder than it really is. I pretty much lost faith in humanity really; not people-wise, but humanity itself."

The Relationship is not Acknowledged

Disenfranchised grief can also occur when a relationship is not acknowledged (Doka, 1989). When placed into foster care, youth in foster care form new relationships with multiple caregivers (e.g. case managers, foster parents, court-appointed advocates; Mitchell, 2016b). These relationships can become meaningful in youth's lives and can become distressful if the relationship dissolves. For example, one youth reports:

> It really didn't matter whether I was separated from [my family] but when I was in foster care, some of my foster parents like I been separated from because of my behavior …I wish I was smart enough to know that some of my foster parents was just somebody to try to help…. It was kind of rough because the other foster parent I went to wasn't as good as it was with her because she helped me with a lot…. She treated me like I was her real child. (Penny, female participant)

Penny expressed that it was the separation from one of her foster parents, and not her original family, that caused her to grieve. The non-death loss of her foster parent, due to

her placement in a new home, made Penny "feel bad cause I wish I woulda stayed with her." When asked whether anyone was there for her during this loss, Penny replied, "No, not really." Following this, Penny was asked if it would have been helpful to her if she would have had somebody there for during this time. She replied, "Yes, just to have them cause they could've encouraged me, 'Everybody makes mistakes but just move on with your past.'" As Penny illustrates, separation from care providers while in foster care can be emotionally painful for youth.

The experience of placement instability is not an uncommon experience for youth in foster care (Blakey et al., 2012; Leathers, 2006; Unrau et al., 2008). Other youth in this study also reported experiencing placement instability while in foster care. Alejandra states, "Being that I was in foster care like the majority of my life, I've been moved from place to place." Sadly, when youth experience placement instability they often also experience multiple non-death losses (e.g. the loss of siblings, foster parents, foster siblings, and congregate care staff). It is important to consider how these transitions can provoke additional losses, grief, and trauma. For example, Justin and Debra report:

> We'd go through families like it was nothing….it drove me to hate change more and more because I would have to start all over and get used to another set of house parents in the house. It was constant anger and restarting over because it was constantly new faces in the house. (Justin, male participant)

> I was in so many different group homes and foster homes. I got separated from a lot of people. In foster care you get close to people and then you randomly get separated like at random times…. In foster care, you don't keep friends, like you go from school to school, you go from house to house. You don't keep nobody. Which is why when you get out of foster care, you know, you don't have anybody. (Debra, female participant)

Justin and Debra discuss how transiency in foster care can create emotional turmoil, and how establishing a bond with someone only to see it disintegrate can intensify grief and trauma. According to youth's reports, the non-death losses of significant relationships often are disenfranchised by the people in their lives. When disenfranchisement occurs, youth are not only confronted with a loss, they are also challenged with how to cope alone.

The Griever is Excluded

Disenfranchised grief can occur when the grieving capacity of certain individuals, such as children or people with cognitive disabilities, are overlooked (Doka, 1989). Some adults believe that children are unable to comprehend or understand loss. This misconception is problematic because it fails to recognize how children are affected when their grief is left unacknowledged. The implications of not recognizing a child's loss is further illustrated by the following report:

> I felt like nobody acknowledged you know, that, that loss that I had. They didn't care. Everybody's getting money to foster, you know; hell, the foster people, they're getting money to keep us, you know. DSS workers, they're getting paid, they don't give a freak man, they go home, they eat a hot meal, you know relaxing. And, I'm chilling in foster care, away from my family, so nobody to me. I felt like no one acknowledged my loss and hurt during that time period. It made me felt terrible because I felt like I had no stand, no take. Um, it, it was just awful like, I felt like nobody wanted to hear you know, about you know, you're too young, and, and nobody took great concern to understand what I was going through, or honestly what any kid in foster care was going through to be honest with you, so yeah. (Jasper, male participant)

Jasper discusses his experience of disenfranchised grief in foster care and identifies his being "too young" as a factor for this disenfranchisement. As wisely noted, "If a child is old enough to love, he or she is old enough to grieve." (Wolfelt, 1983, p. 49). This guidance is particularly useful to reflect upon when considering how to assist children grieving the non-death loss of loved ones. It is in the best interests of the child to attend to and address their fears, concerns, anxieties, and losses (Mitchell, 2016a). The capacity of children and youth to grieve and love should never be underestimated.

The Loss is Disenfranchised

Another way that individuals can experience disenfranchised grief is when the loss they experience is disenfranchised by society (Doka, 1989). For example, a child who loses her mother because her parent was abusive may be at risk for disenfranchised grief. Youth in foster care may hear comments such as, "You're better off" or "You should be grateful that you are in foster care"; all statements that are disenfranchising. These comments suggest that the loss experienced does not justify a grief response. This is problematic because youth deserve the right to grieve the losses of those whom they love, regardless of the reason for the loss. Ebony discusses the first loss she experienced in foster care and how it was disenfranchised by her care providers:

> The first loss [I experienced] would have been when my mom killed herself….I felt very hurt and alone and the people who did acknowledge it, they said that she went to hell because she killed herself and cause she wasn't Christian, so I guess that made me even more upset. (Ebony, female participant)

The loss of a parent can be devastating for a child, regardless of whether it is a death or non-death loss. As Ebony attests, not having a supportive network during this time can be confusing and upsetting. Although Ebony's report is of a death-loss, it provides a good example of how certain losses can be disenfranchised because of stigma. Suicide is often stigmatized by society and individuals who have lost a loved one due to suicide may fear judgment by others (Doka, 2002). It is critical that children know that their losses, despite the circumstances that cause the loss (e.g. loss due to abuse, neglect, or substance use) are valid, acknowledged, and worthy of grieving. Children deserve to be surrounded by caregivers who will create a safe and nonjudgmental space where their losses will be acknowledged, respected, and enfranchised.

The Grieving Style is Considered Socially Unacceptable

A final consideration for disenfranchised grief occurs when an individual's grieving style is regarded as unacceptable by society. For example, females who never shed a tear after the loss of a loved one are often disenfranchised by society. Comments such as, "She never cried after her mother died. There must be something wrong with her" characterize how an individual's grieving style can be disenfranchised by others. As illustrated by youth's reports in this study, engaging in "problem" behaviors is how some youth in foster care cope with experiences of non-death loss and disenfranchised grief. For example, when discussing her separation from her siblings, Riley shares, "It was hard not having at least one of my siblings with me. Because they're the only family that I have…I was angry and I ran away a lot. It made me mad. I didn't understand why. I was sad. I was upset." Riley also reported that nobody was emotionally there for her during this time. Carly and Stacie respond similarly:

> Most people would say it made them sad. It actually didn't make me sad. It made me angry that I couldn't see them….I acted out. I got in a lot of fights. I ended up in a treatment facility. I acted out um in a verbal and physical way….[I felt] lonely. (Carly, female participant)

> I missed [my siblings]….I was pissed off about it. I was pissed off and I hated the system. I was mad as it could possibly get me. They tore my family apart. I was always bouncing around from house to house….After that I kinda went loose. I quit school. Didn't do really a whole lot for a long time and then I got myself together after I turned eighteen. (Stacie, female participant)

These reports suggest that the youth's "acting out" behaviors were influenced by their experiences of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief. The majority of youth who reported they engaged in these behaviors stated they did not have someone in their lives to speak with about the grief they were experiencing, and having someone with whom they could speak would have been helpful.

Enfranchised Grief

While some youth in the study explicitly stated that their grief was *never* enfranchised while in foster care, not all youth reported that their grief was left unattended. When discussing those incidences of enfranchised grief, youth identified various types of relationships that provided acknowledged and support. For example, Larson identifies a case manager who enfranchised his grief while in foster care:

> My DSS worker was pretty much like a mentor to me throughout the whole process. To this day I can still call her and talk to her about anything. No matter how depressed or sad I was about being taken from custody I knew that I always had a person even before I had met my foster mother….because she already knew the situation of why we had got taken from my parents and everything so she could help me understand everything spiritually a lot more and it helped me understand everything. (Larson, male participant)

Jeff identifies a foster parent who was there for him when he was grieving the loss of his parents:

> [My foster parent] didn't treat me different than her kids and she showed me love just like a mother would and I got real close. And so, that comfort to start to express myself and she helped me with the anger I had and that everything was gonna be ok. She would reassure me that I'll be ok even though I was going through a tough time. (Jeff, male participant)

Adam identifies a fellow youth in foster care who enfranchised Adam's ambiguous loss of his foster parents:

> A buddy of mine in another group home was there for me. He talked to me about how he was separated from his foster family and all that. So we're pretty much going through the same situation and we kinda just got real close and hung out a lot. It helped me see there's another guy my age going

> through the same thing I'm going through and if we go through it together we can get through it. You know we can be strong enough to overcome it. (Adam, male participant)

Fabiola identifies a group home staff who helped her when she was missing her siblings from whom she had been separated:

> [The staff from the children's home] helped me get my feelings out and not to hold them in 'cause the kind of person I am I hold my feelings in and I don't let them out. And talking to someone, especially someone that I trusted, helped to bring it all out… .I trusted them and they were just very encouraging to me and they helped me open up because of the words they said…the encouragement they had told me…I didn't open up to them right away. It was more of it took some time to getting to know them personally to open up. (Fabiola, female participant)

Paul identifies a pastor who he could speak to when he was missing his parent:

> I always asked [the pastor] to pray with me….It helped me learn a lot just about like, life and everything. About needing to really be down and sad and all that. It's going to happen, but I'll always have somebody to talk to. (Paul, male participant)

Darryl identifies a Divine Being/God who was present for him while he grieved the loss of his siblings:

> There's a reason for everything. There's a reason why I was separated from them…Nobody really wasn't there for me. I felt like the only person I need was there for me was God you know that's the how I feel. God and myself…that's the only thing I needed. (Darryl, male participant)

As illustrated by these reports, youth received enfranchisement via various relationships in their lives. This information is meaningful as it demonstrates that there is not one specific person or relationship that can offer support to grieving youth in foster care. When given the opportunity to do so, youth were usually receptive to engaging in a relationship with someone who made an effort to acknowledge their losses and enfranchise their grief. In all of these interactions, the enfranchisers were engaging in elements of C.A.R.E.; that is, communicating, affirming, and recognizing youth's experiences of loss and grief, and ensuring that their emotional needs were being met (Mitchell, 2016a). Furthermore, these findings support the need for youth to have a relational home where they feel safe to expose their vulnerability, feelings, and concerns.

Delayed Enfranchisement

Reports by youth in foster care suggest that some youth experienced disenfranchised grief, others experienced enfranchised grief, and some youth experienced both. That is, while some youth never had their grief acknowledged, others experienced enfranchised grief early in their placement, while others reported that their grief was not acknowledged until a relationship of trust was established with someone in their first or a subsequent placement. In regard to the latter experience, Katrina notes that having her loss acknowledged "did not happen until the very last home that I was in and I still keep in contact with them." Similar to the construct of delayed grief (i.e., when grief responses are postponed until a later time), I suggest that the experience of enfranchised grief may also be delayed. I refer to this latter phenomenon as *delayed enfranchisement;* that is, when an individual's grief is enfranchised after he or she has experienced disenfranchised grief. Katrina's report further illustrates how disenfranchised grief and enfranchised grief, even though delayed, can impact youth in foster care. Katrina explains how she felt when no one acknowledged her loss. She states:

> At first it aggravated me and it upset me. And then after a while being in foster care I got used to it. I just thought it was normal. I didn't know no different because from the age of eight 'til seventeen that's how I lived. Nobody cared about what happened to me or anything like that…. [When my loss was finally acknowledged in my last home] it made me scared because in foster care, foster families don't show you love, they don't show you compassion….and the last home that I was in, they loved me as their own kid. They did any and everything possible for me and it made me very happy and it scared me to death at times. (Katrina, female participant)

Katrina's experience demonstrates how youth may normalize disenfranchised grief within the foster care system when their grief is not acknowledged or attended to when the loss initially occurs. Fortunately, as Katrina later discovered, disenfranchised grief is not the only type of experience and receiving love and acknowledgment from care providers can bring with it new experiences of worthiness and love. However, delayed enfranchisement, as discussed by Katrina, can also be accompanied by fear. Youth who have experienced disenfranchised grief, and have normalized such behavior, may be cautious about the longevity and authenticity of this perceived "non-normative" enfranchising behavior. Without early enfranchisement, children run the risk of becoming more susceptible to hopelessness, intense feelings of anger or guilt, and feelings of disconnection (Doka, 2002).

Implications

The lived experience of youth in foster care substantiates the need for child welfare providers, practitioners, and policy-makers to attend to the impact of non-death losses on children and youth in foster care. Non-death losses such as ambiguous loss and symbolic loss are often traumatic, yet reports by youth in foster care suggest that these types of losses are often disenfranchised by the child welfare system. Furthermore, it is important to consider how the experience of enfranchised grief versus disenfranchised grief can impact youth's psychological and emotional well-being, behaviors, and outcomes. For example, Wendy and Terrance discuss the impact of disenfranchised grief and provide insight into the emotional support they did not receive yet would have welcomed:

> Having somebody to talk to and express how I was feeling; I never really had that….And I feel like that would have made me a better person and that would have actually helped me than like me doing like some drug-, or smoking weed or doing all this stuff that I done to cope with it so I wouldn't know like what else to do 'cause I just didn't have anybody to talk to…. So if I had one person in my life to build like that one like that trusting relationship and I feel like that would have helped me. (Wendy, female participant)

> I didn't have nobody to go to, so that's why I took it the way I took it. I took it the wrong way. If I had somebody there I could vent to or release some frustration or talk to, then I, I wouldn't have been through some of the other things in my life I've been through. (Terrance, male participant)

Other youth, such as Luis and Travis, identified people in their life who acknowledged and attended to their grief and how they were impacted by experiencing enfranchised grief. When asked how it made them feel when someone acknowledged their loss, they replied:

> It made me feel human. She brought me back to life cause the way I would describe my actions and the way I felt, I felt like a zombie, I wasn't really living. I felt like I was living in prison. And I haven't done anything wrong; I got harmed. (Luis, male participant)
>
> It felt pretty good. It really did. Because if I, if I didn't have somebody that I cared for so much or loved so much to be there for me at that time, I don't know where I'd be at right now. (Travis, male participant)

Ultimately, every child deserves to experience the enfranchisement of their grief. It is essential that intentional efforts are made in child welfare policy and practice to normalize enfranchised grief and implement this support earlier rather than later in the grieving process.

Concluding Thoughts

There is an overabundance of research which indicates that youth in foster care experience negative outcomes more often than youth who have not been in the foster care system (Ahrens, Garrison, & Courtney, 2014; Roller White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buher, 2015). It is critical that intentional efforts are made to avert negative outcomes for youth in foster care, which may otherwise be prevented by the provision of appropriate support and services. Youth report that this one factor, the enfranchisement of their grief, could make the difference between positive and negative long-term outcomes. It is important to note that the majority of study participants reported they had at least one adult in their lives to whom they could go for advice or emotional support, however, more than 25% of study participants explicitly stated that their losses and grief were *never* enfranchised while in foster care. That is, an individual's capability to provide emotional support does not necessarily translate into the ability to acknowledge and address grief; many adults are uncertain about how to best communicate with or help children who are grieving (Schuurman, 2003). Therefore, it is recommended that the child welfare field enhance child welfare programs and policies to address children's experiences of non-death loss, and educate child welfare professionals and providers about the traumatic impact of non-death loss and how to support grieving children and youth in their care. Ultimately, no child should grieve alone; all children in foster care deserve to have their non-death losses and grief acknowledged and enfranchised.

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