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The University of San Francisco

Unkept Promises:
A Critical Analysis of Hope Disclosed in Narratives of African American Male Youth Living in Group Homes

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

Department of Leadership Studies

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Shadrach Linscomb

San Francisco, California

May 2009

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

Unkept Promises: A Critical Analysis of Hope Disclosed in Narratives

of African American Male Youth Living in Group Homes

The specific purpose of this inquiry has been to help create social exchanges and better practices when it comes to dealing with African American male youth who have been placed in a group home setting—that is, a small residential facility that is designed to provide care for foster children with mental health or behavioral issues. These homes usually have six or fewer residents and are staffed 24 hours a day by trained caregivers.

Hermeneutic reflection provides the framework (Herda 1999) to better understand everyday social experiences. A critical hermeneutic orientation (Ricoeur 1981, 1992, 1996, 2004; Kearney 2002. 2003) allows for tradition, imagination, and critique to play significant roles in the proposed research and to create possibilities for transformation of self and others. Common themes of misunderstanding, belongingness, and isolation emerged during the research conversations with the African American male youth of this study.

The research participants of this inquiry were 7 African American males between the ages of 18 and 36 who had emancipated from a foster care system somewhere in the San Francisco Bay Area, where they were placed in at least one group home during their duration in foster care.

This research suggests that engaging in meaningful conversations with individuals who are marginalized from mainstream society is a good starting point to open up new worlds of understanding. A key way to sustained meaningful relationships is the comprehension of the self and the other in a cultural context. The final finding reveals that professionals in the field do not have to stay committed to past practices in our interactions with others. With the use our imagination, we can put in place practices of inclusion rather than exclusion.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Shadrach Linscomb	04/08/09
Candidate	Date

Dissertation Committee

Ellen Herda	04/08/09
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CHAPTER ONE:

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

Introduction

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore and analyze the experiences of African American male youths who have lived in one or more group homes—that is, small residential facilities that are designed to provide care for foster children with mental health or behavioral issues. These homes usually have six or fewer residents and are staffed 24 hours a day by trained caregivers. Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies in the United States are designed to protect children from abuse or neglect and to support families in raising their children in safe and nurturing homes. Foster children who fail multiple placements, either with a relative or in a foster home, eventually end up in a group home setting. Many of these children are administered psychotropic medications to deal with their behavioral or mental health issues. A large percentage of African American males are placed in group homes due to multiple failed placements (Marks & Tonso 2006), and many of these youths have social, emotional, and educational needs that are not currently being addressed (Corbin & Pruitt 1999).

In some sense, we can say that these young males are communicating through social text any discourse that can be articulated by writing (Ricoeur 1981). Their failed placements, problems in school, and behavioral issues are the venue of their discourse. It is time to collect data from these young males through conversations and to analyze the data so that we can create a better tomorrow. That tomorrow may arrive through providing both the young males and their service providers a deeper understanding of

what it may take to both imagine and carry out a more appropriate life.

Engaging in meaningful conversations with individuals who are marginalized from mainstream society is a good starting point to open up new worlds. Participating in conversations with others may lead us to better service delivery. Herda (1999: 72) writes:

> It is in conversations with speakers oriented to reaching understanding that the validity claims are raised—that there is the possibility of telling our story of the past and evaluating it. A conversation is an event during which several things may take place: we evaluate ourselves and others, we tell and retell our story, we see the past, and we pose possibilities for the future.

Statement of the Research Topic

The writer's focus is on the interrelationship between the social system and these young men. The research has the potential to increase the understanding of professionals in the child welfare system of the specific needs of this population.

Background of the Research Topic

The concept of the family has always played an important role in the field of social work, since families make significant contributions to the preparation of children for adulthood (Newman, Griffin, O'Connor, & Spas 2007). Unfortunately, due to poverty, racism, substance abuse, lack of appropriate parenting skills, and mental health issues, the adults in some families are unable to provide their younger members the necessary life tools, security, and nurturing. As a society, we have created organizations, programs, and policies to fill the void when families break down. Too often, however, many of these institutions not only do not meet their stated purpose, but they actually make situations

worse for the individuals and communities involved. As Bolman and Deal (2003: 5) note:

> Organizations can frustrate and exploit people. Too often, products are flawed, families are dysfunctional, students fail to learn, patients stay sick, and policies make things worse instead of better.

In the present writer's experience, this unfortunate situation is especially true of what happens to many young African American males in group homes. Once these boys are institutionalized, they lose any sense of family and much of their personal power. Their daily routines are as structured and inflexible as those in any jail. They are awakened at the same time every day, eat meals exactly on schedule, earn points for "good" behavior, and are punished for "bad" behavior. Even with the best of intentions, the staff members who run these institutions are often tied down by rules and regulations beyond their own control. If, for example, a counselor becomes momentarily angry at a boy's misbehavior, the counselor is not allowed to show his or her true feelings, because that would be considered unprofessional. In fact, if the counselor were the boy's parent in a real home, the parent's anger might be instructive to the boy and permanently correct his misbehavior.

Many African American male youths in group homes have problems in school and become involved in the criminal justice system (Mauer 1999). For these reasons alone, one could say that the foster care system has failed these boys.

Significance of the Research

Child welfare is a complex system in which many organizations work together to strengthen families and keep children safe. Figure 1, below, shows the professional

involvement and social structures in the life of a typical African American male living in a group home.

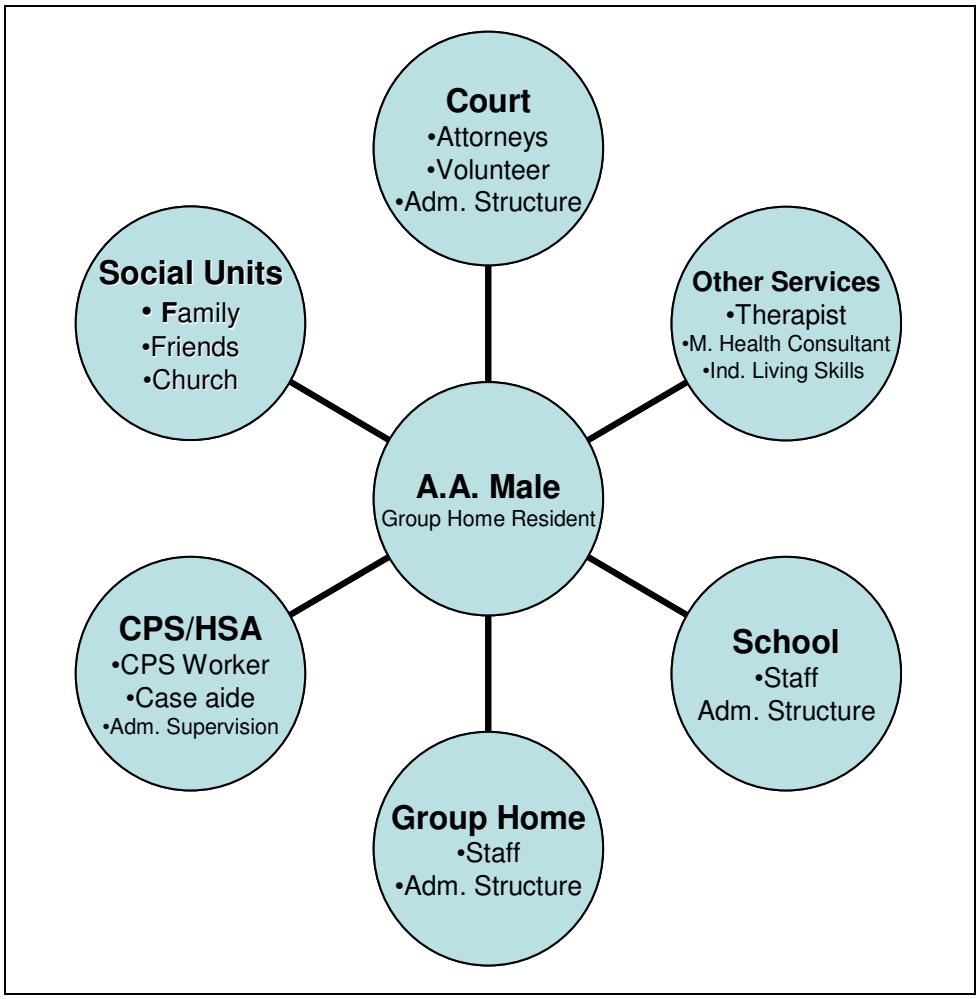


Figure 1: Social Structures of Boys in Group Homes

This research project will help social workers and educators in the child welfare system to create better policies, practices, and social exchanges to meet the needs of young African American males in foster care. While other studies (e.g., Bowie 2003; Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997; Tate 2001) have examined the overrepresentation of African

Americans in the foster care system, they have all tended to focus on the perspective of the social workers rather than that of the youths. I will approach the topic quite differently by conducting a hermeneutic participatory research study via conversations with the youths themselves, who will have the opportunity to present their stories and histories in their own voices. All of the participants in this study will be male because, as Tate (2001) notes, African American males are the most marginalized group in foster care.

Why a hermeneutic approach? In my opinion, this is the most authentic and honest way to gather information about people who have been socially marginalized. As Herda (1999: 89) notes:

> The researcher needs to assume the stance that both the research participants and the researcher have the opportunity to see mistakes and wrongdoings in their present and in their past. To document mistakes requires taking an ethical or moral position on an issue. The data do not speak for themselves. Our history and our present voices speak for us, and, thus, our language can either mask or reveal problems that traditionally have been skirted or left unspoken.

The narratives of African American male youths living in group homes are the key ingredients to opening new possibilities for creating relevant practices and can take us on the path to finding new ways of being in our social interactions and creating just institutions.

Summary

In this Chapter, I have provided an overview of this research project, including its purpose, background, and significance. In the following chapter, I profile the tragic

experiences of young African American males in this country.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE PLIGHT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE YOUTHS

IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

The condition that African American males are in today is alarming. They are disproportionately suffering for many social illnesses, such as school failure, involvement with the criminal justice system, health care problems, crime victimization, and a high rate of foster care placement (Mauer 1999). Within the traditional K–12 educational structure, African American males disproportionately account for suspensions, expulsions, special educational placements, and dropouts (Polite & Davis 1999). Furthermore, African Americans of both genders account for about 6.7% of the population in California, but 36% of the children in foster care, with males remaining there longer than females (Bowie 2003). As regards the criminal justice system, Mauer (1999) cites the following statistics:

- Nationally, 49% of prison inmates are African American, compared to their 13% share of the overall population.
- On any given day, nearly one in three (32%) of African American males in the age group between 20 and 29 is under some form of criminal justice supervision—whether in jail or prison or on probation or parole.
- An African American male born in 1991 has a 29% chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life. The comparable figure for white males is 4%, and for Latino males, 16%.

African American male teenagers constitute a large percentage of the violent crime offenders in the United States (King 1997). They are also significantly more likely than

European-American males to be the victims of murder, robbery, and aggravated assault. The American public, as King (1997: 80) notes, is well aware of this:

> Throughout the last decade, the media have drawn attention to the number of violent crimes committed by adolescents and young adults, especially young African American males. Television networks, newspapers, and popular magazines have devoted a considerable amount of air time and print space to covering tragic stories of teen homicides, murders, and rapes. As a result, Americans are more aware of violent crimes committed by African American teenagers and young adults than at any other time in the history of the United States.

Many scholars, politicians, and television commentators have attempted to explain the causes of this violence, but they usually avoid controversial issues such as slavery and its legacy, institutional racism, and poverty (King 1997; West 1999). Instead, they attempt to provide a band-aid approach to a complex historical problem. "In my opinion," says King (1997: 80), "this is similar to trying to explain how batter becomes cake without examining the role that flour, eggs, and milk play in the baking process."

Currently, professionals in the public schools, the child welfare system, and the criminal justice system are dealing in their various ways with the violence among African American male youths. The challenge for these professionals is to understand that this violence did not begin with rap music, latchkey children, problem homes, MTV, or recreational drugs. Rather, the seeds of the violence were planted into the very social fabric of this powerful nation with the inhumane enslavement of Africans on a land that was stolen from Native Americans (King 1997; West 1999). To be properly understood, this violence must be examined from an historical, cultural, and social perspective. Unfortunately, this is precisely what laws, policies, and interventional services fail to do.

The Cultural Influence of Hip Hop

Many young African American males in foster care today listen to or perform hip hop music. Roach (2004) contends that hip hop culture, especially rap music, both influences young African American males and is a reflection of their experience.

Guy (2004: 48) describes how the oppositional culture of hip hop, its language of pain, and its way of expressing personal experience changed from being a cultural outlet to a marketable enterprise. "Rap," he writes, "has transcended the boundaries of the hood to become an international force in popular and capitalist culture." This transformation is a cause for concern because although the music is about the African American experience, and is mainly performed by African American artists, it is largely both distributed and purchased by whites. As Guy (2004: 49) notes:

> Even black owned and operated labels such as Death Row, Bad Boy Entertainment, and Def Jam Records have been financed and controlled by white media megacorporations such as Polygram, CBS's Epic Records, MCA Music, and Warner.

These corporations have not always acted in the best interests of African American children, who often look up to rap artists as role models and representatives of their culture, although the songs that get air play frequently promote sexist, violent, materialistic values and instant gratification (Guy 2004).

Domme Socialization of African American Males

The concept of Domme Socialization, which is my own creation, did not occur to me overnight. It comes from my reflecting on my own personal experience as a "troubled

youth," my seventeen years of experience working in the child welfare system in various capacities, and my current research on African American male youths living in group homes. The concept is intended to provide a framework to help social workers and others to better understand the everyday social experiences of African American males in foster care placement.

The word *Domme*, which is short for *dominatrix*, refers to a woman who is the dominant partner in a sadomasochistic relationship. Thus, Domme Socialization (or DS, for short) is an entanglement of social relationships that exist within households, communities, and professional encounters in which females are dominant and males are subservient. These relationships may or may not involve sexual contact. The range can be from taking control to treating another person as property. Therefore, DS describes relationships in which dominant females prescribe social labels, interpret actions, and provide rewards and punishments to disadvantaged males. Social workers, teachers, parents, foster care providers, and case managers working with populations from marginalized communities are often conductors of this process. Often, females who were socialized to play with Barbie dolls are in a position of judging males who were socialized to play with action figures. Inevitably, there will be conflicts and cultural misunderstandings between these two groups (Baggerly & Parker 2005). The power between the two sides is out of balance because professionals and adults are in a superior role, whereas clients and children are in an inferior one. Although American society pretends to be heavily influenced by patriarchal relations, males from marginalized communities do not always benefit from this social arrangement, which is trumped by other social issues such as racism and poverty. In other words, patriarchy in the United

States is still a matter that mainly benefits *white* males. African American male youths in the foster care system suffer more from DS than any other marginalized group in the nation (Tate 2001).

DS in Female-Headed Homes

The number of single-parents homes in the United States has increased over the years, and the majority of the single parents in such homes are women (Ricciuti 1997). Most African American males who are in foster care come from female-headed homes. Due to violence in many urban neighborhoods, involvement with the criminal justice system, and poverty and unemployment, many adult African American males are not able to be the primary custodians in their own homes. Many young African American males' first guide to the world is a female who is responsible for meeting his needs. In most cases, that female will be his mother or his grandmother. That female's relationship with the boy's father and with other African American adult males can have an important influence on how she relates to the boy, and he to her. Frustrations, conflicts, and misunderstandings should often the norm in these relationships (Ricciuti 1997). Furthermore, the same social forces that beat down the father are waiting for the boy. By the time he becomes a teen, his mother or grandmother may feel that she does not understand his behavior at all, while he sees her in the same negative way.

DS in Day-Care Centers and Head Start Programs

Gender and ethnicity play important roles in human interactions (Arnold, Griffith, Ortiz, & Stowe 1998). Most day-care centers are dominated by female staff, so young

African American boys are often in situations where they are observed, monitored, and taught by females in positions of power. If the boys come from marginalized communities, they will be judged by middle-class female values. Unfortunately, cartoons and other media outlets that cater to young boys are often violence-oriented, whereas outlets that cater to little girls tend to focus on communication skills. Many little boys are confused at first when they become aware of violence in their community, but allured by the violence in the mass media, they start to act out, and soon their day-care providers are sending notes home to their parents, describing the boys' negative behavior. It is important for these boys to learn to act appropriately in social settings, but there are times when the judgment calls of the professionals are slanted. Differences are often labeled negatively, and what feels familiar is labeled positively. Many young boys like to play-fight while pretending to be one of their favorite cartoon or action hero characters, whereas little girls would usually prefer to play house. Both of these behaviors are gender-appropriate, but the boys' behavior may be viewed as deviant by female day-care staff.

DS in the Child Protection System and the Social Work Profession

The average social worker in America is white, middle-class, and female, whereas the average child in foster care in this country is poor and African American (Bowie 2003). Thus, we have situations in which middle-class females are in the position of diagnosing children from marginalized communities, and creating action plans to deal with the perceived social needs of these children.

When it comes to the Child Welfare System, the stakes are even higher for African

American males than in the other DS situations mentioned so far. Unfortunately, due to bureaucratic rituals, cultural differences, and rushed assessments, many African American males in foster care are misdiagnosed and placed on psychotropic medications (Denby & Gibson 2007). African American boys in foster care face numerous challenges in society, including racial prejudice, economic hardship, limited access to cultural services, educational bias, and community violence (Baggerly & Parker 2005; Polite & Davis 1999). The average social worker either pretends that these social conditions do not exist or is culturally incompetent to address them. A social worker who advocates what she believes a young boy in her caseload needs is simultaneously operating from within her own set of cultural assumptions. For example, an African American boy may have to dress a particular way in order to pass through certain neighborhoods. His white, middle-class, female social worker may then interpret his dress as proof that he is a member of a gang. If, on the other hand, the boy's social worker is a male ex-gang member, that individual may recognize that the boy is just a popular kid in his neighborhood. Thus, the first social worker adds to the boy's problems, whereas the second social worker is likely to find ways to be helpful.

Why DS Is So Problematic

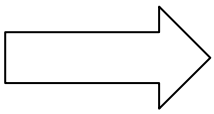
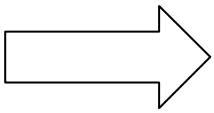
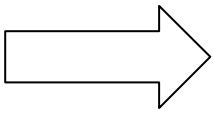
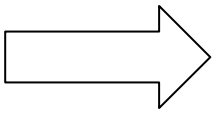
Some educators may argue that DS is inevitable in our society. But for some young African American males, particularly those in foster care, the amount of DS they are exposed to is excessive. Some of these boys experience DS in multiple areas of their lives, including their households, neighborhoods, and encounters with professionals such as teachers, therapists, and social workers. Excessive DS can lead such boys to

experience negative consequences in their adult years (see Table 1, on page 14).

The boys are constantly being judged, evaluated, and monitored by parents, social workers, and therapists, among others, who have social tools to enforce their decisions. These tools include oral and written reports, treatment plans, and recommendations, which can determine a boy's whole lifestyle, including the level of residential care appropriate to him, his placement in special education classes, the administration of psychotropic and other medications, and how other professionals will relate to him.

Even when a majority of professionals agree on a boy's diagnosis, that may still be just an act of emplotment—that is, according to Ricoeur (1981), the gathering of information about human actions with the goal of creating a coherent story. Some diagnoses are exaggerations of the worst actions that professionals expect from a boy, and ignore whole aspects of who he really is. They treat him like a Jeffrey Dahmer instead of just a boy who is dealing with personal issues. Very few of these diagnoses become self-fulfilling prophesies. Thus, psychological evaluations and court reports are complicated forms of storytelling, and, as Ricoeur (1981:170) reminds us, "telling a story…is deploying an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgment operates in a hypothetical mode. Thus, foster parents, daycare providers, social workers, and psychologists have a tendency to be like novelists, creating characters and plots, as they project their own fears and anxieties onto their subjects (Ricoeur 1981).

Table 1: Applications of Domme Socialization

General Characteristics of DS 	• Excessive DS is viewed as good for the client. • Conflicts and anger are viewed as bad. • Talk is viewed as the best form of expression. • IQ is viewed as the only measurement of intelligence. • The process of the organization is viewed as good. • Differences are viewed as bad. • Professionals are viewed as experts.
Social Mediums of DS 	• Psychological evaluations. • Interviews. • Written social reports by professionals. • Case plans and treatments. • IEP reports. • Court reports.
Social Practices of DS 	• Social labeling. • Social conformity. • Separation from the mainstream. • Specification. • Administration of psychotropic medications.
Experiences and Feelings Produced by DS 	• Clients feel a sense of alienation, are self-conscious, and have low self-esteem. • Clients' autonomy is often destroyed. • Professionals and caretakers feel a sense of control. • Professionals and caretakers often lack meaning and purpose in their work.

In my many years as a social worker and as a group home consultant, I have heard

many professionals voice their fears that some young boy or other will grow up to be a sociopathic serial killer. Nevertheless, I have never seen this happen to any one of those boys. Basically, the professionals were making cultural judgments that reflected middle-class biases.

Using an interpretive model of understanding, one might say that therapists and news reporters are similar in many ways, in that they both pretend to be objective observers when they actually have many prejudices, interpreting reality through their own cultural lenses (Kearney 2003). In reality, individuals, groups, and whole communities have many narratives, and their events can be told from many different perspectives (Edelman 1977; Herda 1999; Kearney 2002; Ricoeur 1992). Thus, in any news account, the public does not actually get "facts," but rather cultural perspectives empowered by sophisticated language. "It is not facts that are crucial," argues Edelman (1977: 85), "but language forms and socially cued perceptions." In the social work field, psychological evaluations are often used in courtrooms to influence important decisions, and the news media have the power to portray images from those courtrooms worldwide. Such reporting can sometimes go unchallenged, and thus have a powerful influence.

Every time a case about a young boy is presented in a staff meeting, a courtroom, or a school, the presenter may have culturally biased motives. Social reports from professionals are often reflections of their tellers and readers, more than of their subjects, satisfying dramatic needs instead of verifying truths. Unfortunately, in the case of many African American males in foster care, this novelistic spirit is driven by feelings of fear and cultural misunderstanding. The professionals are not producing documentaries of human connectedness, but instead are displaying horror films that depict young African

American boys as monsters and villains.

Status Generalization and Negative Racial Stereotyping

Although their middle class is growing, African-Americans as a whole are continuing to fall economically behind Caucasians in this country. Some researchers feel that this economic disadvantage is used by many people both to justify social inequality and to support negative stereotypes about African-Americans, such as that they are lazy and irresponsible (e.g., Brezina & Winder 2003). This is a form of status generalization, from the particular to the general. The logic is that if a person is low in one way, he or she is low in many, if not all, ways. In more academic language, Stolte (1990:1360-61) made the point this way:

> Status generalization is an intricate dynamic through which culturally evaluated diffuse or task-specific traits (e.g., gender, race, alleged reading ability) are imported and activated in particular interaction situations (e.g., work groups, juries, classrooms, teams) to produce a quite stable inequality structure of power and prestige.

Status generalization can be and has been applied to virtually every minority group in this country, from Asians to the elderly. However, the two groups that have received the most attention in recent times are African-Americans and women. As Forsyth (2006: 191) notes:

> Status generalization explains why women and African Americans are given less status and authority in groups than European Americans and men. Despite changes in sexist and racist attitudes in society, stereotypical biases still make gaining status in small groups a difficult task for women, African Americans, and other minorities.

Status generalization applies not only backward in time but also forward. That is,

one's prejudices formed in the past color one's expectations in the future. Thus, if one has a low opinion of the productivity of African-Americans, one is likely to expect little of the African-American who has just entered one's workplace. Even when that African-American performs well, the biased observer will look for the weaknesses in the performance rather than the strengths. Thus, African-Americans, like other minorities, may have to work twice as hard as everyone else just to stand still (Forsyth, 2006).

Brezina and Winder (2003) explored the status generalization process in detail in regard to race relations and economics. One of the issues they explored was the possession of rewards or resources. "Subjects who had received high rewards from a third party," they write, "were presumed to possess relatively high levels of task ability; those who had received low rewards were presumed to possess less ability" (p. 404). According to this study, resource-rich subjects are presumed to be better than their resource-poor counterparts. Thus, according to this status generalization, African-Americans, who are more resource-poor than Caucasians, are perceived by many people to be less able and worthy.

The research on status generalization is relevant to many contexts, but nowhere more so than to the schools and workplaces of the nation. As for the schools, from kindergarten to graduate school, teachers make assumptions about their students, often on the basis of race, and assign tasks to them accordingly. For example, Caucasian teachers may assume that their African-American and Latino students are less computer-literate than their Caucasian and Asian students, and therefore give them less challenging projects or homework. Furthermore, they will probably be more likely to recognize high computer literacy among those African-Americans and Latinos who possess it. Thus, the

educational system is often a vehicle for maintaining the status quo.

Furthermore, the status generalization does not only occur from teachers to students, but also from students to other students. The Caucasian and Asian students may share the teachers' low expectations of African-American and Latino students, and African-American and Latino students may even have low expectations of other African-American and Latino students.

Similar dynamics operate in the workplaces of America, where, once again, status generalization has helped to maintain the status quo (Stolte 1990). Women in the workplace talk about a "glass ceiling" that keeps them from rising above a certain level. African-Americans, until very recently, have often not been able to get in the front door, let alone rise to the top floor.

> In group settings, many minority individuals may try to possess or imitate the traits of people who are resource-rich in order to gain acceptance or rewards from the other group members. These minority individuals may have low expectations of other minority individuals if the latter do not subscribe to these values. For example, a task group that consists of a majority of African-American middle-class professionals may not totally accept as a member an African-American who is from a lower socioeconomic background, since that member may subscribe to different characteristics, operate from a different set of values, and possess mannerisms that are perceived as less worthy than those of the majority.

The interactions between the minority members may be carried out intentionally or unintentionally, and verbally or nonverbally. As stated by Brezina and Winder (2003: 407), "status generalization processes are not only powerful but tend to occur automatically, usually on a subconscious level."

Summary

Hip hop culture, especially rap music, which promotes sexism, violence, materialistic values, and instant gratification, both influences young African American males and is a reflection of their experience. That experience must be examined from an historical, cultural, and social perspective, but unfortunately that is precisely what laws, policies, and interventional services in this nation fail to do.

The problems of young African American male youths, especially those in foster care, are compounded by the fact that they are monitored, judged, and placed by middle-class female professionals who espouse middle-class female values. The writer refers to this process as Domme Socialization (DS). Social workers, teachers, parents, foster care providers, and case managers working with these boys are often conductors of this process.

CHAPTER THREE:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This study explored and analyzed the experiences of African American male youths who have lived in group homes. This review of literature illustrates how my study adds to the research. The topics discussed in this area are the following: (a) the history of group homes; (b) understanding group home life; and (c) African American male experiences in group homes. In addition to that, there is an in-depth discussion of the hermeneutic approach in anthropological research. All of these topics provide a conceptual basis for this study.

The History of Group Homes

Group homes are small residential facilities that are designed to provide care for foster children with mental health or behavioral issues (Berrick, Courtney, & Barth, 1993; Solomon, 2004). They are a form of out-of-home placement. Out-of-home care has always involved a tension between parental rights and responsibilities, on the one hand, and the need to protect the safety and well-being of the children, on the other (Kadushin 1974; McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996; Thesis 1924).

In the early part of the nineteenth century, almshouses or poorhouses took in poor children, adults, and the elderly, along with mentally ill individuals, usually with no distinctions made between these groups in terms of services. Insofar as the poor children were concerned, they were largely viewed as social deviants involved in violence,

immorality, and prostitution. The solution, some thought, was to remove such children from their parents when they were very young, before the depravation set in (Kadushin 1974; McDonald et al., 1996; Smith & Devore 2004).

In many cases, however, the children were homeless and living on the streets. In response to the large number of vagrant children in New York, Charles Loring Brace, a minister and early social worker, founded the New York Children's Aid Society in 1853, from which he created a program called the Placing Out System. From 1854 to 1929, Brace's organization sent an estimated 100,000 children to homes in the west and midwest, where they lost all their ties to their biological families. The problem was that most of the children were Catholic, whereas the families they were sent to were virtually all Protestants, so Catholics and Protestants naturally had contrary views on the worthiness of Brace's efforts. In response, the Catholic Church began its own widespread social service programs, as did other religious denominations (Bowie 2003; Kadushin 1974; McDonald et al., 1996; Smith & Devore 2004).

If Brace's approach was basically parent-centered—that is, designed to meet the needs of the adults—a child-centered approach that resembled modern social practices was initiated by Charles Birtwell and the Boston Children's Aid Society in 1886. In Birtwell's program, placements were individualized, based on a study of each child. Birtwell believed that the children should ultimately be restored to their parents, if at all possible (McDonald et al. 1996). He also pioneered the idea that foster parents would be reimbursed for their expenses in caring for the child (McDonald et al., 1996). Birtwell's approach was affirmed by the First White House Conference on Children, in 1909. Nevertheless, Trotzkey (1930) concluded that foster care and institutional care were both

necessary and equally successful. In practice, however, this country has continued to favor the former over the latter (Laird & Hartman 1985; McDonald et al., 1996).

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 and the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 gave shape to out-of-home care programs and services in child welfare as they exist today (Bowie 2003; McDonald et al. 1996). That is, human service agencies prefer placements that include: (a) reunification; (b) adoption; (c) guardianship; and (d) long-term out-of-home care (McDonald et al. 1996). Thus, today, a child is first placed into foster care in which reunification services are offered to a family member. If a child is not reunified with his (or her) family, then the agency seeks a permanent home for him by means of adoption or guardianship placement. If neither of these is possible, the next step is long-term placement, in which many foster children remain until the age of 18. Some foster children are placed for the long term with relatives or group homes.

The structure of the child welfare system in this country has remained pretty much the same since the 1980s. The main difference is that where most of the children placed in long-term care and group homes used to be Caucasian, today most of them are African American (Bowie 2003; Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997; Collins & Williams 1999; Denby & Gibson 2007; Smith & Devore 2004).

Understanding Group Home Life

There are more restrictive and less restrictive forms of foster care. A less restrictive form might be placement with a relative. A more restrictive form would be placement in a group home (Berrick, Courtney, & Barth 1993; Solomon 2004). Group homes are artificial rather than natural environments, even though all of the social interactions and activities that take place inside them are real human experiences (Anglin 2002). Foster

children who fail multiple placements, either with a relative or in a foster home, eventually end up in a group home. Many of these children are administered psychotropic medications to deal with their behavioral or mental health issues (Denby & Gibson 2007). Therefore, the goal of many human service agencies that provide foster care is to use placement in a group home as a last resort (James et al. 2006).

A typical group home structure is very different from a typical biological family unit structure (Brukas 2008; Johnson 1999). To begin with, a group home is staffed 24 hours a day by trained personnel. The residents are usually placed with three to five others, all of whom usually have issues such as poor impulsive control, substance abuse, or poor academic performance (Anglin 2002; James et al. 2006; Kahan 1994;). Unlike the members of a biological family, these youths don't interact with parents and siblings, but rather with middle-class professionals such as counselors, program directors, therapists, social workers, attorneys, psychologists, and sometimes probation officers, who have routine meetings to discuss the youths' needs (Chamber & Childre 2005).

Scholars have noted that there are many aspects of groups homes that have never been formally studied—for example, why so many group home children go on as adults to develop mental health issues, become homeless, and ultimately incarcerated (Alford, Gavazzi, & McKenry 1996; James et al. 2006).

African American Male Experiences in Group Homes

There are three factors that lead to the marginalization of African American males in group homes: (a) social labeling by professionals; (b) school experiences; and (c) the linkage between the foster care and juvenile justice systems.

Social Labeling by Professionals

African American children in general are often considered the "other," and so they are regarded as having a great need to conform (Constantini & Blackmon 2002; Edelman, 1977; West 1999;). The very language of helping professionals can at times be harmful, as Edelman (1977: 59) notes:

> The helping professions define other people's statuses (and their own). The terms they employ to categorize clients and justify restrictions of their physical movements and of their moral and intellectual influence are especially revealing of the political functions language performs and of the multiple realities it helps create. Just as any single numeral evokes the whole number scheme, our scientific connotations can justify a hierarchy of power for the person who uses it and for the groups that respond to it.

The divisions between professionals and their clients is emphasized by the labels the former use to describe the latter, such as "slow," "delayed," and "aggressive," which the children tend to internalize (Ricoeur, 1981). Social labels and social symbolism walk hand in hand with each other to create social realities. Someone who is repeatedly called "slow" tends to think of himself as "slow." Other similarly defining terms include "violent black male," "gang member," and "special education kid."

In reality, if one were to take any three children from a special education class anywhere in America, those children would very likely be very different from each other. Nevertheless, middle-class professionals will label all of them "special education kids," and this limiting characterization will carry over to society at large (Brezina & Winder 2003; Forsyth 2006; Stole 1990). As Edelman (1997: 63) writes:

> Once established, a categorization defines what is relevant about the people who are labeled. It encourages others to interpret developments so as to confirm the label and to ignore, discount, or reinterpret counterevidence.

Social workers or group home counselors who deal with youths may think that it is helpful to label them in order to obtain better services for them. But no human being is accurately described with one label to characterize every aspect of their lives (Ricoeur, 1992). Thus, the language that the helping professionals use can be one-dimensional, and even though they believe they are trying to help their disadvantaged clients, they may actually be attempting nothing more than the imposition of conformity. Edelman (1997: 73) writes about this phenomenon:

> It is not chance that the groups constrained by these rationales are also groups that experience bias in society at large or that the "treatment" consists either of restoring conformist behavior or of removing offenders from the sight, the consciences, and the career competition of the conventional.

Experiences in Foster Care and Public School Systems

The vast majority of youths in foster care systems in the United States attend public schools that serve highly diverse ethnic populations. Such schools, irrespective of their foster care populations, tend not to be doing well academically. Talbert-Johnson (2004: 22) notes:

> The underachievement of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in comparison to their mainstream peers continues to be a pervasive problem in urban education.

African American youths experience many inequalities in the foster care system in this country. Perhaps the most important of these is their numerical overrepresentation in the system. As Bowie (2003: 1) states:

> The disproportional representation of African American children in the foster care system is in direct conflict with the very construct and term *child welfare*.

In California, for example, whose total population is only 6.7% African American, 36% of the children in foster care are African American, and the African American males remain in foster care longer than the females (Bowie 2003). Tate (2001: 36) contends that African American males are the most marginalized group in foster care, especially academically:

> In this country, the academic experiences of African American males in foster care are unlike the experiences of any other group in or outside the foster care system. They are subject to the same barriers which seem to confound and encumber the academic progress of many African American males while also being subjected to a host of barriers unique to their status as foster children. These children are faced with the task of overcoming obstacles to academic achievement imposed by the education system, plus they must grapple with an assortment of obstacles as over-represented and under-serviced members of the child welfare system. African American males are absent from and dropping out of school at unparalleled rates, and they are placed in the foster care system more frequently and stay longer than other populations.

The notions of education that go back to the ancient philosophers, such as Socrates,

Plato, and Aristotle, who lived in a homogeneous society, are not necessarily compatible with the reality of today's schools (Ozmon & Craver 2003). In effect, many of the philosophical foundations of modern educational theory trace back to white males in positions of privilege and do not take into account the perspectives of members of minority groups, who have to deal in their daily lives with racism, oppression, and hardship (Rothstein 2006).

The foster care systems and the public school systems both emphasize middle-class values, which frequently brings them into conflict with minority youths. For example, an African American boy who has a problem might go to the local barbershop for advice (Alexander 2003). Once he lands in a group home, however, he will almost certainly have to get his counseling from a therapist, which may lead to cultural misunderstandings, especially if the therapist is middle-class and white. For their part, the public schools censor textbooks, forbid discussion of certain issues, and endorse many biases and attitudes in subtle ways that help to promote the status quo and thereby penalize many African American males (Ozmon & Craver 2003).

The foster care and public school systems frequently interconnect with Child Protective Services (CPS), because foster care providers and teachers must provide reports about foster children's well-being and behavior to CPS social workers. Teachers, counselors, daycare providers, and other helping professionals are all mandated by law to report any abuses to CPS, and so are considered good sources of information about children (McDaniel 2005). Sometimes, foster care providers, school staff, family members, and social workers meet together to discuss individualized education plans (IEPs) for children (Chamber & Childre 2005).

Getting an education is vital in today's society. This does not only involve academic achievement. As Gill (1991) notes, moral behavior, family stability, economic success, appropriate parenting, and cultural self-worth can only be achieved through effective formal and informal education. Educating youths is the primary vehicle for constructing productive adults.

Our society's failure to create a supportive educational structure for all African American children has had negative consequences not only for the African American community but for the whole nation (Mauer 1999). Corbin and Pruitt (1999: 69) observe how African American children gradually become aware of their own marginalization:

> As African American children develop, they become aware of the inequalities that exist within American society. Some citizens are treated well, whereas others suffer from limited opportunities. The development of this awareness begins in childhood and gradually intensifies through adulthood. The media, newspapers, and even our classroom textbooks project images of Eurocentric power, dominance, and beauty.

Currently in the United States, there are large numbers of African American male children who are having contact with public school systems and foster care systems that are failing to help these children to reach their potential. Although programs and services are available to many African American male children with the goal of helping, there is considerable room for improvement.

The Linkage Between the Foster Care and Juvenile Justice Systems

The unique experience of African American males in foster care is one that goes

beyond teaching conformity, but a social scheme that prepares youth for adult involvement in the criminal justice system (Smith & Devore 2004; West 1999). Foster care was intended to protect children from neglect and abuse by their parents and other family members, yet all too often it becomes an equally cruel form of neglect and abuse by the state on an individual, communal, and macro level (Courtney 2000; Smith & Devore 2004). Unfortunately, children who are placed in foster care are sometimes abused in their foster home or group home placement. The state has power to announce who is an unfit parent and who deserves protection, but goes unchallenged about the type of care it provides. In some cases, children have a better chance of becoming productive adults if they are left in their supposedly "dysfunctional" homes instead of being placed in foster care. Many foster youth end up having problems in school and becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997; Courtney 2000). Children who were once viewed as victims of abuse become future menaces to society (Courtney 2000; Smith & Devore 2004).This problematic situation is especially true for many African American males who were placed in foster care (Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997; Ryan 2006). The question is, have our social services helped these young males, or have the young males simply helped to create jobs for middle-class professionals?

There is a need for the foster care and juvenile justice professionals to have ongoing discussions about their parts in this social dilemma. The child welfare and juvenile justice systems often work with the same clients, deal with similar issues, and develop similar goals (Heldman 2006). Ryan (2006: 08) noted the following about the experience of African American males in foster care:

> Juvenile delinquency remains a significant problem for child welfare systems throughout the United States. Victims of child abuse and neglect are more likely to engage in delinquency compared with children in the general population. Although the magnitude of this relationship is not fully understood, the risk of delinquency is particularly high for African American males and for children in substitute care settings.

Ryan (2006) argued that to better understand the link between the foster care and the juvenile justice systems, we must investigate the importance of social bonds, attachment, commitment, and perceptions of permanence among African American males in foster care. Most researchers, however, have approached this issue from the perspective of outsiders. The present writer, on the other hand, will be approaching the issue from the inside, drawing on his own experiences as a troubled youth and later as a social worker with troubled youths. Engaging in meaningful conversations with individuals who are marginalized from mainstream society is a good starting point for opening up new worlds.

Transitioning from Foster Care to Adulthood

The original goal of foster care systems was to provide temporary care for children while supportive services were put into place to facilitate their reunification with their families. Over time, the foster care system in this country has become more involved in making permanent arrangements for children. Many youths now leave foster care at the age of 18, which presents huge problems on a national level, especially homelessness, unemployment, and substance abuse (Freundlich, Avery, Gerstenzang, & Munson 2006). There is clearly a need for transition plans that can truly address the requirements of these youths in a constantly changing world.

Many foster youth eventually return to their original communities, where they become involved in activities that lead them into the criminal justice system. Therefore, appropriate transition services must be devised to prevent this (Baltodano, Platt, & Roberts 2005; Rutherford, Bullis, Wheeler-Anderson, & Griller-Clark 2002;). At the present time, the social service systems tend to deal with these youth in one of two ways. Either they connect them with family members, or they leave them on their own. Clearly, more productive options must be devised. Baltodano, Platt, and Roberts (2005: 385) observe:

> When youth do not understand transition, transition is often superficial and ultimately unsuccessful. Communication is a critical part of making transition a success.

Thus, it is imperative for group homes, youth correction agencies, public schools, families, and others who are in charge of assisting these transitioning youth to include them (and others whom they trust) in developing their own transition plans. When this is done, the youth are more likely to be successful upon their return home by enrolling in educational programs, entering careers, and becoming productive members of their community (Baltodano, Platt, & Roberts 2005; Rutherford, Bullis, Wheeler-Anderson, & Griller-Clark 2002).

The Hermeneutic Approach to Anthropological Research

In this study, I used the methodologies of hermeneutic interpretation. As a theoretical orientation, hermeneutics is a form of textual analysis, a process of bringing to light the

hidden meanings in a specific text—in this case, my conversations with African American males who have lived in group homes. Textual analysis is the ability to reconstruct the intentions of an author or speaker. It is an artful form of understanding, developmentally based in the relationship between the reader and the text. This interrelationship assumes that persons share a common world through their experiences. A critical hermeneutic orientation to research provides the framework for understanding everyday social experiences through an interpretive paradigm. This interpretive paradigm helps one to obtain a better understanding of self and others.

Maloney (1993: 40) defined hermeneutics as a way to "interpret the shared meanings and practices that we have for our experiences within a context." This definition of hermeneutics perfectly describes the intent of my study: to uncover the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of young African American males who have lived in group homes.

The Anthropological Perspective

When conducting research, anthropologists often attempt to become participants in the situations they are studying. That is, they are participant-observers as they gather information that can be used by other professionals (Geertz 1983). Herda (1985: 3–4) states the following about the role of anthropological research:

> In the world we inhabit, the problem for anthropologists "become(s) one of making it possible for people inhabiting different worlds to have a genuine and reciprocal impact upon one another," and for any cultural institution the issue becomes whether or not human beings, through anthropology or anything else, are going to be able "to imagine principled lives they can practicably lead" (Geertz 1983: 161, 234). Anthropologists need more than local knowledge to carry on anthropology because the relativism for which anthropology is famous does not address the

> questions of the quality of our lives or what a practicably led life is all about…. "One way we can alter the context of our own prejudices and conclusions is to become aware of others' judgments in the world" (Geertz 1983: 77). Understanding our prejudices will not come about without people going out of their way to learn about different judgments, conclusions, and forms of living.

Fusion of Horizon

Many African American male youths in group homes come from marginalized communities and/or abusive homes. The professionals involved in their lives include child protective workers, counselors, therapists, group leaders, social workers, attorneys, and sometimes probation officers. These professionals are largely from a middle-class background, so there is an unequal power relationship between them and the boys. This unequal power dynamic plays out in the social exchanges between the two sides. Therefore, instead of engaging in meaningful conversations with the boys, the professionals will conduct emotionally empty interviews with them. Instead of listening *to* each other, the parties talk *at* each other.

The work of Gadamer (1994) is quite helpful in understanding how to engage in meaningful conversation with persons of all backgrounds. In a professional-client relationship, each person speaks from what Gadamer (1994:302) calls his or her own "horizon," which he defines as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point." For a professional to develop a comprehensive assessment of a client, it is important for both parties to be heard. In a sense, both are limited to their own visions, traditions, and histories. As Gadamer (1994: 306) notes:

> In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past.

Our horizon moves with us as we encounter others. In a traditional interview format, responses are usually guarded, at least at first, and there is no room to test out personal prejudices. A client may say whatever he believes the professional wants to hear, and the professional may ask superficial, routine questions. The dialogue becomes a social game that is played out without meaning. A better approach would be to engage in meaningful conversation in which both parties grow from the experience. The act of placing oneself in another's situation is the route to better understanding (Gadamer 1994). What Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons occurs when people are in the act of understanding a horizon other than their own.

Oneself as Another

Many young African American males enter foster care at a tender age and stay there until they leave as adults. They start out with relatively unrestricted care with relatives or in a foster home, but often move on to restricted care, as in residential treatment homes. In their journey to adulthood, their conceptions of themselves are important. As Ricoeur (1992: 115) says: "In many narratives the self seeks its identity on the scale of an entire life." Therefore, these young males try to make sense of who they are by reflecting on past experiences of a world they once knew, while interpreting their current experiences as foster youths. Ricoeur (1992) calls this ongoing process a present perception with a

recent memory.

The events and experiences in the lives of these young males are part of the life history of others, as well as the boys themselves. These others include parents, professionals, and peers (Ricoeur 1992). These relationships, which involve the history of one person inside the histories of others, constitute what Ricoeur calls "entanglements." For a group home resident to see himself in a positive light, it is important for those around him to see him that way. As a youth is authoring his own life, there are other characters and an audience who are involved in the live performance.

Too often, helping professionals are highly influenced by traditional positivist thinking, which leads them to pathologize many African American youth. In some cases, professionals pigeonhole boys in ways that prevent the professionals from conceiving imaginative new possibilities. The challenge for professionals is to see themselves as "others" in respect to the boys and develop an understanding of entangling relationships.

Narratives Matter

Storytelling is an important human act, almost as essential as eating and breathing (Kearney 2002). Human lives are full of events that can be told as stories. Today, those stories can be told through various media, from small talk over the water cooler to e-mails over the internet. Within the child welfare system, storytelling about clients and professional experiences occurs through venues such as transfer summary reports, court reports, case notes, progress reports, and minutes of meetings.

Due to the nature of social work, many court reports and transfer summaries about adolescents in the child welfare system are filled with pathological labels that ignore

other potentials that the child may have. As Kearney (2002: 130) notes, "inside every human being there are lots of little narratives trying to get out." Thus, the question becomes, how do we find ways to encourage youths to let their narratives out? Herda (1999: 77) puts the question this way:

> How do we move from pre-understandings to new understandings? How do we overcome the pre-understandings that separate us from the new understandings that carry us beyond the current order of our lives, in organizations, schools, and communities?

On the other side of the equation are the professionals, who have to be listening attentively when the youths do let their stories out. If no one is listening, the child will not feel heard, and pathology *may* set in or intensify.

Self-Understanding

All understanding begins with self-understanding, for, as Ricoeur (1981) observed, self-understanding encompasses knowledge of the outer as well as the inner world. One way to promote self-understanding and understanding of the world is to encourage people to read and write poems, stories, and plays. In the context of social work, that could be the key to getting professionals and clients involved in telling and listening to each other's stories. As Ricoeur (1981: 143) says:

> We understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works. What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and, in general, of all that we call the self, if these had not

been brought to language and articulated by literature?

The point here is not to focus on the commercial success of the storytelling but the therapeutic aspects of self-expression.

Whose Emplotment?

As I reflect on my own study, I find that my research to hermeneutics has made me feel that I have been bamboozled by the American educational system, which presents history as unbiased fact when it is actually highly biased fiction. Furthermore, there are differences of interpretation by historians and by readers that create more distortion and bias. It may be better to present history as an act of emplotment.

Emplotment is the gathering of information about human failures and achievements with the goal of creating a coherent story for an audience (Ricoeur 1981). The question is, Whose emplotment do we accept?

Ever since the days of RenÈ Descartes, White males have been positioning themselves as leaders of the world. As a result, many historians have written histories of Western civilization in ways that represent many of these White males (such as Christopher Columbus) as better than they were (Ricoeur 1981). This emplotment process promotes ideologies. Therefore, what you notice, what information you choose to gather, and how you tell a story is essential to how it will be heard.

History is basically an act of understanding, interpreting, and explaining. Hermeneutics teaches us that the same story may be interpreted differently by different listeners, depending on their background. For example, someone from a dominant group may understand a story quite differently from a person from a marginalized community.

However, Western civilization has not presented its history as a series of events that can be interpreted, but rather as a collection of undeniable facts.

Historians always have motives when they tell stories. At one time, it was in the interest of the dominant culture to portray marginalized groups in condescending ways. It is time to uncover many other stories that were *not* told, so that we can better understand the past. Ricoeur (1981:296) concluded that "by opening us to what is different, history opens us to the possible, whereas fiction, by opening us to the unreal, leads us to what is essential in reality."

Let us tell histories that demonstrate collaboration in the past rather than oppression. As we look at our society today, we wonder why there is still so much misunderstanding among the races. It is important for all of the stories of the past to be uncovered, for they reveal the possibilities for the future (Ricoeur 1981).

Three Kinds of Human Relationships: A Hermeneutic Perspective

If you are a professor teaching graduate students, a counselor working at a residential treatment program for adults, or a social worker with caseloads of foster teens, your ability to maintain respectful relationships with others will be essential to performing the task at hand. Even though each of these professionals performs a different type of role, they share a common human activity. There is no need for social workers if there are no clients. A professor lecturing a class without any students present is hardly ideal. An administrator does not want to pay a residential counselor a salary when there are no residents to counsel. In each case, there is a need to have a relationship with others. Due to the complexity of modern-day organizational life, matters such as politics, management, and other hierarchical systems take up much space, but those things

unimportant if appropriate relationships do not exist. Looking through a hermeneutic lens, Gadamer (1960) observes that there are three kinds of human relationships.

The first kind of relationship is what Gadamer (1960) calls *inter-personal*, which involves treating another person like an object (I-It). Human beings sometimes avoid engagement with others because they are trying to discover typical behavior patterns and psychological laws that govern those patterns. This simple act of interpretation minimizes the other person's being. A little boy in foster care is a far more complex human being than what is written about him in a court report or orally presented in a presentation (Gadamer 1960; Kearney 2002; Ricoeur 1991). The narrative in the court report presents the boy as a singular totality, but in reality he is always in the state of becoming until he dies (Ricoeur 1991). This simplified interpretation of the boy not only distances the professionals from the reality of who he is, but also colors the boy's view of himself. Moving past this superficial level of relationship is a must for professionals if they want to find meaning in their work, to truly engage with their clients, and to produce meaning for others.

The second kind of relationship is a little warmer, but still lacks genuine connection to the other person. Gadamer (1960) says that in this type of relationship we are able to see the other as a *Thou*, and not just as some data for analysis (I-Thou [a]). At least at this level, a professional genuinely want to understand his or her client or student. The professional may understand that connecting with the client or student is good for both of them, but there is still something that is blocking their connection. For example, as Gadamer notes, one person may be in a power relationship with the other, and so is unable to listen to the other with an open mind. Thus, most of their interactions may feel

more like interviewers than dialogues. In many cases, a professional may believe that he or she understands a client or student, but is really viewing that individual in a particular context. For instance, the average social worker is not truly interested in a client as a whole human person, but only in the context of being a client. The average professor of mathematics is not going to be interested in a student's music career. The only reason the professional may listen carefully to the client is to try to figure out the causes of a particular problem. A professor may ask a student where his research paper is, or a social worker may ask a client why she has not completed a parenting education class. Thus, even when the intentions are good, there is no real human connection, and the relationship lacks authentic dialogue.

Gadamer's (1960) third kind of human relationship has benefits for both sides. Each party acknowledges the many narratives of the other and has a willingness to hear something new (I-Thou [b]). They may have prejudices about each other, but they are open to new discoveries, and this allows genuine dialogue to take place. True openness to another person (as well as to a text) may help an individual to see that his or her own prejudices, beliefs, and assumptions are wrong. Thus, a person's views can be changed in ways that could not happen on their own. For example, a social worker whose client is African American may well learn something about the history of how African-Americans migrated to California. A professor with a Japanese student may learn something about how Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II.

In Figure 2, below, I summarize Gadamer's (1960) three kinds of human relationships in terms of social work and from the perspective of the social worker.

Level 1: I-It Relationships

- The social worker views and treats clients as objects, not as subjects.
- The social worker's focus is on finding appropriate treatment for clients rather than establishing relationships with them.
- The social worker expects clients to act in accordance with professional diagnoses.
- The social worker places a heavy emphasis on identifying and controlling clients' typical behavior.

Level 2: I-Thou [a] Relationships

- The social worker genuinely desires to understand the client.
- The social worker does not engage in real dialogue with clients, but instead conducts one-sided interviews.
- The social worker claims to understand clients, but views them within a limited context.

Level 3: I-Thou [b] Relationships

- The social worker acknowledges clients as human beings and not just as clients.
- The social worker is open to the possibility of hearing new things from clients, making new discoveries, and growing from the experience.
- The social worker is committed to having an ongoing dialogue with clients.
- The social worker's relationship with clients differs over time.

Figure 2: Three Types of Relationships Presented in Social Work Practice (based on Gadamer 1960)

Difficult Forgiveness

There are many stories about how certain institutions cause harm to various communities. In fact, whole countries have taken advantage of other countries, exploiting them for their natural or human resources for the sake of profits. On a smaller scale, some foster children have shared their stories about how the foster care system has failed them, and it is difficult for them to forgive those who have caused them harm. As Ricoeur (2004: 456) observes:

> Forgiveness—if it has a sense, and if it exists—constitutes the horizon common to memory, history, and forgetting. Always in retreat, this horizon slips away from any grasp. It makes forgiving difficult: not easy but not impossible…. If forgiveness is difficult to give and to receive, it is just as difficult to conceive of.

In the course of the present research, it is important to examine the historical relationship that African American children have had with many social institutions in the United States. To begin with, a large proportion of African American children in the foster care system have not been successful in the public school system (Bowie 2003; Tate 2001). Many of these children have gone on, as adults, to share their experiences of outright abuse at the hands of these institutions. Ricoeur (2004: 501–502) comments about this type of situation:

> Our uneasiness concerning the right attitude to take with regard to the uses and abuses of forgetting, mainly in the practice of institutions, is finally the symptom of a stubborn uncertainty affecting the relation between forgetting and forgiveness on the level of its deep structure. The question

> returns with insistence: if it is possible to speak of happy memory, does there exist something like a happy forgetting? …The arrival of a memory is an event. Forgetting is not an event, something that happens or that someone causes to happen. To be sure, we can notice that we have forgotten, and we remark it at a given moment.

Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. Thus, we may not be able to speak of a happy forgetting of a painful past event, but there may come a time when persons who have been abused can forgive those who have abused them.

Summary

In this Chapter, I have recounted the inequalities experienced by many African American males in the foster care system in this country and the parallel inequalities in the public school system. To capture stories about such inequalities, I have used a hermeneutic approach, analyzing the text of my conversations with African American males who have lived in group homes.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE HERMENEUTIC PROCESS

Introduction

The hermeneutic tradition is not a methodology protocol but a research process that shapes an inquiry. Herda (1999) suggests the following procedures for conducting a participatory research project in the hermeneutic tradition:

1. Present a theoretical framework
2. Develop categories
3. Propose research questions and conversation guidelines
4. Conduct a pilot study
5. Select the research site or sites
6. Develop entrée to the research site or sites
7. Select the participants
8. Gather data
9. Perform data analysis
10. Describe the researcher's background

Theoretical Framework

Young African American males in group homes are often asked to tell their stories, or they have their stories told by others. For example, they may be asked by social workers what happened at school on a particular day. Or they may be asked how a home visit went with a family member. Some are asked questions about their family life prior to entering foster care. In addition to that, their stories are often put into texts, such as case notes, court reports, and transfer summaries to other professionals to attempt to provide an interpretive understanding of their experience.

Below is a presentation of one major aspect of critical hermeneutics, mimesis. After I

describe mimesis$_{1, 2, 3}$ I present these concepts in the context of a young African American male.

Mimesis$_1$

In this context, Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1988) concepts of mimesis$_1$ (prefiguration), mimesis$_2$ (configuration), and mimesis$_3$ (refiguration) are helpful for understanding the dynamics of the boys' lives, how they themselves interpret those lives, and how those lives are interpreted by others.

As Herda (1999: 77) notes, "Mimesis$_1$ creates…our traditions, assumptions, goals, and motives." It is the life one actually lives. For example, Donald (not his real name) is an 8-year-old African American boy, who used to be my client in the child welfare system. When he was 3, he was taken away from his mother and placed in a foster home because his mother suffered from a substance abuse problem. After having behavioral problems in that home for about a year, Donald was placed in a group home. Obviously, the traditions he grew up with and imitated for the first three years of his life were severely disrupted when he was placed in another home, and that disruption was repeated a year later. Donald's assumptions about life, as well as his goals and motives, were deeply altered by these experiences. Thus, Donald's mimesis$_1$ is his living through the chaos of these experiences.

Mimesis$_2$

Herda (1999: 77) states that "mimesis$_2$ imitates the configured life." In Donald's case, when he was 3, he got physically hurt in the course of a fight between his mother and her boyfriend, which resulted in Child Protective Services coming to the house. After a social

worker investigated the family, she wrote a court report recommending that Donald be removed from the home. In writing that report, the social worker attempted to put some order into Donald's story, or what Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) calls "emplotment." In making her judgment calls, the social worker magnified and distorted the extent of the abuse and overlooked some positive aspects of the home environment—including the deep love that Donald's mother had for him and the protection and guidance his older sister gave him.

In effect, the social worker, operating on the level of $mimesis_2$, did not present the child's reality but an interpretive imitation of that reality as understood by an outsider. As Kearney (2002: 134) notes, "there is a difference between lived and recounted life." Ricoeur (1982: 179) calls what the social worker did "imitating human action in a poetic way." Unfortunately, this can lead to highly undesirable results. In Donald's case, the foster care system placed him in an environment that was actually less psychologically healthy than his original home.

$Mimesis_3$

In child welfare, communicating to other professionals about clients' needs and services is an everyday practice. Staff meetings, trainings, conferences, supervision meetings, and small talk among co-workers are venues to share experiences and stories about clients. When the social workers and supervisors at Child Protective Services read the initial report on Donald and discussed the options for him, they were engaging on the level of $mimesis_3$. However, because they were stuck in traditional ways of thinking, they did not use their imaginations to conceive a better future for Donald.

As Donald matures, especially in his adolescent years, he will probably increase his

own abilities to shift from $mimesis_1$ to $mimesis_2$ and $mimesis_3$. That is, he will not only live his experiences but interpret them and develop life lessons for creating new possibilities for himself. That is why the use of imagination plays such an important role is creating his future.

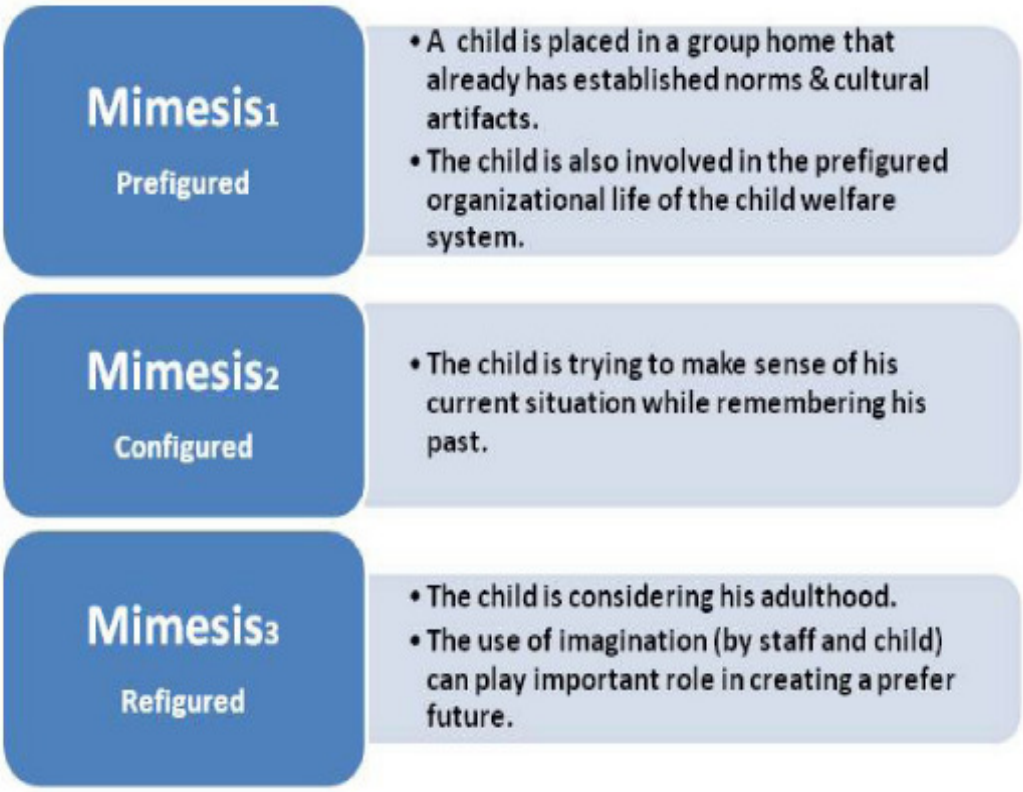


Figure 3: Group Home Placement As It Relates to the Stages of Mimesis (Appendix D) (based on Herda 1999: 78)

Research Categories

In this study, the research categories frame the theoretical orientation toward data collection and data analysis. The research categories in this are the three stages of mimesis as they apply to African American male youths living in group homes.

Research Questions and Conversation Guidelines

The researcher and the 7 participants (six formal conversations and one informal) were interconnected in a meaningful learning process through engaging with the research questions. As Herda (1999: 108) notes:

> There is a close relationship between asking a question and understanding. Gadamer suggests that it is this relationship that gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension. Questioning is not the positing of, but rather the testing of, possibilities. Questioning is like the opening up of meaning, not merely recreating someone else's meaning.

In an inquiry of this type, the overall goal is to aim for a fusion of horizons that opens possibilities for our new understandings with associated actions (Herda 1999). Table 2, below, depicts by research category a sample of the type of questions that directed the research conversations. The questions should not be considered as laws, but more of guidelines for fruitful conversation.

Table 2: Categories and Sample Research Guide

Category & Description	*Sample Research Question*
Mimesis$_1$: Prefiguration	1. Tell me something you remember about your home environment prior to entering foster care. 2. What are some of the main things you remember about the first day you were placed in a group home? 3. What is the most memorable thing that happened to you while you were living in a group home?
Mimesis$_2$: Configuration	4. What are some of the major challenges you see that young African American males placed in group homes face today? 5. Based on your experience, how would you describe some of the major functions of a group home? 6. If you were a director of a group home, how would you design a program that would meet the needs of its residents?
Mimesis$_3$: Refiguration	7. What have you learned from your experience that has prepared you for the future? 8. What roles do you see yourself playing in the future? 9. If you have children in the future, how would you like their lives to be different from yours?

Pilot Study

On November 18, 2007, I conducted a pilot study to test my research categories and conversation questions. The process went well, so I do not anticipate many procedural changes when I conduct the full study. There will be some adjustments, however, since my participant in the pilot study, Dante Hiles, was a 35-year-old African American male, who had spent ten years in the San Francisco County foster care system, ending in 1989. Thus, my conversation with him concerned experiences that had occurred two decades

earlier. In the case of 5 of the other participants, on the other hand, their ages ranged from 18 to 20, and therefore reflected on personal experiences that were much more recent.

Furthermore, in my conversation with Dante, I asked questions that I had written out beforehand, and I asked those questions in an order that I had determined in advance. That took away from some of the spontaneity in the dialogue. Therefore, when I conducted my full study, I tried to memorized the questions a little and asked them as topics emerge naturally in the conversation. I also tried to follow the flow of the dialogue rather than control it. (For a full transcript of my conversation with Dante, see Appendix E.)

The Research Sites

The two sites for this research are: (a) the Long-Term Foster Care Teen Unit, which is part of San Francisco County's Child Protective Services; and (b) the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP). Both of these youth service programs work closely together and are, in fact, located in the same building at 225 Valencia Street in San Francisco. Youths who are not reunified with their parents or adopted by new parents remain court dependents until they are 18. During that period, they are served by case managers in long-term placement units.

In addition to case management provided by CPS, the ILSP helps foster youths between the ages of 14 and 21 to develop skills needed to live successfully after they leave the foster care system. Participation in these workshops is voluntary, so some youths opt out of them. The ILSP offers support in such areas as self-esteem building, college preparation, mentoring, tutoring, computer skills, life skills, referrals for housing, assistance with living expenses, and educational stipends. The Teen Unit and the ILSP

both keep contact information on youths after they leave the system.

Entrée to the Research Sites

Since I am employed by the City and County of San Francisco as a Child Protective Services Worker, I have full access to the case records, court reports, and staff at both of the research sites. The administrators of all the relevant agencies have approved my research project, on the assumption that all my participants will be legal adults. Furthermore, from 2005 to 2006, I worked in the Teen Unit for 15 months as a Child Protective Services Worker, so I am very familiar with the staff and procedures there.

Participant Selection

My participants in this research project were all African American males between the ages of 18 and 36 who had emancipated from a foster care system somewhere in the San Francisco Bay Area, where they were placed in at least one group home (see Appendix F). I have two reasons for choosing this group: (a) many educators believe that African American male youths are the most marginalized group in foster care; and (b) there are fewer requirements for conducting research with adults than with minors who are dependents of a court.

To obtain participants, I asked the administrators of the two research sites to give me the names of up to 20 candidates (ten candidates from each site), along with their personal contact information. The personal information is only to be provided after getting permission from willing participants. The administrators provided me with 12 potential research candidates total for my study. Each 12 potential candidates at that time were told by a staff person at Independent Living Skill Program and/or Teen Unit about

my research as I had provided the staff with full detail about my inquiry. After that I sent a letter of invitation to these candidates, in which I had described the purpose of the study and some of the questions I would like to ask them (see Appendix C). In my case, none of the candidates responded to my letters. I made contact with all 12 potential candidates by phone, but only 7 of them actually met with me. Afterwards, I also mailed the consent form, agreeing to participate in the research conversation, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (see Appendix D) to all 7 candidates in addition to having them to verbalized agreement on audio. I also sent letters of confirmation (Appendix E) to remind individuals about our scheduled meeting. After our research conversations were conducted, all of the participants were sent a follow-up letter to thank them for their participation (Appendix F).

Data Collection

The data were collected by recording and transcribing the conversations with each participant. Each participant was different in ways of responding to questions, knowledge about the subject matter, and cultural ways of communicating. Some participants talked more than others and some participants were practical in their conversation. In all cases, each research conversation were respected, accepted, and viewed as important data for this research. After the research conversations were conducted, I personally transcribed each conversation. Then I sent a copy of the transcript to each participant for his comments and feedback. I only received a phone call from two of participants in regards to changing minor information such as the number of years residing in foster care and year of emancipating out of the foster care system.

Research Journal

In addition to the transcriptions of the conversations, I often noted important information, insights, and discoveries in my research journal. The purpose of keeping an ongoing research journal is to note personal observations and concerns. As Herda (1998: 98) notes:

> An important source of data is the personal log or journal kept by the researcher. This document is the life-source of the data collection process, for in it goes the hopes, fears, questions, ideas, humor, observations, and comments of the researcher. A forthright and well-documented log will show remarkable changes over time in the researcher's understanding of both the process and the theory.

My research journal serves as a source of refuge for me as well as a source for data. A research journal can enlarge the context in which data is understood (Herda 1999). Please find an excerpt from my journal in Appendix G.

Data Analysis

Herda (1999: 98) writes the following about data analysis:

> Analysis is a creative and imaginative act. In data analysis the researcher appropriates a proposed world from the text. When we expose ourselves to a text, we come away from it different than we were before….
> Implications in such research are often two-fold: the researcher sees the world differently than before the research, and implications are manifest for looking at the everyday problems differently.

My own data analysis proceeds in the following sequence:

1. I transcribed the audiotapes of the conversations myself so that I can relive the conversations and gain insights into them.

2. I pulled out significant statements, develop themes, and place them in categories.

3. I substantiated the themes with quotations from the transcripts or my own research journal.

4. I examined the themes to determine their meaning within the framework of critical hermeneutics.

5. I invited the participants to comment on and make changes to the transcript of their individual conversations.

6. I discussed the grouping of themes and sub-themes in a theoretical context.

7. I also discussed the research problem in a theoretical context.

8. I looked for implications of the text that provide new insights and new directions for the issue under investigation.

9. I made suggestions for future research.

10. I presented examples of learning experiences and fusions of horizons on the part of the participants and myself.

Research Timeline

April 24, 2008:	Defended the proposal.
Aug. 01, 2008:	Completed five research conversations and one informal conversation.
Aug. 21, 2008:	Transcribed all five research conversations.
Sept. 06, 2008:	Conducted additional research conversations.
Sept. 13, 2008:	A total of seven research conversations had been transcribed.
Sept. 27, 2008:	Completed the Data Analysis chapter.
Oct. 23, 2008:	Completed the Secondary Analysis chapter.
Dec. 31, 2008:	Scheduled to complete the Summary, Implications, and Recommendations chapter.

Background of the Researcher

In a sense, I feel that this research topic chose me, rather than the other way around. Although I was not in the foster care system as a youth, I am a survivor of child abuse.

My mother, who had a drinking problem, left the home when I was 9. My father then became physically and emotionally abusive toward me.

My teachers weren't the best, either. I can recall a day in first grade when I was called into an office with school staff, and my parents were not there. A woman I had never seen before told me that my chances of succeeding in school and getting a job as an adult were slim to none, if for no other reason than my severely impaired speech. I left that office, rejecting that evaluation, although I kept my thoughts to myself. Those counselors didn't know my fighting spirit.

After that day, I was assigned a speech therapist, and I also started writing short stories, which I shared with only a few teachers and friends. Over the years, I made tremendous progress with my speech, although I still struggle with it a little to this day.

In middle school, I became a problem child after an incident one day in the hallway. My friends, Terrell and Gilbert, were walking through the school with me when we came upon a huge hole in one of the walls. As we stood there discussing whether some kids our own age could have caused so much damage, some girls overheard our conversation and reported us to the principal. When we were called into the office, no one believed we were innocent—not even my father or my friends' parents. After that, we were called into the office whenever something went wrong at school. From there, it was all downhill—lectures from the counselors and suspensions from school.

From the age of 15 on, I was basically living on my own, either on the streets or staying at friends' houses. To me, that was safer than being around my father. In school, ironically, I was doing well academically, but getting into trouble socially. For example, I might finish a class assignment before everyone else, but then get into a fight with the

boy sitting next to me. One of my teachers decided that my problem was that the work was too easy for me, so I should be assigned me to honors classes. The other teachers went along with this plan, hoping that I would get in over my head and drop out of school.

At first, this strategy worked out very badly for me. The other kids in my classes made fun of me, and the teachers also made me the butt of jokes. One of the problems was that I was from a neighborhood that was looked down on by the other kids, so I was always having to stand up for my neighborhood, which frequently turned into fights.

Luckily for me, all of this changed when a new counselor, Ms. Martin, arrived at the school and took a liking to young Shadrach. She had faith in me and told me that one day I would help little black boys who had gotten into trouble like me. “Live up to your name,” she said. “In the Bible, Shadrach survived in the fiery furnace. And so will you!” I started to believe in myself, and by the end of twelfth grade, I walked off the stage with a diploma in my hand.

My experience with that counselor *did* inspire me to help others, especially young African American males, who are too often ignored at best and condemned at worst. Middle-class values and conventional thinking have no place for them. Organizational trainings and classrooms are vehicles for maintaining the status quo. Both as a professional in the social work field and as an adult African American male, I feel that it is my duty to conduct research that supports better, more productive practices. In this spirit, I, Shadrach Linscomb, proudly present this dissertation.

Summary

In this Chapter, I have presented the hermeneutic theoretical framework of the study,

including a description of the categories of mimesis$_1$, mimesis$_2$, and mimesis$_3$. I then outlined the research questions and presented the conversation guidelines. After presenting a brief description of the pilot study for this project, I described the two research sites for my study and how I had selected the participants for this study from those sites. I then described the ways I gathered the data for the study and the ways I analyzed that data. Finally, I presented my own personal and professional backgrounds, indicating how these have brought me to this project and prepared me to conduct it.

CHAPTER FIVE:

DATA PRESENTATION AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Introduction

When we are asked who we are, we often respond by telling our story, reflecting on the past, recounting the present, and anticipating the future. Narrative provides one of our most useful forms of understanding our historical identity (Kearney 2001). Unless we reclaim, understand, and reinterpret our history, we cannot create a future that consists of new possibilities. Ricoeur (1992: 163) writes about this:

> The past of narration is but the quasi past of the narrative voice. Now among the facts recounted in the past tense we find projects, expectations, and anticipations by means of which the protagonists in the narrative are oriented toward their mortal future…. In other words, the narrative also recounts care. In a sense, it only recounts care. This is why there is nothing absurd in speaking about narrative unity of life, under the sign of narratives that teach us how to articulate narratively retrospection and prospection.

The data analysis for this study will be presented in a form of emplotment and narrative. I have transcribed all of my research conversations after allowing the participants to read and modify the text. From that text, I present the data in a narrative form that includes characters, testimonies, plots, descriptions of settings, and my own reflections. It is important for the stories of the past to be uncovered, for they reveal the possibilities for the future (Ricoeur 1981). The narrative format helps to capture stories about fear, pain, understanding, and hope in way that is highly personal. This snapshot provides the reader a presentation that is far more multi-dimensional than a research

survey. As past stories are discussed, new stories can emerge. As Ricoeur (1981: 277) says, “These changes, in turn, reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the characters, giving rise to a new predicament which calls for thought or action or both.” This new narrative can open many possibilities for the future as the clients engage in rewriting their story.

Study 1: Dante Hiles

My first research conversation was with Dante Hiles, a 36-year-old African American male, who exited from the foster care system in 1991, when he was 18. Currently, Dante resides in Stockton, California, with his wife and two children. My drive from my home to Stockton to meet him was emotional. Dante is my biological nephew, since my half-sister is his mother. Although he is only a few years younger than I, we have been strangers to each other for the past fifteen years or more. At one time, we were close, and there are many photos of us together as little boys. Now I have a closer connection with my neighborhood cleaner than I do with my nephew. Dante was put into foster care at the tender age of 8, and remained there until adulthood. As I was driving to his house, I was thinking that just maybe this research project could lessen the emotional distance between us. In fact, I was wondering just how that distance had gotten so deep.

I remembered how big he was, even as boy—tall and wide. He would get into trouble at school and home, playing practical jokes. Or at least *he* thought he was playing. Other people didn’t take things that way. For example, a teacher once complained to his mom that he had set fire to a trash can in the classroom, putting the kids at risk. My sister had a hard time disciplining him, because even when she became physical, that didn’t stop him. We used to say about him, “He can take a whooping!”

After two hours, I finally arrived at the address that my nephew had given me. When he opened the door, he seemed to be prepared for my visit. To begin with, his wife and children were already out of the house, and he had set up a table and chairs for us in his living room. He asked if I wanted to drink anything, and I asked for coffee—black with three teaspoons of sugar. A hot cup of coffee always calms me down. While he fetched a cup of old Joe for me, I pulled out my compact audio recorder and a notebook and pen, just in case I needed to jot something down. I also placed my list of questions in front of me on the table. Dante soon returned with my cup of coffee and a can of Sprite for himself. It was time to get things started, so I turned on my audio recorder.

At first, it was hard for Dante to tell his story. To many of my questions, he would reply, "I really don't know" or "I don't wanna talk about that." But as the conversation progressed, we both became more relaxed, and he began to open up about his life. I was emotionally moved by his comments when he described how he had been taken away from his mother. "I came home one day," he said, "and there was my mom, sitting in the kitchen with a white gentleman. And then my mom said, 'You're gonna be going with him.' That's how she presented the situation to me. I was shocked and didn't put up no fight or anything, but got in the county car, and looked through the back window at my mom as we pulled away."

He was placed in a foster home, and then in another one, and next in one group home after another, because he always acted up and got thrown out.

"It gave me a lotta hate and a lotta anger," he said. "I feel that I was cheated. Not just cheated because I was taken from my mother, but also cheated out of getting an education. The staff in those homes never cared about me or my getting an education."

At times, it was difficult for me to stay focused on what Dante was saying, because his experiences were so similar to my own as a boy, and my memories kept intruding on my thoughts.

Nevertheless, I pushed my memories out of my mind and strove to get a better understanding of how he felt about being placed in foster care and group homes. As I asked Dante questions, I occasionally sipped on my coffee to give him time to think over his answers. I wanted to know about the structure and routines and rituals of group home life.

"See," he responded, putting down his Sprite, "when I was in there in those days, the counselors didn't help. It was like they were preparing us for prison. They gave us a certain time to go out and return. They didn't care what we did in the street."

I just let Dante tell his story. He obviously had a lot on his mind that he wanted to be heard. He brought up his negative experiences and also what he wished would have taken place instead.

"If I had it to do all over again, " he said, "I would have kicked and screamed when that man was taking me away from my mom. I would have begged her to let me stay."

Dante was bitter that, once he was in the system, no one in his family, including his mother, ever came to visit him. Social workers did occasionally arrange for him to visit his mom at her house, but only for a few hours at a time. When Dante was 15, his mom gave birth to his brother, and it was emotionally very hard for Dante to watch his mother raise this boy to adulthood. When Dante was 17, his mom gave birth to a girl who was even wilder than Dante, and yet his mom never placed her in foster care. This also made Dante feel worse about the way his mom had treated him. It occurred to me that one of

the main reasons for the difference in the way my sister treated her three children is that Dante was so big, and his size, even when he was a child, intimidated people.

When Dante was approaching his eighteenth birthday, and about to be released from his group home, he got into a fight with another boy, and ended up seriously hurting both that boy and the staff person who tried to break up the fight. That landed Dante in the custody of the California Youth Authority.

"I got into a fight every day I was in there," he said. "The first one came right after I was booked."

Three years later, when he came out of the CYA, he immediately married a girl he had met four years before, and kept in contact with throughout his confinement—with visits, letters, and phone calls. Now he had two children with her: a 15-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy.

"I'm just trying to make sure my kids have a better childhood than I did," he said.

When I left Dante's house, I drove a few blocks away and pulled over to think things over. As I sat in my car for a good twenty minutes, reliving the encounter I had just had with my nephew, I thought of all the ways his story as a boy was so similar to my own.

Study 2: Barry Weston

Barry Weston, a 20-year-old African American male, exited from the San Francisco foster care system in the summer of 2007. One of counselors at the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) provided me with Mr. Weston's contacting information. After two brief phone contacts with Barry, I finally made arrangements to meet with him in a small office used by the ILSP in San Francisco. Since I am an employee of the Human Service Agency, which is in the same building, it was easy for me to book and use the room. I

was not sure if Barry would be comfortable in that room, since it is one floor below the Foster Care Teen Unit, where he used to meet his social worker, but it was available and would give us more privacy than, say, a coffee shop. As it turned out, the location of the room did not bother him at all.

I went to the room thirty minutes early to set up my digital audio recorder and look over my notes. I had my written list of questions with me, but I had pretty much committed them to memory. I also brought two notebooks and two pens, one set for me and the other for Barry, if he wished to write anything down, which it turned out he didn't.

Barry did not show up at the appointed time. After half an hour, when I was starting to pack up my things to go, he arrived. He had some apology about missing his bus, but I only half listened to that because I was just happy that he had made it. We quickly introduced ourselves to each other, since we had never met before, and then we sat down for our conversation. He broke the ice with a joke "is this going to hurt," he asked. We both laughed accordingly.

Barry was a slim, light-skinned African American male, about 6'-2", who spoke with a soft voice. My first questions to him were framed within the first stage of mimesis, since I was trying to get an understanding of his life prior to entering foster care. However, I soon learned that Barry had been in foster care ever since he was a baby, and so he had no memories of anything before the age of five or six. He told me that he had been in ten different homes over the years: four of them, foster homes; and the other six, group homes.

Barry related to me how he had been hurt several times, both physically and

emotionally, by other boys in those homes, and he was critical of the staff for not preventing this:

> Me personally, I see one of the challenging things is getting jumped by other residents. Also, being in a house with other youths who had been abused, sexually or mentally or physically, isn't easy. Kids sometimes hurt other kids, and there isn't nobody around to stop stuff like that. It would be better if they would be around to watch stuff like that. Not just sitting there doing their job, but going into residents' rooms to make sure everything is okay and safe.

From what he told me, it sounded like Barry was on the losing end of most of the fights with the other boys. His slight build made him a perfect target for bigger boys, as I know from my own experience as a group home counselor.

I asked Barry what thoughts he had about designing group homes to make them work better in the future, since he had so much experience with them. He responded that it is important for staff to listen to the boys and take time to get to know them. I was a bit surprised by this answer, since in all the years he had spent in foster care and group homes, I figured there must have been *some* individuals who listened to and cared about him. But I did not want to challenge him, because I wanted to give him the space to tell his own story. I might have asked him if listening and caring were all that matters in a group setting, but that question did not occur to me at the time.

Barry had some vague notions of what he wanted to do with himself later in life, but no clear plans for getting there. He was a student at City College, he said, and had some financial assistance from the school, but he didn't yet have an academic major, and he wasn't working. When I specifically asked him about his future plans, he said, "When I get older and get some money, I want to give back to my community. Me personally, I

see myself starting a school." I wasn't sure if he meant this or if it were just something he said to try to impress me. In any case, I didn't come away with the sense that Barry had clear and practical ways to achieve realistic goals. Overall, his responses to my questions were less substantive than I would have wished.

When I reflected on our dialogue after Barry left, I realized that, up until a couple of years before, social workers and other professionals had been responsible for providing care for him and had made all his important decisions for him. He had no family members who served as role models for him to help him navigate his way through life. I was somewhat depressed by the thought that the foster care system in this country does not seem to be designed to produce individuals who are successful in the adult world.

Study 3: Marcus Hubbard

At the time of our meeting, Marcus was a 19-year-old African American male who had been emancipated from the foster care system in the fall of 2007 and was participating in the Independent Living Skills Program of San Francisco. Prior to my selecting him for this study, the program staff reported to me that Marcus was emotionally delayed but highly functional. I did not let that assessment bias my judgment, either in having him as a co-researcher for this project or when I was talking with him during our conversation, because I myself am a survivor of physical abuse, which impacted my emotional development and gave me an aversion to being in groups.

I arranged to meet Marcus in the office where I conduct my own publishing house, View House Publishing, in Oakland, California, because that location was convenient for both of us. On the cold and rainy night of the meeting, I was running a little late because of an emergency with a client in my social work practice. When I called Marcus on his

cell phone to tell him I would be about twenty minutes late, I learned that he was already standing outside the building in which my office is located. But he was willing to wait for me.

When I arrived, I found a slim, brown-skinned young man, about 6'-0" tall, waiting for me. Since I felt bad about being late, I invited him to have dinner with me at a Chinese restaurant a block away, with the understanding that I would pay for the meal.

As we walked to the restaurant, I observed that Marcus was very polite, but not very talkative. When we sat down in one of my favorite restaurants, I was glad to be out of the cold and wet weather. Marcus ordered shrimp fried rice, and I ordered my favorite dish, salt-and-peppered prawns with garlic noodles. As we waited for the food, I decided not to stick to my prepared questions, but to just let Marcus talk freely about his experiences.

As he spoke, I realized that he reminded me a little of myself, because he had a slight speech impairment like the one I had at his age. Most of our conversation focused on the difficulties he was having finding his own place to live. He was currently staying at the home of his maternal aunt, from which he had been removed as a little boy. “But every day,” he said, “she tells me I need to find my own place.”

Marcus told me that he was attending workshops in the Independent Living Skills Program, but as I listened to him, I realized once again that the ILSP may be good at providing a social club atmosphere and a sense of belonging, and may teach the youths genuine social and practical skills, but in one meeting for two hours every week, there is no way that the program can substitute for good parenting.

Marcus and I enjoyed our dinners, but afterwards we both returned to our separate realities.

Study 4: Brahim Remmas

Brahim Remmas is a 19-year-old African American male, who was emancipated from the foster care system in the fall of 2006. Currently, he is a participant in the Independent Living Skills Program in San Francisco. Since this was my fourth research conversation, I was relaxed before he got there, and I was ready to jump right in.

I met with Brahim in the same room that I met with Barry Weston. Brahim was a little shorter than me and a little stockier. He wore a baseball cap turned slightly to the side, which went with his hip style.

When he arrived on time, I turned on my audio recorder, reminded him of the purpose of my research, and recorded his consent to participate. To break the ice with him, I started by chatting about sports, and soon discovered that he was a Forty-Niners football fan, just like me. That conversation relaxed both of us, so I started to focus in on his experiences as a foster youth. It soon became apparent that he did not want to talk about his life prior to his being placed in foster care, and the tense expression on his face and the way he held his arms across his chest told me that it would not be wise to push him to do so. He did indicate that he did not like living in group homes, and would have preferred living in a foster home. Then he went on to explain to me the difference between the two:

> I was actually in a group home, and not a foster home. Foster homes and group homes are not the same. See, there is a little difference between the two. I am pretty sure you might know a little bit about it, but to me a foster home is more like a family thing in place, and a group home is more like a business where kids come in and out. The main group home staff gets paid for dealing with the children that are residents…. So, to be blunt about it, at first when I entered my first group home, it was a little cool, but everybody started bumping heads in there. I was the one that everybody

> messed with the most, so it was kinda hard for me. Since I was the youngest, everybody attacked me, because that is how it is.

I felt honored that Brahim was opening up to me, especially since he was becoming more and more emotional as he recalled his experiences. I did my best to be delicate with him and just let him share his stories in whatever ways were comfortable for him. Toward the end of our conversation, he talked about how difficult it could be when he would get used to living in one group home and then get into trouble, which would cause him to be placed in another home:

> I tried to prevent it from happening, 'cause I was comfortable, in a sense. You know how it is when you move in with somebody and get kinda homey and used to things. You don't want to really move unless you really need to. Yeah, it was kinda like that for me.

Although Brahim definitely did not enjoy his life as a group home resident, it was clear that he appreciated having someone listen to his story. Just before he left, he told me that he had a job in a grocery store, was taking photography classes, was trying to stay on the right track, but wasn't sure what the future held for him.

After he was gone, I sat for a few minutes, reflecting on our conversation. Although I hadn't wanted to push him to tell me anything he was uncomfortable about, I wasn't sure I had found the right balance in this respect. Perhaps, I thought, I could have drawn him out a bit more.

Study 5: Sheldon McClain

Sheldon McClain was an 18-year-old African American male, who had been

emancipated from the foster care system in the summer of 2007, and was currently living with his paternal uncle, sleeping on the couch in a one-bedroom apartment in Richmond, California. At the time I met him, he was participating in the Independent Living Skills Program in Contra Costa County.

I met with Sheldon in the living room of his uncle's home. During our conversation, his uncle stayed in the bedroom for most of the time, but came out once or twice to get something from the kitchen, without in any way interrupting the conversation Sheldon and I were having.

Sheldon was a light-skinned, slim, tall, young African American male, about 6' 2". I quickly learned that his father was serving a life term in San Quentin Prison for murder, and that his mother had died a few years ago. Like all the other boys in my study up to now, Sheldon did not want to talk about his life prior to his being placed in foster care. This made me wonder if I needed to rephrase some of my questions to make the boys open up more about this topic.

Sheldon told me that he was in the same group home for ten years, starting from the age of eight. For the first couple of years, he felt very timid around the other boys. When he got older, however, and taller, he eventually became "king" of the house, dominating the other boys, but still respectful toward the staff.

Unlike all the other boys I had met so far, Sheldon had a very positive attitude about his life in the group home, which he indicated was far more nurturing than his life with his biological family. "Yeah, man," he said, "before I came to the group home, I didn't have anyone to celebrate my birthdays. But at the group home, they celebrated my birthdays. It was cool having someone celebrate your birthday for once." In fact, Sheldon

regarded the residents and the staff at his group home as family members, and he told me how much he missed interacting with them. Although it was against the rules, he visited his old group home from time to time for the first year after he left it, and would have dinner there. Everyone—staff and residents alike—welcomed him.

Sheldon was also the only boy to date to mention that he was in therapy. He told me that he regularly went to both group and one-on-one therapy sessions, and spoke positively about them.

Sheldon didn't say anything about his feelings for his uncle, but commented that he was staying in this house only temporarily and was planning to move to Los Angeles to be closer to some other relatives. He was very proud of the fact that he had a job as a cashier at Wal-Mart.

When I left the house, I sat in my car for a few minutes to jot a few things down in my journal. Here was a young man who had positive feelings toward the professionals who had worked with him over the years and who actually had warm feelings toward his group home. Perhaps it had helped that he had been in only one home all those years, and not bounced from one to another. Although he didn't have his own real bed at the moment, Sheldon did have a job, and he was looking forward to starting a new life in Los Angeles. In my heart, I wished him well.

Study 6: Nathan Gaines

Nathan Gaines was an 18-year-old African American male, who was 5'9" tall and weighed 200 pounds. His thick eyeglasses gave him the look of a professor. One of my colleagues whose is a director of a group home in Richmond told me that one of his residents recently emancipated out of the system. I asked my colleague to give Mr.

Gaines my number in regards to my study and to my surprise Mr. Gaines gave me a call. He suggested that we meet at a certain spot in a park in Richmond, California, so we did.

I arrived first, and recognized Nathan from his red shirt, which he had told me he would be wearing. When we first met, I asked him if he had any hobbies, and he told me he liked to read, especially Harry Potter books. Once I turned the conversation onto his life, Nathan told me that he had been emancipated from the foster care system in June 2008. He had no memory of his life prior to foster care, he said, since he had been removed from his biological family when he was only an infant. He had no idea why he had been placed in foster care. "I think it was over some family affair or some family incident," he said. "It's really hard to remember because I was just a little baby." I didn't tell him that, in my experience, when children are taken from their parents as infants, there is usually a substance abuse problem in the home, and so he was probably drug-exposed from a very young age, if not even before birth.

Nathan did remember that he was in a foster home in Hercules with a white couple until the age of six, but then was removed from there for some reason he was unaware of. "I went to a couple of different homes within a year's time," he said, "and then, for some reason, I was later placed back with the home in Hercules." At that time, the foster father was no longer living in the home, and Nathan had no further contact with him. At the age of fifteen, Nathan was placed in a group home in Richmond and remained there until he was emancipated at eighteen. I asked him why he had been placed in the group home, but he didn't want to talk about it. He did tell me, however, that he called his foster mother on the phone every week he was in the group home, and still calls her to this day.

One topic that Nathan did want to discuss was the fact that, while he was in the group

home, he took psychotropic medications. I told him that, as a minor, he had the right to refuse taking them. He said that he knew that, but took them anyway because it would make it easier for him to get along with the staff. In any case, he discontinued taking the medications after his emancipation.

When I asked him about his future plans, Nathan said that he intended to go to a community college and maybe study filmmaking. Currently, he is residing in a transitional housing program for adult males.

After Nathan left the park, I wondered why he had been taken away from his foster mother in Hercules, given back to her, and then taken away again, years later. But these are things I will never know.

Study 7: Edward Aduelohiym

My final research partner was Edward Aduelohiym, who was referred to me by a woman whom I will call "Terry," who is the administrator of the Independent Living Skills Program in San Francisco. She told me that Edward had made a successful transition into adulthood, and I should meet him. Edward now resides in Arizona, but visits San Francisco three or four times a year to see his biological sister, who is a couple of years older than him, and to visit with the ILSP staff, especially "Terry."

At my suggestion, Edward and I met for dinner at Everett and Jones Barbeque in Jack London Square in Oakland, over the Labor Day weekend in 2008. We found a cozy spot in the back and sat down to look over the menu. Edward ordered a beef brisket dinner, and I ordered a chicken dinner with a Sock-it-to-me cake. Both of us washed down our food with huge glasses of lemonade. I had already discovered that enjoying a good dinner together has a way of breaking the ice.

Edward is a tan-skinned, 33-year-old African American male, about 5'10" and 185 pounds. His story is quite different from those of the other participants in this study because he asked to be placed in foster care. “I volunteered to be placed into the system,” he said. “My sister and I believed that my home environment wasn’t good for me.” So his sister called Child Protective Services when he was almost sixteen, and they removed him from the home.

Edward went on to tell me that his mother had died when he was young, and that he had a bad relationship with his father, who was a drug dealer and substance abuser. In fact, the home, Edward said, was basically a place for continual drug activity and traffic. Therefore, he and his sister decided that foster care was his only option.

As he was telling me about this, Edward paused for a moment, apparently reliving his experiences in that house. I remained quiet, not wanting to interrupt his thoughts and feelings.

Next he told me about his journey into foster care. For the first three weeks, he lived in two different shelter homes, and then was placed in a group home called Park Place, where he stayed for the next two years, until he turned eighteen. Thus, Edward is the only one of the seven participants in this study who was not put into a group home because of behavioral or mental health issues. He felt that Park Place tried to meet his needs, and during that time he became quite close with “Terry,” whom he regards as a mother figure. A smile came to his face whenever he mentioned her name, and he told me that his relationship with her had inspired him to become a social worker. Basically, he wanted to reach out to others the way she had reached out to him. “It’s true,” he said, “that some kids need someone to hold their hand in tough situations until they learn how to walk

through by themselves." Terry, he said, knew when to hold on and when to let go. On the other hand, he recognized that not all kids in group homes have positive experiences like his:

> I may be one of those who benefited from the ILSP program, but I would say that most of my friends had a hard time with that transition, because to them the ILSP wasn't real life. The program does have great services to offer, but connecting that with real-life experiences is a challenge.

Today, Edward has a bachelor's degree in Social Work, and is a county social worker in Arizona. In fact, the work he does is very similar to the work I do. When we left the restaurant together, I said to him, "Continue to do your good work with the young people," and he wished me the same. I was glad that "Terry" had introduced us.

Summary

In this Chapter, I have presented my research conversations with seven African American male youths who lived at various ages in one or more group homes in the San Francisco Bay Area. These conversations, along with my journal notes and my personal reflections, are the preliminary sources for the data analysis that forms the body of the next chapter. I have presented this data to the reader in the form of narratives that contain personal descriptions, story lines, quotes, and personal reflections.

My goal in this Chapter was to depict actual people dealing with life, rather than to present impersonal subjects in an abstract research design. Dante, Barry, Marcus, Brahim, Sheldon, Nathan, and Edward are real people, telling their stories to a real person, who also has memories and feelings about similar events in his own life. Thus, as a researcher,

I brought my own experiences to the text, but I never let my voice drown out the voices of the speakers. Likewise, my reflections never get in the way of understanding these young men, but rather serve as a microphone for them to tell their stories.

CHAPTER SIX:

SECONDARY ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the data presented in Chapter Five through the lens of critical hermeneutic theory, especially three conceptual research categories that are based on Ricoeur's (1984) stages of mimesis, which I discussed earlier, in Chapter Four. This secondary analysis presents some new possibilities for understanding the specific experiences of the participants in this study. That is, the shift from $mimesis_1$ to $mimesis_2$ to $mimesis_3$ (see Figure 4) in the experiences of these young men will help us to understand the dynamics of their lives, how they themselves interpret those lives, and how those lives are interpreted by others.

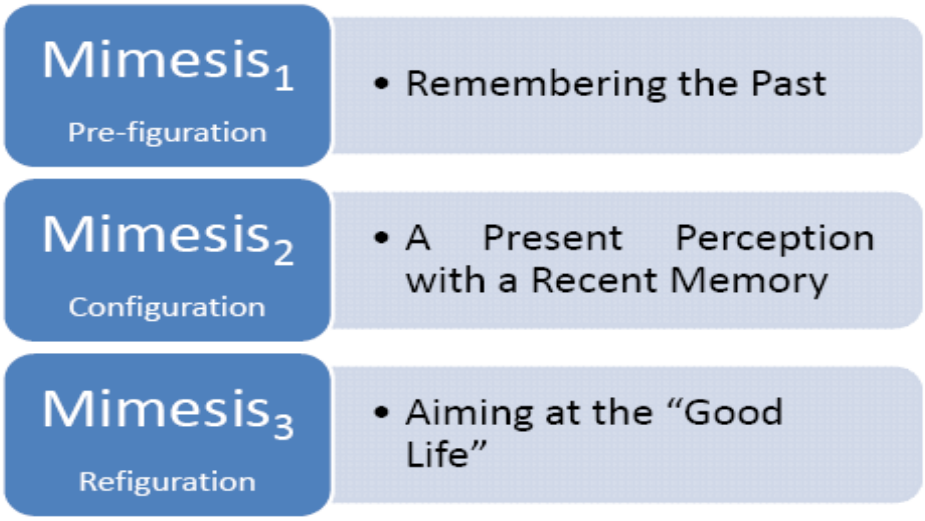


Figure 4: Stages of Mimesis (based on Ricoeur 1992)

Mimesis$_1$: Pre-figuration—Remembering the Past

Each young man who participated in this study had, at one time in his life, been removed from a parent or a family member by Child Protective Services, so I began every conversation by asking about this episode in their lives. Even though each story was unique, the emotions the boys felt were very similar, for their tragic experiences had repercussions throughout their lives. Ricoeur (1992: 152) reminds us that "tragedy is essentially an imitation [*mimesis*] not of persons but of action and life [*bion*], of happiness and misery."

The boys often relive, recount, and reinterpret their tragic stories. Those narratives never end because they constantly look back at things differently. A young boy who tells his friends about his removal three months after the event recites a very different version from the one he will tell when he becomes an adult who shares his story with co-workers. Not only are the words different, but also their meaning. Here are some quotes from my research partners as they shared their experiences with me about being removed from their families:

- "I came home from school and I was taken away."
- "It is sad to say, but I do remember the day I entered the foster care system."
- "I was just going through some hard times with my family, and that is why I ended up in foster care, but I don't want to talk about it too much."
- "Well, at first I was a little scared and kind of nervous."
- "It is kind of hard to talk about. Let's just say that I have been in foster care my whole entire life."

- "I wanted to be placed into foster care because my home environment was so dysfunctional."
- "It was a long time ago, and I don't remember the details."

Although most of the boys were removed from their families by Child Protective Services because the boys were at risk of being harmed or had actually already been harmed, not one of the seven young men reported to me that he had been removed from his family for his own safety. All but one of the young men blamed themselves and their behavior for the removal, feeling that they were outsiders in their own families.

Mimesis$_2$: Configuration—A Present Perception with a Recent Memory

After being removed from their families and placed in a foster home, each one of the young men engaged in the process of trying to make sense of his new reality while remembering his past life with his family. During this stage, each boy reinterpreted events and agents in a search for meaning (Ricoeur 1992). They recalled this period to me in the following terms:

- "I feel that I was cheated. Not just cheated because I was taken from my mother, but also cheated from getting an education. Not getting a proper education, I feel, screwed up my future. I feel that from going to group homes to group homes screwed up my future by preventing me from getting a good education."
- "Being placed in a house with other residents who had been physically abused, sexually or mentally, isn't easy. Kids sometimes hurt other kids, and there isn't anybody around to stop stuff like that."
- "Yeah, I had a lot of problems growing up. Got in a group home when I was about twelve, and I didn't leave until I was eighteen last year."

- "Everybody wants to be home with their family because they don't think they really belong in foster care. But the real reality is that some group homes might treat you better than your family did…at least at the group home I was in. Still, kids have this fantasy or idea about being with their family."

- "A group home is a place where they care for you, provide food, and clothing for you."

- "I was basically alone and on my own. I also was worrying about the other kids and how I was going to fit in with other kids in the group home. I also thought a lot about the fact that I was in a home with people who weren't my family."

- You know, you now have a social worker to help you out with things."

Mimesis$_3$: Refiguration—Aiming at the "Good Life"

Ricoeur (1992: 172) writes, "Let us define 'ethical intention' as aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions." Ideally, Child Protective Services should be one of these just institutions, but it often falls short in many ways. When a young African American male is placed in foster care, he looks forward to what will become of him in adulthood. Unfortunately, the social workers in Child Protective Services too often fail to help him aim for the good life because they fail to use their imaginations. They narrow his options instead of broadening them. On the other hand, social workers can be highly inspirational. One of my research partners told me that a female counselor who worked in the Independent Living Skills Program helped him to imagine what he might be like as an adult, and it is thanks to her that he went to college and became a social worker. "She was a big role model for me," he said, "so I thought about giving back to other kids as she had done for me. She walked me through and held my hand as if I were a baby. So I want to help other foster children in the same way." As we look at this young man's story, we see

that the services provided by the Independent Living Skills Program were less important than the relationship he established with the counselor—in Gadamer's (1960) terms, an I-Thou (b) relationship.

Summary

All but one of the young African American males who participated in this study indicated that they had major difficulties with the transition process when they were taken from their parental home to the foster care system, and then again when they left the foster care system to enter the adult world.

I feel that I have grown from this experience, both as a person and as a professional in the social work field. The process of gathering and analyzing data on these young men was therapeutic, enlightening, and joyful at the same time.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

Hermeneutic reflection provides the framework to better understand everyday social experiences. An interpretive approach to the research at hand brings new understandings. Ricoeur (1998: 185) writes, "the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation." A critical hermeneutic orientation has allowed tradition, imagination, and critique to play significant roles in this research and to create possibilities for transformation for self and others (Ricoeur 1998).

In these final pages of this dissertation, I present the major findings of my study, the major policy recommendations that I have conceived, and suggestions that I have for future research. Less traditionally, I then present my own personal reflections and two letters that I believe will inspire people who are in the situation that the participants in my study found themselves in as boys.

Findings and Implications

All the young men in this study were open to having a conversation with this researcher. From those conversations, I gathered some commonalities, which I am presenting here as seven findings that enhance our understanding of their social experiences as residents of group homes. I am especially interested in the implications for professionals in the field.

Finding 1: Separation, Alienation, and Isolation

The act of being removed from one's family is a tragic event that the young males often relive in their minds.

Interventions may be designed to meet the specific needs of individuals, but they may actually destroy those individuals' self-esteem. Most social work programs are involved in actions of separation. That is, they separate from the general population those individuals who have been diagnosed as having certain problems, such as autism or antisocial behavior. This social lumping leads to alienation and generalization among the boys—alienation because they are separated out from everyone else, and generalization because not every autistic child is the same. This process of alienation and generalization only intensifies as the boys grow older. Many young African American males in group homes "graduate" directly into criminal institutions. The question is, how can we create services that are more inclusive and less exclusive?

Finding 2: The Need to Connect with Others

Each one of young men expressed the importance of developing supportive relationships with others.

Although these young men were separated from their families, labeled in various ways, and lumped together by syndrome, they still felt the need to bond with others. Therefore, service providers in the field need to know how to relate to such individuals, especially by actively listening to them, showing compassion for their needs, and connecting them to helpful members of society at large.

Finding 3: Creating a Supportive Homelike Culture

It is important for the culture of the group setting to feel like home. Things worked well for these young men at those times when the staff members attempted to make the environment feel familiar.

The young men in this study all entered a group home that already existed and had a structure and rules prior to their arrival. The director of the home probably designed a program not only to meet the needs of the residents, but his or her own needs. Thus, when a new resident arrives, he must learn the established ways of the home and conform to them. Also, prior to his arrival, the staff have received multiple documents about him, such as court reports and psychological evaluations, which predispose them to relate to the young man in specific ways, many of them negative.

Thus, the staff members should learn about each resident primarily through their own conversations with and observations of him, and not let his paper trail overly influence them. Even in those cases where social reports appear to be accurate assessments of a young man, these reports should be regarded as only one among many narratives about him. Everyone's life consists of many narratives. For example, a young man who is prescribed psychotropic medications for his mental health issues might be a brilliant musician. With the right support, he could make a profession out of his musical talent. Too often, the early labels put on an individual prevent him from reaching his potential.

Thus, it is essential for group home staff to engage in meaningful conversations with the residents, their family members, and other service providers to truly address the multiple needs of the boys. Sometimes, the key to helping a boy might be as simple as celebrating his birthday or giving him music lessons.

Finding 4: The Importance of Education

The young men in this study viewed education as an important vehicle for achieving a good life.

Although the literature shows that many African American boys in foster care, and in group homes in particular, are not succeeding in the public school system, the boys I talked with all stressed how important it is to get a good education if one wants to have a good life. Six of the seven young men regretted not having gotten that education. The seventh *had* a bachelor's degree in social work, a good job in that field, and was pleased with the work he was doing.

Finding 5: Misunderstanding by Others

All the young men stated that their actions and behaviors were often misunderstood by others.

The Child Protective Service system and foster care in general were created to protect children from physical and mental abuse. Professionals may believe that group homes are designed to meet the needs of foster children with specific mental health and behavioral issues, but the unspoken message often is that group home residents are "different," have serious emotional and behavioral issues, and are incapable of doing anything without supervision.

Especially because of this labeling process, all the young men in my study felt that other people had been predisposed to attribute certain motives to them, whether or not these assumptions were accurate. This miscommunication was not confined to the boys'

interactions with professionals, but also extended to their relations with other boys, who also bought into the labeling.

Finding 6: Internal and External Factors to Placement

The majority of the young men in this study believed that their own behavior was the main contributing factor in why they had been placed in a group home.

All but two of the young African American men in this study had been placed in foster care between the time of birth and the age of 7 (the exceptions were 8 and 15). Because these boys were so young, they tended to blame themselves, from the very beginning, for their being taken away from their families. At their tender age, they obviously lacked the perspective to understand that they were being abused by others in their home. This self-blame continues right up to the present.

Thus, professionals who interact with boys in group homes, or even with men who had lived in group homes earlier in their lives, need to be sensitive to this tendency on their part to blame themselves for their situation.

Finding 7: Difficulties Transitioning to Adulthood

All but one of the young men in this study experienced major difficulties with transitioning into adulthood.

As stated earlier, many young African American males in group homes go directly from there to penal institutions. But that is not their only problem when they mature. Some have mental illness issues, some cannot find gainful employment, and many become homeless.

The Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) in San Francisco is designed to help foster youth with the transition to adulthood. Every county in California has a similar program, and there are comparable ones in other states. But although the ILSP helps the youth with various skills, including self-esteem building, college preparation, computer literacy, referrals for housing, and assistance with living expenses, even the most successful of the young men in this study felt that the program may be, as one of them put it, "good, but it's not real life." On paper, he said, the ILSP does some fine work, but the reality is that African American boys who live in group homes eventually go back to the neighborhoods they originally came from, and therefore they have to deal with the poverty and violence that are typical of those marginalized communities.

Policy Recommendations

Some of these findings are more manageable by professionals than others. The first, removal from the family, is the most difficult to counteract because it is in the distant past. Sensitivity and realism on the part of professionals can go a long way to addressing the other six. Below I have provided some helpful suggestions in term of policies for administrators and leaders in the field to consider in order to create a social environment that meets the needs of the participants in this study. The goal is to move us from our traditional way of operating, which often leads many young people to travel to the journey of otherness (see Figure 5).

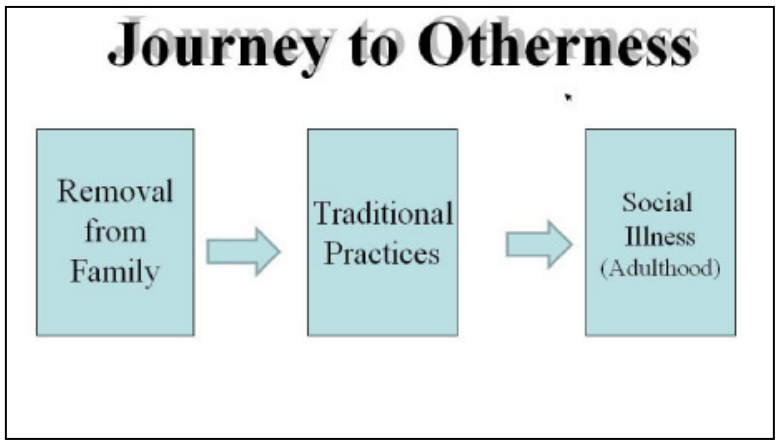


Figure 5: Traditional Ways of Operating

Extending the Age of Dependency

Transitioning into adulthood is a difficult enough process for all young people, so the social and other barriers are even greater for youths who have recently been emancipated from the foster care system. One helpful intervention might be to extend the age of emancipation from 18 to 21. The legal system should offer this extended dependency only under the following conditions: (a) the youth must participate in the program voluntarily; (b) the youth must have an educational and/or vocational plan in place; (c) the years between 18 and 21 must be strictly focused on transitioning to adulthood; (d) a case manager must be assigned to the youth; (e) there must be transitional housing for the youth; and (f) the court should review the youth's circumstances every six months.

Opportunities for the Youths to Tell Their Own Narratives

As stated earlier, when a child is placed in a group home, his paperwork usually arrives before him, which gives the staff time to learn about him. Unfortunately, this

often leads to social labeling and prevents meaningful possibilities. To prevent there being such dominant narratives about youths, social workers should create formats for them to tell their own stories, which could be attached to the official papers. These stories could describe the boys' strengths through their own eyes, and need not necessarily be in written form. Although they could be shaped into essays or poetry, the stories might also be captured in video presentations, painting, sculptures, music, or some other form of artistic expression. These self-narratives should be just as important as any other part of the boys' files. Such creative narratives would enrich the interactions between the boys and the professionals.

Raising the Racial Consciousness of the Professionals

Many of boys in group homes are taken from marginalized communities, so it is essential for professional staff to be knowledgeable about racism and race relations. Thus, it should be mandatory for all professionals who deal with these boys, from social workers to group home counselors, to participate in annual trainings such as Undoing Racism.

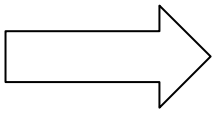
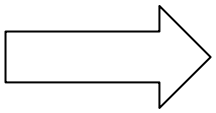
Annual Professional Self-Assessments

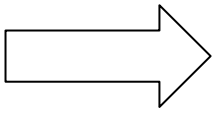
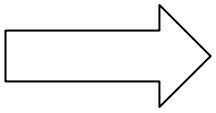
Social workers, counselors, and teachers who work with youth who reside in group homes should have an opportunity to assess their own performance at the end of every school year. This assessment, in essay form, gives their professionals an opportunity to create their own narratives about what did and did not work well in the previous year.

Antidotes to Domme Socialization

In Chapter 2, above, this researcher discussed the power of what he called Domme Socialization as it pertains to African American males in the foster care system. After conducting this study within a hermeneutic framework, I provide in Table 3, below, a model for professionals to reduce the negative influences of excessive Domme Socialization. In effect, Table 3 provides remedies to the ills listed in Table 1, above.

Table 3: REDS
(Reducing Excessive Domme Socialization [DS])

General Characteristics of REDS 	• Excessive DS in the life of an African American boy should be identified. • Conflicts are part of life and can be a learning opportunity. • IQ is just one form of intelligence. • There are multiple ways to express oneself aside from words. • There should be a critical analysis of the organization's system and process. • There are appropriate times to show anger. • Differences should be viewed as opportunities for new discoveries. • Professionals should act as guides. • Professionals should see clients as human beings. •
Social Mediums of REDS 	• On-going assessment reports. • Reflective journals. • Narratives from clients. • Conversations with clients and family members. • Light emphasis on traditional social reports, such as psychological evaluations, interviews, case plans, treatment plans, IEP reports, and court reports.

Social Practices of REDS 	• Acknowledge clients' strengths. • Get family members involved in clients' lives. • Respect and honor differences (diversity). • Help clients to live in a world with others. • Psychotropic medications should only be administered when everything has failed, but ongoing assessments should be conducted. •
Experiences and Feelings Produced by REDS 	• Clients feel connected to others in the world. • Client feel good about themselves. • Professionals and caretakers feel good about their work.

Suggestions for Future Research

After completing this study, I can see at least five areas that would be valuable to explore in the future: (a) the effectiveness of the Independent Living Skills Programs in California; (b) the linkage between the foster care system and the juvenile justice system; (c) inclusive educational programs; (d) the negative consequences of labeling behaviors by professionals; and (e) ways that might improve the boys' academic success.

The Effectiveness of the Independent Living Skills Programs in California

Every participant in this study has had some contact with the Independent Living Skills Program in the county where he resides, and similar programs exist throughout the United States, whose main goals are to help teens make a successful transition from the foster care system to self-sufficiency as adults. In my experience, social workers have a highly favorable attitude toward these programs, whereas the young men I talked to felt that the programs, while well-intentioned, do not prepare them for real life. Thus, there is a need for these programs to be studied to see how effective they really are, and how they could be improved.

The Linkage Between the Foster Care System and the Juvenile Justice System

African American males in foster care have a higher risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system than any other population in foster care (Ryan 2006). Why this is so needs to be studied.

Inclusive Educational Programs

In recent years, educators have devised programs that attempt to give all students the right to feel safe and supported in regular classrooms, in the belief that inclusive practices lead these students to feel better about themselves, and consequently to behave better in society. It is time to find ways to keep young men like the ones in this study not only in their classrooms, but also in their families and communities.

The Negative Consequences of Labeling Behaviors by Professionals

As I have noted throughout this study, deficit thinking by professionals about youths in foster care has negative consequences on the youths' emotional, intellectual, and social growth. Language is powerful, shapes perceptions, and creates reality. How professionals label these boys can be helpful or dangerous to the youths? Thus, there is a need for studies that measure this influence on the lives of the boys as they are dealt with in the public schools, the child welfare system, and the criminal justice system.

Ways That Might Improve the Boys' Academic Success

As mentioned earlier, African American males in foster care do not tend to do well in school. Only one of the young men in the present study received a college degree, although all of them stated that getting an education is the key to success. Thus, there is a need for studies that examine what keeps these youths from reaching their educational potential, and how these obstacles might be overcome.

Self-Assessment Mediums & Changes in Philosophy

As stated earlier, having a self-assessment medium for social workers, counselors, and teachers who work with youth who reside in group homes can be beneficial. Therefore, there is a need for research on various mediums of assessment among social workers related to policies and social actions. In addition to that, it also appears a need for further research on various ways to create smooth transitions when agencies are making changes in their philosophy.

Personal Reflections of the Researcher

Conducting this research has been an emotional journey. I have jumped back and forth between my personal identification with many of the participants and my understanding as a professional in the field of social work. Although many of us come to this field to help others, there are times when society blocks us from doing so by insisting that we act according to certain fixed policies and customs. At other times, we may prevent ourselves from doing good by following old habits.

Despite the best intentions of the best social workers, schoolteachers, and therapists, some young African American males who are in group homes may feel alienated from their families, schools, and communities. Traditionally, social workers, schoolteachers, and therapists who deal with youth have labored to label them, separate them from the mainstream society, and "cure" them. These professionals try to act like scientists in white coats conducting experiments with rats, instead of exploring relationships with young people. Scientists do not tend to have relationships with the rats they use for experiments, but instead see themselves on a higher level than their subjects. When we are talking about children and adolescents, there is a common humanity, but we still operate like scientists. "To overcome our Cartesian anxiety," wrote Gardiner (1998: 119), "there is a need to shift our conceptual focus from objects to relationships. Only then can we realize that identity, individuality, and autonomy do not imply separateness and independence. To regain our full humanity, we have to regain our experiences of connectedness with the entire web of life."

As a society, we rely on organizations for goods and services. Child Protective Services was designed to protect children from abuse or neglect and also to help families

to raise their children in safe and nurturing homes. Group homes were created to deal with children in foster care who have failed multiple placements or who have behavioral or mental health problems. There is a saying in the social work field that these interventions were created so that children can reach their full potential. But what happens when the organizations we have created to make things better actually make them worse? What if group homes actually increase feelings of isolation, alienation, and separation?

Compelled by our Cartesian anxiety, we are convinced—without evidence—that labeling, separating, and alienating young men from mainstream society is our only option. Then we wonder later why many of these young men have a hard time transitioning from foster care to a productive adulthood. In fact, we have created a perfect formula for producing adults to fill our prisons.

But there is hope. We do not have to stay committed to past practices in our interactions with others. By looking at institutions and organizations as having a history, or story, we can realize that what is descriptive can also be, as Ricoeur (1981) says, "redescriptive." That is, what has been told can be *re*told in new ways. If we use our imagination, we can put in place practices of inclusion rather than exclusion. A new holistic approach will open new possibilities for us. Bernstein (1983: 36) writes:

> It is precisely in and through an understanding of alien cultures that we can come to a more sensitive and critical understanding of our own culture and those prejudices that may lie hidden from us.

We have been in the business of objectifying and demonizing those who have been

socially prescribed as "others." We forget that in other times, *we* may have been seen as the "others." This process of labeling only creates superficial boundaries that prevent human connection. Ricoeur (1992: 139) writes:

> We take an interest in the "experiences" themselves rather than in the "person, the subject of experiences…," that place less emphasis on differences between ourselves at different periods and others who have had experiences similar to our own…; we ignore as much as possible the boundaries between lives by giving less importance to unity of each life.

Professionals are always assessing their clients, but it may be beneficial for them to examine their own relationship to the problems at hand and the way they interpret events. Social workers, teachers, and therapists should be less like scientists with their rats and more like anthropologists, who become participants in their own research. Perhaps keeping a reflective journal would be better than conducting case notes. For clients to change in positive ways, there must be a dynamic relationship between them and the professionals who seek to help them.

In keeping with the hermeneutic framework that I have used for this study, let me conclude this section of the study with my own personal story as a young African American male who had to fight against the practices of separation and alienation that some in the helping professions tried to impose on me.

As a young boy, I was always interested in writing and in watching school plays. In kindergarten through fourth grade, I was too shy to want to be in a play. But by fifth grade, I was ready, and told the drama teacher, whom I will call "Miss Meanface," that I wanted to be in the Christmas play. She told me that was impossible because I had a

severe speech impairment. I thought that over for a day or two, and then I decided to use my power as one of the two "Kings" of the school, along with my good friend Terrell.

"If I don't get a part in the play," I said to Miss Meanface, "Terrell and I will see to it that none of the other kids are in your play, either." That was not an idle threat, because Terrell was the biggest kid in the school, and I was known as a fighter who never quit.

Miss Meanface relented a little. "Okay," she said, "you can hold a sign."

"That won't do," I replied. "I've got to have a speaking part…at least, a small one."

And she gave me one.

At that young age, I instinctively knew something that Miss Meanface did not—namely, that it was important for me to have the same experiences as all the other kids if I was going to improve my speaking. Although in those days I did not have the words or the theories to express this thought, I was aware that being socially isolated from other children was not in my best interest.

I practiced that part as hard as I could and performed it to the best of my ability. Yes, I stumbled a little here and there, but I got the chance to be like all the other kids, and that was good for me.

Many years later, when I was a counselor at a middle school, I wrote plays for the children to perform, both in the classroom and in the auditorium for the whole school. I allowed any child to participate who wanted to, and I provided a supportive environment for all of them. If a play was about African American themes, and a Caucasian boy or girl wanted to be in it, that was fine with me. If a boy or girl had behavioral issues that normally kept him or her from being allowed to participate in extracurricular programs, I had a talk with the principal to make an exception. Children in special education classes

who wanted to be in the play got to do so. The only requirement was that you wanted to be there—and no kid ever protested this policy.

I would like to share in this research inquiry two letters. The first was written by Lawrence P. Adams, who is now an adult, but was in foster care as a youth. I came across his letter online when reviewing a website for writers, AuthorsDen.com. In his letter, Lawrence stated that he was writing to counter many of the negative messages out there about foster children. His letter inspired the second letter here, which was written by me.

An Open Letter from Lawrence P. Adams

> Dear Fellow Foster Children,
>
> I know you may feel your life is currently in turmoil, not in a place you really consider your home or awaiting a final decision on a new place to call home.
>
> You probably at times feel like you are alone in the world, that no one else has or is going through what you currently are. You may feel that no one can possibly understand or know what you are going through. In most situations, your case worker or foster parents have never been in foster care, so you think, "No, you don't know what I am going through." In most situations, your feelings about others knowing what you feel, understanding your feeling, etc., are probably true.
>
> I, however, can tell you straightforwardly that I do know what you are going through, I do know many of the things you are feeling, and understand them. I know…because I have been exactly where you are today. As many young people say today, "Been there…done that!"
>
> I was a foster child from the day of my birth until I aged out of the system at age eighteen. There is very little you could share with me that I myself have not experienced.
>
> I have felt alone, I have felt depressed, I have felt that no one understood, I have felt no one really cared about me, and, yes…I have even wondered if it was worth living.

You are not as unique as you think you might be. As a matter of fact, there are many thousands who, besides myself, have been exactly where you are at.

I am here to tell you that you can overcome ALL of this. If I can…I know you can!

I do not know why you are in foster care. It might be the same as me…from birth. It might be because of troubles within your home that requires you to be out of your home for a short- or long-term basis. It may even be because of something that you did wrong for others to feel you needed a temporary outside-the-home situation. Or finally, it might be that you are awaiting a new family to become your Mom and Dad.

It does not matter why you are in foster care. What is important is how you come out of foster care.

I know many aspects of the foster care system make you feel that you might be of no value, that you cannot be a success.

This is absolutely not true!

I felt many times while in foster care, and while being moved from one home to another, the same feelings many of you are having. But I have been able to overcome them, and so can you!

YOU are of value! You can hold your head up proudly! You can be whatever you choose to be!

Yes, even those of you who may have done something wrong to get placed within the foster system…you can overcome this mistake, it can become something of the past. All of us have made a mistake in our lives, even more than one, but we learned from our mistakes and moved forward. You can do this as well. You need to begin making those changes today.

Your foster parents do care about you and what happens to you, whether you are in your current home for a short term or a longer time. They would not be foster parents if they did not care about children and want to help. No, they are not in foster care for the money they receive to assist in your care. In many situations, your foster parents will spend far more than what they receive.

I will not say no foster parent will do wrong. Yes, as in every situation in life, there may be a bad one. This is true also with biological/adoptive parents as well. If one does neglect you or do you harm in any way, then you must report it. Please make sure any allegation you make, however, is

in fact true. Do not make allegations just because of how they may have felt it necessary to discipline you one day and you get angry at them. Never, ever, make a false allegation.

Honor, respect, and obey your foster parents. They do, in fact, have your best interest at heart. Whether you are with them for a short time or longer time, they will do the best they can for you. You need to honor, respect, and obey them in return.

I know most of you wish that you were not in foster care. That you would be home, either with your Mom and Dad or an adoptive family. That may or may not come some day. You must make the very best of your situation. I ended up aging out of the system. I never had a permanent Mom and Dad all the time I was growing up. Despite this, I hope I have become a person any Mom and Dad could have been proud of. That is my hope for each and every one of you as well.

I know you can do it! Study hard, work hard, know that you have self-worth, not only to yourself but to others, and you can reach for the highest of goals. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise!

If I can…I know you can!

—Lawrence P. Adams

An Open Letter to the Foster Children of the World

Dear Foster Children,

Often it may feel like a lonely journey. In addition to that, the direction of the journey may look gloomy. Not having the chance to control such elements in one's personal life sometimes makes you feel powerless about your future. I'm speaking of my own experiences as a youth, hoping it links us together away from the thoughts of loneliness and isolation.

Although the details of our experiences are not the same, I do know of nights of pain, nights of coldness, nights of suffering, and constant acts of moving from place to place in search of a dwelling to call home.

I also want to give you some hope through what appears to be dark times. I found a magic potion while I was dealing with the madness of my situation. Brothers and sisters, that potion is called imagination. Use your imagination to help create a better tomorrow. Without the use of imagination, no bridges, freeways, or cities would ever have been built. Dare to have dreams. Develop some goals to make your dreams come true.

Sincerely,

Shadrach Linscomb

Final Words

The specific purpose of this inquiry has been to help create social exchanges and better practices when it comes to dealing with African American male youth who have been placed in a group home setting. Theoretically, the two main goals of the child welfare system in relation to the population we are studying should be: (a) to help these individuals to learn life lessons so that they can live appropriately in the world with others; and (b) to help them to aim at and achieve a good life. Unfortunately, the reality has been far different. The social labeling of these African American male youths in group homes has led to their isolation, destruction of their self-esteem, and self-fulfilling prophesies of failure. The feeling of otherness among these males is more powerful than it is for any other children placed in foster care. These boys are truly "others" among "others." Not only have they been ripped out of their families, but they have also been deemed unsuitable for foster care. Memory and imagination, both is needed to aim at a good life.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Transcript of My Conversation with Dante Hiles for the Pilot Study

On November 18, 2007, I conducted my pilot study to explore the facilitation of my research topic, research categories, and conversation questions. My research conversation partner was Dante Hiles, a 35-year-old African American male who exited a foster care system in 1989. Currently, Dante resides in Stockton, California, with his wife and two children.

SHADRACH LINSCOMB: First of all, thanks for this opportunity to meet and also giving permission to audio tape our conversation.

DANTE HILES: No problem.

SL: As you know I am doing some research looking at the experiences of African American male who had been placed in a foster care group home. Can you tell me something you remember about your home environment prior to entering foster care?

DH: My home environment?….. Wow, my home environment?

SL: It doesn't have to be detail. It doesn't have to be deep.

DH: I really don't know. I don't want to talk about that.

SL: That's fine. We can skip that question. What are some of the main things you remember about the first day you were placed in a group home?

DH: The first thing I remember I came home from school and there was a white gentleman there. My mother said that I was going to stay with him for a while. That was how it was pronounced to me. I got into the car with him. I was in the backseat looking out of the window. He took me to Children Home Society, San Francisco, California. Then I was there waiting for a placement.

SL: Okay.

DH: I came home from school and I was taken away…..Keep going?

SL: Yes, keep going with it.

DH: Then I was taking to Children Home Society. It's place, a shelter for kids, runaways and children that were abandoned. They send you to a foster home each night

until they find you a placement. It's where you wait for your foster home placement. I remember the first place I went to was a house. I was placed there temporary, it was a temporary placement. The lady had her own two adult sons and I had to share a room with them. I think her sons were doing drugs, but at that time I didn't know much about drugs. I just know that they were leaving out of the home at weird times of the night. It was a bad experience and the lady was rude. I stayed there at that home for about a week and later was brought back to Children Home Society for a new placement. They put me in another place.

SL: Okay. Based on your experience, how would you describe some of the major functions of a group home?

DH: The major function? I don't really know. There are many children with different problems. I really didn't see how they were helping. Most of the counselors did not really care, they just had a job. This was a placement. I didn't make it to a group home yet. This was the early 80's or late 70's.

SL: Okay.

DH: Later, I went to a foster home. The man was a lawyer and his wife was a producer. They were talking about adopting me, but it didn't work out. It was a situation with his wife was at work and he was at home. The guy was nice, but it wasn't like your mom and dad. He never has experience raising a kid. It was hard for him to relate to me and it was hard for me to relate to him. It didn't really work out. I was having lot of problems. I started acting out.

SL: At that time were you having visits with you're your family?

DH: No, I didn't see my family for a while. .

SL: If you were a director of a group home. How would design a program to meet the needs of the its resident?

DH: You got to find out what they like and dislike. Say I was a director of a group and I had five staff members.

SL: Yeah.

DH: I'll try to group the kids together with similar problems with a counselor. That counselor will work with you and your group. See, when I was in there in those days the counselors didn't help. It was like they were preparing us for prison. They give us a

certain time to go out and return. They didn't care what we did. They didn't care what we did in the street. So, I would try to get counselors that could relate to the kids and their problems. That is what I would do if I was a director.

SL: Ok, what have you learn from your experience that prepared for future?

DH: Nothing. It gave me a lot hate and lot anger. I feel that I was cheated. Not just cheated because I was taking from my mother, but also cheated from getting an education. Not getting a proper education I feel skewed up my future. I feel that from going to group homes to group homes skewed up my future by not getting a good education. Now, I got a I- don't- give- dam attitude and I'm not a person you want to mess with. Group home didn't do anything at all. I think I could had did lot better if there was someone there trying to help. My mother was not there at all. I didn't have any family visits.

SL: Yeah.

DH: Then I went to Saint Vince School for boys. It was like a catholic school for bad boys. This is when my mom and I had an agreement if I was good for a year, I could come home. I was trying to get my life together and going to school. I was doing alright. That is was when my mother got into a relationship with my younger brother's father, Bobby, Sr. No one didn't tell me nothing about having a brother and found out when I finally had a visit. Soon afterwards, Bobby Senior passed away and the thought of me returning home ended because my mom was having problems. I started acting out again. I wasn't able to come home and I went back to that placement in San Francisco. Then I ended in El Sobrente. My whole experiences in group homes to juvenile hall, I had no visits from family. It was a bad experience. I wouldn't recommend no family to send their children away. If they did they would have to do a lot better than how they did in those days.

SL: So how old are you now?

DH: I'm 35 now.

SL: That was about 17 years ago?

DH: Yep….When I left the last group home I went to California Youth Authority for two years. That was another bad experience. I wasn't even there thirty minutes and I got into a fight. It was a lot drama. What I really learn is that they were preparing us for

prisons. There was nothing, but gangs. There were gangs from everywhere. Not just gangs from the Bay Area, but from LA, gangs from New York, White gangs and Mexican gangs. There were Gangs from everywhere. I suppose to get out there in a year, but I did about two years. Everyday you had to fight.

SL: What did you do when got out Youth Authority?

DH: I got my lady and started looking for work in Stockton. I got a job at Denny's and worked there for two years for very low paid. I got a break and got a job at Modern Installations. It has been a sad story every since. Now I'm just trying to live life. If it would all happened all again, I would beg and cry to my mom for me not to leave home. When I was taking I didn't show any emotions. I just left with the social worker.

SL: Yeah.

DH: When I left I was not ever able to go home to live again after that. I feel that I was cheated. I really didn't feel that my problems were that bad from my mother to give me away. She just gave her son away to the State of California. She gave up on me, but had some more children. What type of message are you giving your son? So you are writing a book about this you say?

SL: I'm doing a dissertation about looking at the experiences of African American males who had been placed in a group home. I'm trying to get a better understand. I'm going to attempt to have some conversation with about 8-10 individuals with similar experiences. I'm also a consultant at a group home now. Many young man leave out of placement and get involved in the criminal justice system.

DH: Yeah, I was going to tell you that. Many of the guys I was in group home with are now in prison and some are even dead. Each of the guys that was in there with me in San Francisco are in prisons. One of my friends already has two strikes.

SL: Yeah, state pays a lot of money to support group home placement, but for some reason it seem not to be working.

DH: It's a money game and it wasn't never about the children. I hear that they get about three thousand dollars per kid per month.

SL: I believe now the range is $4000-$7000.

DH: Wow, whoever is running the program is in it for the money. I can remember one group home I was at the staff left us on the weekends. We were all left alone in the

home. He would come back on the week day. One counselor was smoking crack at the group home. They wouldn't even register me for me to school. The staff dropped me off at school and told me to register myself in school. I didn't know how to do that at that time. The staff just wanted to go back to the home to smoke some crack. One of the resident sold crack to the counselor. They finally shut down that place. I don't know how group homes are now, but in my days they were bad.

SL: You should think about writing your story down on paper.

DH: I was thinking about writing a rap about it, a rap about the government because the government is cold, man.

Appendix B:

List of Participants

1. Dante Hiles, a 36-year-old African American male who exited out of the foster care system in 1989. Currently, Dante resides in Stockton, California with his wife and has two children.

2. Barry Weston, a 20 years old African American male who exited out of San Francisco Foster Care system in the summer of 2007. While he was in foster care, Mr. Weston participated in the Independent Living Skill Program. Currently, Mr. Weston is playing on attending City College of San Francisco for fall 2008 semester.

3. Marcus Hubbard, a 19 years old African American male who emancipated out of the system in the fall of 2007. Mr. Hubbard also participated in the Independent Living Skill Program of San Francisco County.

4. Brahim Remmas, a 19 year old African American male who emancipated out of foster care system in the fall of 2006. Currently, Brahim is a participant of Independent Living Skill program of San Francisco County.

5. Sheldon McClain, a 18 year old African American male who has been in foster care system from the age of ten until the age of eighteen. Mr. McClain emancipated out of the system in the summer of 2007. This researcher also worked with Mr. McClain as a group home counselor approximately eight years ago. Sheldon also participated in the Independent Living Skills Program in Solano County.
6. Nathan Gaines, age 18 African American males who spent his early child years in foster homes, but spent his last three years in a group home in Richmond, California. He emancipated out of the system on 06/14/08.

7. Edward Edward, a 33 year old African American male who spent two years at a group home in San Francisco. Currently, Edward is a county social worker in Arizona, but visits his family and friends in the San Francisco Bay Area approximately three times a year. As a foster youth Edward participated in the Independent Living Skill program and still keeps in contact with the staff. As a social worker, Edward works from an Afro-centric framework.

Appendix C:

Letter of Invitation

Date

Dear Xxxxxxx,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my dissertation project. As you know, my research is about analyzing the experiences of African American male youth who have lived in group homes, of whom you are one. From the study, I hope to gain a better understanding of how to meet the needs of this population and to make recommendations for developing better practices and policies.

At this time, I am seeking your permission to record and transcribe our conversations, which will become the data for my analysis. When the tapes have been transcribed, I will provide you with a copy of our conversation for your examination. You may then make any additions to or deletions from the transcript. When I have received your approval to proceed, I will then analyze the transcript. Please note that the data collected from you, including our conversation and your name and status, will *not* be held confidential. Before participating in this research project, you will sign a consent form.

Below, you will find a series of questions that I may ask you during our conversation. The most important thing for you to remember is that I am interested in hearing you express whatever it is you want to say about your own experiences. I hope that by us engaging in conversation we will learn many things together.

• • • • •

Reflecting upon your experiences, please consider the following questions:

1. Can you tell me something you remember about your home environment prior to entering foster care?
2. What are some of the main things you remember about the first day you were placed in a group home?
3. What are some of the major challenges you see that young African American males placed in group homes face today?
4. Based on your experience, how would you describe some of the major functions of a group home?
5. If you were a director of a group home, how would you design a program that would meet the needs of its residents?
6. What have you learned from your experience that has prepared you for the future?
7. What do you see yourself doing with your life in the future?

Thank you again for participating in my study. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely,

Shadrach Linscomb, MSW

Appendix D:

Participant Consent

April 22, 2008

Dear Shadrach Linscomb:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS)at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #08-028). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.

2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.

3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

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IRBPHS University of San Francisco
Counseling Psychology Department
Education Building - 017
2130 Fulton Street
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080
(415) 422-6091 (Message)
(415) 422-5528 (Fax)
irbphs@usfca.edu

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http://www.usfca.edu/humansubjects/

Appendix E:

Letter of Confirmation

Date

Xxxxxxx Xxxxxxx
Independent Living Skills Program
1225 Valencia Street
San Francisco, CA 94112

Dear Mr. Xxxxxxx,

Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to have a conversation with you about your ideas, experiences, and viewpoints on foster care issues pertaining to African American male youth. I am confirming our meeting time on _____.

Please let me know if you need to change our scheduled meeting time.

With your permission, I will record our conversation, transcribe the tapes into a written text, and submit that for your review. After you review the text, I would like to discuss with you the conversation we had. Please remember that the data for this research will not be kept confidential.

The exchange of ideas in a relaxed conversation is the key to my research. You will then have the opportunity to make comments about the transcript and to make additions to it or subtractions from it. Furthermore, you will not only be able to make corrections, but to have the space for reflection.

Once again, thank you for your participation in my study, and I am looking forward to engaging in conversation with you at our meeting.

Sincerely,

Shadrach Linscomb

Appendix F:

Follow-up Letter

Date

Participant's Name and Title
Company or Organization
Address

Dear XXX

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on _____. I truly appreciate your willingness to participate in my research project. Our conversation together will be a valuable part of my dissertation.

I have attached a copy of our transcribed conversation. Please take a moment to glance through the attached transcript and add changes or clarifying comments if you feel the need to do so. I will contact you in two weeks to discuss any changes you might have made. As a reminder, I will be using the attached transcript as data for my research inquiry.

Again, thanks for your participation.

Sincerely,

Shadrach Linscomb, MSW
Researcher & Doctoral Student
School of Education
University of San Francisco San Francisco, CA 94117
Linscs@cws.state.ca.us

Appendix G:

Excerpt from My Research Journal

As I wrestled with new concepts, research, and analyzed meaningful conversations, I cannot say that all of my reflections were joyful, since they involved taking a hard look at experiences of others that were similar to my own. In fact, one of the things I have learned from this process is that understanding others gives one insights into oneself as a member of society. I also have learned from conducting this inquiry that expectations of persons in a powerful role can have a huge influence on students, workers, and clients….