

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chilyouth

Former foster youth remember multiple placement moves: A journey of loss and hope

Yvonne A. Unrau^{a,*}, John R. Seita^{b,1}, Kristin S. Putney^c^a Western Michigan University, School of Social Work, 1903 W. Michigan Avenue, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5354, USA^b Michigan State University, School of Social Work, 254 Baker hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 48824, USA^c Western Michigan University, School of Social Work, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 December 2007

Received in revised form 13 March 2008

Accepted 24 March 2008

Available online 7 April 2008

Keywords:

Foster care

Placement disruption

Multiple placements

Attachment

Family privilege

Grief and loss

Resilience

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the experience and perceived impact of multiple placement moves on adults who lived in foster care for at least some portion of their childhoods. Network and snowball sampling resulted in interviews with 22 adults between the ages of 18 and 65 years old, who had formerly lived in foster care. The findings reveal that the experience of placement moves is not only remembered as a series of significant losses but also perceived by participants to leave imprinted negative emotional scars, particularly in the area of trusting people and building and maintaining relationships. While participants remembered the negative aspects of placement moves in very similar ways, strategies for coping and resilience were more unique to individuals. The findings are important in that prior research on placement stability has not focused on understanding the perceived consequences of the move experience on those formerly in foster care who are now adults. Theories of attachment, grief, traumatic stress and resilience, as well as the concept of family privilege, can help to inform best practice for foster care practitioners and caregivers involved in placement moves for foster children.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of research to suggest that adults with childhood histories that involve living in foster care are significantly disadvantaged in terms of well-being and personal achievement when compared to adults without similar histories (see, for example, Pecora et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007). Placement instability while in foster care has been identified as a factor that is significantly related to negative outcomes for children. For example, multiple foster placements have been linked to increased behavior problems (Newton, Litrownik & Landsverk, 2000; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan & Localio, 2007) and poor academic performance (Eckenrode, Rowe, Lairde & Brathwaite, 1995; Pecora et al., 2006). To date, most research on out-of-home placement moves (i.e., placement instability) has focused on counting placements, and a variety of definitions have been constructed to yield such counts.

The focus of this paper is on investigating placement move experiences from the perspective of adults who lived through multiple out-of-home placements during childhood. Two “big picture” questions, which were part of a larger qualitative study, framed this paper. Specifically, adults who were formerly foster children were asked to remember and describe their experiences of placement moves while in foster care. Both positive and negative aspects of these memories were explored, and participants were asked about the relative importance of moving placements compared to their overall foster care experiences. Second, participants were asked to share their perceptions about any lasting consequences that their childhood placement move experiences had on

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 269 387 3185.

E-mail addresses: Yvonne.Unrau@wmich.edu (Y.A. Unrau), seita@msu.edu, jseita@sbcglobal.net (J.R. Seita), ksputney@gmail.com (K.S. Putney).¹ Tel.: +1 517 355 3291.

their present-day lives. The second line of questioning targeted areas of relationships, personal habits or behaviors, as well as general impressions.

2. Literature review

Placement instability for children in out-of-home care is a concern of child welfare systems in North America, Europe and Australia. Unrau (2007a) recently reviewed 43 studies on placement stability from nine different countries. She found that nearly half of the studies reviewed constructed a definition of placement move from case record information, and most studies used delimiting criteria to arrive at a count of placement moves with the child as the unit of analysis. For example, moves for children were counted in some studies only when certain conditions were met (e.g., planned versus unplanned), while in others moves were only counted if they happened within a specified time frame, or involved a particular type of placement. Only seven of the 43 studies, factored in a measure of placement quality when counting moves and only a few included the perspectives of foster youth as a data source.

The majority of research on placement moves seeks to determine which factors are predictive of placement breakdown or whether such events are linked to other outcomes, such as behavior problems, academic functioning, and permanency. Many studies have focused on the association between child characteristics, especially behavior problems, and the “outcome” of placement breakdown. Some studies have observed that placement moves have a negative effect on the subsequent behavior of children (Rubin et al, 2007; Leathers, 2002; Newton et al, 2000). We could find no study that investigated factors related to the particular experiences of placement transition and subsequent child behavior or attachment.

Researchers have attempted to investigate the pattern of moves for multiple placement changes by monitoring timing, type and sequencing of placements experienced by foster children. The results of this research suggest that there is no typical pattern for placement moves (e.g., Usher, Randolph & Gogan, 1999; Wulczyn, Kogan & Harden, 2003; James, Landsverk & Slymen, 2004; Connell et al., 2006). The placement pattern experienced by foster children moving through care is quite varied, which suggests that the unique experience of placement moves deserves more attention. We could find no study examining the patterns of interpersonal relationships formed and lost by foster children during (or related to) the period of placement transition.

There is a dearth of research on placement moves that studies the perspective of foster children who have lived through multiple placement changes (Unrau, 2007a). We found only a few studies that touched on the topic as part of a broader investigation. First, Festinger (1983) reported that in a sample of youth who aged out of the New York foster care system, 62% said they moved about the right amount during their spell in care, while 30% reported having moved too much, and 5% indicated they would have preferred additional moves. Second, Johnson, Yoken, and Voss (1995) interviewed 59 foster children ages 11 to 14 in Cook county. Fifty-eight percent of their sample reported not having any involvement in the decision to move, and over three-quarters said they tried to get along in the foster home. Finally, Sinclair, Wilson, and Gibbs (2005) surveyed 150 foster children to learn what children want from foster care placements. With respect to placement moves, the findings suggest that foster children want placement moves to be more organized, to have more information related to the move during the transition, and to know that if a move does not turn out well that the option for a different placement is available.

Two qualitative studies have explored the problem of placement moves when foster home placements are disrupted or breakdown. Both studies are weak in terms of methodological rigor but do offer some insight into the interpersonal dynamics of placement moves. The first study was conducted by Butler and Charles (1999) in the United Kingdom. A total of 11 foster parents and youth were interviewed to discuss the dynamics of family foster care after a placement breakdown. The findings point to the different perspectives that foster parents and youth have. Specifically, they describe an inherent tension in the foster parent–child relationship, calling it a “gifted relationship” because foster parents seek to give foster children a “fresh start” and hope to receive thanks for their efforts. Meanwhile, foster youth participating in the study described their struggle to hold on to existing relationships and a fear of sending messages of disloyalty to birth parents when expressing appreciation to foster parents. Butler and Charles (1999) describe how youth use “emotional closure” as a survival mechanism and how foster parents and youth are susceptible to “exclusive thinking” in which both parties view the foster child as a separate member of the family.

The second qualitative study reviewed was conducted by Barber and Delfabbro (2003) who interviewed 13 youth in South Australia. The youth were 10 to 15 years old and all had experienced a move after exhibiting problematic behavior. The findings of this study noted that youth talked about the moves in two ways: some were unhappy with their placements and welcomed the move while others reported that they liked the initial placement and regretted the move.

Given the limited number of studies on the topic of placement move experiences, there is an obvious gap in the research literature. Specifically, without understanding how placement moves are experienced by former foster youth, any efforts to develop practice or policy solutions are incomplete. The purpose of this study was to fill this gap by investigating multiple placement moves in out-of-home care from the perspective of adults who had lived through these experiences during childhood. This paper seeks to understand how multiple placements are remembered by former foster youth and the perceived consequences of those experiences in adult life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

The sample for this study was derived by using snowball sampling procedures that involved a series of chain referrals stemming from multiple recruitment sources, which included foster parents, social work students, staff from foster care programs, academics

with expertise in foster care, and foster care participants who were either known to research staff or had publicized their identities as foster care “alumni.” All participants met three eligibility criteria for study participation: (1) minimum of 18 years of age, (2) no longer living in care, and (3) had lived in two or more placements while in care.

Our recruitment efforts yielded 22 participants during the first and second quarters of 2007; most resided in the Midwest United States. Fifteen (68%) were female and seven (32%) were male. When asked to identify their race, participant replies were as follows: 13 (59%) “White or Caucasian,” three (14%) “Black or African American,” three (14%) “Native American or Aboriginal,” two (9%) Biracial, and one Hispanic. On average, participants remembered entering foster care at age 11 (entry range 0 to 15 years old) and exited at age 18 (exit range was 11 to 19 years old). The average length of stay in foster care was seven years (length of stay ranged 2 to 19 years). We did not ask participants any questions about the reasons why they entered foster care. Table 1 shows the number and type of placement moves remembered by participants.

The youngest study participant was 18 and the oldest was 65 years old. We consider the age range of study participants as a special feature of the study as there is very little information on older foster care “alumni.” On average, study participants had exited from foster care about 18 years (range 6 months to 47 years) prior to being interviewed for this project. This time span is noteworthy because some participants were asked to recall events that took place a very long time ago. However, the impact of the passage of time upon memory is not clear, as recent brain research suggests that traumatic memories are more accurately retained than more mundane memories (LeDoux, 2004). Perhaps that is one reason why the age of participants did not help us organize participant responses into meaningful categories or themes in the analysis. Gender, race, and number of moves also did not prove as useful concepts for organizing participant responses. Regardless of these characteristics, participants spoke of their placement move experiences as though they had “happened yesterday.”

Study participants were asked basic questions about education, employment and health. With respect to education, 18 (82%) participants had completed high school or had earned their GEDs, and this count includes six participants who had successfully earned college degrees (i.e., 2 doctorate, 1 masters, 1 baccalaureate, and 2 college degrees). In terms of employment, 15 (68%) participants said they currently had full-time employment or were attending school full-time; this count includes one full-time mother who chose not to work outside the home and one participant who retired from full-time employment. Most participants (82%) reported having health insurance, and this count includes Medicaid. Finally, 16 (73%) participants said they still have contact with at least one adult (e.g., relative, foster parent, staff) who cared for them during their time in foster care. The amount of contact ranged from “once in a long while” to “almost daily.” The study did not explore the nature or quality of contact between participants and former caregivers.

3.2. Study procedures

All participants consented to participate in the larger study after reading a project flyer that met standards set by a university IRB committee. This paper reports on two main questions addressed in the larger study (Unrau, 2007b). The portion of the structured interview schedule that applies to this paper is featured in Appendix A. Fifteen participants took part in the study via telephone interview, four participated in face-to-face interviews, and three elected to receive the interview questions by e-mail. All participants responded to questions set by the structured interview schedule; however, e-mail respondents were not exposed to any interviewer prompts or probes.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a location comfortable to the participant and were audio taped, as well as transcribed verbatim. Telephone interviews were recorded by the interviewer at the time of the interview. Wearing a telephone headset and seated at a computer terminal, the interviewer typed the responses—verbatim if possible—of the interviewee as the interview was conducted.

Table 1
Number and type of placement moves remembered

Number of placements	<i>n</i>	%	Shortest placement stay	<i>n</i>	%
3 to 5	7	32	Days	1	5
5 to 9	7	32	Weeks	7	32
10 to 19	5	23	Months	12	55
20 or more	3	14	A year	1	5
			Missing	1	5
Type of placements ^a	<i>N</i>	%	Longest placement stay	<i>n</i>	%
Home of a relative	9	41	Less than 1 year	4	18
Foster home (no relation)	22	100	1 to 2 years	9	41
Staffed facility	12	55	2 to 3 years	4	18
Birth parent (return home)	7	32	3 to 4 years	3	14
			5 years or more	1	5

* With multiple moves, participants could select more than one choice.

Development of the study's procedures was guided by criteria for evaluating qualitative research studies proposed by Shek, Tang & Han (2005). A detailed account of how the study met each criterion is described elsewhere (Unrau, 2007b). Here we offer a summary of steps taken to increase the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

- First, there were three interviewers used to gather data for the project, but the majority of interviews ($n=13$) were conducted by one person. A 90-minute training was required of each interviewer, which emphasized skills of qualitative interviewing, including emphatic neutrality (see Patton, 1999), alertness to interviewee discomfort, and recording responses to capture the voices of participants in their own words.
- Second, bias of researchers in data collection was guarded against by comparing participant responses across interviewers, holding regular meetings to discuss interviewing skills, each interviewer keeping a journal to note personal reactions, and using a structured interview schedule.
- Third, bias in analysis was minimized by testing inter-rater reliability on a segment of interviews, having one researcher conduct first-level coding by reading across complete transcripts and another conduct first-level coding by reading across questions within each transcript, seeking negative evidence of the observed findings, and having two foster care experts—individuals who had lived in foster care and also made their careers in helping foster youth—review the findings and assist with the interpretation of those findings. One expert also was consulted at the outset to develop the interview schedule for the study (see Appendix A).
- Fourth, coding of transcripts was accomplished by first reading through transcripts for emergent “meaning units,” which were then coded. Constant comparative methods were used to further develop first- and second-level coding (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003; Coleman & Unrau, 2008).

4. Findings

The findings of this study are presented below, according to the two major research questions addressed. Quotes from study participants are tagged with three identifiers in an effort to illustrate how participants with different characteristics provided similar responses. After consulting with our foster care experts, we decided to use three identifiers to “tag” participant quotes (i.e., number of moves, age grouping and race). It was agreed that gender would be omitted to offer a comfortable sense of anonymity to persons providing the quotes and because male and female participants were represented in equivalent proportions across the age groupings. The number of participants who provided a response for each theme presented below is noted as a way of communicating the “volume” of each theme when considered in the context of the study participants as a whole.

Findings are presented according to the two major questions explored in this paper: (1) how were multiple placement experiences in foster care remembered by former foster youth, and (2) what are the perceived consequences of those childhood placement moves on their lives today?

4.1. Remembering multiple placement move experiences

Four major themes emerged from the transcript data to describe how study participants remembered multiple moves experienced during their time in out-of-home care. The strongest theme was the memory of placement moves as a time of experiencing profound losses. A second theme was that participants remembered the move experience as a time of shutting down emotionally. In addition to these negative memories, some participants recalled the actions of a caring adult, which we identified as a third theme. The final theme that emerged was descriptions that pointed to a “guarded optimism” communicated by participants when recalling their “next” placements.

4.1.1. Loss

The first theme was loss. Placement moves were remembered by most participants as a time of profound loss. Losses were felt in six different areas: (1) loss of power over one's personal destiny, (2) loss of friends and connections to school, (3) loss of personal belongings, (4) loss of (or separation from) siblings, (5) loss of self-esteem, and (6) loss of normalcy.

4.1.1.1. *Loss of power over personal destiny* ($n=15$). “Not knowing.” Most participants remembered placement moves as an experience in which they had no control or influence in decisions or events of their lives. Many said they received little if any information about their moves ahead of time, which is an issue that has been raised in other research (Johnson et al., 1995; Butler & Charles, 1999; Sinclair et al., 2005). Fifteen participants described how moving from one placement to another was an experience into the unknown. “You don't know the who, what, where, when or why.” Participants conveyed that “moving is part of the whole system.”

- It was the unknown of how long I would stay somewhere else and with whom and who was I going to be. I never got to set any goals because life always took over. I found I was always living in chaos and just surviving. [28+ moves with many returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]
- ...not knowing what you were walking into. What adjustments, expectations, what the people were like... I had one move where they didn't tell me I was moving. I was in school... got a call to come to the office... the social worker was there. All my clothes were in the car... I was leaving my brother, my friend and had no chance to say goodbye to the foster parents... It was like I was being moved to a foreign country. [6 moves with 0 returns home, 43–53 year old African American]

- The uncertainty, the trying to fit in all over again, not really knowing the rules... not knowing the expectations... The suddenness of it. No preparations. All of a sudden you pack your bags, you're leaving. No time to mentally prepare to get all of your things... wonder(ing) what you did wrong... [4 moves with 0 returns home, 37 to 40 years old Caucasian]

4.1.1.2. *Loss of friends and connection with school (n=13)*. For many participants, a placement move disrupted ties to friends and school. The loss associated with friendships affected both established friends left behind, as well as perceived opportunities to make new friends because of the temporary nature of the next placement. Moving multiple times compounded the challenges of keeping old friends and making new ones. For most participants, the lack of stability in placement meant discontinuity in school and disruption with friends.

- It was a totally different school district... It tore me away from everybody I knew... [3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]
- Constantly changing school. I think my education suffered... Having no close friends because you knew you would be moving again. [9+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]
- The whole school situation... you can't establish relationships, have friends. [6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]

4.1.1.3. *Loss of personal belongings (n=9)*. Many participants remembered losing personal possessions during a move transition or recalled the risk of having their possessions stolen or end up missing. One of our foster care experts pointed out that when a foster child's personal possessions are lost in a move transition, the child loses not only the personal item but also the link to memories associated with that item. Thus, in a very real sense, losing physical items seem to have the effect of losing a part of oneself. For foster children "on the move," personal items can act as memory keepers and when an item is lost, so is the potential to trigger any memories associated with it.

- I had to get rid of some things. I had too many things that I had to get rid of. Extra stuff I needed, pair of clothes, radios, sound system, model cars, just like a whole bunch of junk that you don't really need... I don't like people helping me move personally cause things come up missing. I tell people don't touch my stuff. [9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]
- I usually lost everything I owned. There was never any packing involved (laugh). You never had to take anything, you just went. [6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]
- Everything got left behind. You end up only with the clothes on your back when you go from place to place... it was losing everything you had. Your stuff was all you had. [4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]

4.1.1.4. *Loss of (separation from) siblings (n=8)*. Since the interview questions did not ask about siblings, we do not report any information about how many participants had siblings, the quality of those relationships, nor what role siblings had in placement moves. Nevertheless, one-third of participants remarked on the significance of siblings in the placement move experience. The comments made about siblings suggest that connection to siblings provided some sense of familiarity, a connection that was otherwise not available in the placement move experience. It may be that moving to a new placement with a sibling, or to be reunited with one, provides an emotional or psychological buffer to the effects of the many losses felt by foster children.

- It was hard because I had two brothers, and nine times out of 10, we couldn't be together. I would have to move in with a stranger... I was shy back then, so it was difficult. [9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]
- It was scary, but my big brother was with me and my sister was already in the foster home that adopted me... [5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]
- I'd say probably the most difficult or hardest part from moving out of the placements was the second and third foster home. Even though they were within the same school district, I was moving away from my sister... even though I can only stand to be around her for about an hour and then we want to kill each other. [3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]

4.1.1.5. *Loss of self-esteem (n=13)*. Many participants remembered the move experience as a time of feeling "unwanted." Many seemed to internalize this rejection by questioning what was wrong with them, or wondering what they did that "caused" them to be moved. There is no doubt that other aspects of the foster care experience, including the reasons that led up to placement in foster care, also contribute to loss of self-esteem. However, participant responses suggest that the move experience may be an event that isolates and intensifies this downward spiral, leading to loss of self-esteem.

- What is wrong with me? Why does no one want me? Why can't I stay in one place?... that's what I was thinking. [28+ moves with many returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]
- You get all the attention and affection at first, and then later, it's like, Oh, I am done with you. [8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]
- It made me more insecure... Didn't fit in. Foster care made my shyness worse. It was not a great self-esteem builder for me. [4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]
- Being unwanted and feeling like you were unwanted. Every time you felt like you were making progress, you lost it... They don't want you. You got to the point where you don't even care anymore [33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]

4.1.1.6. *Loss of normalcy (n=10)*. Beyond self-esteem, participants commented about how moves added to the stigma of being in foster care. Participant comments suggested that not only did they feel different from “normal” but that they were also living outside the “range of normal.”

- Once I began to realize what normal people do and compare myself to them, I learned to lie to myself and others about who and what I was. [28+ moves with many returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]
- You see other children play and be happy and you are not happy. [33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]
- You feel more like a guinea pig or some kind of an animal than a human being. [8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]

4.1.2. *Time of shutting down (n=12)*

Beyond the many losses, a second theme emerged from participants' memories about placement moves as a point of “giving up,” “disconnecting,” “detaching” or “withdrawing” from people. It seems likely that becoming socially withdrawn was a consequence of the many losses experienced.

- I never attached... I learned not to trust anybody but myself. You know I was extremely detached from any caretaker that I ever had purposefully cause that was my survival technique. [6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]
- ... but after a while I shut everything down emotionally, and things didn't matter... you don't want to come apart around strangers, so you just put up a thick skin, which makes it hard for people to get through... it starts to make you numb. [13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]
- ... it made it real difficult to trust people... I have become more guarded cause I get so scared to lose somebody. It takes me a long time to drop my guard... As soon as they are nice to me, I automatically think they want something. I become really defensive. It made it difficult for me to become attached... Eventually I became an angry, angry person who could not trust anybody. [8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]

4.1.3. *Memory of a caring adult (n=11)*

Amidst the mostly painful memories of placement moves lingered a third theme; that is, recollections of nurturing or caring adults who seemed to anchor a positive memory and provide a source of strength.

- The last move I didn't really want to move, but I left foster care shortly after that. My time in foster care was pretty positive I guess. I didn't have to experience the bad things I saw other kids experience. I had good foster parents. At one point my biological mom said ‘you seem to like your foster parents better than your real parents,’ and at the time, she probably was right. [6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]
- One thing, the first foster mom was a churchy lady. She did stuff with us. I got along with her. I could talk to her. I liked the last one too. She knew kids. She was like on our level. I was doing okay in those two foster homes. She would talk with us. She did not just yell at us. [5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]
- I remember the second home; when they were taking me there that the caseworker was real happy, real happy. And, it was for the best. [4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]

4.1.4. *Guarded optimism*

The fourth theme to the question of how former foster youth remembered their placement moves was “guarded optimism.” The interview question asking about the “best” or “easiest” part of moving (see Appendix A) drew many pauses and hesitations from participants. Indeed, thirteen participants said “nothing” was best or easiest. Some talked about the “good” as a chance to get away from a “bad” placement. However, even if something good came out of the experience, the message of study participants was clearly that it was a difficult time in their lives, with many negative memories. Some study participants also shared memories of feeling hopeful for something better—by either connecting more with others or getting a chance to learn or experience something new. Perhaps because participants had less to say about the “upside” of placement moves, their replies did not easily distill into one common theme. Thus, the following three sub-themes emerged.

4.1.4.1. *Leaving a bad placement (n=7)*. The event of moving wasn't always something to be avoided. Many participants commented on the best thing about a move was leaving a “bad” placement.

- A couple of homes I was really glad to be leaving. [9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]

4.1.4.2. *Chance to start over (n=6)*. For several participants, the move marked an opportunity for them to reinvent themselves or a chance to learn from new situations. A move to a new home provided some participants the chance to start with a clean slate or a new view on how other people lived.

- Hmm... (pause) that's tough. Probably the fact that nobody knew you. You had the chance to start over, even though it mostly failed. But it was not really easy or good. [4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]

4.1.4.3. *Connecting with people (n=5)*. Some participants remembered the event of moving as a catalyst for connecting with people. One participant spoke of increased time spent with her caseworker during a placement change. Another mentioned that people in the new placement made an effort to make you feel welcome. And, three others mentioned that they saw a move as a chance to be reunited with siblings or return home, even if that did not happen.

4.2. *Perceived lasting effects of past multiple foster placement moves*

The second major research question addressed in this paper had to do with participants' perceptions about the long-term "impact" of their multiple placement moves. The analysis revealed two major themes: (1) trust issues with other people, and (2) life lessons gained from the experience.

4.2.1. *Trust issues (n=18)*

The first major theme was mistrust or lacking the ability to trust other people, and it was a strong underlying theme when participants considered how past placement move experiences affected them today.

- It makes you sort of not be able to trust a lot of people... I trust people, but I could be more trusting... I went into a lot of foster homes, but I really wasn't able to get close to any of them, except one. I did not really get along with them. [13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]
- If I could find someone to talk with or trust, I think my life would be easier, but history teaches me not to trust. I say "I'll figure it out. Forget it". I don't let my [spouse] help. I make it harder. I don't want to trust [my spouse] to do it. I do it alone. It makes quality of life more difficult. [4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]

For some participants, trust issues were further complicated by struggles with managing emotions or mental health problems in their present-day lives. Descriptions of feelings of instability, hypersensitivity, depression, eating disorders, self mutilation, defensiveness, resisting authority, poor hygiene, anger, thievery, and being in "great pain" were mentioned by some participants when speaking about issues of trust. In addition, many participants spoke about trust issues by describing ways in which they either maintained a level of *safe distancing* in their interpersonal relationships with others, or lived loner or transient lifestyles, which involved moving often in their adult lives and consequently not connecting to others.

- ...and because you don't trust people, when you get close to someone you are subconsciously sabotaging that relationship because inside you think that it is not real, they will leave me, or they will find something wrong with me because that is the way it goes... but for me now to get close to people, that is a difficult thing, cause of my youth, and going through this system. [13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]
- You're not comfortable in one place; you're bound to move. You don't know what to call home. I never stay in one place. I moved four times in the past years. It does affect you. You don't know what to call home. Especially when you get into a relationship. It is hard to stay in one place. I moved from the time I was two, even before foster care. It has been unstable. I moved so much. I can't stay in one place. [7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]

4.2.2. *Life lessons learned from multiple placement moves*

The second major theme related to the perceived impact of childhood placement moves on present-day lives of participants had to do with the life lessons gained through these experiences. A remarkable aspect of the interview data was finding that while participants recalled the experience of placement moves and its negative impact in similar ways, many derived personal lessons or strengths from these experiences, and these were unique to individuals. The personal optimism communicated by many participants, despite otherwise dismal recalls of move experiences, might be regarded as a resilient quality that helped them overcome the odds of negative outcomes.

4.2.2.1. *Individual strengths (n=15)*. Participants identified various unique strengths that characterized them as individuals. For example, individual characteristics used by participants to describe themselves included: creative, independent, compulsive, articulate about own needs, more tolerant of life, outgoing and friendly, respectful of others, being prepared, having strong survival skills, remembering a specific foster parent, being a mentor to foster children, and being an expert packer. With the exception of being "an expert packer," most personal strengths were general in nature and did not directly tie to the experience of foster care or placement moves.

4.2.2.2. *Exposed to difference (n=5)*. One "positive" reflection of multiple placement move experiences was the idea that living with many families provided participants a unique viewpoint of family life and opportunities to interact with many different types of people.

- Yeah, I am sure that I can relate to other people, how I got where I got today, you know, having my own apartment and living on my own... [9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]
- Um... I think in some ways it made me more compassionate toward other people. You get to see how different people's lives are and kind of relate to them. [6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]

4.2.2.3. *Be a better parent/cherish biological relationships (n=5)*. While we do not know how many participants were themselves parents or how many participants had contact with biological family members, a few related their multiple placement move experiences to the value they presently hold for their own families. Participants expressed wanting to “do the right thing” for their children, wanting to raise their children better than the way they were raised. There was a strong desire to “be a better parent”, and feeling protective and aware of the preciousness of their children.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with available literature reporting general negative outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system (e.g., Pecora et al, 2005; Courtney et al, 2007). In this study we learned that multiple foster care placement moves were remembered as experiences of profound loss and perceived to have lasting detrimental impacts on the present-day lives of study participants. Due to the limits of the study methodology, however, we cannot rule out other possible factors that may also have contributed to how study participants remembered their childhood experiences nor can we isolate the placement move experience as the sole contributor to how individuals perceive their present-day life struggles. For instance, all study participants also had experienced abuse or neglect by their parents and being removed from their birth families; and, such traumatic events also are expected to leave lasting negative impressions. On the other hand, one might then argue that the foster care experience characterized by multiple moves did not relieve the trauma and losses suffered prior to foster care. It is the case that study participants who had varied foster care histories ended up recalling the losses associated with multiple placement moves in very similar ways. Further research inquiry is needed to compare the perspectives of individuals who experienced multiple foster care placements versus those who experienced one placement.

The qualitative nature of the study limits generalizations beyond the sample; however, the findings bring greater understanding to the possible lingering effects of placement moves on foster children, as well as provide insight into the psychological dynamics at play during the process of placement moves. We relate the findings of the study to theory and research in three general areas: (1) attachment, grief and family privilege; (2) complex trauma and (3) resilience.

5.1. Attachment, grief and family privilege

The many losses remembered by study participants highlights the importance of theory and research in the areas of attachment, grief, and family privilege. The findings suggest that these concepts should be considered by foster care practitioners and caregivers every time a placement transition occurs. The findings of this study support other research that shows that foster children change placements without the benefit of being properly informed about the move (Johnson et al., 1995; Butler & Charles, 1999) and raises doubts about the opportunity for foster children to psychologically process the impact of a move after it happens (Black, 1984). When children are not allowed to grieve separation and loss, their ability to cope with change and attach to adult caregivers becomes seriously compromised (Jewitt, 1982; Fahlberg, 1991). Specifically, participants in this study described their struggles with trusting others and managing interpersonal relationships.

The dynamics of the “gifted relationship” observed by Butler and Charles (1999) may complicate the grief process for children being cared for by foster parents. Specifically, when new caregivers approach children’s arrival to their home as a “fresh start,” it may ignore the needs that foster children may have to process the losses of people, items, and other connections to familiarity. It seems reasonable to suggest that foster parents and caseworkers should be trained to view placement transition from the perspective of children, to recognize signs of loss, grief or traumatic stress responses so as to avoid further harm that could result if children are expected to forget past placements, regardless of the duration of stay. Cairns (2002) recommends that foster parents endeavor to “learn the child,” which is a perspective that requires foster parents to be knowledgeable in relevant theory such as attachment and grief, but also open to learning how each particular child processes his or her world. “Learning the child” in the context of stages of child development is also essential if caregivers and caseworkers hope to meet children’s particular needs when placement moves happen (Fahlberg, 1991). The insights gained from this study can contribute to developing a framework for professional development opportunities.

The many losses—personal power, friends and school, self-esteem, normalcy, personal belongings, connection to siblings—felt by adults who as children moved through multiple foster care placements may add up to an even greater loss. Seita and Brendtro (2005) introduced the concept of family privilege to discuss the idea of invisible benefits that individuals gain from permanent membership in a caring family. Such privilege can be measured in human capital needed for any child to transition through adolescence and into adulthood. Examples of family privilege for foster children in the context of placement moves may include knowing that a caregiver will prepare you for a transition in ways that make sense to you, trusting that a caregiver will make sure you have packed your most precious belongings to take with you, not having to explain to friends in your new neighborhood how you fit into your “family,” and knowing that your caregivers will remain constant when you relocate to a new residence, even if they do not move with you.

5.2. Traumatic stress

Foster children who lack family privilege are likely to mistrust caseworkers or foster parents (Seita & Brendtro, 2005; Benzola, 1993; Fisher, 2002). This mistrust is adaptive and intended to protect them against further disappointments and pain. While this mistrust is adaptive in the short-run, it is problematic in the long-run (Seita & Brendtro, 2005).

Many study participants remembered their placement moves as a time of shutting down, and this “reaction” to placement moves was described in very similar ways by male versus female participants, as well as participants of different ages, races and who had experienced different types and number of placements. This finding does not suggest that multiple placement moves will affect all individuals in the same way; indeed, our study methodology with only 22 participants and qualitative approach could not support such a claim. Further research is needed to investigate how particular characteristics of individuals or move experiences affect perceptions or outcomes related to placement moves. However, the findings point to the possibility that repeated and abrupt separations of living environments—after having suffered child abuse and neglect and removal from one’s family home—may result in a common or “core” reaction by individuals who experience this sequence of events.

The growing body of research on complex trauma, which describes the types of negative consequences experienced by children exposed to chronic stress, helps explain the reaction described by participants in the study (Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola & van der Kolk, 2003). The many losses remembered by study participants suggest that placement moves are a source of much distress for foster children. The many and repeated losses may well compound any consequences of stress related to prior abuse and neglect or removal from a birth family home. Theory on complex trauma describes several areas of impairment that result from children being exposed to high levels of distress. Participants in this study described their emotional states during the time of transition in ways that parallel research that explains how complex trauma manifests as problems with attachment, affect regulation, cognition and behavior problems. The significance of using a traumatic stress model for understanding the effect of multiple placement moves on children is that the damage caused is physiological and often leads to lifetime limitations in how one relates to other people, regulates emotions and processes information cognitively. The permanent effects of such stress is supported in this study by participants’ descriptions of the lifetime struggles—mistrust, safe distancing in relationships, transient lifestyle, and managing mental health issues—that they attributed to having lived through multiple placement moves in childhood.

5.3. Resilience

Participants in the study recalled memories of a caring adult and a sense of hope or guarded optimism when they talked about their placement move experiences. Other “positive” accounts of the experience were lessons learned, as well as a sense of having individual or personal strengths. Recent research on resilience and protective factors indicates that this construct provides a viable framework to limit the negative emotional impact of movement within the foster care system. Resilience is a characteristic that varies from person to person, which was observed in this study as participants identified unique personal strength characteristics despite having described the experience of placement moves in similar ways. It seems that participants in the study possessed a quality of resilience, or the innate ability to bounce back from singular or ongoing trauma. However, despite possessing some qualities of resilience, all participants in the study had mostly negative memories of placement moves and were able to identify how those moves negatively impacted the quality of their lives many years after having left care.

Resilience is a feature embodied in the concept of family privilege as described by Seita and Brendtro (2005). While theories of attachment, grief, and traumatic stress help us to understand the negative consequences of multiple placement moves, theories of resilience and family privilege can be used to shape more sensitive policies and practices when considering placement decisions. In the resilience literature, family privilege approximates protective factors (Werner & Smith, 1992; Rutter, Giller & Hagell, 1998; Fraser, 2004). Protective factors are contained within the ecology of young people and serve as buffers from risk factors. The memory of a caring adult was perhaps a protective factor that kept many study participants from suffering more adverse consequences. On the other hand, the unique personal strengths identified by study participants suggest that there were many pathways to overcoming or living with the adverse effects of multiple placement moves. And, any practice responses developed to address the problems associated with multiple placement moves for foster children must allow for individual and varied reactions to move events.

6. Implications

The study findings have many implications for research, policy and practice. First, it is evident that more research is needed to investigate how placement moves are experienced by foster children. The present study was retrospective involving adults between the ages of 18 and 65 years old. While the findings point to the possibility that multiple placement moves provoke common negative reactions, such as loss and mistrust across a variety of individuals, more investigation is required before presenting such an argument. Additionally, further research to investigate which factors protect against or exacerbate the negative effects of multiple placement moves is needed. For example, the length of stay in placement, moves between relatives versus strangers, level of child’s involvement in move process, and age of youth at time of move are just a few variables that may influence how individuals experience and respond to multiple placement moves.

Second, it can be argued that the study’s findings provide support for policy that seeks to keep placement moves in foster care to a minimum. Moreover, the findings may well provide a useful perspective from which to engage policy makers in dialogue about crafting policy that not only seeks to prevent the number of physical moves that foster children experience but also to reduce the traumatic effects associated with moves when they do occur.

Finally, there are practice implications that follow the study’s findings. Practice implications include developing a theoretical framework to inform foster care practitioners and parents about how to best manage placement moves and respond to foster children’s experiences of loss and trauma during such transitions. Suggested theories to include in developing a practice framework are as follows: attachment theory, grief and loss, traumatic stress and resilience. In addition, the concept of family privilege provides a unifying perspective that ties these theories together for practice.

While the sample size was a methodological weakness of the study, the message in the findings is strong. It seems reasonable to suggest that foster care practitioners must be equipped with strategies to help children process the stresses and hopes associated with each placement move. In addition to adding topics of trauma, separation, family privilege and loss to worker and foster parent trainings that do not presently include such topics, perhaps additional efforts could be made to develop practice protocols to ensure children are provided the opportunity to process their hopes and fears of every move in developmentally appropriate ways, and with a trusted adult. It seems that the task of the practitioner is to simultaneously work to prevent unnecessary moves and to develop strategies to reduce the negative impact of moves when they do occur. Application of these practices might serve as protective factors and help promote positive adaptations to multiple placement move experiences, such as attachment, trust, and interpersonal connections that last into adulthood.

Acknowledgements

Ms. Anita Lacy for assistance with the development of the research questions and interpretation of findings.
Western Michigan University Graduate Assistant Program and School of Social Work for project funds and support.
Ms. Shawn L. Tenney, graduate assistant, School of Social Work, for careful review and editing of this paper.

Appendix A. Interview questions

Questions about remembering multiple placement moves

1. Thinking about your total experience in foster care, how “big a deal” was moving from one placement to another when you were living in care?
2. What was the best or easiest thing about moving from one placement to another that you remember? (Was there anything positive that came from moving from one placement to another?)
3. What was the most difficult or hardest thing about moving from one placement to another that you remember? (Was there anything negative that came from moving from one placement to another?)
4. When you think about all the moves from one placement to another that you experienced during your time in foster care, what lasting impressions/memories stick with you to this day?

Questions about the impact of multiple childhood placement moves on present-day life

5. Do you think that your experience of moving from one foster placement to another in your childhood impacts how you relate to other people today? If so, how?
6. Do you have any personal habits that you think were caused by the multiple placement changes that you experienced in foster care?
 - a. What habits have you developed that add to the quality of your life? (For example, a former foster youth claims to be excellent at packing a suitcase because he lived in so many different places?)
 - b. What habits have you developed that take away from the quality of life? (e.g., a former foster youth says that she nervously checks windows and doors several times before going to bed each night because she has lived in so many different places).

References

- Barber, J. G., & Delfabbro, P. H. (2003). Chapter 12: The views of disruptive children and their carers. In J. G. Barber, & P. H. Delfabbro (Eds.), *Children in foster care* (pp. 184–195). New York: Routledge.
- Benzola, E. (1993). *Temporary child: A foster care survivor's story*. Los Angeles: Real People Publishing.
- Black, D. (1984). Sundered families: The effect of loss of a parent. *Adoption and Fostering*, 8, 38–43.
- Butler, S., & Charles, M. (1999). 'The past, the present, but never the future': Thematic representations of fostering disruption. *Child and Family Social Work*, 4, 9–19.
- Cairns, K. (2002). Making sense: The use of theory and research to support foster care. *Adoption & Fostering*, 26(2), 6–13.
- Coleman, H., & Unrau, Y. A. (2008). Qualitative data analysis. In R. M. Grinnell Jr., & Y. A. Unrau (Eds.), *Social work research and evaluation: Foundations for evidence-based practice* (pp. 370–386), 8th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Connell, C. M., Vanderploeg, J. J., Flaspohler, P., Katz, K. H., Saunders, L., & Tebes, J. K. (2006). Changes in placement among children in foster care: A longitudinal study of child and case influences. *Social Services Review*, 80, 398–418.
- Cook, A., Blaustein, M., Spinazzola, J., & van der kolk, B. (2003). *Complex trauma in children and adolescents. White paper from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network*. www.NCTSN.org.
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G. R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., & Keller, T. (2007). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 21*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.
- Eckenrode, J., Rowe, E., Laird, M., & Braithwaite, J. (1995). Mobility as a mediator of the effects of child maltreatment on academic performance. *Child Development*, 66, 1130–1142.
- Fahlberg, V. I. (1991). *A child's journey through placement*. Indianapolis Indiana: Perspectives Press.
- Festinger, T. (1983). *No one ever asked us—A postscript to foster care*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fisher, A. (2002). *Finding fish*. New York: Harper Torch.
- Fraser, M. (2004). *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective*, 2nd ed Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- James, S., Landsverk, J., & Slymen, D. J. (2004). Placement movement in out-of-home care: Patterns and predictors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 185–206.
- Jewitt, C. L. (1982). *Helping children cope with separation and loss*. Harvard, Massachusetts: The Harvard Common Press.
- Johnson, P. R., Yoken, C., & Voss, R. (1995). Family foster care placement: The child's perspective. *Child Welfare*, 74(5), 959–975.
- Leathers, S. J. (2002). Foster children's behavioral disturbance and detachment from caregivers and community institutions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(4), 239–268.

- Ledoux, J. (2004). *The emotional brain*. London: The Orion Publishing Group Ltd.
- Newton, R. R., Litrownik, A. J., & Landsverk, J. A. (2000). Children and youth in foster care: Disentangling the relationship between problems behaviors and number of placements. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24(10), 1363–1374.
- Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, 34, 1189–1208.
- Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., et al. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- Pecora, P. J., Williams, J., Kessler, R. C., Hiripi, E., O'Brien, K., Emerson, J., et al. (2006). Assessing the educational achievements of adults who were formerly placed in family foster care. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, 220–231.
- Rubin, D. M., O'Reilly, A. L. R., Luan, X., & Localio, R. (2007). The impact of placement stability on behavioral well-being for children in foster care. *Pediatrics*, 119(2), 336–344.
- Rutter, M., Giller, H., & Hagell, A. (1998). *Antisocial behavior by young people*. Boston: Cambridge University Press.
- Seita, J. R., & Brendtro, L. K. (2005). *Kids who outwit adults*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Sinclair, I., Wilson, K., & Gibbs, I. (2005). *Foster placements: Why they succeed and why they fail*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Shek, D. T. L., Tang, V. M. Y., & Han, X. Y. (2005). Evaluation of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work literature (1990–2003): Evidence that constitutes a wake-up call. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 15, 180–194.
- Taylor-Powell, E., & Renner, M. (2003). *Analyzing qualitative data*. Paper G3658-6 in *Program Development and Evaluation Series*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/pdf/G3658-12.pdf>
- Unrau, Y. A. (2007a). Research on placement moves: Seeking the perspective of foster children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29, 122–137.
- Unrau, Y. A. (2007b). Moving in foster care: Multiple foster care placements in childhood. Unpublished Manuscript. Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University.
- Usher, C. L., Randolph, K. A., & Gogan, H. C. (1999). Placement patterns in foster care. *Social Services Review*, 73, 22–36.
- Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wulczyn, F., Kogan, J., & Harden, B. J. (2003). Placement stability and movement trajectories. *Social Services Review*, 77, 212–236.