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Perception of Well-Being Among College Students with a Lived History of Foster Care Placement Background

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ABSTRACT

College students with a lived history of foster care are often described in research in terms of their potential deficits or the adverse and trauma-related impacts of their life experiences related to foster care. At the same time, however, they have developed strengths that have helped them to gain entry to college. In this exploratory research, we interviewed undergraduate students with a history of foster care placement who were entering a four-year university to determine how they perceived themselves in relationship to their personal well-being. Most were able to speak to multiple indicators of well-being, which we share here. We suggest utilizing a framework of well-becoming when working with young persons with these experiences, keeping in mind that this is a developmental self-organization process. Assistance from skilled peers and adults aids in this development, which will serve these young adults beyond their college experiences.

Keywords: college students, foster care, well-being, well-becoming, strengths perspective

College students with a history of lived experience in foster care have been exposed to and endured adverse events that influence their growth and development in the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Gypen et al., 2017). Youth with a history of foster care have to deal with adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and ambiguous loss of family and relationships (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017),

as well as a lack of stability (Salazar et al., 2013). These youth have been found to meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD at higher rates than general youth populations (Salazar et al., 2013), and the impact of this childhood trauma is negatively associated with earning a four-year degree (Morton, 2018). Since the start of the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Fullerton in 1998, college support at two- and four-year institutions for youth formerly in foster care has become more widespread, therefore awareness about this population of learners is needed to promote their success (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). It is important to understand how college students from foster care manage developmental growth that is part of the normal trajectory of emerging as a young adult in the context of higher education. The experience of foster care, as well as the child abuse and neglect that precipitated the foster care experience, shape and influence how individuals both perceive and receive the world around them.

This study explores the question of how young people with a history of foster care placement perceive their personal well-being in the first semester of enrollment at a university that offers a campus-based support program. Students with a history of foster care placement were interviewed about several dimensions of their own well-being to gain distinct perspectives and insights about how the students see themselves at the beginning of their college education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Well-being is a concept used to describe the health and wellness of individuals. In the broadest sense, well-being is a lens for considering dimensions of growth and fulfillment across various aspects of youth development, as well as considering how youth are shaped by and influence interpersonal relationships, community connections, and societal influence (Harper Browne, 2014). Schweiger and Graf's (2016) definition of well-being includes the importance of using an ecological framework as a way of recognizing the impact of context of systems and relationships on well-being. The Person-in-Environment perspective, introduced by Unrau and McCormick (2016), considers this ecological perspective of well-being by highlighting how an individual's internal environment of cognitions, emotions and physical experiences, especially when trauma history is a factor in a person's life, is an essential part the ecological landscape of well-being.

Since 2012, the Administration of Children Youth and Families (ACYF) has promoted the definition of child well-being as comprised of four key domains established by Lou and colleagues (2008) related to assessment of well-being in child welfare: (1) cognitive functioning, is indicated by reasoning, problem-solving skills, decision-making, and academic achievement; (2) physical health and development, which uses normative standards for growth and development and assesses risky behaviors that impact health; (3) emotional/behavioral function, which is concerned with self-esteem and self-concept, identity, and a positive outlook; and (4) social function, which refers to social networks and interactions, peer relationships, and social skills (Lou et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2012).

Youth who enroll in college as wards of the state have in common several key life events that adversely impact one or more domains of well-being. Although individual experiences vary, these youth have, at a minimum, experienced abuse and/or neglect from their caregivers and were subject to a child protective investigation that resulted in subsequently being placed in the custody of the state. State-approved living arrangements vary, and may include kin foster care (court-appointed placement with family members), stranger foster care (court-appointed placement with foster families unknown to the youth), group home care (court-appointed placement in a group home setting), or institutional placement (e.g., detention, psychiatric facilities). The challenging circumstances of growing up in foster care are often associated with greater health disparities as compared to populations of youth who have never experienced foster care (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005; Pecora et al., 2009; Gypen et al, 2017).

The harmful circumstances of growing up in conditions of abuse and neglect, and the separation from known family by the foster care system has been studied largely from the lens of pathology, with a focus on challenges faced by participants in these systems (Pecora et al., 2003). Research has largely focused on gaps or deficits of children resulting from trauma, but without considering the mediating effects of the foster care context on child well-being or development (Pecora et al., 2003). For example, when placement in foster care is part of the childhood experience, it often involves abrupt changes in the physical and relational spaces, which can re-traumatize children (Salazar, 2013). Yet this dynamic of rupture, loss, and disconnection is often overlooked when interpreting observed behavior used to inform a mental health diagnosis. Consequently, there is little research to understand how young people exiting the foster care system and entering college manage to adapt and grow despite the adverse conditions and challenges of childhood.

Resilience and Adaptions to New Contexts

Youth who age out of foster care emancipate from the child welfare system without legal or permanent ties to a family. Some begin college as wards of the state, but all qualify as independent status for federal financial aid, and many must navigate the college journey without the benefit of a continuous parent/caregiver relationship or a home to return to during breaks from college. College students who must overcome such adversities are often viewed through a lens of resilience (Nuñez et al., 2022). In general, resilience is a concept that points to growth through adversity, and exists only in the context of risk factors (Ungar, 2008); that is, one is perceived as resilient to varying degrees only in the presence of risk factors. This definition provides a frame from which to view individuals who endured, navigated, and overcame adverse and threatening childhood experiences. Ungar's (2008) definition of resilience includes growth that is perceived as positive by dominant culture, such that youth who age out of foster care and excel at school, maintain part-time employment, and express gratitude for programs of support and professionals therein, would be praised as resilient.

However, Ungar (2008) also refers to the idea of hidden resilience, which refers to so-called maladaptive coping strategies developed by youth who experienced

adversity through childhood. In other work, Ungar (2018) notes that "the resilience of an abused or neglected child is related to the availability and accessibility of contextually and culturally relevant services that facilitate positive development in a context of significant adversity" (p. 4). As such, hidden resilience may refer to the types of behaviors which emerge in situations where supports are unavailable or inaccessible (Ungar, 2018). In their examination of youth in foster care, Samuels and Pryce (2009) describe maladaptive behavior as a form of self-reliance developed under conditions of survival; however, this source of resilience in conditions of adversity also posed potential risk for youth when these self-protective behaviors emerged in other contexts.

Investigations into the characteristics of youth in foster care offer other clues about essential traits necessary to overcome adversity from a childhood in foster care. Hines, et al. (2005) describe inner resilience as having an "internal locus of control" (p. 392) and note that youth who have this are more likely to persevere in their educational goals. Similarly, Hass et al. (2014) found that having a sense of autonomy or control over one's environment was identified as a turning point towards academic success for college students with foster care histories. Amechi (2016) explored these concepts through a lens of self-authorship and noted that the strength of any internal locus of control or sense of autonomy is context-dependent. Amechi's (2016) research notes that opportunities for youth to develop self-narratives is critical for academic achievement. However, he also stresses that the process of gathering, interpreting, and analyzing information to make meaning of one's life is context-dependent.

The authors who explored resilience noted the importance of understanding contexts (Samuels & Pryce, 2009; Ungar 2008, 2018), as did Amechi (2016) in his work on autonomy as a factor in academic success. In order to achieve success in academia, understanding those particular contexts can help empower the students to make meaning of their lives and have more agency in their journey to enhance their well-becoming.

Understanding Well-Being, Well-Becoming, and Self-Organization

There is a need to understand how youth with a history of foster care placement develop well-being during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Because of the complex conditions of childhood and the layers of trauma often endured (e.g., abuse and neglect prior to foster care and ruptures of placement and relationship while in foster care), this understanding is best approached as a process versus an outcome. Schweiger and Graf's (2015) frame of well-being and well-becoming is helpful as it acknowledges that well-being is both a state and a process. Specifically, Schweiger and Graf (2015) explain that "well-being refers to the current state of a person while well-becoming refers to the development from one state to another over time" (p. 86). Moreover, Schweiger and Graf (2015) acknowledge that the relationship between well-being and well-becoming is not straightforward; that is, well-becoming can emerge from a state of ill-being or well-being, it is interrelated with youth development, and it is impacted by both behavioral and environmental factors (or contexts).

Self-organization is another concept that explains well-becoming. Carl Rogers (1995) discussed this in his work as self-actualization or movement toward complex and complete development, or an "organismic tendency toward fulfillment" (p. 123). Rogers (1995) claimed that this is available to people who experience a growth-promoting climate, or one which has as its goal the development of a person. Such a climate must have three things: genuineness; acceptance, or "unconditional positive regard" (p. 116); and empathetic understanding. When all of these are present, it creates an opportunity for wholeness in the person, and they can grow. Hudson (2010) describes self-organization as a process of natural problem solving which helps a system change and grow, and even develop flexibility, independent of external control over one's life. In the context of foster care, young people have minimal or no external control over key decisions in their lives, such as where they live, who they live with and for how long, yet this is the context within which growth and self-organization take place. To aid growth, individuals need to provide the types of support mentioned by Rogers (1995), and systems and individuals in systems, such as academia, must provide meaningful services which are available to students (Ungar, 2018).

To understand the development of students with a history of foster care placement, then, we need to look at well-being in a self-organizing way that acknowledges prior life experiences and the influences of different contexts on development, and we need to explore how well-becoming emerges, as well as how college students understand themselves and their own journeys. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) began to explore development and resilience in adolescence, but this work focused on young adults. In this study, we aimed to explore how college students understand their well-being in their transition from foster care to college. In order to do this, we asked first semester college students with foster care histories to participate in interviews exploring their well-being and their understanding of themselves at that particular point in time.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We approached our research with two research questions: How do young people with a history of foster care placement perceive their personal well-being? How has life shaped their thoughts, actions, emotions, insights and somatic experiences as they navigate college?

Since this is an exploratory study, the authors used a grounded theory approach to the research. Grounded theory is an inductive method of research which grounds the study in the participants' experiences and allows findings to emerge from the narratives of the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

A convenience sample of 10 students participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in a four-year public university and were receiving support from a campus-based scholarship program designed to support students with foster care histories. Subjects were recruited by flyer and e-mail via the program to participate in a one-on-one, in-person interview with a peer who was trained to perform the task. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were completely voluntary. All

participants completed a verbal (or signed) informed consent. Participants chose from a list of gift items (e.g., bath lotion and soap basket, headphones, notebooks), each approximately $25 in value, as an incentive. Incentives were provided to acknowledge the time and effort of study participants. Since these incentives were small, practical tokens of nominal value, ethics review determined that they were not coercive. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. This research was approved by the institution's IRB. The demographic and participant background information is presented in Table 1

Table 1: Participant Demographic and Background Information

Age at Interview	Gender	Race	Age at Foster Care Entry	Number of Foster Care Placements	Years in Foster Care	Ever Received Mental Health Services	Person Whom You Rely On
18	Male	White	16	1	2	No	Aunt
19	Male	White	10	15	9	Yes	Mentors
18	Female	White	12	3	3.5	Yes	Grandma
19	Female	White	8	3	4	Yes	Foster Mom
19	Female	White	16	1	3	Yes	Mentors
19	Female	White	12	3	5	Yes	Grandma
20	Female	White	15	1	0.25	Yes	Grandma
19	Female	Black	5	6	8	Yes	Mom
19	Female	Black	16	1	1	Yes	Friend
20	Female	Black	17	1	2	Yes	Myself (Me)

Semi-Structured Interview

The interview instrument was created based on the protocol of the iRest yoga nidra model (Miller, 2010, 2022; Miller, 2015), which offers a secular process of self-inquiry composed of 10 steps (see Table 2). The iRest framework has 10 categories that are designed to support individuals in experiencing a sense of self that is holistic in nature and independent of the context of life situation. The iRest framework overlaps with the cognitive, emotional, and physical domains noted by the ACYF, and additionally offers a category of experiencing a sense of self. Table 2 shows the aspects of the iRest interview protocol mapped onto the domains presented by the ACYF. The iRest framework is a practice that centers on understanding oneself in

relationship to a collective sense of well-being and is based on the understanding that well-being is multidimensional, can be cultivated through practice, and is anchored in an individual's ability to experience a sense of deep "ok-ness," if not wholeness (Miller, 2010, 2022). From this perspective, individuals who have endured life adversities are viewed as whole and "unbroken," despite exposure to traumatic life events. Well-being and well-becoming, from a yoga nidra perspective, are comprised of multi-dimensional paths that aid individuals in understanding how their inner experience is organized and metabolized, as well as how they process experiences with others and the environment.

Table 2: Ten Steps of iRest Grouped by ACYF Key Domains of Well-Being

Physical Health and Development	Emotional/Behavioral Function
• Inner resource: a visceral felt sense of security, calm and safe haven in the body • Aware of body sensations • Aware of breath flow and sensation	• Aware of emotion sensations in body and mind • Experiencing sensations of joy or well-being emanating from the heart or belly spreading through the body.
Cognitive	**Sense of Self in a Social World**
• Setting Intention: Reflecting on focus for self in the present moment of a situation • Aware of cognition/belief sensations in body and mind • Conscious sense of self	• Heartfelt desire: articulating a sense of value, purpose and meaning for self in relation to "place" in the world • Witnessing thoughts, memories and images without judging or trying to change them. • Integration: allowing for a process of self-organizing in which changes are anchored around a sense of peace or wholeness.

Because iRest yoga nidra is not context-dependent, it provides a helpful lens for investigating how well-being and well-becoming are experienced by first-year students who have transitioned to college from foster care placement. The iRest framework for well-being also has documented benefits with a college student population (Eastman-Mueller et al., 2014), as well as populations that have experienced trauma (Miller, 2015). Using this descriptive and strengths-based

information, we explored the strategies this population of students adopted to manage positive and negative life stressors.

All authors received training in the iRest method and were familiar with the philosophy of the model and its use in practice. The authors met multiple times to convert the iRest framework into questions that would make sense to participants without an iRest background. Since the third author was a member of the target population being studied and had existing relationships with the population, she served as a final check of question suitability. Additionally, given that some of the phrasing of questions might be unfamiliar to students, the authors also prepared prompts to help participants understand the questions.

Data analysis began as soon as the first interview was transcribed; the author who conducted the interviews also transcribed them. The author conducting the interviews made sure she understood the statements made by the participants before she moved forward during the interviews and used reflective statements to clarify participant language and meanings as a method of member checking during the face-to-face interviews (Stahl & King, 2020). The first author read each transcript as it became available. Since this study included only ten interviews, and the interviewer conducted member-checking during the interviews, only one author coded the data. After all of the transcripts had been completed, the first author began a more formal analysis process using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The author used a line-by-line method of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) when analyzing the data, seeking recurring themes in the narratives. This was done both with printed copies of transcripts and with the Excel spreadsheet versions of transcripts, so that responses could be explored by individual and by question. A constant comparative method was also used to find themes across participant responses, whereby answers given by participants were compared to each question as themes emerged (Conrad, 1978). This then led to focused coding, or selective coding, (Creswell, 2007) in which the author looked for repeating themes across narratives. Another complete iteration was conducted each time a new theme was discovered. In some cases, frequencies of particular words or phrases were used to analyze and describe data. After reviewing results, both the first and second author met to discuss findings and analysis procedures to determine if further analysis was necessary until they reached agreement about the results. After agreement was reached between the first two authors, all authors reviewed results and provided feedback.

Table 3: Participant Responses to Questions

Participant	Inner Resource	Body Sensing	Breath sensing	Emotion	Joy	Intention	Cognitions	Heartfelt Desire	Witnessing** 1	Witnessing** 2	Integration
1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
2	?	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3	Y	Y	Y	?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	?*	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
5	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
6	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
7	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
8	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	?	Y	Y
9	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
10	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note. Y = answered Yes, N = Answered No, ? = Uncertain. *Prompting questions were used for when participants answered "no, but," responded "sort of," were uncertain how to answer, or gave both yes and no answers. **Witnessing was broken into two columns as the answers varied in many cases: Do you ever feel connected to something larger than yourself? (W1) Do you ever have the ability to take a step back from what you are experiencing? (W2)

RESULTS

Physical Health and Development Domain

Inner Resource

Question: "Do you have a way of accessing a 'happy place' or feeling deeply okay with yourself? How do you access that place? What feeling do you get when you are there? If you were to teach me how to access this place/Okay-ness, what would I feel in my body?"

Five participants answered "yes" to this question. One participant said "no," but then proceeded to describe their experience of having a "happy person" versus a "happy place". Those who have access to this "happy place" discussed things that get them there, like listening to music, relaxing, talking with others, writing, stretching, sleeping, enjoying solitude, and just thinking of that happy place. Four participants

said they do not have a way of accessing this inner resource of feeling ok with themselves.

The feelings they identified when in touch with their inner resource were calm, being at peace, feeling happy, safe, content, or focused. One identified that "everything else goes away." Another described it as being happy "in my own world," and "everything's going to be okay." Others described feeling as though "no one can hurt me" and "I can figure everything out."

The bodily sensations they identified related to this state were similar: joy, happiness, contentment, safe, secure, centered, grounded, and feeling clear and good about oneself. One described their body feeling "like a flute," another described "energy coming through," and one described feeling "at one with self."

Body Sensing

Question: "What physical feeling do you get that tells you that you are secure or deeply okay? Insecure or not okay? Empowered or disempowered?"

When asked to describe how they physically sense they are secure or deeply okay, many discussed feeling "calm," noting that they "can breathe," they feel "peaceful" and they feel safe and secure, adding that there are "no threats." One stated that, "I kind of get like, warm inside." Others described it as that "moment when you open up," or "being open." Interestingly, three of the ten respondents described this as an absence of other feelings, such as "regular sadness goes away." One stated that they don't have a physical feeling that tells them they are deeply ok, and described it "more an absence of threat, dread, discomfort, overwhelm." One participant shared, "I haven't experienced that."

Breath Sensing

Question: "When do you become aware of your breathing? Are there times when you try to regulate your breathing? Please describe."

Five participants described the sense of being aware of their breath related to physical exertion. Four participants described noticing their breathing when it feels "stressed" or when they need to "regulate" it, and two directly linked that to their anxiety or experiencing anger or excitement. They were aware when it was "too much," or that they were "breathing really fast" or "panting." Six participants also discussed using their breath to help regulate themselves when feeling anxious, stating they would "take a deep breath to get things back to doing what they're supposed to do." Others described this as using breath after "having an experience that feels like something that happened to me in my past." Another described regulating their breath to relax at bedtime. There was a lot of overlap in the responses to this question, as the categories of responses are very similar (stress, regulation, calm, relaxation).

Summary of Physical and Health Development Domain Findings

Just over half of the students reported having some way to access feelings of being deeply okay, which is noteworthy. In other words, many students could

describe how they accessed the feeling of being deeply ok, and how it felt for them to be there. For some participants, body sensing was associated with the experience. In some instances, it was the absence of persistent negative feelings versus of presence of positive feelings that indicated a sense of well-being. Breath sensing was something to which almost all participants had access and they described using this access to help them control their stress or regulate their bodies.

Emotional/Behavioral Domain

Emotions

Question: "Is there an emotion that's present for you right now? If so, what is the emotion? How do you know that this is the emotion that you're experiencing?"

Four of the participants responded that they felt content. "Very content. … like an overwhelming sense of peace." Two described feeling calm or safe, and one shared that they were really relaxed. One person initially said they could not identify an emotion in the moment, but then shared they felt "content." One was feeling exhaustion and tiredness, one was feeling a "little bit gloomy" and one was feeling depressed. Several responses in this category also referred to feelings that were not present in the moment: "I don't feel anxious," "I don't feel threat," "I'm not tensed up or worrying," or, "I'm not experiencing anything overzealous." We saw something similar in previous responses, where sometimes participants identified the absence of certain feelings when describing how they felt.

Joy

Question: "What brings you joy? (Love, Joy, Bliss) What does joy feel like? Where do you experience joy in your body?"

Five of the ten participants named relationships, specifically with friends or family, as the thing that brings them joy. One explained: "For me joy feels like I am able to be myself. I am able to trust the people around me, so I can just go all out." Compassion, laughter, good food, pets, and music were also mentioned as things that bring joy to life.

For many participants, the stomach and the heart had the most mentions for where they felt joy in their bodies. "Happiness, jumpiness in my heart and in my stomach and I can't stop smiling. In my stomach, in my heart, in my face, and in my fingers." Two others talked about "the butterfly feeling" in the stomach when discussing joy and how it feels in the body. One stated, "You feel good and you feel warm. … Yeah, like my stomach and then like the warmth just all over. I just feel, like, so good."

Five participants named the heart as the seat of their joy. "Just--it feels like your heart's just full and you're happy." "Joy feels ... I don't know how you could describe bright physically, but I feel bright. I feel like perky, umm... Really my head and chest area, so like my heart really."

Summary of Emotional/Behavioral Domain Findings

When asked to describe their emotional states, participants were more likely to describe their physical state of being, such as calm, safe and tired. Common feeling words, such as sad, happy, interested were not used by participants to self-describe their emotional experience. Again, in this section, however, some described an absence of certain difficult feelings (e.g., anxious, tense, threat) to describe emotions that were present. At the same, time participants were able to connect with the physical experience of joy when asked about it.

Cognitive Domain

Intention

Question: "Do you set goals for daily living? How often? Please give an example."

Six participants responded "yes" to this question, one said "sort of" and three said "no." Some students identified formal methods that they used to help them track their goals, like using whiteboards and calendars, and were very task-specific. Others were more informal in their approaches and tended to have daily things that they wanted to accomplish. For those who identified that they set goals, they noted that they experienced satisfaction from "crossing off my list" and getting things "out of my way."

Cognitions or Concious Sense of Self

Question: "What is a belief that you have about yourself, positive or negative?"

There was a broad range of responses to this question, with little repetition of themes. Two respondents answered both the negative and positive piece of the question directly. "Negative: I think I'm lazy. Positive: I am also doing more, so I'm proud … but I still think I could be doing way, way, way more most of the time. Excited to see, like, what I can do in the future." Other participants shared their beliefs about themselves: "I'm not lucky. I'm a strong individual. I'm a very confident person;" "That I am going to live until tomorrow. It keeps me going and makes me have a purpose;" "Whatever I stick my mind to and I say that I am going to do, I always do it;" "I'm content enough to know that I will be able to make it through, like, all of this stuff and turn out good on the other side."

Summary of Cognitive Domain Findings

Although most of the participants reported setting goals for daily life, not all used this skill. Many of the belief statements shared spoke to an enduring focus on self-reliance or survival, as well as their determination and ability to persist, no matter their circumstances.

Sense of Self in a Social World

Heartfelt Desire

Question: "What are the essential qualities that best describe you?

When you share these qualities with the world, how does it reflect back to you? What is it about you that you bring to the world?"

When describing their qualities, three participants mentioned being good listeners, three noted that people felt comfortable around them, and three mentioned being "caring." Four mentioned being "understanding," and others mentioned being empathetic, accepting, trustworthy, considerate, funny, and intelligent.

When describing what they bring to the world, all participants mentioned some way of helping the world, giving back, advocating, or offering compassion. Three mentioned teaching, one mentioned being a doctor, and one talked about being a social worker. Overall, the message was one of being helpful, being a safe person and showing compassion, and bringing "light to the world," through humor, peace, and positivity.

Witnessing

Question: What is the physical experience to be in your body? Do you ever feel connected to something larger than yourself? Do you ever have the ability to take a step back from what you are experiencing?

There was some disparity between answers to the different components of this question. When asked if they ever feel connected to something larger than themselves, one person responded, "I don't know. I don't think so," and another stated, "kind of." Three participants mentioned specific people or connecting with people more generally, and three discussed animals as their sites of connection. One mentioned music, one mentioned weather, one mentioned a particular place that held important memories, and two referred to a higher power or God.

When asked if they are able to take a step back from what they are experiencing, seven participants said yes, although almost everyone identified that they could not do that if they were mad. One answered, "no," and one stated, "rarely, but sometimes." Two participants identified that they were unable to do this in the moment, but that they could sometimes later, if they were alone, if they were able to "take a moment, sit there and relax," or if they had a chance to "walk away and group my thoughts together." Many noted that having the ability to leave the situation was helpful in terms of gaining perspective on the situation and calming themselves.

Integration

Question: How do you integrate all of the experiences of your life? How do your unique experiences show up for you in your everyday life? How do you navigate those experiences? How do you set yourself up for growth and healing?

The answers to these questions, specifically how they set themselves up for growth and healing, were very detailed and showed variation and self-awareness. Some discussed journaling, learning, observing, remembering, and trying to make better decisions. Some mentioned therapy or connections with others, looking up to

those who have been through similar experiences, communicating with people and sometimes gaining perspective from them, and "somehow finding validation to my experiences to aid healing."

Others discussed trying to center themselves and "get to" their happy place so they could keep going with their days. Others discussed having perspective, looking back, trying to live "one day at a time," and "trying to keep an optimistic outlook on life." Some mentioned that they talked to themselves to get through things or took mental health days when necessary. One mentioned that they like to "confront everything that is causing me stress." Their answers seem grounded in trying to grow, to make connections, to gain a sense of perspective about what they are experiencing, and to center themselves.

Summary of Sense of Self in a Social World Findings

Participants largely described themselves in relationship to supporting and caring for others. And, although not all reported a connection to a higher power, most were able to describe the ability to take a step back to observe themselves. This combination of describing oneself in relationship to others, and the ability to self-reflect are assets for developing a sense of self through the college experience. Overall, the participants seemed to share meaning about their life journeys, and they are able to articulate those feelings.

Summary of Results

The students who participated in these interviews were able to speak to multiple dimensions of well-being. It is unclear, however, if they also understand these insights and behaviors as ways in which they attain well-being and develop well-becoming. This could be an issue of integration, as mentioned above, and could potentially be enhanced by having skillful peers and adults help them to recognize these dimensions of well-being and name them as a way to help with understanding their own self-organization and growth. Although there were some students who reported they were unable to access some of the dimensions of well-being explored, many were able to access them and reported consciously using them when they needed to regulate or relax.

Assessing the students on these dimensions of well-being allowed us to see their strengths, their skills, and their well-becoming. Indeed, it was clear that despite having arrived to college from difficulty and harmful conditions, participants had managed to self-organize around elements of well-being for themselves. Because we looked for well-being and asked about it specifically, we were able to find it and explore it here. This suggests that being strengths-based means remembering to ask about strengths (Saleebey, 1996), versus just focusing on challenges. As such, using a strengths-based focus with populations who are frequently framed as being at-risk or as having experienced trauma can help us see a fuller, more holistic picture of their growth and development.

DISCUSSION

Well-being is a multidimensional concept, and participants in the study were invited to speak to their experiences in face-to-face interviews. The interview protocol investigated well-being from 10 dimensions using the framework of iRest and AYCF dimensions of well-being, and almost all participants responded in ways that suggest they can describe their experiences across physical, emotional, and cognitive states. Whether or not they understand these as aspects of their well-being or a process of their own self-organization of well-becoming is less clear. The interviewer had to provide prompts and assurances to allay concerns that their responses were not adequate to the questions, which shows that their understanding of these domains has not been explored previously. Even though they were able to share their experiences, it is unknown if they have made connections between their actions and thoughts and their own well-becoming.

In some narratives, students described their experiences in terms of an absence of negative feelings. Diener's (1984) definition of well-being (cited in Diener, 2009) includes the individual's experience, the absence of negative factors and the presence of positive factors in the individual's life. Diener's (1984) work makes sense of these student descriptions, and offers important clues about how to listen to student's experiences. In addition to listening for positive indicators of growth and learning, it may be equally important to hear the acknowledgement of absence of negative experiences for the students with traumatic histories. Absence of negative stimuli may be a sign of progress and by naming it as such, we are able to help students to re-organize their experiences to promote well-being.

The findings of this study point towards a portrait of four-year university freshmen with experience in foster care who possess qualities of resilience that could be actively cultivated during the college years to yield lifelong benefit. These students shared that they had managed to have success and enter college, and that they also have skills for processing their beliefs, emotions and physical feelings. Most college students from foster care do not have continuous caregivers in their lives to help them integrate life lessons at college into their developing selves. While there are many opportunities to engage in new experiences, students from foster care or disconnected students may have no person or place of refuge to allow self-growth to occur. Additionally, without a continuous caring adult to help frame these efforts as attempts to develop well-becoming, the students may not be making the connections between their efforts and their well-being.

For youth who experienced foster care, the concept of well-becoming may be a more fitting perspective from which to view well-being. Well-becoming implies that the organization of the self, and personal growth and development are active processes to be attended to and cultivated during the college experience. Well-becoming invites an attitude of understanding that personal well-being is shaped by risk and protective factors, available resources, security, and other contextual factors. This broader view may aid self-organization and encourage a more encompassing understanding of growth across the life span which requires that attention be paid to contexts, per the definitions of well-being and well-becoming proposed by Schweiger and Graf (2015).

Limitations

The generalization of findings from this study is limited by design and small sample size. As such, this information may not be applicable to other students who are entering college after exiting foster care. Further, there were some characteristics of this sample which may impact the type of results we found. Most participants interviewed in this study were in late adolescence (18 or 19 years old). None had first entered foster care younger than five years old, half of the participants experienced only one placement, and all but one had received mental health services. These features of development suggest that the participants, as a group, may have benefited from protective factors, or at least may have experienced fewer risk factors compared to all youth in foster care. Moreover, all participants in the study had successfully cleared the hurdles of acceptance and enrollment into a four-year college.

Implications

There are several implications that emerge from this project. The first is that a focus on well-being and well-becoming has the potential to aid development during college years for this population. The responses from participants in this study suggest that regular inquiry about cognitive, emotional, and physical experiences would optimally support developmental growth as students with a history of foster care placement transition from adolescence to young adulthood during the college years. Intentional focus on all three of these areas of well-being may be critical to support integration of self for students who do not have continuous caregivers or adult mentors to help them connect the dots of their growth. Further, attention to the physical, emotional and cognitive domains of well-being will promote and strengthen social connections, thus enhancing well-becoming.

The results of this study suggest that models of student development which focus on well-being are needed for the population of college students arriving to campus from a foster care experience to help them understand their strengths and strategies that have contributed to their resilience. Further intention is needed to help them integrate their life experiences through understanding the self and building an identity beyond the foster care experience, and into the identity of college graduate that is embedded in a post-foster care context. If enduring relationships have not been formed during the college experience, then graduation can feel like another treacherous phase of development without the securities of continuous caregivers or family.

Experiences during college that promote self-organization based on well-being are essential for this group of students. Further study is needed into interventions to support self-organization and growth for students with foster care histories. Exploration of secular practices such as iRest yoga nidra meditation or other mindfulness practices may be key to helping college students with trauma histories to develop a sense of inner coalescence and the forming of self-identity. Practices, such iRest yoga nidra meditation, that support students to identify, develop, and solidify a sense of well-being that is consistently available amidst challenging circumstances are a practical first step to offer students until further research

investigation happens. Such a practice may further support students to recognize an inner sense of well-being that enhances well-becoming across their college experience and throughout their lifetime. This practice is inexpensive and, when offered by a trained practitioner, does not have harmful side effects (Gray et al., 2018). Additionally, training college faculty and personnel to view students from a multi-dimensional lens of well-being is also key. One way to access discussions of this type of self-organization is through using Unrau and McCormick's (2016) environment-in-person perspective (EIP). The EIP model provides a map of internal self-experience. The EIP model incorporates the key domains of physical, emotional, cognitive, and self as interrelated aspects of how an individual is poised to perceive and receive the world. The premise of the EIP perspective is that all individuals receive and perceive the world through cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects as they form a perspective on the self, and in order to engage meaningfully with people, social workers (and other helpers) need to meet them where they are in these areas of experience. This model provides a practical framework for college faculty and personnel to formulate questions that account for the complexities of experiences with which college students from foster care are familiar. Through skillful questions that consider the dimensions of well-being, college faculty and personnel can contribute to the self-organizing process in a way that supports well-becoming.

According to the descriptions of the students interviewed in this research, they are able to speak to the multi-dimensional components of their experiences, although they may have varying degrees of awareness of how these pieces fit together. We suggest that using the EIP model and framing the students' experiences as indicators of well-being will aid the students in their attempts to understand their own well-being as they are tending to it; additionally, this will help offer the language and framework for them to understand their own growth and strengths. Since many of the students will not have other adults present in their lives to help provide this grounding, college personnel may need to step up to provide some of these supports for them.

CONCLUSION

Through this research, we aimed to explore how young people exiting foster care and entering college see themselves and speak to their own well-being. Our findings show that these students have self-awareness and self-organizing skills that have aided their growth and accompanied them to college. Their ability to describe their sense of well-being warrants further investigation so that college personnel who are tasked with supporting and facilitating student experiences are better prepared to acknowledge existing student strengths, as well as create opportunities for continued growth and development. .

If we return to the discussion of inner resilience (Ungar, 2008), or self-organization (Rogers, 1995), it follows that if we are able to help college students with a history of foster care placement understand their well-being as well becoming, we will be able to enhance academic success (Hass et al., 2014) and promote social well-being and well-becoming. Providing these important supports to students may also help them gain a greater appreciation for their own strengths and abilities and help reinforce the characteristics that have helped them to attain the degree of success

they have achieved (Amechi, 2016). This shift may also help us move the language regarding youth with a lived experience of foster care from that of pathology and deficit to a strengths-based model.

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