

“There’s no autonomy”: Narratives of Self-Authorship from Black Male Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education

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This qualitative study explores the college pathways and experiences of four Black male foster care alumni. Through in-depth interviews, the author identifies how challenging experiences and adverse environmental conditions in the foster care system shaped their self-defined college goals. This study confirms how dissonant experiences, or developmental crises that challenged students’ current ways of knowing and conceptions of self, enhanced self-authorship development, and ultimately their success in college. Recommendations for student affairs practice and policy are provided as they relate to recruitment and retention efforts.

Keywords: College access, college going, foster youth, Black males, self-authorship

Introduction

The educational pipeline is often a complex process for youth in foster care to navigate. A growing body of research has brought national attention to the precarious social conditions of children in foster care and youth transitioning to adulthood (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2010; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Davis, 2006; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013). Despite substantial declines in the foster care population over the past decade, Children of Color remain disproportionately overrepresented. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families [HHS] (2014), approximately 400,000 youth are in the foster care system on any given day; and nearly 25% of youth placed in foster care were Black. Although some youth are placed in foster care after being orphaned, others may have had two additional traumatic experiences: parental abuse and/or neglect resulting in intervention by child protective services; and subsequently, removal from their biological parents or guardians by the State (or Title IV-E agency) (Federal Definition of Foster Care [FDFC], 45 C.F.R. § 135520, 2000).

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The pathways to college that foster care alumni may encounter—and the many factors and experiences that facilitate or hinder their access and success in higher education—are only beginning to be understood. Although estimates vary, a policy report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) estimates that 72,000 foster youth were enrolled in colleges and universities during the 2013–2014 academic year—less than 1% of undergraduates receiving federal student aid. Sociostructural forces (including poverty, homelessness, racism, and unequal access to high-quality P–12 schooling experiences) have contributed to persistent opportunity gaps for foster youth in higher education (e.g., Davis, 2006; Dworsky et al., 2013; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). Traditionally, foster care alumni have been categorized in higher education as only low-income (Davis, 2006). However, grouping foster youth with other marginalized groups ignores the impact of their unique foster care history. Foster care alumni have many assets, valuable experiences, and strengths to contribute that often have been underestimated by stakeholders in higher education and are largely omitted from the research literature (Davis, 2006; Draeger, 2007; Wolanin, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences and college pathways of Black male foster care alumni (BMFCA). Informed by findings from a pilot study on BMFCA in college (Amechi, 2013), I assess whether these students possess self-authored ways of knowing as a result of their challenging and adverse precollege socialization experiences. Self-authorship is defined as “the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs to form judgments” (Baxter Magolda, 1998, p. 143). Self-authorship theory is particularly useful in revealing how challenging and adverse preadolescent experiences promote self-defined college goals and academic self-efficacy.

The Educational Trajectories of Foster Care Alumni

Students with foster care experience in higher education are among a burgeoning population whose concerns, backgrounds, and experiences differ from their peers (e.g., Davis, 2006; Draeger, 2007; Wolanin, 2005). Unlike many of their peers who have access to supportive parents, youth in the foster care system may need more supportive networks to successfully traverse the foster care system and to help overcome their traumatic histories (Davis, 2006). Research (e.g., Courtney et al., 2010; Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005) also suggests that comprehensive support and independent living programs serve as buffers for foster youth, and help them navigate college and career opportunities. To situate the findings reported in this study, three relevant literatures are summarized below: (a) foster care alumni and the complexities of adulthood, (b) foster care alumni in higher education, and (c) Black men in higher education.

Foster Care Alumni and the Complexities of Adulthood

An estimated 23,000 youth emancipate or age out from the U.S. foster care system each year, with most exiting at 18 years of age (HHS, 2014). Faced with greater independence, limited financial resources and assistance, underdeveloped adult skills, and few if any safety nets, youth exiting foster care may struggle to function independently as young adults—often leading to negative personal outcomes that have long-term affects on society as a whole. Between 30% and 45% of foster youth have been homeless at least once by age 26 (Dworsky et al., 2013). Although some circumvent homelessness by participating in independent living programs

(Lemon et al., 2005), others struggle to lead productive and stable lives after exiting foster care (e.g., Courtney et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). In addition to facing a greater risk for mental and physical health issues (Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010), some foster youth have unfavorable outcomes such as high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, and adult criminality (e.g., Barth, 1990; Dworsky et al., 2013; Pecora et al., 2006). The astonishing prevalence of emotional and mental health challenges among foster youth is one of many severe threats to effective transitioning to young adulthood and to academic success in higher education.

Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education

The educational plight of foster youth garnered national media attention in a 2013 *New York Times* article, “Out of Foster Care, Into College,” which provided a glimpse into some of the hardships that foster youth encounter, from the standpoint of those who live it each day (Winerip, 2013). These narratives can help stakeholders in higher education understand why it is critical that foster youth be treated differently from other marginalized students. Nationally, college completion rates for foster youth hover around 15% for the few that matriculate into college (GAO, 2016). Everyday life for many foster youth is filled with adversity including personal, social, and financial barriers that keep them on the margins of higher education (Davis, 2006).

Even with national efforts to improve college completion rates among all students (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009), limited empirical research has been gathered tracking how foster youth fare compare with the general college student population (Davis, 2006). A few studies have explored personal factors that contribute to academic success among foster youth in college (e.g., Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). In examining 14 foster youth in college, Hines et al. (2005) found that resiliency—or having an “internal locus of control”—enabled these youths to persist toward their educational endeavors. In a similar study of 19 foster youth, Hass et al. (2014) found that achieving a sense of “autonomy” or “control” over their environment led to a turning point in their lives and facilitated their academic achievement. Still, little is known about the educational experiences, perceptions, and socialization of BMFCA—a subgroup underrepresented in previous studies (e.g., Hass et al., 2014; Hines et al., 2005).

Black Men in Higher Education

In analyzing nearly two decades of empirical research on Black men in higher education, Harper (2014) asserted that “their enrollments, academic performance, and rates of baccalaureate degree attainment remain just as troublesome now as they were 15 years ago” (p. 117). The dominant narrative for Black boys and men, in both academic and public discourse, centers on their troubled existence and hopeless futures (e.g., Harper, 2009, 2014; Harper & Wood, 2015; Jackson & Moore, 2008). Scholarly literature on Black undergraduate men suggests that BMFCA may face similar academic and social outcomes that are equally if not more troubling, given the marginalizing effects of their foster care history (e.g., Harper, 2009, 2014; Harper & Wood, 2015; Jackson & Moore, 2008). However, the voices of BMFCA remain conspicuously absent from this literature, and little is known about the experiences of those who overcome adversity. For these compelling reasons, the present study aims to address a significant gap in scholarly literature by providing a qualitative examination of BMFCA in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Baxter Magolda's (2001) widely accepted theory of self-authorship is based on a longitudinal qualitative study of young adults, and offers empirical evidence supporting the concept of meaning-making as it relates to students' epistemological development. Pizzolato (2003) says that self-authorship is "a relatively enduring way of understanding and orienting oneself to provocative situations in a way that (a) recognizes the contextual nature of knowledge and (b) balances this understanding with the development of one's own internally defined goals and sense of self" (p. 798). Baxter Magolda's (2001) participants expressed concerns around three central questions: How do I know? Who am I? and What relationships do I want? The questions represent three dimensions—cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal—and constitute the basic components of self-authorship theory, as well as delineate the areas through which researchers examine and understand the meaning-making processes that individuals undergo as they meet the challenges of adult life (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Based on a three-phase model—(a) *The Crossroads*, (b) *Becoming the Author of One's Own Life*, and (c) *Internal Foundation*—Baxter Magolda (2001) posited that young adults proceed toward self-authored ways of knowing in which external formulas or influences become less significant compared with internal ones. Young adults begin their journey toward self-authorship without an internal compass or a self-defined plan for their future (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In effect, these individuals follow a path dictated by influential people in their lives (e.g., parents, teachers, peers). Baxter Magolda (2001) found that young adults often arrive at a point at which they become dissatisfied with their future plans or lack of success. After enduring intense cognitive dissonance, individuals in the first phase (*The Crossroads*) begin to acknowledge the need to consider their own viewpoint, feelings, and general welfare in relationships. The second phase (*Becoming the Author of One's Own Life*) is characterized by intensive self-reflection as individuals learn to create their own path and determine their beliefs based on conviction. Once individuals find stability in their self-concept and in mutual relationships, they discover that their life decisions are based on their own beliefs (*Internal Foundation*).

Increasingly, scholarly investigations have used a holistic developmental model to examine diverse college students. Torres and Hernandez (2007) employed self-authorship theory in an examination of 29 Latino/Latina college students. They found evidence of a unique developmental task involving the recognition and deconstruction of racist messages. Strayhorn (2014) operationalized this theoretical model using a survey for African American first-year college students, offering evidence of a moderate correlation between academic self-efficacy and measures of self-authorship.

In examining high-risk groups, Pizzolato (2004) found that these students entered college with "self-authoring ways of knowing intact" (p. 429), as many already had overcome adversity early in life that had produced disequilibrium. Based on a similar study of high-risk students, Pizzolato (2003) noted two important findings: (a) challenging experiences were associated with movement toward self-authorship and (b) lower levels of privilege may catalyze self-authorship development. For both studies by Pizzolato (2003), a high-risk college student was conceptualized as "one whose academic background (academic preparation), prior performance (low high school or first-semester college GPA), or personal characteristics may contribute to academic failure or early withdrawal from college" (p. 798).

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Collectively, findings from these investigations suggest that lower privileged students may become self-authored before or during college. Accordingly, because the precollege socialization experiences of some foster youth are fraught with precisely the kinds of challenging circumstances that may provoke development toward self-authorship, this study sought to investigate empirically whether such processes might be especially evident among this underserved population.

Method

The present study was guided by the following research questions: How do BMFCA make meaning of their experiences in the foster care system and higher education? In what ways do BMFCA develop self-authoring ways of knowing? and How does self-authorship contribute to Black male success in higher education? The use of narrative inquiry methodology is consistent with the epistemological assumptions of constructivism (belief that knowledge is co-created) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry involves the examination of experiences and stories lived and told (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, this approach is “best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). Ultimately, focusing on a small sample of participants allowed me to delve deeply into their stories.

Participants, Data Collection, and Research Site

I employed purposeful sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007)—that is, sampling according to a set of predetermined criteria—in the present study to ensure that all participants: (a) identified as Black males, (b) were enrolled or recently enrolled (within the previous three years) full time at an institution of higher education, (c) were between the ages of 18 and 27, and (d) identified as a foster care alumni. To recruit participants for the study, I contacted student affairs administrators at two research universities in the Midwest and one on the West Coast, successfully identifying an initial pool of three prospective participants.

Staff members at each institution knew of at least one student who met the criteria for the study. Willing participants were contacted via email and subsequently interviewed one-on-one either in person or electronically via Skype. To ensure confidentiality all participants selected pseudonyms, which were then used to identify them on all subsequent materials. The names chosen for the initial pool were Lamar, Khalio, and Kevin. The point of entry into foster care and type of placement differed among participants (for more information, see Table 1). Two of the participants had been placed with extended family until college (Khalio with his aunt and Kevin with his grandmother); Lamar had pursued an independent living program at age 17. Leading factors that caused their initial placement in the foster care system were issues associated with drug abuse, homelessness, and absentee parents. Lamar also reported being physically and verbally abused by extended family, which led him to run away from home.

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Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

NAME ENTRY	AGE*	FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT	FOSTER CARE
Khalio	27	Early childhood	Out-of-home / Extended family
Kevin	24	Infant	Out-of-home / Extended family
Lamar	21	Early childhood	Independent living program / Extended family
Joseph	24	Infant	Out-of-home / Extended family

* *At the time of the present study.*

Khalio had attained a bachelor’s degree and was completing a doctoral program in political science at a large research university in the Midwest. Kevin had attained a bachelor’s degree from a large research university on the West Coast. Lamar was completing a bachelor’s degree at a small Southern liberal arts college. Lastly, snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2007) were used to identify a fourth participant, Joseph, who was seeking a master’s degree at a medium-sized research university on the West Coast.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of in-depth interviews that were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim (Creswell, 2007). Prior to interviews, participants also were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (e.g., name, age, highest level of education). The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average, and were semistructured—to ensure that all participants were asked the same central questions, yet also to provide participants enough flexibility to identify and share reflections in areas important to them.

The interview protocol consisted of seven main questions that explored the following topic areas: participants’ (a) background and precollege experiences, (b) acclimation to and transition within college, and (c) reflections/observations on life. Questions posed in this investigation ranged from “Can you recall any major success or challenges you have faced in life, and if so, tell me about them?” to “Why did you choose to attend college?” Interviews explored experiences that participants deemed important as they navigated the foster care system and the college transition process.

Data Analysis

I began the analytic process by carefully reading and rereading all field texts to identify relevant themes in which analytic memos and preliminary codes were written alongside the margins of printed copies of the transcript (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My analysis of students' narratives is both inductive and deductive (Creswell, 2007). Inductively, I searched for recurring themes related to their experiences before and after foster care placement, their K–12 schooling experiences, and their transition to college, among others. Deductively, I looked for themes noted in the extant literature on foster youth (e.g., perceived barriers to college access and persistence) and preexisting codes related to self-authorship development (e.g., cognitive dissonance). I used 15 code words in this phase.

Next, I began to “restory” or reorganize participants' narratives into a chronological framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This process consisted of gathering narratives, analyzing them for key elements (i.e., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the narratives to place them in a sequence. In analyzing transcribed responses from participants, I created a grand narrative that fit according to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: the personal and social (the interaction); the past, present, and future (continuity); and the place (situation). After analyzing all cases thematically and according to the holistic development model, I subsequently grouped them based on the developmental phases of self-authorship theory (e.g., *The Crossroads*).

In light of findings from a pilot study (Amechi, 2013), the use of self-authorship theory as a theoretical framework was a priori. I found congruence between the narratives of participants and the dimensions of self-authorship theory. After piloting the study, I subsequently redesigned the interview protocol to closely assess self-authorship development. I recruited four additional participants exclusively for this investigation; findings reported are representative of the four subsequent BMFCA whom I interviewed (Lamar, Khalio, Kevin and Joseph).

Trustworthiness and Researcher Involvement

I took multiple steps to minimize the influence of my insider and outsider statuses on the research process (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Using a researcher journal, I began this process by reflecting on what led me to this study and on my relationship to the participants. I realized that my insider identities—as a first-generation Black male researcher and foster care alumni—were influential in my desire to study the experiences of BMFCA, and ultimately strengthened my inquiry. Before each interview, I (a) acknowledged my insider identities, thereby building trust and rapport; (b) shared my desire to bridge policy and knowledge gaps for foster youth in higher education; (c) told them I was committed to honoring their voices and retelling authentic narratives; and (d) offered to let them review my drafts of their narratives and to provide their own member checks (Creswell, 2007).

I used four techniques to validate my interpretations of the findings (Creswell, 2007). First, I shared with my findings with the participants, which not only served as a member checking tool but also as a way to add trustworthiness to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Second, I employed peer debriefing to minimize bias and to ensure that my inferences were credible (Creswell, 2007). Third, I provided detailed descriptions of students' narratives via audio-recorded and transcribed interviews to promote transferability (Creswell, 2007). Lastly, I invited an inquiry auditor to further validate my interpretations and conclusions (Creswell,

2007). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, a variety of validation techniques were employed during the analysis phase to challenge inherent power differences between the researcher and researched (Jones et al., 2006).

Findings

The BMFCA in this study developed the capacity for self-authorship as adolescents after encountering an array of challenging experiences that called into question their identity, beliefs, values, and social relations. Three major findings regarding the development of self-authorship were deduced from the data: The BMFCA entered college self-authored, having endured challenging experiences and adverse environmental conditions related to foster care. Self-authorship development may require a sense of autonomy or independence. The development of self-authorship enhanced the success of the BMFCA in terms of their academic self-efficacy and ability to cope effectively with and respond to difficult situations in college.

“There’s No Autonomy” – Provocative Experiences in Foster Care

The development of self-authorship among students in the present study was preceded by a number of dissonant experiences—defined as developmental crises that challenged students’ current ways of knowing and conceptions of self, resulting in high levels of disequilibrium. Accordingly, experiences described by the BMFCA were coded as dissonant if they evoked high levels of disequilibrium and led them to reconsider their goals and/or conceptions of self. All participants in the study encountered at least one *Crossroad* in becoming self-authored.

The following narrative from Lamar exemplifies how BMFCA experience dissatisfaction and discontent at *The Crossroads* phase in provocative moments. All the BMFCA interviewed expressed similar sentiments.

There’s no autonomy . . . There’s no autonomy and what happens is... if you have no autonomy and things go wrong, you of course don’t go around blaming yourself if you’re not in control of the situation. You blame the [foster care] system. You blame everything else around you. You transfer the fault. And being in that situation, it’s a dire situation because there is not going to be any active effort to try to make things better.

Navigating the foster care system often is an adverse challenge for BMFCA, especially when confronted by stakeholders and external authorities in foster care (such as social workers and foster parents) who stymie foster youths’ potential, and often prescribe formulas for their behavior. To succeed in reaching college, as Lamar passionately describes below, individuals must cultivate their own internal voice and disregard deficit perspectives:

There are so many resources [in place], and for various reasons. One [example] being outright from people who are making the decisions on behalf of foster youth. They think foster youth are incapable of making their own decisions. They think foster youth are incapable of making good choices. They think foster youth are incapable, not intelligent enough to understand or comprehend what is happening in that courtroom.

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Participants in the present study described how their experiences in school became the one area of their lives in which they had some control over the outcome. As Joseph and Kevin assert, school became a protective factor or an escape from the realities of their dysfunctional family and their community.

Joseph: School was also a *haven*. It was an opportunity to get away for a while. I would just say that dealing with all the issues at home... [such as] seeing my father yelling and hitting us and all types of things at home. Leaving that place for a number of hours gave me a sense of *peace* at least environmentally. It was a place I could receive some of the attention I was seeking.

Kevin: School was my *outlet* where I could just be away from my dysfunctional household. So [in] high school I spent a lot of hours just at school, [or at] afterschool tutoring. I didn't need the tutoring but I just went. Got involved because home was not a happy [or] great place.

In response to the realities of the foster care system, the BMFCA in the present study began to critically assess the importance of constructing their own ideas, beliefs, and identity in social relations to achieve their college goals.

For instance, Lamar reflected on the limited educational attainment among his family members:

It was a very simple logical connection: My mother didn't graduate high school, my brother didn't graduate, my father only had a high school education, my uncle didn't graduate from high school, my aunt didn't graduate from high school. And so I made the connection to their life outcomes and the opportunities they had.

Lamar's inspiration for attending college was deeply rooted in the fact that no one in his family previously had the opportunity to pursue a higher education. Kevin was driven by his wish to flee his environment:

I figured out my wonderful high school was a mess and that we should do something to change it. And so college and education was apparently the way to make change happen. You couldn't do much with a high school diploma and so going to college was a motivation to escape poverty.

As recounted in the stories above, Joseph, Lamar, and Kevin's processing of provocative experiences in the foster care system prompted them to shift from passively accepting external formulas for success to critically assessing them according to an internal belief system.

Achieving Autonomy and Independence in Foster Care

Following multiple placements in the foster care system, the BMFCA in the present study felt compelled to define their own paths in life. For instance, Lamar was able to develop an internal voice and foundation after entering an independent living program:

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“[I understood] that being in an environment where I am in control of my destiny... [I] control my own finances, control my own time, and [am in] control of my own behavior... I’m basically in control of my whole life.”

In addition to receiving his own apartment, the independent living program provided Lamar with a range of social support, resources, and guidance. Ultimately, the independent living program afforded him autonomy, which fostered trust in his internal voice and finally brought his internally defined goals to fruition:

And so being able to do that [pursue independent living program] is why it was the best thing that had ever happened in my life. It was the first time in my life where I was... you can say I was 100% responsible for my livelihood... and so, with that, it was definitely an opportunity to either flourish or diminish, and for me it was flourish.

Other participants similarly described situations in which they rejected formulas from external authorities and began to develop their own. For instance, as Khalio’s foster parent could not provide him with sufficient support or direction to engage in the college enrollment process, he navigated it by himself—demonstrating his confidence in his internal foundation and voice in seeking resources:

I spent a lot of time in our college resource room in high school. I really had no idea what I was looking for; thinking back on it I really had no good sense. I knew that I had to apply to UConn [University of Connecticut], which was the state’s flagship school and I had kind of randomly picked other programs. I remember deciding I wanted to leave [the state] so I started to look at programs elsewhere. I had no idea of how I was going to pay for anything. This was never a conversation with anyone in the family and I didn’t expect it would be. I knew I would figure it out.

Displaying a high degree of self-authorship, Khalio traveled alone out of state to visit several college campuses:

I had a car at that time. I remember taking a trip to Delaware to see the University of Delaware. I had randomly come across a minority recruitment [program] and I signed up for it and I ended up going So I went to the University of Delaware, visited there and then I traveled to D.C. and visited American University and George Washington University. This was nothing arranged; this was just me in the city looking around, asking questions.

Lamar’s narrative below reflects the general developmental shift toward self-authorship found in the stories of all the BMFCA interviewed:

From that time, from [the age of] 16-18, big things happened. A lot of big things happened, a lot of progress occurred because: (A) I was in the environment where I could be independent; (B) I have the resources around me to really put things in

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place. It wasn't just me having all these goals but it was [the realization that] okay [I have] the resources to really put these goals into reality and into fruition and; (C) it was an environment where my condition could be fostered rather than diminished.

As participants' self-authoring ways of knowing evolved, some, like Lamar had caring adults (e.g., teachers, high school counselors, mentors) in their lives who affirmed their aspirations to enter college after exiting foster care, as he describes in the narrative below:

I had the help of mentors who exposed me to the [college enrollment] process... something that I was definitely unaware of... it was new. Nobody in my family had graduated from college. Nobody in my family had gone. People in my family hadn't even graduated high school so the college process... what it took to get in, what it took to be successful once you got there, getting money once you got there, all of these things were extremely new, very new. So having mentors there was very key.

Some BMFCA in this study, like Kevin, pursued their dreams on their own, demonstrating self-authorship in other ways, as he describes in the narrative below:

I also had financial aid of course [but] I had an EFC [expected family contribution] of zero. I was so embarrassed when I found out like 'I can't pay for college...or what is going to happen [if I can not afford college].' But grants and scholarships came in. I was really just on my scholarship hustle.

Self-Authorship and Success in College

Upon entry to college, participants reported acting in self-authoring ways. However, they still encountered provocative experiences that resulted in cognitive dissonance. Although each participant felt disequilibrium differently, challenging experiences during college compelled them to reevaluate and revise their goals in relation to their internal foundation and self-identity. As illustrated in the narratives of Lamar and Khalio, development toward higher levels of self-authorship often requires external support.

In the following example, Kevin described some of the academic difficulties he experienced transitioning to college:

My first fall quarter was just definitely downhill. I just flunked almost everything. I had a D, C-, and an F all in one [quarter]. It was just like really rough to like... oh my God 'I'm a 4.0 high school student; I can't be getting these kinds of grades.' I never had an F a day of my life. It was of course the initial adjustment to college. I guess I didn't feel confident after that.

Contrary to his achievements in high school, Kevin's poor academic performance during his first college term created dissonance, which called into question his way of knowing. Still, he quickly realized that the external realities of college required new skills and formulas for academic success. As he later explained, the establishment of positive, supportive, and meaningful

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relationships with faculty and peers—coupled with tutoring support—were key factors in facilitating his academic self-efficacy and success in college:

That winter quarter I saw improvement because I figured it out: ‘All right, I need to get tutoring... I need help.’ I started asking questions. I really just tapped into all the resources available that I didn’t take advantage of . . . I had study buddies, started utilizing office hours and really taking advantage of opportunities at my disposal.

Whereas Kevin was driven to develop new goals for maintaining his positive self-identity in college, Lamar was forced to make a difficult decision that could have ultimately altered his educational trajectory:

I recently was in an early medical school program where they basically guarantee you a seat into a certain medical school. And I turned that down. The reason I turned that down is because of the responsibility that came if I would have accepted [my admission to the medical school program].

Lamar’s confidence stems from trusting his internal voice. In the absence of external formulas for success, Lamar’s decision to remain at the same institution was influenced by his own belief system. Ultimately, the BMFCA in this study were compelled to reevaluate and revise their internally defined goals independently or through the support of caring adults or other external authority figures.

Discussion

The present study sought to assess ways in which BMFCA develop internally defined postsecondary education goals and how these broadened perspectives contribute to their success while in college. The findings suggest that BMFCA (and perhaps foster youth in general) are more likely to progress toward self-authorship as adolescents as a result of the adverse environmental conditions within the foster care system. Provocative and adverse experiences related to foster care proved to be catalysts for self-authorship development. College then became a self-defined goal for the participants in the study, who all desired more autonomy. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on self-authorship among racially and culturally diverse college students (e.g., Pizzolato, 2003, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007), and resonate with previous findings on foster youth in higher education (e.g., Hass et al., 2014; Hines et al., 2005).

The BMFCA in the present study were exposed to an array of childhood and adolescent traumatic experiences (e.g., parental neglect, physical and emotional abuse). Participants also emerged from marginalized backgrounds in which no one had attended college. For these reasons and others, the BMFCA at *The Crossroads* phase were often unsettled by their disadvantaged social conditions in foster care and strongly desired to dictate their own paths in life—especially as they progressed into their late-adolescent years. The absence of easily accessible formulas and trajectories for pursuing higher education compelled the BMFCA in the present study to develop their own. In the *Becoming the Author of One’s Life* phase, participants developed supportive relationships with caring adults (e.g., teachers, high school counselors,

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college recruiters, mentors) to achieve a range of internal goals (e.g., identifying and applying for scholarships). And with this support, participants developed internal foundations as they increasingly trusted in their own voice.

Self-authorship development also enhanced the success of the participants in terms of their academic self-efficacy, and their ability to cope effectively with and respond to adversity in college. In other words, students who enter college with a self-authored way of knowing may display greater confidence in overcoming academic challenges and coping with difficult sociocultural experiences. Despite entering college with an internal compass, some participants in the present study encountered challenges while assimilating to the culture and norms of their campus. Kevin's narrative, for instance, exemplifies how some BMFCA in this study reevaluated and revised their goals in relationship to their internal belief system (*Internal Foundation*). In response to academic challenges during Kevin's first year of college, his self-authored way of knowing motivated him to revise his internal goals and seek out academic support services on campus. This important finding adds weight to Strayhorn's (2014) assertion that academic self-efficacy and self-authorship are correlated yet distinct concepts.

Findings also revealed the role of social context in facilitating self-authorship development, even when supportive networks (e.g., a caring adult) are accessible. This suggests that BMFCA like Lamar feel constrained by the foster care system and the external formulas they are forced to follow. The turning point for Lamar was when he turned 17, and transitioned to an independent living program and got his own apartment. That's when he finally felt in "control over [his] destiny." The complex interplay between becoming self-authored and achieving a sense of autonomy were also observed in the study by Hass et al. (2014), in which the authors described how achieving a sense of autonomy served as a turning point in the lives of academically successful foster youth. Many perspectives offered in the present study also corroborate Pizzolato's (2003) most salient finding: that lower levels of privilege initiated self-authorship development. Indeed, the willingness of the BMFCA in the present study to engage the self-authoring process reflects what Hines et al. (2005) described as resilience, or having an "internal locus of control," which helped them achieve academic success despite adversity (p. 392).

Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Policy in Higher Education

The many perspectives shared in this study indicate that BMFCA (and foster youth in general) often require year-round housing, federal student aid and scholarships, and support networks to help them actualize their internally defined college goals (e.g., Lemon et al., 2005). All four participants noted the importance of housing and financial stability prior to and during college, and the significant role that stability played in helping them progress toward their internally defined college goals. Ensuring that youth exiting foster care not only have access to financial aid to fully cover college expenses but also to stable, year-round campus housing are key to their success. A small number of state colleges and universities in California have already instituted comprehensive support services for former foster youth through the Guardian Scholars Program (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Nevertheless, it is imperative that both public and private higher education institutions adopt similar comprehensive programs on a national scale.

Kevin, Khalio, Lamar, and Joseph cited the importance of having at least one caring adult support them in actualizing their college goals. Student affairs practitioners in multicultural affairs and residential life units might consider information from this study to support the holistic

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development of foster youth. In collaboration with academic departments, the aforementioned units might consider establishing a living-learning community for former foster youth that would offer them access to a strong peer network and other well-documented academic advantages, and that would help them establish meaningful connections with caring staff (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Brown Leonard, 2007). To help decrease emotional and mental health challenges and educational inequities that stem from foster care, college student educators might also consider developing first-year seminars or programs that address such barriers on an individual level (e.g., tutoring, mental health counseling services) and on community levels (e.g., life skills training for independent living, access to a caring mentor). Overall, these educational programs should help promote self-authorship and serve as a safe haven to foster youth who, as noted, need supportive social relationships and instrumental networks to make an effective transition to the culture and norms of their college campus.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The experiences and themes identified in this article may not be universal for all BMFCA. Rather than generalize, I sought to offer extensive quotes and detailed descriptions of the BMFCA participants' narratives throughout my findings, which the reader can apply to other social contexts (Creswell, 2007). To address cross-sectional design limitations of this study, future researchers might consider a longitudinal design with a national sample of foster care alumni. Future exploration of the role of self-authorship development in enhancing academic self-efficacy, and vice versa, also is warranted. Research along these lines will (a) offer richer insight on the experiences and developmental outcomes of foster youth in general, (b) provide strategies for maximizing their access to and success in college, and (c) advance our understanding of conditions that promote or inhibit self-authorship development among diverse populations.

Conclusion

Youth exiting the U.S. foster care system are among the least likely to enroll in college and are overwhelmingly one of the most disadvantaged groups in higher education (e.g., Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Yet, successful completion of higher and postsecondary education can afford them access to greater self-sufficiency, financial stability, and healthier lifestyles, among other well-documented benefits (e.g., higher lifetime earning, lower unemployment rates, wider range of employment opportunities) (Baum & Ma, 2007). Although pathways to college have not become a norm for this group of marginalized youth, the present study sheds important light on BMFCA in higher education who exemplify stories of success.

Self-authorship theory was useful in revealing how BMFCA develop, nurture, and sustain their self-defined college goals as well as the confidence to overcome adversities. Notwithstanding their sometimes elusive college quest, the self-authorship stories of Lamar, Khalio, Kevin, and Joseph offer an insightful counter-narrative to current deficit perspectives on BMFCA specifically and foster youth generally in higher education. Although participants in the present study were successful in self-authoring their college aspirations with limited support, it is likely that many foster youth need sustained emotional support and access to instrumental support networks.

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Findings from this investigation support the call for targeted national efforts, such as the *My Brother's Keeper* initiative, which seek to improve the social outcomes of young men of color from disadvantaged backgrounds (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). For youth exiting foster care in general, and Black males specifically, having access to caring adults and supportive networks can positively impact their transition to both college and young adulthood (e.g., Hass et al., 2014). As research on foster youth has largely centered on their outcomes in K–12 education, it also is imperative that more scholarly investigations begin to consider the experiences of foster youth in higher education.

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