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We are the dream and the hope. We Rise: Wellness as Rootedness Reconceptualized with Older Youth Impacted by the Child Welfare System

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We are the dream and the hope. We Rise: Wellness as Rootedness Reconceptualized with Older

Youth Impacted by the Child Welfare System

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

by

Dominique Aisha Mikell Montgomery

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

We are the dream and the hope. We Rise: Wellness as Rootedness Reconceptualized with Older

Youth Impacted by the Child Welfare System

by

Dominique Aisha Mikell Montgomery

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Amy Elizabeth Ritterbusch, Chair

Despite decades of specialized attention on the older youth in foster care population, minimal

scholarship or policies have directly addressed this population's wellness experiences and needs

(Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; 2017). To address this gap, our research

collective, which consists of former foster youth, artists, non-profit leaders, and researchers,

designed and implemented a hybrid qualitative study. This study aimed to provide older foster

youth in care with the opportunity to rewrite and re*right* (Smith, 2012) wellness by collectively

depicting the manner older youth in care define and experience wellness. Our methodological

approach was driven by the principles and praxis of youth participatory action research (YPAR)

and combines the methods of photovoice and constructivist grounded theory. It included

gathering and analyzing multiform data, such as intensive individual interviews, photos, creative

writing, and polylogues, and conducting simultaneous data analysis. We recruited fifteen youth

between the ages of 18 and 26 who were actively or formerly involved with the child welfare

system to join our collective and participate in participatory data gathering and analysis. In addition, I conducted analysis on all data elements under the advisement of the other collective members. Principal findings offer a youth-driven definition of wellness as an individualized and evolving phenomenon but consistently include the following components: social, physical, emotional, self-mastery, survivalist, and spiritual wellness. Study findings make a significant contribution to social welfare scholarship through building youth-driven knowledge on the definitions and experiences of wellness of older youth in care, expanding the theoretical canon of knowledge, and expanding the methodological knowledge base on the implementation of YPAR with older youth in care. Additionally, findings can be used to reimagine services provided to older youth in foster care.

The dissertation of Dominique Aisha Mikell Montgomery is approved.

Laura S. Abrams

Laura Wray-Lake

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2023

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Curriculum Vita

EDUCATION

2016   **Master of Arts**

University of Chicago-Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

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SELECTED PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles

Brock-Petroshius, K., **Mikell, D**., Washington Sr, D. M., & James, K. (2022). From social justice to abolition: living up to social work's grand challenge of eliminating racism. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 1-15.*

Mikell Montgomery, D. (2022). 'They Don't Understand Us and are Afraid of Us': Black Social Workers' Perspectives on the Role of Anti-Blackness within Foster Care Service. *Child Welfare, 100(*1), 141-164.

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Abrams, L., **Mikell Montgomery, D**., Plummer, J., Laviña, G., Sarkodee-Adoo, N., Small, L., & Vazquez, N. *(In-press).* Can Social Work Programs be Anti-Racist? Transformative Perspectives on Administration. In W. Ashley (Ed.), Academic Practice in Transformative Social Work. Anti-racist Social Work Practice: Beginning and Advanced Knowledge, Skills, and Techniques. DIO Press.

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SELECTED PEER-REVIEWED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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Brock-Petroshius, K., **Mikell Montgomery, D**., Washington, D., & James, K. (Accepted for 2022, January-Withdrew due COVID-19). *From Social Justice to Abolition: Living Up to Social Work's Grand Challenge of Eliminating Racism*. [Roundtable presentation]. Society for Social Work and Research 26th Annual Conference- Social Work Science for Racial, Social, and Political Justice, Washington DC.

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Chapter 1

Project Summary and Introduction

Due to the intersection of various systemic oppressions, many older youth impacted by the child welfare system have been denied space to imagine the possibility of leading lives defined by wellness rather than marginalization and subjection. Despite decades of specialized attention on the older youth in care population, youth fourteen and older, minimal scholarship or policies have directly addressed this population's wellness experiences and needs (Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; 2017). In response to this absence in literature and supportive policies and practices and our experiential knowledge that older youth in care strived toward and achieved wellness, our collective decided to conduct research in this area. Our collective of Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals, including youth impacted by the child welfare system, originally formed in 2019 for the purpose of freedom dreaming[1] and enacting healing from multi-generational trauma and building resilience for our communities. Prior to forming the collective, we regularly interacted at Better Youth Inc. events and meetings at which I volunteered and in which other members of the collective organized and participated. Better Youth Inc. is a non-profit organization based in Los Angeles, CA, that validates youth by developing life skills through mentoring and media arts trainings. Since 2012, the organization has focused on providing opportunities to youth impacted by foster care, youth impacted by homelessness, and low-income youth serving over 12,000 youth.

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[1] We embraced Robin Kelley's (2002) concept of freedom dreaming, which was imagined as the transformative process by which we "produce a vision that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals, to transcend bitterness and cynicism, and embrace love, hope and an all-encompassing dream of freedom" (xlviii). We considered the freedom dreaming process an act of healing in and of itself and the essential first step to transformative changemaking.

Through implementing this study our collective's aimed to rewrite and re*right*[2] (Smith, 2012) the wellness narratives of older youth in care in alignment with the youth-driven participatory action research (YPAR) of Torre and Fine (2006), which democratized the knowledge production process by shifting research from on youth to with youth. This radical rewriting and r*erighting* deliberately centered the voices of Black, Brown, and Indigenous older youth in care as aligned with our political commitment to creating space for self-determination and freedom dreaming for this population. To guide our study design, we collectively imagined a framework that could help us explore the diverse wellness experiences of youth in care that occurred within an oppressive context but was not defined by that context. We created this framework by turning to the poetic knowledge[3] (Kelley, 2002) of those who have also been pushed into the margins, including Black women like Toni Cade Bambara.

This type of poetic knowledge is exemplified in the inaugural pages of the novel *The Salt Eaters*, Toni Cade Bambara's main character, Velma is repeatedly asked by her healer, Minnie, whether she can hold the weight of being well. Velma, an African American civil rights activist during the 1970s, had just attempted to end her life when the burden of carrying the weight of racism and sexism and their complex intersections became too much to bear (Bambara, 1980). The conception of wellness that unfolds in the remainder of *The Salt Eaters* is rooted in embracing past pain and wisdom and is only attainable through achieving a balance between resistance and world-building freedom dreaming (Bambara, 1980; Kelley 2002). It is a

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[2] We embraced Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) conception of rewriting and rerighting as an essential aspect of self-determination for communities on the margins. Communities on the margins "want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes" (Smith, 2012, 31). Through rewriting the stories told about us we assert our right to tell our stories and to build a future based on our stories. Through rewriting these stories using a participatory and art-based approach and a theoretical framework founded on Black womanist thinkers we assert our right to tell stories in a way that aligns with our passions and our knowledge.

[3] In alignment with Kelley (2002) poetic knowledge is considered the social justice analytics of people of all walks of life, including activists and artists.

conception of wellness meant to acknowledge the experiences of those whose mere survival is in question. Bambara's words, along with the speeches, poetry, fictional stories, song lyrics, essays, and manifestos of other Black womanist imaginers, encourage their audience to resist lives defined by marginalization and to dream of and create new worlds in which states of self-defined wellness are achievable. The poetic knowledge of Black women has deeply explored the right to define wellness and the right to thrive within a context where the state denies both those rights. Creators within this canon have long navigated the question of what wellness means and how to create it in the wake of great pain, particularly great pain that has been both systematic and interpersonal, pain that is shared with youth in care. Through studying this cannon, we created a wellness framework that we have named *rootedness*, which clarified the boundaries of wellness for those pushed into the margins and provided a theoretical starting place for our investigation of wellness with older youth in care.

Using the rootedness framework, our collective designed a hybrid qualitative study driven by the principles and praxis of YPAR that combined the methods of photovoice and constructivist grounded theory to answer the following question: How do older youth in care define and experience wellness?

Our methodological approach included gathering and analyzing multiform data, including intensive qualitative individual interviews, photos, creative writing pieces, and polylogues, and conducting simultaneous iterative data analysis. This methodology was inspired by the photovoice scholarship of Caroline Wang (1999) and Melvin Delgado (2015) and the constructivist grounded theory scholarship of Kathy Charmaz (2014). We recruited fifteen youth between the ages of 18 and 26 years of age who were at the time of study or formerly involved with the child welfare system to join our collective to participate in the photovoice orientated

data gathering and analysis. Through the data gathering and collective analysis process, we collected over 50 hours of individual interviews and group session audios, over 80 photographs, over 80 individual creative writing pieces, and over 6 collectively written pieces. I conducted a youth-centered individual analysis of all data under the advisement of the other collective founders and other collective members who were interested in this process.

This study has made a significant contribution to social welfare scholarship through building knowledge on the definitions and experiences of wellness of older youth in care, expanding the theoretical canon of knowledge used within social welfare scholarship to include the poetic knowledge of Black women, and building knowledge on the implementation of participatory praxis with older youth in care. In addition to scholarly contributions, this work has pragmatic implications for the child welfare system regarding service provision for older youth in care by raising questions about how child welfare services have supported and can better support young people's wellness. Findings in this area can be used to reimagine and improve current services offered to older youth in foster care and shift child welfare practice.

<center>**Chapter 2**</center>

<center>**Literature Review**</center>

An Introduction to Specialized (DiS)ervices for Older Youth in Care

"I felt goosebumps when the gavel slapped down on my judge's desk. Happy because, I'm no longer cared for by a system that was never that good at actually caring for me." – Noel Anaya (Anaya, 2017)

Noel Anaya exited the child welfare system in 2017 at age twenty-one after spending most of his life involved with the system. Noel documented his feelings at his final court hearing, noting that despite being unsure of his future, he was relieved to be able to finally leave behind his anger at constantly being made to feel like he was only a number. While Noel's story cannot represent all older youth in care, his brave disclosure can provide a connection point to the experiences of the 96,840 young people between the ages of 14 and 21 who were involved with the United States' child welfare system during the 2019 fiscal year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2020). While older youth in care only compromise about 23% of all youth in foster care annually, stories like Noel's highlight that older youth in care are an important subpopulation within the child welfare system who are not always being well served and deserve greater attention. While a variety of factors such as previous life experiences and later entry into care make the needs of this population high the failure to meet the needs of older youth in care is due in part to a long history of absence of the voices of older youth in care in decision-making processes and the child welfare system's entanglement with classist and racist ideologies.

<center>5</center>

The Evolution of Specialized Services and Outcome Measures for Older Youth in Care

For years the voices of foster youth have been suppressed because we are too young to speak up for ourselves." – Miguel Ortiz (Ortiz, 2015).

The outcomes of older youth in care have been a national topic of discussion at the federal level for over half a century, but youth like Noel and Miguel continue to lack access to the support they need to feel heard or cared about. Currently, federal legislation requires states to provide specialized services to older youth in care and to measure and track the outcomes of these youth (Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; 2017). Through the Foster Care Independence Act and subsequent rules and regulations, the federal government has attempted to ensure "young people leave the child welfares system prepared to live independently as productive members of their communities" (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, p.4). The service categories for these independent living services provided to youth include career preparation, financial management, home management training, health risk prevention, academic support, and healthy marriage education and are aimed at ensuring youth are ready for self-sufficiency upon their exit from care (Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). To be eligible for federal funding to implement these services, states must track youths' outcomes in the areas of financial self-sufficiency, educational attainment, connections with adults, homelessness, high-risk behaviors, and access to health insurance repeatedly beginning at age seventeen (Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; 2017). While it is advantageous that the unique needs of older youth in care have received specific attention through federal legislation, it is essential to consider the reasonings for this legislation, the content of this legislation, and the resulting implications for the diverse group of older youth served by the child welfare system.

The history of the current legislation began in 1985 when as part of a budget reconciliation act, President Ronald Regan authorized the use of federal funds to support the creation and implementation of independent living services for older youth in care on the state level for a two-year long trial. Notably, conversations concerning this legislation and its future amendments centered around ensuring older young people in care achieve the goals of self-sufficiency and economic productivity.

This focus is exemplified by statements made during the hearing on extending the federal support of independent living services in March 1988. Thomas Downey, the Acting Chairman at the proceedings, explained the impetus of the Foster Care Independent Living Initiatives in his opening remarks by stating:

Why did Congress establish this program? My own State illustrates the answer to this question. Studies on homeless youth in shelters in New York City have shown that 50 percent of these youths had a history of foster placement. Another study found that within 18 months of leaving foster care, one-third of former foster care girls were receiving AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] (Compensation, 1989, p. 4).

At the same hearing, a representative of the Child Welfare League of America testified in favor of the extension reiterating the statistics Downey raised and adding that individuals who had previously been in foster care "exhibited more deviant behaviors, such as more arrests, arrests for more serious crimes" (Compensation, 1989, p.18). Robert Matsui, a representative in Congress from California, argued that by not extending these services, we serve "the goals of drug dealers and other criminals who can recruit these vulnerable youths who are desperately looking for a way to support themselves" (Compensation, 1989, p. 5). While speaking about former foster youth in general, it is noteworthy that a segment of the assessments cited during this hearing

found Black youth who had transitioned out of foster care to be particularly likely to lack self-sufficiency (Stone, 1987).

These statements establish the rationale for this legislation and provide indicators of the type of implications it would have on older youth in care. Within this hearing, reliance on public benefits by former foster youth was the central problem for which a solution is sought, financial productivity of former foster youth was established as the appropriate measure to assess the success of the child welfare system and former foster youth in care were portrayed as deviant. This line of political argument is not unique during this historical period. It mirrors the rhetoric of the racially biased "welfare reform" movement of the 1980s (Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; 2017; McGhee, 2021). During this era, politicians from both parties, particularly Republicans, harped on the need for welfare reform using racially coded imagery to garner white support for the implementation of an economic agenda that blunted government services and concentrated wealth and corporate power.

> Racism was the ever-ready tool for the job, undermining white American's faith in their fellow Americans. And it worked: Regan cut taxes on the wealthy but raised them on the poor, waged war on the unions that were the backbone of the white middle class, and slashed domestic spending. And he did it with overwhelming support of the white working and middle classes (McGhee, 2021, p. 35).

When placed within the historical context of the welfare reform movement that harmed and continues to harm working and middle-class individuals of all races (McGhee, 2021), the implications of the implementation of independent living services become worrisome. Even though independent living service policies expanded government reaches, it did so in a way that aligned with the principles of welfare reform. It encouraged fear of Black, Brown, and

Indigenous people, a disdain for direct government interventions such as cash transfers and in-kind benefits, and embraced the market (McGhee, 2021). Former foster youth, who as a population were quickly becoming more likely to be Black and Indigenous due to the growing racial bias and disparities within the child welfare system (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Roberts, 2002, 2014), were framed as prone to deviance, direct government support to meet their basic needs was framed as abhorrent, and mandating participation in the labor market without consideration of how workers were treated was held as the policy gold standard.

At that same hearing in 1986, a successful independent living program was lauded because it involved "private corporations to assist in job training, employment readiness and job development for young people in foster care" (Compensation, 1989, p. 9). The celebration of programs with corporate sponsorships that prepare youth for work further indicates that a large interest of this policy was to support the concentration of power into the hands of corporations, a theme of policies at the time. The mechanism was through ensuring that the trajectories of older youth in care supported corporate interests, an already trained workforce primed to comply. The discussion of these older youth as on the brink of deviance and welfare reliance continues the same rhetoric used to deny Black, Brown, and Indigenous adults resources, diverting blame to them for their economic disenfranchisement despite centuries of racialized policies that directly impact their economic standing today (McGhee, 2021). The argument that young people's skills and character deficits were the problems and that character education on healthy marriage and behaving in the workplace was the solution is what Bettina Love (2019) refers to as racist policy dressed in new clothes.

At face value character education seems harmless. I am sure we all can agree that

children need good qualities to be successful in life regardless of how you define success.

But character education is anti-Black… with the world crumbling around them they are

taught to vote, volunteer, pay their taxes and have good character, which is code for

comply, comply, comply. Dark children are told that their good character is dependent on

how much they obey. However, history tells us that dark folx' humanity is dependent on

how much they disobey and fight for justice (p. 70).

Providing young people in the child welfare system support to develop good character, defined

as gritty industriousness and to successfully enter the workforce is not itself harmful; however,

focusing on these strategies exclusively does not adequately address the systemic inequalities

that place young people aging out of care at a disadvantage. Self-sufficiency and character

development-focused policies do not adequately address systematic problems that lead youth in

care to struggle during their transition to adulthood, such as systemic racism, ageism, and

classism. Therefore, when the government exclusively invested in these services, it subtly

supported the perspective that foster youth are deficient and the status quo in regard to systemic

oppression is acceptable.

Current Status of Older Youth in Care Services and Outcomes

"I wish someone would have told me what I am and what I am capable of." —Jen Ligali

(Freundlich et al., 2011).

This early focus on the self-sufficiency of older youth in care has resulted in practice,

policy, and research on these youth that continues the trend of focusing on ensuring they become

"a desirable employee with consumer power" (Lash, 2017, p. 85). This trend has remained to the

detriment of researching and investing in developmentally and culturally appropriate services

that align with outcomes that youth themselves may value and require support in achieving.

Federal government funding mandates continue to primarily focus on measuring self-sufficiency-

related outcomes including financial self-sufficiency, housing, and educational attainment (Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; 2017). Longitudinal studies on older youth in care have focused largely on measuring outcomes associated with self-sufficiency and supporting the further investment in policies that prepare youth for self-sufficiency (Courtney et al., 2004; 2016; 2020; Pecora et al., 2005). Additionally, more recent policies crafted to support older youth in care such as The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which allows states to use federal funds to provide foster care services to youth until age twenty-one rather than eighteen, has been greatly shaped by interests in shifting self-sufficiency related outcomes for these youth (Packard et al., 2008; Peters et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, studies of older youth in foster care demonstrate that the focus on self-sufficiency has not resulted in favorable outcomes for youth. Multiple quantitative longitudinal studies showing that when their outcomes are compared to same age peers who are not in foster care, older youth transitioning out of care fare worse (Courtney et al., 2004; 2016; 2020; Pecora et al., 2005). The disparate outcomes include areas of self-sufficiency that federal legislation has aimed to address for decades, such as employment and economic sufficiency, and areas such as mental health and physical health that are not as emphasized (Courtney et al., 2020). These findings clarify that focusing policy on the self-sufficiency of older youth in care has failed to result in meeting their needs in areas that will greatly impact their future, being meet.

In addition to the troubling findings in the area of on self-sufficiency, studies on the outcomes and services provided to youth impacted by the child welfare system raise serious concerns about of the adequacy of the services we provide older youth in care (Freundlich et al., 2011; Raimon et al., 2015; Sepulveda & Williams, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2015; U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau, 2021). When compared to younger youth in care older youth are overwhelmingly more likely to receive inferior quality services in type of placement, level of placement stability and permanency outcomes (Freundlich et al., 2011; Sepulveda & Williams, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau, 2021). Older youth in care are more likely than younger children to be placed in congregate care settings, which have been deemed developmentally inappropriate, with assessments showing that about 69% of the youth placed in a congregate care setting are age thirteen or older (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2015). Older youth also tend to experience high amounts of placement change, with youth aged fourteen and older being more than twice as likely to have experienced four or more placements during their most recent stay in care (Sepulveda & Williams, 2019).

Research has repeatedly shown that the child welfare system is less successful in establishing permanency, the central goal of the child welfare system, for older children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau, 2021; Freundlich et al., 2011). In 2018, older children, defined as children who most recently entered foster care when they were older than 12 years of age, were 30% less likely than all children to exit care to enter a permanent home (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau, 2021). Research also shows that Black, Brown, and Indigenous older youth in care face a system that vastly lacks appropriate services that respect and validate their culture and adequately address the trauma of

historical patterns of racial oppression, leaving them particularly likely to experience adverse outcomes (Raimon et al., 2015). In combination, these factors demonstrate that many older youth in care, particularly Black, Brown, and Indigenous older youth, experience a quality of care that makes it challenging to grow and thrive.

Ultimately, analysis of policy and research on older youth in care indicates that self-sufficiency related goals greatly shape the child welfare system's approach to serving older youth in care. In addition, research demonstrates that older youth in care face troubling outcomes despite decades of specialized services targeting these populations. In combination, these data build the case that the quality-of-care issues and adverse outcomes older youth in care face may partially be the result of the child welfare system's exclusionary focus on older youth self-sufficiency and that a broader policy and practice focus could be beneficial.

Older Youth's Perceptions and Experiences of Transitioning Out of Care

A variety of scholarship focused on the central role of young people pursuing self-sufficiency in their experiences and desires for the future exists (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Pryce et al., 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). For example, Samuels and Pryce (2008) found that older youth transitioning out of foster care took pride in their independence and often viewed dependence as counter to their success. Embracement of survivalist self-reliant identity was primarily focused on youths' ability to survive regardless of social or emotional support however, it also included youth disavowing economic or tangible supports such as supplies for their babies or housing support. Mulkerns and Owen (2008), Curry and Abrams (2015) and Pryce and colleagues (2017) similarly found that older youth often viewed self-reliance as being an essential attribute to achieving success and forming a sense of identity during adolescence and young adulthood. These youth often

described self-reliance as supporting themselves and living independently (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Pryce et al., 2017). In multiple studies when asked about their desires and concerns regarding the future, older youth impacted by the child welfare system discussed fears of losing financial self-sufficiency or dreams of acquiring financial self-sufficiency (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Curry & Abrams, 2015). Curry and Abrams (2015) and Cunningham and Diversi (2013) found that the experiences of older youth amid the transition out of foster care were often defined by goals to reach financial security described as being able to pay for housing and fears of experiencing economic insecurity such as having no money and experiencing houselessness.

While the beforementioned studies demonstrate that self-sufficiency is central to the experiences and perceptions of older youth in care, many of these studies and others on this population indicate that these youth view other factors as central to their current experiences and desires for their future (Appleton et al., 2021; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Storer et al., 2014). For example, Curry and Abrams (2015) found that shifting worldviews, attitudes, and priorities and experiencing emotional growth were central aspects of the transition experience of older youth exiting foster care. Youth described these aspects of the transition in a various ways including pursuing and benefiting from mental health therapy or adopting an optimistic viewpoint towards their future (Curry & Abrams, 2015). In a similar fashion, Mulkerns and Owen (2008) found older youth who had recently exited care valued new abilities and qualities that they had developed since emancipation including joyfulness, self-acceptance, and self-discovery, particularly in the areas of sexuality and culture. Additionally, Mulkerns and Owen (2008) found youth had personal goals of alleviating human suffering and pursuing social justice particularly aimed at assisting foster youth and considered

these goals to be aspects of their identity. In addition, to these studies that indicate older youth in care's value of emotional growth and stability and establishing worldviews, a segment of research pointed to older youth in care subscribing value to social connection and belonging (Appleton et al., 2021; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Storer et al., 2014). Cunningham and Diversi (2013) found that assessing the value of social support and connections, navigating social relationships, and experiencing anxiety regarding their relationships were central themes to youths' discussions of their transition out of care. Similarly, Storer and colleagues (2014) found that young adults who had been placed in foster homes during their adolescence desired foster placements that did not just focus on their basic needs and instead provided a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, youth in this study reported that their foster placements often left them feeling like outsiders and with unsatisfied emotional needs (Storer et al., 2014). In addition, a study of former foster youth who characterized themselves as self-reliant oriented found that when these youth were asked to discuss important aspects of their lives, they often discussed complex emotional and psychological connections to their biological families, former caregivers and social service workers and the importance of social mixing (Appleton et al., 2021). While these findings demonstrated these youth often viewed social connection negatively, they also showed that youth valued selective social engagement (Appleton et al., 2021).

In summary, scholarship on the experiences and perceptions of older youth in care makes clear that while many youth value achieving self-sufficiency, they also consider other factors such as feeling socially connected, feeling optimistic about their future, and pursuing opportunities to positively impact their community as valuable. Extant research has not directly or holistically addressed the topic of wellness, leaving a gap in our understanding of the factors that impact the wellness of older youth in care outside of self-sufficiency.

Addressing Gaps in Research, Policy, and Services by Centering Older Youth

"I feel as though I should have been able to talk; however, when I would try to talk to my workers it wasn't very helpful because they were not trying to listen…I just needed one person that would understand." —Dezzy (Moffa et al., 2020)

Older foster youth's perspectives on their experiences were notably absent from initial conversations on policies that would greatly impact their development (Compensation, 1989; Stone, 1987). This lack of inclusion resulted in inadequate policies and services, and discriminatory views of this population to remain unchallenged. However, in recent years, the role of youth in care in shaping policy decisions has shifted towards inclusion and acknowledgment. At the turn of the century, a segment of child welfare scholars began emphasizing the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives and voices when examining the child welfare system particularly the perspectives of youth (Hochman et al., 2004; Unrau, 2007). For example, Unrau noted that:

> children and their families have historically been excluded from child welfare decision making arenas. The relative absence of research findings presented from the standpoint of foster children may further marginalize this already vulnerable group of society's children. Researchers have a dominant role in shaping what is known about placement moves (Unrau, 2007, p. 135).

Building on these arguments, a variety of scholars who study older youth in care have sought to fill the youth-driven research gap, arguing that this type of scholarship can strengthen practice and policy focused on this population (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Mulkerns & Owen, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Additionally, both the federal government and many of these researchers who conducted studies on older youth outcomes have consulted with youth to design their assessments of older youth outcomes and, in this manner, included young people in the child welfare policy and practice strategies creation processes (Courtney et al., 2004; 2016; 2020; Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; Pecora et al.,2005). For example, the federal government argues that its data collection on older youth outcomes provides a "new opportunity to engage youth as partners in survey research, including dialogue, analysis, and dissemination of outcomes data" and "may help agencies develop new or adjust existing services to be more effective and efficient for youth in transition" (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, p.4). Similar statements were made in the discussion sections of many of the longitudinal studies of older youth in care (Courtney et al., 2016; 2020).

While this change of perspective regarding the inclusion of older youth is positive, there is room for further progress in terms of how foster youth are included in research and policy making. Including youth at the point of data collection does not fully center young people's needs or honor their right to self-determination, and it cannot upend discriminatory ideologies. This form of inclusion does not allow youth to question the goals of child welfare policies and practices, such as the goal of self-sufficiency defined as participation in the labor market and limited use of public benefits, or the manner they or their needs are depicted (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). In addition, despite being a step in the right direction, current methods of inclusion often do not allow older youth in care to ensure that the questions studied and the manner these questions are studied centers their experiences and desires in terms of the services and supports they will receive. This is particularly troubling because research has shown that adult perspectives on normativity and traditional pathological approaches fail to

capture the assets, aspirations, and agency of youth, particularly youth who diverge from the dominant society such as 'racial, gender, and ability minorities' (Christmas, 2021; Delgado, 2015). Research with other youth seen as divergent from dominant society such as unhoused youth, indigenous young people, trans and gender-expansive youth, and youth with mental health conditions has indicated these youth often face barriers to pursuing wellness due to misconceptions about what makes them well and barriers to their survival that make pursuing wellness seem unreachable (Lal et al., 2014; Mountz et al., 2018; Ryan, 2013; Schwan et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018). Additionally, this scholarship points to diversity in components youth accounted for as essential to their wellness and the connection between components and identity such as connection to nature for Indigenous youth and gender identity affirming spaces for gender-expansive youth (Lal et al., 2014; Mountz et al., 2018; Ryan, 2013; Schwan et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018).

In combination, this research calls for a process in which older youth in care can identify and explore multiple wellness components, some of which may be unrecognized or understudied in the child welfare field. Rather than holding onto and including youth in a framework that was made without them to understand and better support their wellness, youth must be what Schubotz (2012) refers to as deciding partners in the research process.

As Lash (2017) articulates when reflecting on services provided to older youth in care, "under the current system it is barely possible to imagine a different way of approaching adulthood other than by focusing on the needs of employers" (p 86). This unimaginability connects to the long legacy of dehumanizing policies such as chattel slavery, Jim Crow polices and mass incarceration that attempt to transform Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the United States into mere sources of exploitable labor and wash away their ability to feel, love or

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strive for anything besides survival (Alexander, 2010; Bettina L. Love & Narrator: Misty Monroe, 2019; Briggs, 2020; McGhee, 202; Lash, 2017). However, what is currently unimaginable can be imagined if we abandon the legacy of dehumanization and instead honor the full humanness of older youth in care, including their right to self-determination and their right to pursual of self-defined wellness rather than merely survival and self-sufficiency. Addressing this goal requires that we reopen the question of what outcomes the state should be supporting older youth in foster care to achieve, whose voices should be centered in making these decisions, and how the child welfare system should serve older youth. Considering the history of inadequate service to older youth in care, particularly Black, Brown, and Indigenous older youth, more research is needed to understand how older youth in care are faring across a variety of areas, including wellness, and how systems can better support youth. Current literature also points to the importance of future research accounting for the racialized oppression and disregard older youth in care often face. This need calls for a methodological approach that centers youth experiences and provides youth control over the narrative. In addition, as set forth in the following chapter, this state of affaris calls for a theoretical framework that can critically assess and comment on both historical and current systemic oppression and interpret resistance and thriving practices of communities on the margins.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

An Introduction to Wellness Reflections of Womanist Radical Imaginers

"My mother tried to make a small path through the wake [the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation] …In other words, even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not simply or only live in subjection and as the subjected. —Christina Sharpe (Sharpe, 2016, p.4)

Our collective's exploration of wellness attempts to resist outcome measure-based narratives of wellness of "at-risk" populations as a starting place. We also purposely does not engage supposed universal wellness theories that are often generated from scholars within the social sciences and medicine and serve as the foundation of exploration within the social welfare field and the child welfare domain in our theoretical framework (Hale et al., 2019; Maslow, 1943; Noltemeyer et al., 2020). This purposeful refusal is meant to stress the importance of starting conversations with communities rather than about communities. As a means of addressing the limitations of previous scholarship and services, we aim to explore the way older youth in care center their own wellness in response to marginalization and as a way of building an existence in which they are more than the marginalized—a world in which they do not just live as the subjected. This requires what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) refers to as a rewriting and re*righting* of the theories of wellness to embrace versions of the concept that align with the ideas of older youth in care. The decolonial praxis of rewriting and rerighting are essential both for strengthening future scholarship and practice that will be built upon it but also as a revolutionary act of building power with those who have been previously denied a platform and access to

power. When we began exploring the idea of collectively rewriting and rerighting the wellness narrative, we collectively questioned the boundaries of our framework and imagined an analytical structure for guiding an exploration of the diverse wellness experiences of youth in care that considers the oppressive context of care but does not constrain wellness definitions to this context of oppression and violence. This analysis led to our collective creation of a theoretical framework entitled rootedness.

Origins of the Rootedness Theoretical Framework

Our collective's journey to create the rootedness theoretical frame began with the earliest conversations of our collective, which formally launched during the summer of 2019 at the *DesAgarrando Pueblo* Research Justice Collective Workshop. Prior to this time, members of our collective regularly interacted at Better Youth Inc. events at which I volunteered and other members of the collective organized and participated. On multiple occasions, we had discussed deepening our work together, but amid events and projects had never had the opportunity to fully explore our ideas. This workshop, convened by Professor Amy Ritterbusch, provided a space in which university-based and movement-based agents of change could join forces through a process of self- and collective reflection involving collective remembering, collective reparation, and collective dreaming for justice. During this workshop, we began to formally explore using our varied talents to expand into new types of work together that focused on newly discovered shared social justice goals and formally declared ourselves a collective called LA Dreamers. While membership of that collective expanded and contracted over time, our central aim of dreaming and enacting healing from multi-generational trauma and building resilience for our communities remained consistent.

Throughout the beforementioned workshop we shared poems, art, music, participated in stream of consciousness writing and individual writing. Our focus was considering how we could combine forces (researchers; non-profit leaders; youth; artists) in a way that aligned with participatory ethos (Cahill, 2007; Schubotz, 2012; Torre & Fine, 2006) to move towards a better world for youth on the margins of society and their families with a particular focus on Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth and youth impacted by the child welfare system. For over two years, we met regularly ranging from multiple times a month to every other month to openly debate what we collectively imagined as an ideal future for the communities we cared deeply for and how to enact that future. During those meetings, we raised questions to each other, completed stream-of-consciousness collective writing, and discussed the results of individual reflections, which included drawings, creative writing, and videos. As those dialogues evolved, it became clear we were talking about the achievement of comprehensive wellness for Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth and youth impacted by the child welfare system and that this wellness should be based in these communities' desires and lived experiences. It also became clear that more work needed to be done to determine what communities' desires and lived experiences were. We decided to begin that work with the older youth in foster care population because of the resonance of that experience for members of our collective and our diverse knowledge in this area.

With our previous conversations in mind, members of our collective reflected independently and jointly upon what we meant when we discussed wellness and our own inspirations for wellness, with the goal of creating a starting place for studying what wellness meant to older youth in care and their experiences of wellness. Across our earlier dialogues and in the dialogues that occurred once we more explicitly began talking about wellness, I noticed

that members of our collective would often turn to pieces of creative writing, particularly the work of Black women, to expand upon their thoughts on wellness. I documented the texts that were raised, began closely reading the pieces raised, documented initial connections between the texts and individual's statements, and each time we meet brought these writings back to the group for further discussion.

These early reflections led me to explore ways to incorporate knowledge from outside the academy as the theoretical frame for this work because our collective agreed that this knowledge was an essential part of our approach to inquiries regarding the wellness of older youth in care. This turn to cultural expressions led to the embrace of Robin D. Kelley's use of poetic knowledge in his foundational scholarship on the history of Black social struggle and the Black radical imagination. Kelley (2002) writes that poetic knowledge is "not what we simply recognize as the formal poem: but a revolt: a scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking" (p. 9). Poetic knowledge based on this formulation is expansive, containing within it the cultural products of social movements, the utterances of people of all walks of life, including activists and artists. What unifies this type of knowledge is its foundation in lived experience and its tendency to imagine and create future worlds (Kelley, 2002). The poetic knowledge of Black women thus became an agreed-upon starting point of our collective framing of the topic.

With this deeper understanding of how poetic knowledge could be used as theory, I began working closely with other members of the collective to clarify our conception of wellness. To complete this process, I revisited notes and transcripts from our past conversations and pieces of poetic knowledge that were mentioned and began writing summaries of major themes that cut across those conversations. I presented these summaries to other members of the

collective for their feedback until we reached a level of comfortability on the initial

conceptualization of the framework.

Ultimately this process resulted in the collective founders creating a multi-genre curation

of Black women's creative expressions that universally challenge marginalization in terms of the

right to be well and right to imagine and create a different world was composed. Analysis of the

poetic knowledge of this canon, a canon we refer to as the work of womanist radical imaginers,

resulted in the creation of a new theoretical framework of wellness to guide our inquiry that we

call rootedness.

A Turn to Womanist Radical Imaginers: Defining Rootedness

Rootedness draws from the womanist radical imaginers canon which includes the work of

a variety of creatives, including Maya Angelou, Octavia Butler, Lucille Clifton, Akasha Gloria

Hull, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Toni Cade Bambara. The canon of creative expression we

call the work of womanist radical imaginers is considered one canon because, as a group, their

cross-genre poetic knowledge resists a culture that aimed to repress, at minimum, destroy, at

maximum, their attempts to reach wellness due to their intersecting identities as Black people

and as women. Their refusal to merely survive silently in the margins and instead dream of and

aid in the creation of new worlds inspires us to resist our differing but connected experiences of

oppression. It is this refusal to merely survive and to dream that unites this work and drives this

scholarly exploration rather than the adoption of a particular label or a complete agreement on

what wellness requires. As a collective, we do not each individually agree with all conceptions of

wellness expressed by individuals in the canon, but we celebrate and are inspired to do our

wellness dreaming guided by their expression. This approach to the curation of poetic knowledge

was loosely inspired by the work of the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC), who engage with the

work of women hip-hop artists. Even though some of these hip-hop artists "say some antifeminist shit on the regular," the CFC argues these artists' confidence within a sexist industry provided members of their collective hope that there was a way forward even when there seemed to be no way (Cooper et al., 2017, p. 4). The CFC modeled how we could "divorce ourselves from 'correct' or hegemonic ways of being in favor of following the rhythm of our own heartbeats," which meant unapologetically turning to the work of artists that inspired us to dream and turning away from restrictive ideas about the right way to be inspired or do theoretical work (Mission Statement, 2010).

While inspirational resistance and world creation efforts exist in many communities, our turn to the womanist radical imaginers canon for theoretical roots is particularly fitting due to the intersecting marginalization older youth in care experience because of their identities as youth impacted by the child welfare system and often as Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth within our society. Within the U.S. context and the global context, the intersection of Blackness and femineity has simultaneously been a site of violence, exploitation, and expropriation and of freedom dreaming, resistance, and rebellious thriving. The poetic knowledge of Black women has deeply explored the right to define and right to thrive within a state context that denies both those rights. Creators within this canon have long navigated the question of what wellness means and how to create it in the wake of great pain, particularly great pain that has been both systematic and interpersonal, pain that is shared by many older youth in care.

Womanist radical imaginers' expressions of wellness include calls for innovative, nuanced conceptions of being well and a rejection of systems that define "the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need" (Lorde, 2007, p.55). Rather womanist radical

imaginers have explicitly advocated for the imagining and creation of a world in which wellness was not defined using the same ideas that have been used to oppress Black women. Lorde warns that "it is not the destiny of Black America to repeat white America's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the sign of a meaningful life" (Lorde, 2007, p.63). Womanist radical imaginers' comprehensive understanding of wellness neither excludes Black women's pain nor hyper focuses on it while excluding all other factors of their experience. Lorde called for all of us, particularly those on the margins, to understand "we are powerful because we have survived, and that is what it is all about- survival and growth" (Lorde, 2007, p. 139), and this call requires a conception of wellness that expands beyond a focus on survival or growth in isolation—both are important. Nuance when considering wellness necessitates a framework that can hold the complex tapestries of lived experiences, needs, and desires that ultimately make up the experiences of those surviving and thriving on the margins.

Through our previously outlined process, rootedness was ultimately conceived as a multidimensional self-defined framing of wellness and thriving within a context of oppression. Rootedness is also as an act of resistance against marginalization and an active step towards liberatory imagining. The rootedness framework consists of five wellness dimensions, including spiritual connectedness, corporal sustenance, creative expression, collective belongingness, and transformative efficacy (see Figure 1). These components of rootedness, while distinct, are not disconnected, and the borders between dimensions are blurry. Each component can be best understood by turning to a selection of the sources of its conceptualization, the poetic knowledge of womanist radical imaginers. The following sections contain definitions and the poetic knowledge context for each dimension.

Figure 1

The Rootedness Theoretical Framework
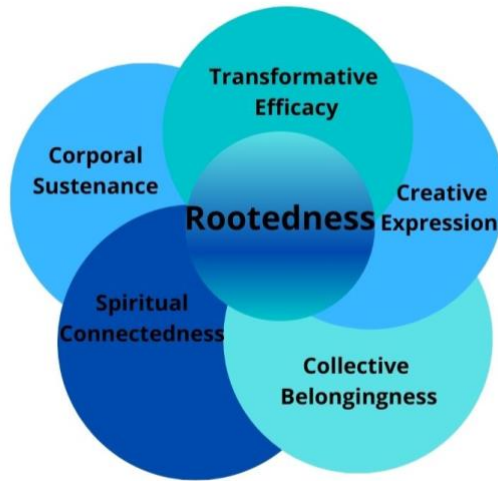
Note. A graphic representation of the pillars of our participatory conceptualization.

Spiritual Connectedness: "You are loved, just you as you are" —Alice Walker[4]

The concept of spiritual connectedness became a central component of our framework for rewriting and rerighting wellness of the marginalized. Spiritual connectedness was imagined in a variety of different manners across the canon; however, it generally denoted a sense of deep connection to non-corporal and corporal elements of the universe that made individuals feel a sense of gratitude and wholeness. This sense of connection was often described in terms of explorations of relationship to death, relationship to the infinite, relationship to temporality, relationship to self, and relationship to other matter.

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[4] (Hull, 2001, p. 97).

In "Thank you, Lord," Maya Angelou (2015) describes a state of gratitude that results from reflection on her own fragility. "I went to sleep last night/ And I arose with the dawn,/ I know that there are others/ Who're still sleeping on,/ They've gone away,/ You've let me stay./ I want to thank You" (p.171). This gratitude extends from thankfulness for continued temporality to thankfulness for the eventual transition from corporality to infiniteness denoted by the line "Because of Your mercy,/ When I die I'll live again" (p.172). This gratitude is both for existence but also for an explanation for existence and for extinguishment, a reasoning for one's connection to the universe. However, notably within this reflection on spirituality, the context of racial identity and cultural belonging prominently appear. Angelou's introductory lines of the poem center Black identity and Black community within experiences of spiritual connectedness through the description of the brown skin and neat afro of the leader of the service and the statement that Sunday service is better when lead by a Black individual. Angelou simply states that her ability to have the full spectrum of her humanness recognized and accepted by her spiritual community is essential to her ability to experience spiritual connectedness. In this way, the pursuit of spiritual connectedness exists within the context of oppression but also serves as a site of transcendence in which Angelou can resist oppression and create a space in which her humanity and infiniteness are fully embraced by herself, her community, and the universe.

While Angelou's exploration of spirituality aligns with religious practice, not all the explorations of the Black womanist radical imaginers in the canon spoke of spirituality from that perspective. In her innovative book *Soul Talk*, Akasha Gloria Hull presents conversations with a cohort of powerful and creative African American women regarding the revival of spirituality and creative force in the African American women community. During one of those conversations, renowned writer and visionary Alice Walker centers love rather than God in her

assessment of her own spiritual connectedness. She states explicitly that "my only spiritual gift is love and I think that out of that love I can heal-heal myself and somebody or something else... But you know I don't think of it as healing, I just think of it as loving" (Hull, 2001, p. 97). In this way, Walker describes spiritual connectedness as a transformative process but resists defining it purely as such. Walker goes on to explain the impact of this spiritual connectedness on her life when she states:

> At some point I got it... and when I finally got it, I started to laugh. And I haven't stopped laughing because what you get, what you understand, is that you are loved...It doesn't have to be by anyone. You are loved, just you as you are. And how can you walk out in the sunshine and feel the wind in your hair and put your feet on the grass and not know that. (p. 98)

Walker's spiritual gift of love allows her to connect to noncorporal and corporal elements of the world, including to herself, from a state of radical acceptance. This connection provides her with immense joy and peace despite past experiences of feeling unloved and refuted. She goes on to clarify that her relationship with her spiritual gift has shifted over time, she had previously possessed it in childhood but then lost it. "Children come into the world as loving beings, knowing they are loved. That's the paradise that's lost, that feeling of being at one with everyone and everything." (p. 198) This reference to past spirituality and loss denotes the loss of wholeness of true self and the return. It also provides a clear understanding of the essentialness of spiritual connectedness to wellness; spiritual connectedness allows us to reach paradise.

Through reflection on these elements as a YPAR collective, it became clear that spiritual connectedness plays an essential role in the wellness of youth in care because it creates an opportunity to achieve a sense of wholeness as one moves through the world and pursues life. It

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allows for those on the margins to exist beyond the plane of subjugation regardless of the immediate context. Spiritual connectedness as a path for reliable connection may play a role in older youth in cares' personal journeys of wellness as they attempt to find wholeness within a context often marked by repeated instability and loss. Additionally, through pursuing spiritual connectedness, young people in care may be able to build an existence that is shaped by acceptance and love defined in a manner that is healing and energy giving.

Creative Expression: "Expressing that ineffable thing" — Lucille Clifton[5]

In this section of rewriting and righting wellness, the centering of womanist imaginers resulted in a clear need to include creative expression as a component of the rootedness frame. Creative expression was described as both a tool of escape and a powerful tool for world creation throughout works in the womanist radical imaginers canon. Creative expression allows the unlocking of parts of the self that were previously unreachable and, through doing, allows for the pursuit of larger wellness ambitions for the self and society.

During conversations with Akasha Hull regarding the role of poetry in her life and in the life of humanity in general, Lucille Clifton noted:

> I think everybody can express. I know everybody wants to. I know there is in humans a great urge toward expressing that ineffable thing that is a part of us. I think some people do it with poems and I know people that can cornrow pretty close to it. I think that people tend not to listen. It's educated out of you. My luck is that I wasn't that educated (Hull, 2001, p.128).

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[5] (Hull, 2001, p.128)

Through this brief statement, Clifton, one of the most respected poets of the period, calls for all of us to embrace the artist within ourselves regardless of what we have been educated to believe about the importance of what we must express. Additionally, Clifton calls on all people to allow their artistic expression to be a venue for the freeing of their deepest sentiment, an act that Clifton suggests is part of our humanity. Clifton's own poems explicate this human need for freeing that which lies deep within through her frill-less prose. This need is exemplified when in "surely I am able to write poems" she writes, "surely i am able to write poems/ celebrating the grass" however then goes on to write, "but whenever I begin 'the trees wave their knotted branches and…' why/ is there under that poem always another poem?" (Young, 2020, p. 426). Clifton's previously noted remarks to Hull seem to answer the poem's closing question. For Clinton, creative expression provides her the opportunity to free the inexpressible sentiments she desperately feels she must attempt to unlock from within, and for Clifton, that is not the stories of trees. Rather much of Clifton's poetry, such as "won't you celebrate with me" turns to her experiences as one who has been "born in Babylon/ both nonwhite and woman", a woman who remarks that "everyday something has tried to kill me and has failed", a woman who creates a life worthy of celebration and awe (p. 426).

For Audre Lorde, the importance of freeing the previously unspeakable takes new importance because to her, it is through creative expression that those on the margins can move toward a better world. Lorde (2007) provides an explanation on the role of art as a tool for liberation in her essay "poetry is not a luxury" when she writes that:

> Our dreams point the way to freedom. Those dreams are realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak and to dare. If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is

discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core-the fountain-of our power... we give up

the future of our worlds. (p. 39)

In this passage, Lorde denotes that the use of creative expression cannot be seen as optional

because it is through creative expression, we gain an understanding of and the ability to move

toward new worlds in which we can be well.

While neither Lorde nor Clifton explicitly mentions older youth in care, and both draw

deeply from their positionality as Black women, throughout their remarks, they make clear that

their words are for all of humanity, particularly those who have previously been denied access to

creative expression. For our collective founder members who are visual artists, poets, and

writers, these words regarding the vitalness of creative expression for all spoke to deep-seated

knowledge which they had held for years. In this way, Lorde and Clifton's words regarding the

deep-seated place of creative expression in human thriving and its role in worldmaking seem

particularly relevant to older youth in care who have been taught the importance of self-

sufficiency and, at times, not much else. This raises the question of how older youth see the role

of creative expression in their pursuit of wellness and whether they have encountered

discouragement or support to express the ineffable.

Collective Belongingness: "Ain't we Black? Ain't we fine?" —Maya Angelou[6]

Womanist radical imaginers within the canon wrote in-depth about the importance of

connecting with others, particularly with those with whom we share the margins such as other

Black people, women, or Black woman. This focus results in our rewriting and righting of

wellness within social work and child welfare scholarship to center the concept of collective

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[6] (Angelou, 2015, p.162)

belongingness. Lorde detailed in her piece "Eye to Eye", a reflection on the rage between Black women, that "we have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other" (Lorde, 2007, p.175). Lorde warns that "when we do not attempt to name the confusion of feelings which exist between sisters, we act them out in hundreds of hurtful and unproductive ways. Never speaking from the old pain to beyond" (p.170). Through this piece, Lorde discusses the essential nature of learning to love our fellow humans, particularly our fellow occupants of the margins, to love ourselves and be able to move towards a world without marginalization. She clarifies that our context makes that loving difficult but not impossible or unnecessary.

While direct social relationships between individuals like Lorde discusses are essential to the conception of collective belongingness, they do not fully encompass the concept. Collective belongingness also denotes an individual's connection to groups of others and to elements of culture that expand and refine their conceptions of self. In her poem "Ain't that Bad," Angelou (2015) directly refers to this type of connection when she writes pridefully about Black cultural practices, Black artists, and other Black community members. While framed as questions, her concluding lines, "Now ain't we bad? Now ain't we Black? Now ain't we fine?" (p.162) read more like declarations of the remarkability of Blackness to which she feels apart. This ability to feel connected and affirmed through a connection unknown others because of shared characteristics provides a deeper understanding of how sociability shapes our wellness.

For youth in care, questions of collective belongingness are particularly relevant as instability in living situations may leave them apart from communities to which they feel connected, and past traumas may leave them feeling disconnected. As Lorde notes, collective belongingness is not always easy to achieve, particularly for those who have been taught not to

trust others, but collective belongingness seems to be essential to wellness. Collective belongingness helps individuals in the present through the development of deeper self-love and throughout the future by providing them with the support to build existences that are more loving and thus maybe an essential part of the overall wellness of youth in care.

Corporal Sustenance: "She was a dolphin...He would not enslave her again." — Octavia Butler[7]

In this section of rewriting and rerighting wellness by centering the art of womanist radical imaginers, we turn to care for the physical body, a central component to rootedness. However, it must be noted that the conception of this care in the canon resists ableism, Eurocentric conceptions of aesthetically pleasing healthy bodies, and the centering of a limited view of physical health over other essential conceptions of wellness. Corporal sustenance was deeply tied to enacting self-determination and liberatory practice.

Angelou's poem "the Health-Food Diner" exemplifies this resistance as she playfully mocks the dietary choices of "health food-folks". She denotes that these individuals "are thinned by anxious zeal" and "look for help in seafood kelp" while she "counts on breaded veal." She rejects the conception of thinness as healthiness instead referring to the frailness of these bodies and her desire to run away from the practices that create this type of corporality. Angelou rejects the idea of a healthy body as the result of anxious obsession regarding thinness and food choices. Instead, she embraces her cravings and dreams for meat and cigarettes and through doing defines a different type of relationship with her body and health. In this way, Angelou centers her own

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[7] (Butler, 2012, p.181)

desires and pleasure when caring for her body rather than the views or feelings of others in her conversation of health and wellness.

Octavia Butler's science fiction works take dreams of different relationships with the body and the need for corporal sustenance to fantastical heights, but similarly draws attention to the essential nature of connection to and care for the body for wellness on your own terms. Butler's work is known for its powerful commentary on gender, race, power, and humanity, and her book *Wild Seed* demonstrates this characteristic of her work on multiple levels. The main character of the book, Anyanwu, a former slave and current African priestess, can nourish and care for her own body in ways that violate the boundaries of ordinary humanness. Butler writes that Anyanwu "had spent much of her long life learning the diseases, disorders, and injuries that she could suffer—learning them often by inflicting mild versions of them on herself, then slowly, painfully, by trial and error, coming to understand exactly what was wrong and how to impress healing. Thus, when her enemies came to kill her, she knew more about surviving than they did about killing" (Butler, 2012, p.52). Anyanwu's miraculous ability to heal herself through understanding and then visualizing changes in her body provides her the ability to avoid death by illness and by the many attempts of others to take her life due to fear and misunderstanding. This ability is later strengthened to the point that Anyanwu can reshape her body to such an extent that she could transform into different beings such as leopards and dolphins. She uses this ability to escape enslavement and a life defined by participation in violence and domination. In this way, Butler (2012) explores the concept of strengthening the body to a point in which outside attacks on the body and the spirit cannot limit the potential to pursue a self-determined life even for those on the margins of society, in this case, a Black woman with supernatural abilities, but a concept with far-stretching resonance.

While discussions of corporal sustenance take quite different forms within the Black radical imaginers canon, it is repeatedly turned to as a site for the exhibition of self-determination. Whether it is control over what is put in the body or control over the body's shape, wellness is supported through the embrace of control over the care of the body and the right to determine what to do with the body. For youth in care, experiences of corporal nourishment as a form of wellness are undoubtedly complex within the context of being under the care and control of the state. Considering how experiences of corporal nourishment may allow older youth to feel a sense of self-determination and control and how those feelings connect to their overall wellness is an area worthy of further exploration and thusly an important part of rootedness.

Transformative Efficacy: "I Rise" —Maya Angelou[8]

In conversation with Hull, Alice Walker rewrites and rerights conceptions of oppression by powerfully stating that "oppression is not your home, and people should stop being so comfortable in it" (Hull, 2001, p.83). This statement proposes that regardless of the treatment a person faces, they are more than those conditions and that they should not accept those conditions as a necessary element in the future. In this way, Walker lays the foundation for the final component of the rootedness framework transformative efficacy, described within the canon as the pursuit of the ability to manifest change.

In one of her most well-known poems, "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou (2015) using the first person, describes an individual exuding an undisputable level of confidence, pride, and exuberance for life that she laughs and walks like she has immense riches in their backyard. However, in this piece, Angelou (2015) clarifies that this confidence and joy are a form of

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[8] (Angelou, 2015, p.159)

resistance against both historical oppression and the constant threat of present-day oppression. Referring to "a past that's rooted in pain" and enslavement Angelou's repeated line 'Still I rise" refuses to allow the reader to forget that the act of rising cannot be understood outside of its oppressive contexts. Rising is resistance. However, towards the end of the poem "still" disappears as do the lines that serve as a direct response to those who are upset or surprised by her ability to rise, the modern-day oppressors who are enraged by her refusal to be broken by capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. What remains is the strong proclamation that "I rise". The poem concludes with Angelou's identification as the dream of her enslaved ancestors and the receiver of their gifts and three final reminders that she rises. In this way, Maya Angelou clarifies that the level of confidence and exuberance that she demonstrates is a result of her ability to rise and transform attempts to break her into strength. Angelou (2015) refuses to allow historical and present-day oppression to go unrecognized in the narrative of her wellness, a tendency that is common in scholarship on those on the margins. She defines a portion of her wellness as knowledge of her ability to transform. Transformative energy, in this case, results in a resistant joyfulness, what Love (2019) refers to as Black joy, or the ability "to embrace your full humanity, as the world tells you that you are disposable and that you do not matter" (p.120) and to help others to do the same.

However, to be clear, the feelings of transformative efficacy are not only available from a place of Black joy. Rather, Lorde importantly reminds us, "everything can be used," including our anger, sadness, and pain. Anger, when focused with precision, "can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel

good" (Lorde, 2007 p. 127). Lorde intends to ensure those on the margins understand that all they feel can be used to define and create a world in which all people can love and grow.

The testimonies of womanist radical imaginers center on the ability to use your full self, including your pain and joy, to create a new world of your imagining as essential to wellness. The boundary between this component of wellness overlaps with all other areas because it is through feeling one can transform the self and what lies outside the self that pursuit of all other components of wellness becomes possible. This ability to create change from a place of authenticity is relevant to the older youth in care because it lies at the base of self-defined wellness. For older youth in care to have wellness of their own definition, they must believe in their ability to transform the world and be given the support needed to continue believing in that ability and manifest change. For young people impacted by the child welfare system, their desires for change will undoubtedly turn to the system that plays a central role in their lives. Thusly, if child welfare scholars aim to support the wellness of older youth in care, they must address: the past disenfranchisement and oppression of youth, the impact of those practices on youth today, and highlight different ways to work with youth. Scholarship must begin to play a role in shifting power to young people by allowing them to rewrite and reright the narratives using frameworks that speak to them.

Rootedness as a Theoretical Frame of Inquiry for the Study of Older Youth in Care

The theoretical framing of rootedness guided our investigation into the wellness experiences of older youth in care by providing a working framework of wellness on which to structure the exploration. Through its definition the rootedness framework called for an investigation of wellness that aligned with the conception of wellness as a multidimensional self-defined phenomena that occurs within a context of oppression as an act of resistance against

marginalization and an active step towards liberatory imagining. In addition, the rootedness framework suggested that dimensions of wellness for those on the margins included collective belongingness, spiritual connectedness, corporal sustenance, transformative efficacy, and creative expression. While our collective's inquiry into wellness intended to be open-ended and exploratory, it assumed that those underlying insights from the rootedness framework might apply to the definitions and experiences of wellness of older youth in care. These ideas shaped the initial thematic steps of the inquiry and served as a preliminary theoretical model for the study. However, this study did not aim to prove or disprove rootedness. Rather, it aimed to use rootedness to frame the inquiry to ensure our collective defining and conceptualizations had a shared starting point. Rootedness provided insights regarding where collective freedom dreaming on wellness could begin but not where it would end.

Through embracing the work of womanist radical imaginers, our collective began the process of rewriting and rerighting the wellness narrative of older youth in care and the theoretical knowledge referred to within child welfare and social work scholarship. Through selecting radical imaginers to engage with theoretically we purposefully asserted our right to embrace a different way of doing theoretical work, a way that spoke to us. The work of womanist radical imaginers provided further impetus for our rewriting and rerighting of the wellness of older youth in care by calling attention to how society has often disregarded the wellness of those on the margins and asserting the right of those on the margins to be well on their own terms. In addition, through imagining lives defined by spiritual connectedness, creative expression, collective belongingness, corporal sustenance, and transformative efficacy, womanist radical imaginers provided us with a starting point to imagine a type of wellness that centers the marginalized. Lastly, the work of womanist radical imaginers allowed us to not just call for a

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rewriting and rerighting of older youth in care wellness but to begin the critical work of

completing a rewriting and rerighting of knowledge creation with the social welfare discipline by

demonstrating the vast knowledge that lies outside of the theoretical roots of the social sciences.

In the next chapter, we will continue our explanation of how we used theory and explain our

methodological approach to this rewriting and rerighting intellectual endeavor.

Chapter 4

Methods

Older youth in foster care currently face a variety of challenges, including decades of racist and ageist self-sufficiency-oriented policies and practices that limit their ability to pursue wellness on their own terms. Given these circumstances, there was a need for research that could aid in the reimagining of the role the child welfare system plays in the wellness of older youth. Our youth-driven research collective aimed to answer that call by applying the rootedness framework to guide an examination of how older youth in care define and experience wellness. Additionally, it aimed to conduct this examination thorough a methodology that would align with the goal of creating a collective space for freedom dreaming for youth impacted by foster care.

To answer our research question, our research collective utilized a hybrid qualitative methodology that included gathering and analyzing multiform data, including intensive qualitative individual interviews, photos, creative writing pieces, and polylogues. Through the data gathering and collective analysis process, we collected over 50 hours of individual interviews and group session audios, over 80 photographs, over 80 individual creative writing pieces, and over 6 collectively written pieces. This methodology was loosely inspired by the photovoice scholarship of Caroline Wang (1999) and Melvin Delgado (2015) and the constructivist grounded theory scholarship of Kathy Charmaz (2014). A graphic representation of the entire data collection and analysis cycle is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Data Collection and Analysis Cycle
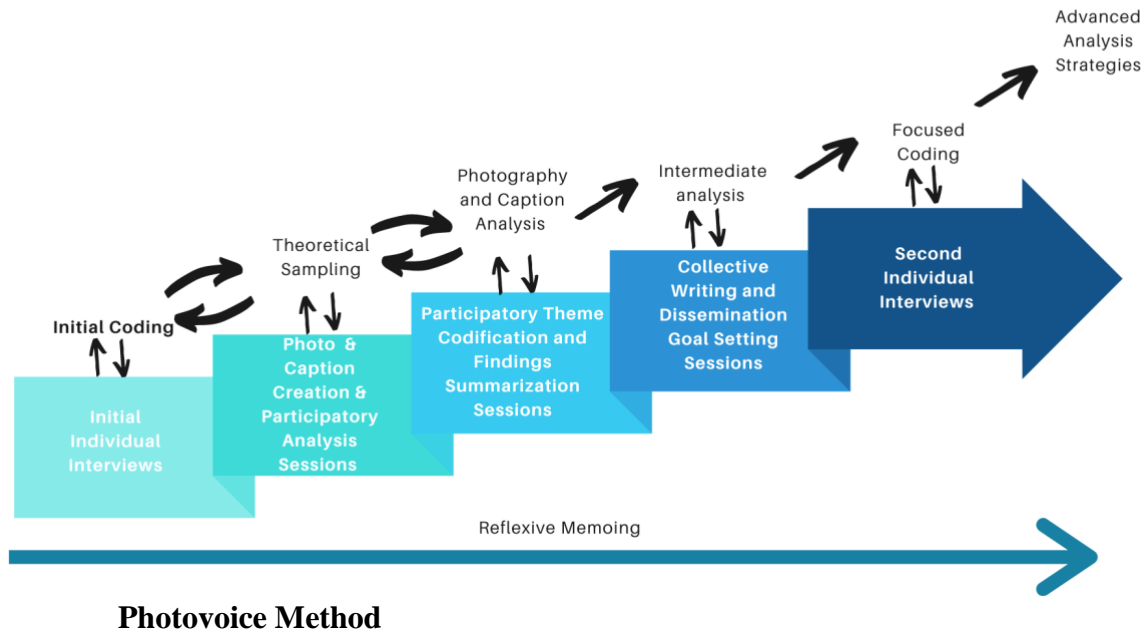
Photovoice Method

At its roots, "photovoice is the use of photographic equipment to capture a visual image and then to transform this image into a vehicle for generating information and discussion" (Delgado, 2015, p. 7). While there are varying aims to photovoice, it is commonly accepted that the method is utilized to enable people to document and reflect upon their community's assets and needs, to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important topics through the discussion of photographs, and to influence policymakers (Wang, 1999). The photovoice method is rooted in multiple fields, including visual ethnography, art therapies, arts-based community development, participatory action research, and qualitative research (Delgado, 2015).

In this study, we turned to the use of photovoice methodology because of its unique grounding in qualitative arts-based research and participatory action research, which resulted in a

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methodology that embraces knowledge creation as a transformative process aimed at achieving social justice, pushes the boundaries of what constitutes evidence, rejects the concept of politically neutral knowledge, and centers the perspectives and desires of those who experience a phenomenon (Delgado, 2015).

Constructivist Grounded Theory-Inspired Method

In addition to the photovoice methodology, this study incorporated elements of constructivist grounded theory. Embracing this second supporting methodology allowed for further consideration of the research question in the context of the entire collective experience, including reflections on the experience itself through analysis of the spoken and written word youth submitted along with their photographs.

Our employment of this method divests from the traditional use in the sense that this study does not solely aim to explicitly build a grounded theory on a narrow phenomenon; however, the assumptions of constructivist grounded theory and the process that allow constructivist grounded theory to build theory are assets for the aims of this project. While we did not aim to build a theory since research in this area is still relatively new, the goals of understanding how older youth in care experience and define wellness is theoretical work.

Charmaz (2014) argues that constructivist grounded theory embraces the inductive, comparative, action, and meaning-emphasized approach of grounded theory while abandoning the commitment to an objective external reality that was implied in the initial work that used the approach. While our study began with a theoretical framework and thus, our analysis was not fully inductive, as previously mentioned, the framework was used to guide the exploration loosely and allowed collective members to collectively construct the boundaries of the

phenomena. In this way, we embraced Charmaz's conception that research should begin from the assumption that social reality is multiple and constructed and that the research "reality arises within a situation and includes what all involved in the research process bring to it and do within it" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). Our study was aimed at the inductive comparative work of placing the variety of experiences of members into polylogue, an iterative meaning-making process in which voices from different positionalities are taken into consideration equally, and noticing what commonalities rose to the top in a manner that aligned well with constructivist ground theory. This study embraced the strategies outlined by both Charmaz (2014), such as systematic simultaneous data collection and analysis, consistent memoing throughout the data collection process and analysis process, and theoretical sampling from the second interview onward to construct an interpretative portrayal of collective members' conceptualizations and experiences.

Research Collective

Rather than using the colonial, dichotomous language of researcher and participant, this study embraced the use of the terminology research collective to describe the community of individuals involved in the inquiry. This was done for a variety of reasons but was deeply driven by our engagement with youth participatory action research (YPAR) approaches. Torre and Fine (2006) clearly outline the importance of centering youth in the research process when they state that "repositioning youth as researchers rather than as the researched shifts the practice of researching on youth to with youth- a position that stands in sharp contrast to the current neoliberal constructions of youth as dangerous, disengaged, blind consumers who lack any type of connection" (p.272). This contrast is particularly relevant when working with older youth in care due to their intersecting identities as youth under state supervision and, often, as low-income youth and/or Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth and the long history of systemic oppression of

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individuals with those identity characteristics. Through our engagement with praxis of collectivity, we acknowledged our shared roles and responsibilities in creating knowledge about wellness and embraced the unique contributions of each collective member to the YPAR process. Our engagement of a collective ethos also aligns with Schubotz's (2012) fourth level of youth participation, "deciding partners", in which youth are considered investigators and make joint decisions with adult researchers. Regardless of age or relationship to the academy, all members of the collective were deciding partners in this research study. Collective members' varying levels of involvement were based on their individual preferences; however, involvement was organized into two different types of membership, collective founder membership and collective membership based on level of involvement in the initial envisioning of the study.

Collective Founders

Collective founders included five youth and me. Additionally, two adults associated with Better Youth, Inc. supported the project ideation and administration; however, due to a desire to provide an opportunity for youth leadership, declined to engage as founders. Together collective founders collaboratively envisioned the study and conducted the organizational work necessary to implement this study. The youth leaders of Better Youth, Inc. had a long track record of successfully providing youth in care opportunities to construct and share personal narratives using the multimedia arts such as photography, videography, and animation through their youth certification programs, internship program, showcases, film festivals, and movie screenings. I have been supporting the work of Better Youth, Inc. for five years in various capacities and currently, am a member of their executive board. As previously outlined, our collective launched in the summer of 2019. Collective founders collaboratively identified the research questions of this study, determined the methods that would be used to answer these questions, and contributed

to the drafting of the theoretical framework of the study. Collective founders also aided in the recruitment of additional collective members and supported and participated in the data collection process. In addition, collective founders participated in the analysis of research data by participating in member-checking activities such as the review of preliminary findings based on their level of interest and time capacity.

Collective Members

The collective founders recruited fifteen additional youth to join the research collective as members. The inclusion criteria for these members included identifying as a young person between the ages of 18 and 26 years, currently residing in California, and being currently involved with or having a history of personal involvement with the child welfare system in the United States after age twelve. These criteria were meant to ensure all youth had experience in care during adolescence or young adulthood. Over one hundred youth expressed interest in participation. Therefore, in addition, to these inclusion criteria, the collective founders considered the time of expressed interest and the overall diversity within the group in the areas of age, gender identity, racial and ethnic background to decide between interested individuals. Collective members participated in all formal data collection activities, including taking photographs, writing descriptive narratives, participating in group polylogues, and one on one interviews with me. Additionally, all collective members conducted participatory analysis of the photo and photo caption data. While these young people did not shape the study's initial ideas, the participatory underpinnings of photovoice allowed them to shape the manner we collectively conceptualized wellness and the final dissemination of findings.

Recruitment

Recruitment for this study was conducted collaboratively by the collective founders of this study using both direct recruitment, referrals, and internet postings. In alignment with our participatory approach, research collective founders jointly considered the characteristics of members we sought and a culturally appropriate manner of recruiting youth (Delgado, 2015). Recruitment occurred in multiple stages, and the diversity of the sample was considered at each stage, and recruitment practices shifted to increase diversity. This included prioritizing the recruitment of individuals from particular backgrounds when it was noticed that individuals from these backgrounds were underrepresented in the sample after the initial round of recruitment. Recruitment strategies included advertisement of the study through Better Youth's social media pages, the social media pages of collective founders and the social media pages of organizations collective founders were members of using flyers created by collective founders. In addition, collective founders presented Better Youth's organizational partners with a study introduction letter and flyer and asked these groups to consider advertising the study through their channels, including email lists, social media pages, or announcements during meetings. Through this process, a variety of non-profit organizations serving older youth impacted by foster care across California shared information about our study with the youth they served.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed by the North General Institutional Review Board of the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. I was listed as the principal investigator of the study, and other collective founders were listed as community-based consultants. As part of the Institutional Review Board process, it is typical for researchers to reflect upon the manner they will address the ethical issues of privacy,

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confidentiality, harms and benefits, and consent which we have done. However, institutional review board approval is only one measure of the ethicality of a study, and the collective founders were committed to a larger vision of ethicality for this study that was inspired by the principles of photovoice and the principles each of us held based on our lived experiences as both researchers and the researched. For this reason, we embraced participatory principles to guide our inquiry that are particularly relevant to the implementation of this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Privacy was considered throughout the creation and implementation of this study. While privacy is an individually assessed phenomenon, the collective founders incorporated practices into the study to attempt to make all members feel in control over the amount of access others had to themselves. The open nature of the chosen data collection methods allowed members to decide how much to share about themselves. The use of password-protected virtual meeting spaces helped prevent members from stigma associated with being a member of the collective. Sharing of results of the study was done in a manner that respected the privacy of each member with members deciding whether any information should be withheld.

Unlike many other studies, this project relied on the entire collective being involved in various research activities, including data collection and analysis. For that reason, consent documents made clear that confidentiality of data was not possible between members of the collective (see Appendix A for consent form). Additionally, since more individuals were involved in data processes, there was a higher chance of confidentiality violations however, all members were briefed on the importance of respecting their fellow collective members' right to confidentially during the consent procedures and reminded at each session.

In terms of confidentiality of data to those outside the collective, all collective members selected pseudonyms at the beginning of the project, and all documentation and records from the project were cleaned to remove any identifying information before beginning analysis. In addition, collective members were encouraged not to include identifiable photographs of themselves, and when youth selected photographs with identifying features, they were supported to artfully redact identifying features before these photos were included in any analysis activities. All uncleaned records of the study were kept securely until cleaning occurred, and this process was managed by me.

Risks and Benefits

Minimizing the risks and increasing the opportunity for all collective members to benefit from involvement in the study was considered important to collective founders based on our own lived experiences participating in research; therefore, we reflected on these matters significantly. Ultimately, our approach to risks and benefits was to proactively attempt to create balance and to embrace an approach of continual transparency to allow for informed decision-making in alignment with everyone's right to self-determination.

The major harms possible from involvement in this study were emotional distress due to discussing personal experiences related to rootedness and wellness. To minimize the risk of emotional distress, the study was designed to provide all collective members with complete control over how much they shared and what they shared. In addition, as a member of the collective, I considered it my role to be attentive to signs of emotional distress by members and to remind the collective that participation in any activities is always completely optional, including involvement in the collective. At each session, we provided time for emotional processing, and I made myself available to all collective members immediately before and after

each session. Lastly, collective founders created a protocol for dealing with collective members in crisis and fortunately, we never had to utilize it.

In terms of benefits from involvement, all youth members of the collective and youth collective founders were compensated with a small stipend equivalent to the rate of $15 per hour for their participation over the course of the study. This level of compensation was considered extremely important to acknowledge the expertise and effort young people would place into the project. Compensation was distributed directly to youth collective members using Visa gift cards virtually at three different points during the project and totaled $375 compensation per youth collective member. Youth collective founders were hired through Better Youth Inc. and compensated $1,175 each for their contribution to the study. Our collective secured $12,500 of funding from The Stoneleigh Foundation and The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues to serve this purpose. In addition, to compensation, all collective members may have benefited from working towards improving conditions for youth involved in the child welfare system in the future.

Consent Procedures

Collective founders collaboratively designed the consent form and procedures to align with our ethical principles. I led all collective members and founders through an informed consent procedure prior to their first interviews via a virtual meeting. This consent procedure included me sending the individual a written copy of the consent form prior to the consent meeting. The consent form was written at a middle-school reading comprehension level to ensure all members found it accessible. The consent form covered the purpose of the study, what participation in the study would be like, the expected risks and benefits of participation, and confidentiality. At the virtual meeting, I introduced myself, read the informed consent form in

full, answered any questions the member raised, and collected their verbal consent if they agreed. The consent form is provided in Appendix A.

Nine Guiding Principles of Photovoice

One of the major reasons photovoice was selected as a method for this study was because it is a value-driven methodology. Our research collective aimed to implement the photovoice elements of this project in a manner that aligned with the nine guiding principles presented by Delgado (2015). These distinct but at times overlapping guiding principles of photovoice included:

1. [Youth have] the will and ability to help themselves.

2. Youth and their community know what is best for their advancement.

3. Ownership of how best to use photovoice to assess internal assets rests within, rather than outside the community.

4. Partnerships and collaborations between residents and community practitioners are the preferred route for any photovoice assessment, with assessment being planned with, rather than for the community.

5. Reliance and use of community assets in one area will translate into other facets of the community, often offering a synergistic effect.

6. Photovoice assessments must be inclusive rather than exclusive of community participation parameters and must not reinforce biases between and within groups.

7. Photovoice must not be expected to conform to predictable timetables and themes because each project is unique to the community being assessed, although assessments may share a core of similarities among communities.

8. Photovoice findings must be exhibited and distributed in a manner that reflects culture- and community-specific preferences for communication.

9. Photovoice must seek to maximize external financial, political, and emotional investment in the community.

(Delgado, 2015, pg. 94-99)

Each of these guiding principles assisted us in operationalizing our values during the implementation of this project and greatly shaped the methodological practices we selected. Notably, despite our engagement with all the principles from Delgado (2015), that our approach to this project was most deeply impacted by consideration of our values around self-determination. These values regarding self-determination aligned with the three guiding principles of Delgado (2015) regarding communities' abilities and ownership over the research, principles one, three, and eight. A sense that there was a lack of access to self-determination available to older youth in care was one of the impetuses for this study, and we considered this project as an opportunity to demonstrate the power and importance of this value. This was the case even before we selected photovoice as our method and considered the Delgado (2015) principles. This value of self-determination was central to our engagement with photovoice and greatly shaped our approach to all ethical questions when planning the implementation of this project. That value guided us as we encountered the ethical dilemmas that were a natural part of the research process.

Data Collection

This study included a diverse set of data collected through collective members participating in a variety of different activities, including completing demographic questionnaires, participating in individual interviews, taking photographs, captioning photographs, and participating in group analysis sessions and polylogues in collective spaces.

Demographic Questionnaire

All collective members were asked to fill out a short online demographic questionnaire through Qualtrics before their initial interview. The questionnaire included open-ended questions about personal background such as: month and year of birth, gender identity, personal gender pronouns, race, ethnicity, and current and historic child welfare involvement. Collective members were able to opt-out of answering any questions. Results from this demographic questionnaire were used to provide context to findings throughout the results chapter of this manuscript. The demographic questionnaire is provided in Appendix B.

Individual Interviews

Over the course of the study, all collective members participated in two individual semi-structured interviews, one at the launch of the study and a second at the conclusion of data collection. These interviews provided all collective members with the opportunity to reflect on their individual conceptions of wellness and their participation in the study.

Prior to the first full collective meeting, each collective member except myself participated in an individual virtual interview conducted by me. These interviews were semi-structured in nature and audio recorded. These first interviews prompted each collective member to discuss goals for their involvement in the project and to their current conceptualization of wellness for older youth in care, such as: Describe a recent experience in which you participated in an activity that made you feel well -What was the activity, how did you become engaged in the activity, who supported or discouraged you from participating in this activity? For the one collective founder who do not have direct child welfare experience, they were asked to discuss

their wellness experiences in general and their experiences working with young people in care as they pursued wellness.

After the final group analysis session, collective members were interviewed a second time by me. This second interview provided collective members with an opportunity to reflect on their participation in the collective and explore their current ideas about wellness and how child welfare practices and policies support the wellness of youth in care. Collective members were asked questions such as: Describe the most memorable moment from your participation in the collective- What happened during this moment, and why was it memorable?; How do you conceive of wellness for older youth in care?; How would you like to see the child welfare system incorporate what you learned during this study? Interview protocol overviews can be found in Appendix D.

Photographs and Caption Creation

Over the course of five weeks, collective members explored and recorded their experiences, assets, and barriers around wellness by taking photos based on prompts and authoring captions on their photographs that explain the meaning of the photo and the manner it connects to the prompt. The prompts were deeply informed by our rootedness theoretical framework, which provides more expansive wellness models within adversity contexts, the collective founders' lived experiences and personal narratives as expressed during the planning of the study and statements collective members provided during their initial interview regarding their conceptions of wellness. The five prompts included what role spiritual connectedness, corporal substance, creative expression, collective belongingness, and transformative efficacy wellness act within their wellness beliefs and practices. Prompts included questions such as: How does creative expression fit into your wellness beliefs and practices? How does your caring

for your physical body fit into your wellness beliefs and practices? Along with these prompts, collective members were presented with relevant segments of the poetic knowledge that shaped the rootedness framework. Each week collective members were encouraged to submit two photos with captions however, at times, young people opted to submit only one photograph and explained their photographs live rather than submitting a pre-written caption. Photographs and captions were shared at the group analysis sessions, which were audio-recorded and transcribed, and used as a data source. Photovoice activity topics are provided in Appendix E.

Participatory Analysis and Dissemination Sessions

Youth participated in collective analysis sessions to determine a subset of the study's findings based on photographs and photograph captions. These sessions were audio-recorded, and transcripts were used as data. After completing participatory photograph and caption analysis, collective members determined the portion of our findings and photographs they wanted to share through a film and aided in the process of creating this final film. Dissemination of findings was considered an essential part of our collectives' approach to photovoice as a youth participatory action visual research method. Our use of photovoice as a method was chosen partly because of the ability for images to haunt us and move us towards justice-seeking action (Mitchell et al., 2018). We aimed to build upon this haunting ability by paring images and storytelling with calls to action through our film, our dissemination product. Our film draws from a variety of the participant-led tools for engaging policymakers outlined by Mitchell and colleagues (2018), including personal narrative sharing and overarching thematic findings. This manner of dissemination is meant to combat the challenges often experienced when disseminating visual research, including audience members, particularly policymakers expressing disbelief or denial of findings and witnessing findings without truly engaging them

(Mitchell et al., 2018). After making decisions about what should be included in the film, the collective collaborated to create the content needed for the short-filmed presentation. This film will be distributed through the Better Youth film festival platform in Fall of 2023.

Collective Demographics

In total, our collective consisted of 20 youth, five collective founders, and 15 collective members. Based on the results of our open-ended demographic questionnaire, we are able to report information regarding the racial/ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, pronoun use, ages and care history of young people involved in the project.

In terms of race and ethnicity, our sample consisted of a diverse group of youth with about equal representation of Black/African American youth (7/20) and Hispanic/Latino youth (6/20). The collective also included Native youth (2/20) and Mixed[9] youth (4/20). Regarding gender identity, the majority of our collective identified as female (11/20), with about twice as many youth identifying as female than as male (6/20). We also had a noteworthy amount of youth identify as non-binary or non-gender confirming (3/20). The majority of young people in our collective used she/her pronouns (11/20) however, youth also used he/him pronouns (6/20) and they/them pronouns (3/20).

The average age of collective members was 22.13 years, but the average age of the entire collective was 23.5 years. This difference between the average age of the whole collective in and the age of collective members alone is the result of the age restriction of 26 being applied for collective members but not for collective founders. Collective founders consisted of youth who

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[9] The Mixed racial/ethnic category includes youth who used the term 'Mixed' exclusively and youth that reported they being a "mix" of more than one racial or ethnic group.

were affiliated with Better Youth Inc. prior to the impetus of this project and were passionate about improving conditions for youth impacted by foster care. While targeting transition-age youth Better Youth Inc. does not apply age restriction for alumni interested in or in need of additional resources or support. While the oldest collective founder was 35 years old, this individual, like all collective founders, identified as a youth because they were still in the process of transitioning out of foster care into adulthood and were still benefiting from support intended for such youth. Collective founders were passionate about including older youth in the study because, based on their lived experience, foster care involvement greatly impacts the transition to adulthood and at times, makes that transition longer. This understanding of care involvement ultimately resulted in us setting the age cap for collective members at 26 years despite the fact that extended foster care ends at age 21 and welcoming youth who were currently in care (6/20) and youth who had aged to participate in the collective. While a portion of young people struggled to identify when they were formally in care due to having histories of multiple entries and exits from the care system, our collective reported being impacted by foster care for 3.11 years on average, with a standard deviation of 7.87 years. An overview of the demographics of the individual, collective members can be found in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

Our collective utilized a variety of different data analysis strategies that fit within our larger methodological choices based on the type of data collected during this study.

SHOWeD Method: Participatory Analysis of Photographs and Captions

After each prompted photography exercise, collective members meet and engaged in critical dialogue, knowledge sharing, and participatory analysis through group discussion of our

photographs and captions. These group analysis sessions were held virtually on a weekly basis and had a one hour and a half duration. Two sessions were held each week to accommodate the complex scheduling needs of the youth in the group. Youth were only expected to attend one session each week, but a subset of youth elected to attend both sessions each week. At each of these sessions we implemented the SHOWeD method. The SHOWeD method, as outlined by Wang (1999), provides a framework for reflection and analysis of photographs through proposing the following questions:

What do you **S**ee here?

What is really **H**appening here?

How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

Why does this situation, concern, or strength **e**xist?

What can we **D**o about it? (p. 188)

Each collective member was asked to share their two favorite photographs of the week and the captions. Then the collective participated in polylogue and group analysis in which collective members shared our reactions to the photographs and captions using the SHOWeD method. At the end of all sharing and analysis, each photographer selected their favorite photograph they shared for inclusion in the final analysis. If the collective member could not decide between photographs, both were included. Each group analysis session was audio-recorded, and transcripts from these sessions were used as data.

After the weeks of photo and creative writing curation, collective members analyzed our favorite photos from each weekly topic as a collection using the SHOWeD method. Next

collective members codified the issues and themes that arose from each collection of photographs and from all the photographs as one large collection (Wang, 1999, Wang 2006; Wang & Burris,1997). Based on our findings, we collectively wrote a synopsis of the issues, themes, or theories of their art for each weekly topic and for the entire collection. These synopses were used as data in the analysis process.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Multistage Analysis of Written and Spoken Data

In addition to the group analysis of photographs, I conducted additional youth-centered analysis of all individual interview transcripts, captions, and group analysis transcripts. While this analysis was done independently as a member of the research collective, my independent analysis is considered part of our collective polylogue, speaking directly to the knowledge-building we conducted together in our shared space of freedom dreaming. Independent data analysis was deeply influenced by the constructivist grounded theory methodology as described by Kathy Charmaz (2014) and situational and relational mapping analysis activities as described by Clarke and colleagues (2017).

The theoretical work of Charmaz (2014) on constructivist meaning making encouraged our collective to adopt an approach to analysis that could adequately account for the social nature of reality, the impact of the positionality of those involved in the researcher process on knowledge, and the contextual nature of all knowledge. This resulted in me employing inductive comparative systemic data analysis strategies analysis focused on actions and processes to create an interpretative portrayal of how older youth in care define and experience wellness. The data analysis practices of this portion of the study can be divided into three areas: memoing, coding, and analysis strategies. Notably, I rapidly alternated between activities in each area throughout the analysis process.

Reflexive Memoing. Within the constructivist grounded theory approach, memoing is considered a pivotal step between data collection and analysis and between analysis and finalizing study results (Charmaz, 2014). During this study, I used memo writing as a crucial method to reflect on my own relationship to the research process, to evolve the data collection process, and to analyze data and codes early and continuously throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2014). I began memo writing during the recruitment process and continued memoing throughout the entire data collection and analysis process. This rigorous memoing included completing memo-writing sessions after each interview or group session, after completing every coding session, and after completing every data analysis session. Memo-writing was conducted using stream-of-consciousness writing and stream-of-consciousness audio-recording sessions that were later transcribed.

Initial memos after interviews and collective analysis sessions were completed within twenty-four hours. These initial memos focused on describing what was going on in the field during the interview or focus group, what stood out to me during the session in comparison to previous sessions, and what collective members seemed to be saying or doing during the session (Charmaz, 2014).

I completed post-coding memos after both initial coding and focused coding sessions. Post-coding memos focused on what processes were discussed during the session, the conditions under which the processes seem to be occurring, what initial connections I could make between that session and other sessions, and what connections I needed to check by looking at other transcripts (Charmaz, 2014).

After completing intermediate and advanced data analysis sessions and focused coding sessions, I wrote post-analytic session memos. These memos were focused on categorizing data,

describing how categories had emerged and changed, sharpening categories, and contextualizing categories (Charmaz, 2014).

As previously noted, I used memoing to practice reflexivity throughout the research process. Regardless of the type of memo being written, I reflected on my positionality and how it impacted my perspective on the data being collected or analyzed. I asked myself a variety of reflexive questions, such as: What previous ideas did I have about the elements of the situation that were raised? How do I feel about other collective members? How do I feel about myself? How do I feel about the perspectives collective members shared?

These reflexive practices were essential because our approach to this research embraced the idea that all collective members, including myself, offered an interpretation of the studied world, not a picture (Charmaz, 2014) which required me to reflect critically on my standpoint. Throughout the process, I aimed to practice in a manner that could ascertain that I represented the setting, collective members, and their actions and meanings fairly (Charmaz, 2014).

Coding. In line with the method of constructivist grounded theory, I considered coding to be "the pivotal link between collecting data and developing emergent theory to explain these data" (Charmaz, 2014,p. 113). My coding process consisted of two stages, including initial coding and focused coding, which were separated by intermediate analysis strategies. Additionally, each coding session was directly followed by a memoing session.

To embrace a truly inductive approach to analysis, line-by-line initial coding was used for the first three interviews of the study and the first two group sessions. Initial codes were not preconceived; rather, I created codes as I scrutinized the data and attempted to define the meaning within (Charmaz, 2014). While initial coding was not preconceived, I acknowledge that

I did not come into this study with a blank slate. Rather I acknowledge that I was a tool of the analysis and that my managed preconceived notions, such as my ideas about what youth deserve, were part of my usefulness. This management process was addressed through the initial memoing process. This, along with the initial coding techniques, allowed me to stick close to the data. During initial coding, I attempted to stay close to the action that was occurring in the data and use gerund coding to accomplish that task. Charmaz argues, "coding for action curbs our tendencies to make conceptual leaps and to adopt extant theories before we have done the necessary analytic work" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 117). Additionally, my initial coding was guided by the goals of keeping codes short, simple, precise, action-orientated, and coding in a quick and open fashion (Charmaz, 2014).

After completing initial coding, initial memoing, and applying intermediate analysis strategies on a segment of the data, I created a list of focused codes, codes that represented ideas and concepts that came up most frequently or appeared to have the most significance during the process (Charmaz, 2014). I then applied these focused codes to all subsequent interviews and collective dialogue transcripts to advance the theoretical direction of our work (Charmaz, 2014). While the focused codes were inspired by the initial codes, the focused coding process was emergent, and memoing enabled this emergent nature to evolve. By comparing data with the focused codes, I redefined these codes as I needed (Charmaz, 2014).

Analysis Strategies. Initial coding and memoing allowed me to define implicit meanings and actions and gave me a starting point for intermediate analysis, which focuses on the creation of focus codes. During intermediate analysis, I embraced a variety of analytic strategies such as making theoretical comparisons between data, looking for negative cases, looking closely at the language used and emotions expressed by members in small passages of

data, asking sensitizing, practical, and theoretical questions of the data in order to begin to create focused codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As these strategies were applied, I wrote in-depth memos on my findings.

Following focused coding, advanced analysis strategies inspired by the situational analysis method of Clarke and colleagues (2017) were utilized to move toward findings. I conducted relational mapping on the central situations that sat at the center of the analysis, experiencing wellness while in care. The core goal of these mapping activities was to describe all the human and nonhuman elements in the situation of the inquiry and explore the relationships between the elements (Clarke et al., 2017). The elements included in my maps were human elements, such as partners and friends and institutions like the child welfare agency and nonhuman elements, such as discourses like discourses youth have heard about wellness, physical spaces like placements, and concepts like wellness (Clarke et al., 2017). I wrote notes during these mapping sessions and considered what elements impacted the phenomena and how those elements related to each other. Later, I reviewed these notes and used the ideas that arose during these sessions to build and saturate theoretical categories and finalize study results by a independent process of theoretical sorting, diagramming, and integrating memos (Charmaz, 2014).

Justification of Methodological Choices

A variety of methods could have been used to address our research question, and our selected methodology is not without limitations however, these choices also came with benefits. The sample diversity is limited for a variety of reasons. Our use of a collective-based photovoice participatory methodology required us to create an environment in which group cohesiveness could emerge. This requirement resulted in us choosing to limit the sample size of this study to

fifteen youth collective members to allow for more substantial engagement between collective members. While diverse concerning years in care, gender, race and ethnic background, and age, the sample is relatively small, which limits its overall diversity. Additionally, due to the diversity in terms of child welfare policies and practices across the nation, we limited our sample to youth who currently resided in California. This geographic limitation was done to increase the likelihood of youth having had similar experiences while in foster care; however, this choice limits our ability to speak to youths' conceptualization and experiences in other states. Our recruitment methods may have also limited the diversity of our sample. We relied on non-profit organizations that serve older youth in foster care to advertise the study which may have limited the sample diversity by excluding youth who were disconnected from service providers. While these decisions may have limited our sample in terms of diversity, maximum variation of the sample was not the intention of this study. Rather, due to the limited amount of research in the area, we aimed to provide a thick description of youth's conceptualizations and experiences of wellness that could provide a comprehensive foundation for future research.

The length of this study was also a limitation. To craft thick descriptions of the wellness conceptualizations and experiences of older youth impacted by foster care, our methodology relied on the close analysis of a multi-form data set, including multiple interviews with each youth, several meetings as a collective, and multiple art pieces from each youth. Our collective made the decision that due to the high amounts of engagement needed to collect this much multi-form data from each youth, it was wise to limit the study to ten weeks of duration to avoid a high attrition rate. This relatively short study length may have decreased the amount of cohesion of the group and, as a result, the level of disclosure of collective members. Since our aim was not to measure how youth's wellness perspective changed over time, this limitation was not considered

significantly detrimental to our study's success; however, research aimed at measuring change over time would need to weigh the benefits of collecting multi-form data versus the benefits of a low attrition rate.

Despite these limitations, we argue that our methodological choices were appropriate for our aims. Our collective turned to these methodological approaches because they allowed for the centering of youth's experiences and youth's analysis regardless of the preferred form of expression and provided a manner to analyze data that stayed close to the meanings of those with lived experiences of the phenomena (Charmaz, 2014; Wang, 2006; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Woodgate et al., 2017). In addition, through the collection of multiple forms of data and the use of two methods of qualitative inquiry, arts-based photovoice and interview-based constructivist theory, we embraced a more innovative approach to qualitative research. This approach allowed us to increase our capacity to integrate the cultural values and nuances of a group on the margins of society, older youth impacted by foster care, that would not necessarily be attracted to or well-served by the implementation of more conventional approaches alone such as individual interviews and surveys (Delgado, 2015). By limiting the study to ten weeks and compensating youth for their efforts we were able to demonstrate our respect for youth's time and be inclusive of youth with varying life circumstances including youth who were balancing school, work, and family commitments. Lastly, this approach allowed us to triangulate based on data type, data source, and researcher, enhancing our findings' trustworthiness and robustness (Miles et al., 2014). Other scholars have used this type of hybrid qualitative research methods to investigate phenomena with communities on the margins, to create thick levels of descriptions, and to use findings to advocate for interventions and policies that can create social change

(Freedman et al., 2014; López et al., 2005; Rosalia et al., 2013; Taylor, 2020; Torres et al., 2013).

Chapter 5

Results

In this results chapter, I will present what we learned about how older youth in care define and experience wellness through our youth-centered collective rewriting and rerighting process. This chapter is divided into two sections, the first focuses on presenting thematic findings in the area of wellness definitions, and the second focuses on presenting thematic findings in the area of wellness experiences. These findings were based on individual-level and collective-level data and refined through both collective analysis and youth-centered independent analysis I conducted, as outlined in the methodology chapter. To best honor our collective process and accurately present the meaning of these thematic findings, youth's words during individual interviews and collective spaces, youth's photographs, youth's writings, and excerpts of polylogues are centered in the presentation of these results. Through this presentation style I highlight the role of youth as authors of this rewriting of the wellness narrative and demonstrate how youth have acted on their rights over their narratives.

5.1 Wellness Defined: Mosaics of Youth-Driven Freedom Dreaming About Wellness

Utilizing youth-centered analysis, we argue that our collective members, as youth impacted by the child welfare system, hold unique perspectives on the definition of wellness, a finding inadequately reflected in modern child welfare policy. Our collective defined wellness for youth in foster care as a constantly evolving personal state consisting of a mosaic of irregular wellness pieces. The term mosaic represents the collective's idea that wellness as a state, like a mosaic that depicts an image using irregular pieces of colored glass, is multi-faceted, with experiences in different wellness subareas piecing together the overall wellness state. Analysis identified six common wellness pieces that consistently factor into the wellness of older youth impacted by foster care. These common pieces include social, physical, emotional, survivalist, spiritual and self-mastery wellness. While these wellness pieces are common to the wellness of all youth, they are irregularly sized because each wellness piece is not equally relevant to every youth, and the relevance of a wellness piece may shift for a youth over time. The evolving contexts and individual preferences of youth make the state of permanent wellness unachievable. However, lived experiences in the physical and mental realms can bring youth closer to or farther away from wellness. The following sections provide greater detail on the youth's definition of wellness by documenting the meaning of each wellness piece.

Social Wellness

*"[Social wellness is having] people who uplift you and speak life into you." (*Jasmyn, 26 years old (she) [interview])

Youth described social wellness as having the skills and abilities to socialize with others in a fashion that positively impacts your life and the lives of others and having access to a

network of supportive individuals whom you relate to and can socialize with regularly. For example, during her interview Michelle, 25 years old (she), defined social wellness in part as "having people support you. Like, let's say, I'm sad, or I'm angry, or I'm just happy about something, I feel comfortable enough to go to somebody to talk about it." In this way, Michelle denoted social wellness as inclusive of having a social network made up of individuals that were accepting and supportive of her to such a degree that she felt a sense of comfort with them during both positive and negative emotional states. The idea that a positive social network is fundamental to the definition of social wellness was supported by various young people across different data forms. Jasmyn, 26 years old (she) noted in her interview that social wellness is about "putting yourself around people who uplift you and speak life into you and don't put you down." Similarly, Bernadette, 19 years old (they) remarked during their interview that social wellness involves "talking to people…feeling comforted in the fact that you're not alone". In this way, youth emphasized that youth required relationships that made them feel supported to be well.

In addition to defining social wellness as having a positive social network, a segment of youth defined social wellness as being capable of building and maintaining a social network through interacting positively with others. One youth described this sentiment plainly:

> It takes someone who has good, like somebody that is well…to adapt to all these things and to react to others around. That's where social well-being comes from…Interacting with other people, the way I communicate, the way I socialize, the way I treat people. (Hazard, 20 years old (he) [interview])

Through these statements, Hazard explained that social wellness is not solely contingent on how others treat you but also on your ability to treat others well, an idea that arose repeatedly in the

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data. Two youth's photos and captions (Figure 3 and Figure 4) further exemplify that social

wellness is reliant on social abilities and skills as well as access to individuals with whom you

can positively socialize.

Figure 3

 Passing on that Passion

Playing basketball and passing on that passion represents wellness to me. This picture is

actually family, this is one of my little people so to speak, and if you are a basketball

player, you know his form is absolutely terrible. He definitely missed the shot, but me

being able to teach him or just allow him to play and passing on what was safe to me is

wellness because giving always makes me happy. (J, 26 Years old (he) [photovoice

activity])

J's photo and caption, which described coaching a younger relative on basketball fundamentals, draw attention to how having a network to positively socialize is foundational to the conceptualization of social wellness. For J, sharing something that he was passionate about with another person to whom he felt a sense of connection brought him significant joy in addition to engaging in his passion of playing basketball. Having a positive family-based social network created the opportunity for J to perform the skills he defined as necessary to social wellness. Based on how J conceptualized social wellnesses, without this network of younger family members, J would not have been able to strengthen his wellness through mentoring.

While J's photo and caption emphasized that social wellness is in part defined as having a positive social network, other youth used their art to define social wellness as developing the skills and ability to positively connect with others after lived experiences of trauma and social isolation. The practice of defining social wellness as inclusive of having the skills and the ability to positively socialize with others is exemplified by the photos and captions of Alexis, 25 years old (she) (see Figure 4 and 5). Alexis denoted that while social connection is an important part of wellness, it also had been challenging for her. When asked about connecting with others and wellness, Alexis shared art that depicted herself in a state of isolation, and her writing focused on lacking the ability to connect with others despite sometimes believing that her isolation is atypical.

Figure 4

Trouble Connecting with People

I've always had trouble connecting with people. I have friends and stuff, but not really

that connection that people talk about. I connect to plants and animals better than people.

The picture depicts me being alone. I tend to go through things alone. I guess my

problem, or my biggest quirk, is whenever I'm going through things, or overly stressed, I

isolate myself. I just go through it alone. (Alexis, 25 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

After sharing this photo and caption, several youth in our collective expressed deeply connecting

with the sentiments Alexis highlighted. During our collective space, one of our collective

founders Duck, 35 years old (they) remarked that like Alexis, they struggled with connection but

that they believed that they could develop the ability. "Tomorrow, I will have the capacity,

ability, and knowledge that I can reach out to my loved ones because there was a time when I

didn't have loved ones. Now, the difference is that I have a support system."

Another youth noted:

> You're not [broken] I, too, along with others in this group, struggled to have a
> connection, like I didn't want people to know, I didn't have my mom. That I was in foster
> care…Even today, sometimes it's still a struggle to connect with others. I have to
> constantly work on it. (J, 26 years old (he) [collective space])

Despite a tendency to isolate, Alexis, like J and Duck, also expressed an effort to develop her

social abilities and to create strong bonds with others, particularly with her children, for whom

she demonstrated her deep love by photographing them and reflecting on her connection with

them in her caption.

Figure 5

A Different Type of Love

In the photo are my two children and my niece, who I got guardianship of because my

sister passed away last October. I've struggled with connection, but with them, I've had a

connection that I've never had. It's just a different type of love. My strongest connection

is with my kids (Alexis, 25 years old (she) [photovoice activity]).

For Alexis and many youth in our collective, developing the abilities and skills necessary to

connect with others was foundational to their conceptualization of social wellness.

Analysis of our multiform data revealed that the youth in our collective believed that for

youth impacted by foster care, social wellness consists of having a supportive social network as

well as gaining and practicing the skills of positively relating to others. It was also clear that

while pursuing social wellness may take a significant effort because of histories of trauma and

isolation related to their foster care involvement, that does not make it any less valuable or less

possible for youth impacted by foster care.

Physical Wellness

*"It's a balance." (*J, 26 years old (he) [interview])

Youth in the collective asserted that moving towards a state of physical wellness is an

integral part of achieving overall wellness. When defining physical wellness, youth described

having healthy bodies free of disease and pain by freely and regularly participating in activities

they believe serve the body, such as exercise, eating, resting, and bathing, based on individual

physical wellness goals. In an interview exploring individual definitions of physical wellness, J

explained that such wellness was achieved through participating in various maintenance

activities: "it is balance, not overeating, having your sugars, your carbohydrates, your fruits…it's

a balance, so it's not easy... Also, physical exercise." J's statements exemplify youths' beliefs

that physical wellness, like wellness in general, is not a simply achievable state but rather a constant balancing act. In her interview, Jasmyn, 26 years old (she) also denoted the need to participate in such maintenance activities as central to her conceptualization of physical wellness: "The normal bathing, combing your hair, brushing your teeth, dressing yourself nicely, appropriately, comfortably, not allowing anybody to physically harm you, and just to be gentle with yourself." Jasmyn's comments about physical wellness, particularly her remark "to be gentle with yourself," demonstrate that, for youth in our collective, definitions of physical wellness reflect nuanced ideas about health and self-care.

Through collective data analysis activities, youth explored their initial individual definitions of physical wellness and pushed one another to consider physical wellness in novel ways. Youth collectively explored their relationships with the opposing ideas that bodies are something to be shaped through disciplined action and that bodies are something to be gently cared for.

Some youth, like Victor, 20 years old (he), initially embraced a view of physical wellness that was shaped by ideas of the ideal physique and the importance of disciplined actions. In our collective space, Victor discussed embracing exercise to ensure his body looked a certain way and that the pursuit of that goal made him feel well when presenting the following photograph and caption (Figure 6).

Figure 6

In Shape

> I used to do track and cross country, so I love to run; it helps me stay in shape and
> actually keep my physique. Sometimes when I come back, my legs are so sore, it's hard
> to walk. I also like to walk. I feel that walking, it helps me stay slender and keeps me in
> great shape. Also, with the weights, I'll use them not all the time because I'm not a big
> guy, but I'll use them here and there, and I'll also use them with calisthenics like sit-ups,
> push-ups, and stuff like that. It makes me feel good. (Victor, 20 years old (he)
> [photovoice activity])

Victor's photograph shows the equipment he utilized to shape his body into the form he desired. Repeatedly in his caption, he used terms like "slender", "shape" and "physique" and discussed how participating in activities that impact his body's appearance made him feel good.

While physical appearance was a driving force for some youth to achieve physical wellness through exercise, others shared their focus on using exercise to gently care for the body:

I can't do [weightlifting or running], but I would love to. I would love to be able to run with the sun beaming on me and just enjoying the natural sounds of it; that looks so cool, it just looks, yes, desirable… They're not realistic for me, but I really do love just the idea of being outside and being able to just move your body. (Duck, 35 years old (they) [collective space])

As demonstrated by the above statements, members of our collective initially expressed a range of views regarding the definition of physical wellness. However, the polylogue did not end with the expression of incompatibility; rather, that incompatibility was the impetus of an extremely productive polylogue that resulted in the creation of a nuanced definition of physical wellness that was inclusive of both disciplined and caring action towards bodies. The exploration of these concepts is well-represented in the following summary of the polylogue that occurred after the presentation of these incompatible statements.

In response to Duck's statement, featured above, in the collective space, Victor responded, "Everybody can run; your limit is what you set your mind to." However, Duck pushed back on the concept that their physical wellness could be summarized as a question of willpower by explaining that due to a health condition, there were limitations on their physical activity. In this short back-and-forth, these youth implored our collective to explore the ideas regarding whether physical wellness requires participating in disciplined action and whether physical wellness goals should be self-defined.

Tree, 21 years old (they), continued along this path by pushing the conversation toward physical wellness outside of exercise in the collective space: "I feel like everyone has expressed their way to make your body better externally like different ways like boxing, running, stuff like that. I am not an exercise person. It's just personally my choice. I just don't like running." Tree

then presented their photograph and caption (Figure 7), which focuses on rest rather than exercise as an important way to pursue physical wellness.

Figure 7

As Peacefully as my Cat

I take care of my body by resting after a long day. If I have a tiresome day, and I'm just like, "Man, this sucks. I have so many stressors in my life," and I'm just overthinking a lot, I'm like, "You know what? I need to go to sleep. I need some rest." I imagine myself sleeping as peacefully as my cat in this photo, just sunbathing the morning away. (Tree, 21 years old (they) [photovoice exercise])

Tree emphasized that protecting physical wellness can be done in a variety of manners and that agency and choice are important considerations when considering the definition of physical wellness. Their statement, "it's just personally my choice" puts forth the notion of self-efficacy in physical wellness, drawing attention to one of the collective's most foundational elements of overall wellness: its personal nature. While this polylogue only showcases a subset of the evidence that supports the theme that diverse activities, including rest and exercise, play a central

role in the conceptualization of physical wellness, it is noteworthy because it demonstrates how young people collectively created nuanced wellness definitions.

Other youth, such as Wolf, also stressed a self-empowered perspective on physical wellness that focused on self-love and empowerment regardless of outside perceptions or standards in their art (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Even Though it Seems Taboo

> I love dancing as a way to feel connected with myself and others and stay fit! I love pole dancing, even though it seems taboo! My old gym even had an 8-year-old practicing traditional Chinese pole dancing, it was so cool. I really, really feel like just doing whatever you love, no matter how it's perceived, is important. (Wolf, 25 years old (she) [collective space])

In her description of her own physical wellness practice, Wolf calls attention to the idea that physical wellness should center on the perceptions of the individual rather than the perceptions of others. When explaining her impetus to begin pole dancing in the collective space, Wolf remarked that she was inspired by seeing videos of a plus-sized woman winning pole dancing competitions and realized that "there is a stigma that you have to be skinny, but I can climb on a pole just like a skinny person." While Wolf discussed fitness, she did not embrace ideas regarding fitness being associated with a particular body shape or the need to participate in particular physical activities to shape the body.

In conclusion, the embrace of an expansive and self-defined conceptualization of physical wellness was a theme seen throughout the youth's individual reflections, participatory photography, and polylogues in collective spaces. Youth understandings of physical wellness embraced both commonplace ideals about exercise as a method of achieving a desired physique and physical wellness, as well as less common ideas about the importance of exercise and rest for pleasure and physical wellness. The common theme underscored across the data was that physical wellness is the pursuit of activities individually assessed to be beneficial for one's body while acknowledging that those choices are shaped by circumstances and contexts such as health that are outside youth's control.

Emotional Wellness

"You don't have to be happy all the time." (Michelle, 25 years old (she) [interview])

Analysis of the individual statements, polylogues, and photography of the collective elicited a definition of emotional wellness as being capable of feeling the full emotional spectrum

(happiness, sadness, etcetera) but spending the majority of the time in a state of clarity, stability, and peace as a result of the ability to understand, process, and manage emotions effectively.

Being "at ease, peace, [and] relaxed" was the ideal form of emotional wellness described by several youth during their individual interviews (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she)). Bernadette 19 years old (she), similarly described wellness as "my mind being at ease". While analysis demonstrated that to our collective, the ideal state associated with emotional wellness was a tranquil state, they also argued for an expansive perspective on the states associated with emotional wellness. Youth such as Michelle clarified that "you don't have to be happy all the time, but [emotional wellness is] just a good place where you can be sad, and you're allowed to have those feelings, and those feelings are being valid[ated]" (Michelle, 25 years old (she) [interview]). These statements, in combination, exemplify that youth define emotional wellness as both experiencing a variety of emotions and being able to manage emotions to move towards tranquility.

Using their art and captions, youth explored the fundamentality of emotional management when conceptualizing emotional wellness. For example, the photo art and caption of Gabrielle (Figure 9), 22 years old (she) focused on the importance of "being kind to your mind" and not living "in your thoughts" to emotional wellness.

Figure 9

Be Kind to your Mind

If you continue to live in your thoughts, they'll end up consuming you. It's just one of those things where it's like if you don't take care of yourself and be kind to your mind, you're probably going end up in a dark space. It's going to be hard to get yourself out of that space if you don't take the time to take care of yourself first. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

Based on the youths' understandings of emotional wellness, it is not that the girl in Gabrielle's photo is necessarily emotionally unwell but rather that she may be just moving through complex emotions that are experienced by those who pursue emotional wellness. Overall emotional wellness was defined as something to actively manage. In her interview, Peanut, 18 years old (she), concisely described the role of active maintenance in emotional wellness through her discussion of managing negative thinking: "To not have negative thoughts or not to be depressed

to the point where it's stopping me from doing what I'm doing, what I have to do basically [is emotional wellness]." Additionally, Bernadette, 19 years old (they), used a metaphor to describe emotional wellness and its impact on their life during their interview:

> It's mostly stability, and I feel like a lot of that ties in with this intense anxiety that I have with everything… For example, if I was standing on a ladder and I was trying to reach something, and my ladder is shaking underneath me and I have no grasp on anything, I'm going to come falling down and get a bruise or break my leg. It's like I can't get the thing that I'm trying to get with the ladder if my ladder isn't stable… The ladder is my mental well-being. (Bernadette, 19 years old (they) [interview]

For Gabrielle, Peanut, and Bernadette, managing emotions is central to the definition of emotional wellness as it allows one to move forward in their life and to experience positive mental states.

While it requires active work to move towards emotional wellness, youth found that work to be rewarding because emotional wellness was often foundational to their productivity and success. Emotional wellness allows youth to move through life's challenges with relative ease, as Hazard, 20 years old (he) pointed out in his caption and photo (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

It all Fades Away

Watching the sunset makes me realize that it all fades away with time and every bad

situation cannot last forever. When I took the photo, I was there to experience the sunset.

It was just calming. It just made me realize that no matter how long, there's always an end

to everything. We need rest and just to remember bad situations don't last forever. It all

comes to an end. (Hazard, 20 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

When one has control over their emotional and mental state, they have the chance to enjoy an

unparalleled sense of calm, regardless of circumstances.

Through analysis of photographs, captions, interview data, and collective space data, it is

apparent that youth considered emotional wellness to be an important aspect of wellness. To the

collective, emotional wellness means finding and maintaining a balance between divergent

emotional states which at times could include both despair and tranquility. According to our

findings, pursuing emotional wellness is founded on dedicated efforts to understand, process, and

manage emotions effectively; however, that effort benefits the individual by making them more capable of enjoying their lived experience regardless of circumstances.

Survivalist Wellness

"I have somewhere to be comfortable in and feel safe." (Dajanie, 18 years old (she) [interview])

Surviving in a society that operates like "the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon" is a revolutionary act for youth on the margins (Lorde, 2002, p. 74). Survivalist wellness represents youths' ideas regarding the importance of securing access to the minimum resources needed to support their existence and move towards wellness. As Wolf, 25 years old (she) explained in her interview, this form of wellness includes having access to "stable housing, insurance, and wages... because they're basic needs." Other youth added physical safety to the list of the requirements for survivalist wellness, resulting in a definition that includes housing, income, and physical safety as essential to survival. While analysis revealed that the requirements of survivalist wellness were the simplest of all wellness pieces, it disproved the idea that self-sufficency is more foundational to youth wellness than any other wellness piece.

Duck, 35 years old (they), highlighted the changing nature of their relationship with survivalist wellness through a comparison of their childhood and current experiences:

Back in the day, the danger was 24/7. There was never, at least that I can recall, a moment where I was able to exist and be …today, I'm able to pause. I'm able to stop. I'm able to just recognize that in this moment, nobody's hurting me. Nobody can hurt me. If I'm hungry, I can eat…that wasn't always true. Now, when I catch those moments, there's so much happiness there. It's just the delight in that. (Duck, 35 years old, (they) [interview])

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Duck's revelations demonstrated that the impact of feeling safe and confident in their ability to survive at this point in their life both inspires awe and takes reflection to notice. This stands in stark contrast to Duck's fight for physical safety and survival, being all-consuming during their earlier years.

Duck was not the only youth to reflect on personal histories of instability and pain to speak to the impact of perceived safety on their wellness. When reflecting on her wellness, Dajanie, 18 years old (she) used her art repeatedly to explore the power of being able to finally create a safe space for herself after years without stable housing (see Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11

Somewhere to be Comfortable
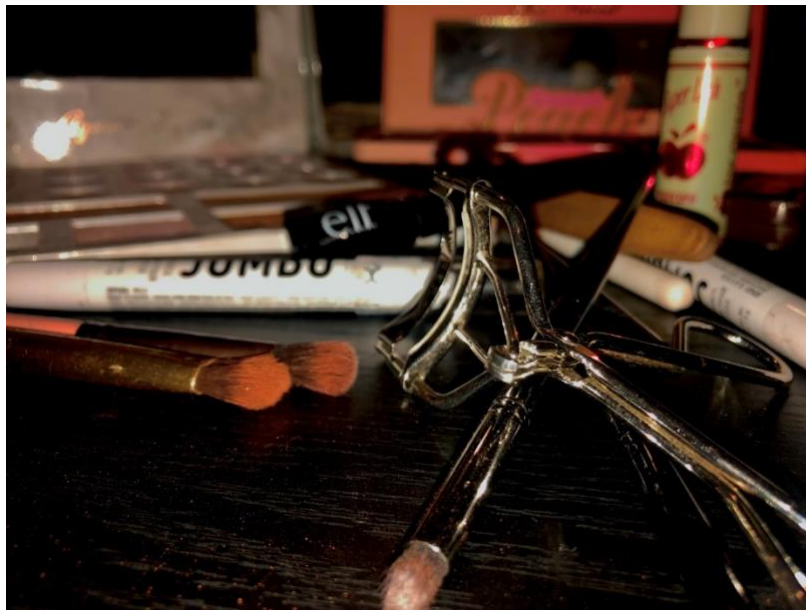
I recently moved in with my boyfriend, and before that, for the past four or five years, I would have to get up and put all my stuff in trash bags and move back and forth, and before that, I was going back and forth with my parents. When I moved, I got a desk for my room, and I got stuff to put my makeup in. I don't know walking into the room, seeing

my makeup, just laying there flat, like I don't have to pick it up, nobody's going to tell me anything, I don't have to worry about picking it up and moving it somewhere else, but it feels really comforting to know that I have somewhere to be comfortable in and feel safe. (Dajanie, 18 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

While Dajanie's photograph of her makeup tools may not conjure images of stable or safe housing, her caption underscores the significance of simply having a safe place to leave her belongings. For Dajanie, surviving included knowing that her belongings were safe and being able to unpack her physical belongings represented being able to unpack herself and feel safe. Dajanie continued to stress the centrality of safety in conceptualizations of survivalist wellness, as visible in this second photo and caption.

Figure 12

My Safe Corner

My safe corner is comforting and reassuring because it reminds me, I'm strong enough to get through any situation and feel the light at the end of the tunnel. It feels like [after] everything I've been through, I have here to come to. (Dajanie, 18 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

The soft lighting and centrality of a large fleece blanket in her photograph, when paired with Dajanie's caption that describes the safe corner she has created for herself in her new home, reiterates the importance of safe housing in the definition of survivalist wellness for this young person and our collective.

In conclusion, while youths' perspectives on wellness include much more than what is necessary to just survive, our collective showed a deep appreciation for survivalist wellness. Youth defined survivalist wellness as having access to the minimum resources needed to support their existence, such as housing, insurance, wages, and physical safety, and defined what was necessary based on their lived experiences of resource deprivation.

Spiritual Wellness

"What do I have faith in?" (Caden, 23 years old (she) [interview])

The analysis found spiritual wellness to be a powerful component of wellness for youth in our collective. Spiritual wellness was defined as identifying and nurturing a personalized belief in something more significant than the self, which through faith in and deference to provide youth with a sense of hope, acceptance, peace, and support. Caden summarized the collective's belief that nurturing spiritual wellness was essential to its conceptualization: "Figuring it out for yourself …your spiritual health and taking care of that. And nurturing that... And not speaking religiously but like spiritually. Like what brings me hope, what brings me peace. Like, what do I have faith in?" (Caden, 23 years old (she) [interview])

Caden draws attention to the fact that spiritual wellness is a very personal phenomenon, that everyone must define their faith, and highlights the need to nurture your spiritual wellness to experience the benefits of feelings of hope and peace. Belonging to a certain religion alone

doesn't fully encompass spiritual wellness. This theme of nuanced, complex personal relationships with faith was represented by many youth in the study.

As far as spiritual frameworks, the youth in our collective held beliefs in a variety of different philosophies, ranging from deities to tarot cards. Across belief systems, the power of personalized spirituality for wellness was a unifying concept. For example, for Mimi, 20 years old (she), her belief in the power of natural bodies like the moon to impact her wellness gave meaning to some of her life's more mysterious elements. Her photograph of a piercingly bright moon in a dark night sky (see Figure 13) and her discussion of astrology underscored how she conceptualized spiritual wellness as founded in a personalized belief in the power of something larger than the self.

Figure 13

When I Looked up

[The moon] always has been central to how I view spirituality. Based on my astrological
signs, I am greatly impacted by the moon. I have always felt the moon has something to
do with how I feel. That night I felt manic, and when I looked up at the sky, it made
sense. (Mimi, 20 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

Like Caden and Mimi, J, 26 years old (he) also discussed the importance of having a personal connection to a higher power for wellness. In his individual interview, he emphasized acting on his personal spiritual beliefs as providing a sense of support:

> Knowing that I'm talking to my God. I'm being honest. That makes me feel well. As I'm praying to God, you're also at the same time visualizing what's happening to yourself because you're talking it out and that helps. Then you see what you can do about it. (J, 26 years old (he) [interview])

For J having a deep sense of connection to "his God" is significant to his conception of spiritual wellness because it directly impacts his wellness in the given moment and provides support for his mental processing of his lived experience and his decision-making regarding future wellness-oriented action.

Similarly, Thor, 25 years old (he), used his art to define spiritual wellness as providing the ultimate form of wellness, support, and help. Layering stylized text that denoted needing help from God directly atop a self-portrait, Thor made clear that he relied on his connection to God to support him as he moved through life (see Figure 14). Thor's caption further explained the value of this connection to God and his commitment to remembering the powerful impact that his spirituality can have on his wellness.

Figure 14

Looking up to God
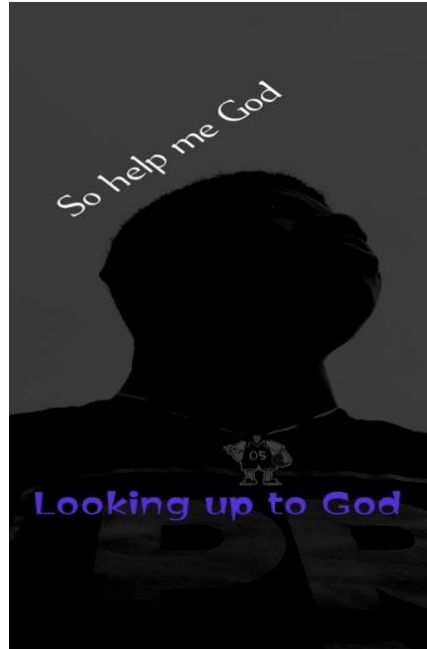
> This is me, just me looking up to God. I actually need God for everything that I can actually do. I took this picture so I could remind myself of the things that I know I need from God and that God can only help me. I will say that wellness is when God is actually helping you. (Thor, 25 years old (he) [photovoice activity]

Spiritual wellness is a powerful driver of overall youth wellness as it provides young people with a sense of hope, acceptance, peace, and support. While the sources of youths' sense of spiritual connection and the ways they nurture that connection were diverse and personalized, the similarity in terms of impact on their lives in the areas of feelings of hope, acceptance and support was quite consistent.

Self-Mastery Wellness

> *"They're called dream commitments."* (Bob, 26 years old (he) [interview])

According to youth in our collective wellness includes viewing yourself as lovable, worthy, and powerful and acting in alignment with these self-perceptions, a component we refer to as self-mastery wellness. This wellness component goes beyond positive self-image and self-concept to include viewing the self as a powerful actor and shaper of reality. Reflecting on the role of self-perception and self-love in wellness, Peanut, 18 years old, (she), began the work of defining self-mastery wellness during her interview when she stated, "I feel like [for] wellness all around, you have to have self-love for yourself…no matter what your body's doing, or no matter what you're feeling inside, you have to have love for yourself."

Having a positive view of oneself resulted in valuing and participating in freedom dreaming and liberatory action for young people. Youth throughout the project reflected on and used their art to address the central role of dreaming of a different future for themselves, believing those dreams could be their reality and acting to enact those dreams in their conceptualizations of wellness. Bernadette, 19 years old (they), discussed the way they set their intentions for themself and manifest those intentions.

> It's … just picturing that energy surrounding you being good and being bountiful and being just abundant in the things that you want to come to you… Abundance for me almost always means manifestation because I'm also very spiritual in a lot of the things that I do in my day-to-day life. When I think about abundance, I think about how much I want it…it makes me feel full, like my cup is full. (Bernadette, 19 years old (they) [interview])

Bernadette went onto say that this aspect of wellness is not simply about wanting a different future and believing you deserve it, but rather it is also about taking action to make that future a reality. They stated that part of wellness is fundamentally about saying,

"I can." Because I feel like "I want" sounds too needy, and … it makes it sound like I

won't make the effort to do it, but if I say I can do it, then I will do it and then everything

just falls into place. (Bernadette, 19 years old (they) [interview])

In this way, Bernadette's statements are representative of the collective's shared

conceptualization of self-mastery wellness for youth in care, which includes having a positive

sense of self that inspires self-motivated, change-making action. This combination of feeling

empowered concerning sense of self and action together define the self-mastery component of

wellness.

Young people utilized their art to stress that self-mastery wellness was inclusive of acting

in alignment with a positive sense of self. Exemplified in Figure 15 Thor, 25 years old (he), used

his photographs and writings to explore the idea of acting in alignment with the belief that he

was powerful by taking control and pursuing opportunities regardless of challenging

circumstances.

Figure 15

With a New Day
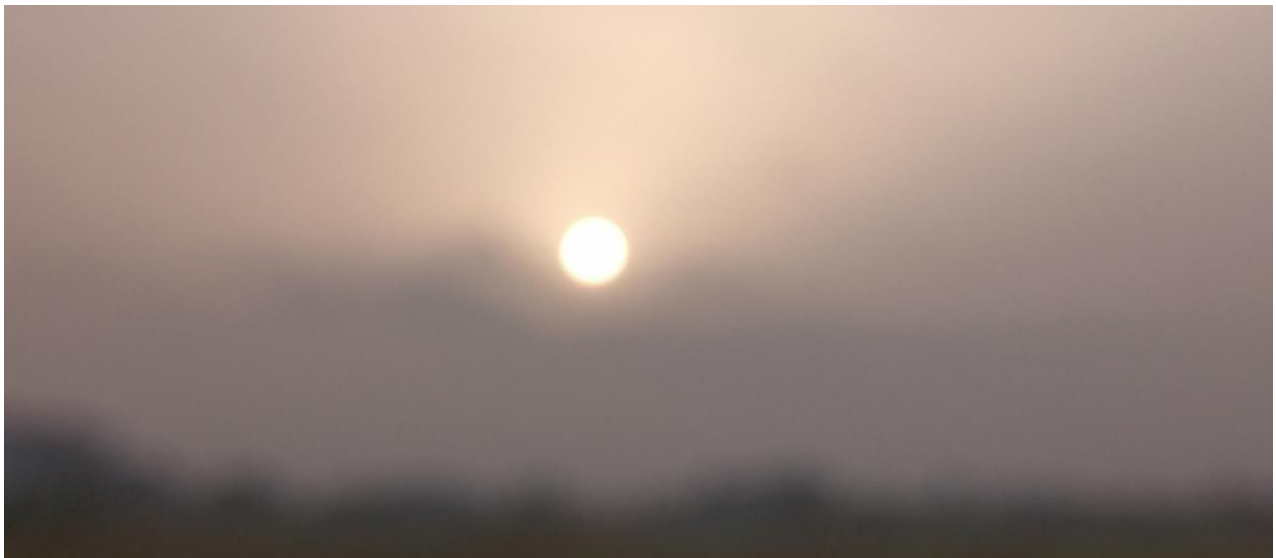
For me, the sunrise means new opportunities, a new day. New opportunities to make

change. It is a new day to start working and to make something good out of what you get.

Sometimes when I'm going through a lot, all I do is just sleep. I know the problem won't

go away, but I just sleep. By the time I wake up, I get refreshed and then new ideas come,

just like the way the sunrise comes with a new day. With a new day comes new

opportunities, new ideas, new things you can do with yourself. (Thor, 25 years old (he)

[photovoice activity])

Thor's embrace of the sunrise as a physical manifestation of future possibilities for his life

denotes a belief in his self-mastery—that he can do something different with the opportunity a

new day brings. Thor and Bernadette were not alone in discussing the role of taking action to

move your life forward. Bob was deeply committed to developing in self-mastery wellness, and

discussed that taking action regularly was central to his understanding of how to progress in that

area of his life:

Every day, I have a dream commitment, whatever it is. Today, it's shoot and post some

photos on Instagram, then I'm going to the studio, and I'm doing my creative writing

class. Every day, I have something that powers me either in my career or my life that I

do. (Bob, 26 years old (he) [interview])

Youth defined self-mastery wellness as both a life vest that enabled them to stay afloat in the

roughest of situational waters as well as an engine for change in their lives. For the youth in our

collective who grew up in contexts that left little in their control, self-mastery was ultimately

about viewing themselves as loveable powerful agents of change in their lives.

Section Summary: On Wellness Defined

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Our collective defined wellness for youth in foster care as a constantly evolving personal state consisting of a mosaic of social, physical, emotional, survivalist, spiritual and self-mastery wellness. We held nuanced beliefs regarding the conceptualizations of these components and the ways in which each uniquely contributed to the definition of wellness as a state.

Youth described social wellness as having the skills and abilities to socialize with others in a fashion that positively impacts their life and the lives of others and having access to a network of supportive individuals. When defining physical wellness, our collective described having healthy bodies free of disease and pain made possible by freely and regularly participating in activities they believe serve the body. Our collective considered emotional wellness as being capable of feeling the full emotional spectrum but spending the majority of the time in a state of clarity, stability, and peace as a result of emotional management. Youth defined survivalist wellness as access to the minimum resources needed to support their existence, such as housing, insurance, wages, and physical safety. Spiritual wellness was defined as identifying and nurturing a personalized belief in something more significant than the self, that faith in and deference to provides youth with a sense of hope. Lastly, according to youth in our collective, viewing yourself as lovable, worthy, and powerful and acting in alignment with these self-perceptions was self-mastery wellness.

As products of youth-centered analysis these definitions contribute to our understanding of the ways in which older youth in foster care understand their wellness and contributes to the important task of rewriting the narrative regarding the wellness of older youth impacted by foster care. Our findings make clear that, these wellness subareas define youth's constantly evolving personal state of wellness making young people's physical and mental experiences in these areas

particularly worthy of exploration. In the next section, we turn to exploring the physical and

mental experiences of wellness of older youth impacted by foster care.

5.2. Saving and Liberating Ourselves: Experiential Wellness Strategies

As examined in the previous results section, our collective defined wellness for older youth impacted by foster care to include a diverse set of interrelated components which are constantly evolving in terms of importance in their lives and relationship with other wellness components. The ever-evolving nature of this definition has resulted in a conceptualization of wellness as a process as much as a final state. Throughout the study, youth described their wellness experiences, chiefly through discussing the strategies they embraced to pursue wellness and how those strategies supported their wellness. Analysis of interviews, group session polylogues, photographs, and captions illuminated that youth in our collective turned to six main strategies to improve their wellness: expressing yourself; embracing temporary distractions; shifting to the spiritual realm; taking time for yourself; socializing and connecting with others; and discovering body care. Each of these wellness strategies is enacted through a variety of tactics that young people employ to improve their wellness as a means of taking their lives into their own hands and exercising their wellness agency. The following section will present these wellness strategies and clarify the tactics young people in our collective employ to save themselves and pursue liberation and wellness. [10]

Strategy #1: Expressing Yourself

"I've always been interested in filmmaking, photography, and any art-related thing…It's something that just makes me feel like me." (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [interview])

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[10] This section's title was inspired by the generous and generative work of Shira Hassan in Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction.

All youth in the study discussed expressing yourself as an essential strategy to foster their wellness. Youth collective members described participating in various activities to express themselves with expressing yourself defined as taking action to externalize internal states in order to process and manage those states. Most of the youth, like Wolf, 25 years old (she), reported engagement in multiple creative or artistic activities to express themselves. "Pretty much I do it all. I know how to crochet, epoxy, paint, everything." [collective space] Youth named activities such as painting, writing, photography, crocheting, filmmaking, playing musical instruments, and dancing as common outlets to express themselves.

Other youth argued that anything that allowed one to freely express their feelings and life experiences and connect with oneself was a form of creative expression and thus essential to wellness. Bernadette, 19 years old (they) elucidated this point in a collective space, noting that "if you create something, it's creativity. It doesn't really matter what it is because if it's by you, it's yours. That's your wellness." Several youth noted engagement in activities such as basketball, video games and daydreaming as essential expressive outlets in addition to the previously listed arts-based creative expression activities. For example, during a collective space J, 26 years old (he) reacted to another youth who described painting as a positive creative form of self-expression:

> I remember growing up in a household for a little bit where communication was very bad; I couldn't say anything… I wouldn't be heard, so I would play basketball. That's how I would express myself. That was my art at the time…Creativity, no matter what that is for different people, is essential to wellness.

In his statement J exemplifies a belief held by the majority of our collective, that self-expression regardless of the manner it is pursued is essential to wellness. Young people in the collective

purposely turned to certain self-expression tactics to process emotions, feel empowered, or bond with others. In the following subsections, I will outline the particular tactics young people used to express themselves.

Processing Emotions through Self-Expression. Of all the self-expression tactics, youth most commonly cited processing emotions through self-expression. Caden, 23 years old (she) explained in her interview, "for me, mental health, a lot of that has been expression… like painting or drawing or creating animation." Caden is one of many collective members that denoted the positive impact of expression on their mental and emotional wellness. Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) similarly noted that she turned to creative self-expression to help her process inarticulable emotions or experiences and improve her emotional health in general:

> A lot of times, there are not really any words that can really express how we feel or really share our experience, especially if we have a hard time explaining it… [Music or art] helps you to express it in ways where the words fail. It's like when words fail, art speaks, or music speaks. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [collective space])

Times of creative self-expression were times in which youth could connect with their emotions and begin processing them. Many other youth in a similar fashion to Gabrielle discussed creative self-expression as providing the opportunity to connect with emotional states to identify, address and release emotions or past traumas. During a collective space, Tati, 22 years old (she), noted that she used regular journal writing to "help [her] cope with anger and stress" following a traumatic experience. Alexis, 25 years old (she), explained that after losing her sister and becoming her niece's guardian, expressing herself through listening to and analyzing music allowed her to label and eventually process the intense emotions she was experiencing.

I was really depressed…I was like confusing my feelings and confusing my thoughts and stuff. I don't know; listening to music brought me out of that; I guess it helped me figure out what I was feeling. Sometimes I couldn't figure out why I am feeling a certain way. Sometimes there are not words… analyzing and actually listening to songs word for word [is what I did]. (Alexis, 25 years old (she) [interview]

During times of significant trauma, processing emotions and releasing strong emotions through creative self-expression activities played a significant role in youths' abilities to maintain any semblance of wellness.

Figure 16

Except my Cans

As a child, nobody would listen. Except my cans, tips, and stencils. That made for unconscious therapy sessions. The art of expressing myself all night and all over LA saved my life. This was one of the ways I was able to express my creativity, one of the ways I was able to be okay. (Duck, 35 years old (they) [photovoice activity])

While sharing the photograph and caption featured in Figure 16 with the group, Duck recounted how creative expression through graffiti art gave them the will to live during the lowest point of their childhood, when they were exposed to high amounts of violence each day by adults who trafficked them. Duck stated that they were

> just another L.A. kid trying to avoid the havoc at home, through the city I have roamed with my cans and stencils, mind, and subconscious therapy sessions…I didn't understand how therapeutic it was and how lifesaving it was to be able to just express myself, so that is why wellness is creativity; I love my cans. (Duck, 35 years old, (they) [collective space])

After sharing these thoughts, Duck continued stating that they painted 'aggressively' during this time. "I mean, like pissed off and shut down and having no other way to feel like I can yell or scream to the world, y'all are fucked up." (Duck, 35 years old, (they) [collective space])

As Duck's story exemplifies, for youth in our collective, creative expression could not always allow them to fully process their trauma and emotions, but it could provide them with an essential emotional release. In conclusion, many youth used the tactic of processing their emotions through self-expression to strategically express themselves and through doing improve their wellness.

Empowering Yourself through Creative Discovery.   Although not mentioned as commonly as the tactic of processing emotions through self-expression, many youth noted that empowering themselves through creative discovery was a tactic used to improve their wellness. Creative discovery refers to youth exploring and embracing novel ways to express themselves through engaging in activities based on their interests and goals. Youth found the process of creative

discovery left them feeling empowered and liberated. As J explained, "the great thing about

creating is that no one can tell you what you make is wrong but you," [collective space] and thus,

creative discovery left J and many members of our collective feeling empowered and positive.

Youth utilized their art to reflect upon their use of creative discovery to practice self-reflection

and exert their power and self-determination.

Figure 17

Never a Straight Line

Creativity, to me, of all different types, is fluid. You're going through the motions to see

what fits your style. There is never a straight line in creativity, so the edge of this photo

represents the need to jump into it without hesitation. The water represents that fluidity,

and the streams shooting upward are an ode to those who come into their being and

realize how much they've grown. Reflections in the water can be a reflection of one's

creative journey, and should the stream fall back into the water, the process starts all over

again. (Bernadette, 19 years old (they) [photovoice activity])

Bernadette's description of the creative discovery process as fluid and requiring the creator to

jump in without hesitation in Figure17 firmly situates the creator at the helm, a location of

power. Expanding on their photograph and caption, Bernadette explained the empowering nature

of creative expression:

Any sort of creative expression, whether that's fashion and clothing, or you're collecting,

or drawing, or writing, whatever, it's all fluid… You're going through the motions to

figure out what fits you…it's just coming out of that fluidity and coming into your own.

[collective space]

As Bernadette's reflections exemplify, creative discovery was a tactic that created self-

empowerment experiences for youth. This sense of self-empowerment as a result of participating

in the creative discovery process was often experienced along with a sense of liberation by our

collective members. This sense of liberation was featured in several youths' reflections on the

creative discovery process. Thor, 25 years old (he) explained during his interview that his

favorite creative discovery activity, playing video games, allows him to connect with and feel a

sense of freedom. "Gaming is like entering into another world, in which you're free to express

yourself and do whatever you like." This desire to live in a free fashion was also a driver to

participate in creative self- expression activities for Peanut,18 years old (she). For Peanut, her creative discovery time, or "weird time," was a sacred time of self-expression and freedom. During this time, she would make videos for her private social media account in which she would let down the façade of who she thought she had to be and liberate her true self.

> It's just my weird time. Like sometimes, I would make videos. I've always been put in situations where like I had to be mature, or I had to do certain things. … [My weird time] makes me feel happy, like in comfort. I feel like that's my actual self and who I have to be is not myself. (Peanut, 18 years old (she) [interview])

As the statements of youth like J, Bernadette, Thor, Peanut exemplify, youth in our collective explored and embraced novel ways to express themselves through engaging in activities based on their interests and goals, a tactic we refer to as empowering yourself through creative discovery. Turning to the tactic of empowering themselves through creative discovery to strategically express themselves left youth feeling empowered and liberated, improving their wellness.

Expressing and Bonding Together. While most of the discussion on strategically expressing yourself for wellness focused on individual-level tactics, youth also noted that self-expression was not always implemented in isolation. Rather a segment of young people in our collective embraced social, expressive practices to externalize internal states, a tactic we refer to as expressing and bonding together. By adding social elements to their expressive practices, young people tactically created moments of self-expression and social bonding, benefiting their overall wellness in a unique fashion. The art of Bernadette, 19 years old (they), featured in Figure 18 exemplifies the way incorporating social bonding into self-expression practice created a powerful self-expression wellness tactic for young people.

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Figure 18

A Personal Love Language
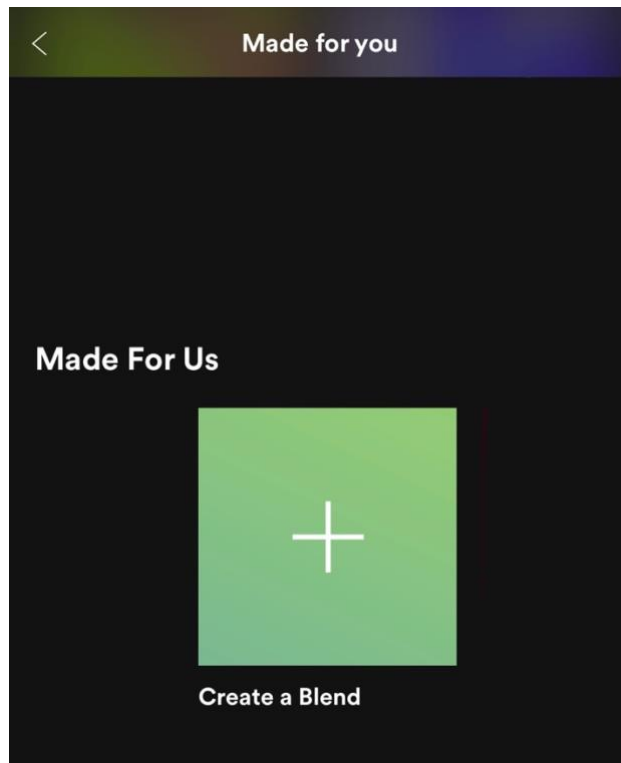
   Music is a personal love language, especially when you can get hype with people about

an artist dropping new music. Blends on Spotify have really helped me expand my

musical horizons as well as get to know people better, more through music and less

through dry small talk. Music will always have a place for everyone, even when not

everyone has a place for you. (Bernadette,19 years old (they) [photovoice activity])

Bernadette, who previously described creative expression as a pathway for self-empowerment,

also described the social aspect of their creative expression in their caption above and their

comments during one of our collective spaces. "I'm a musician, so I like to play music and listen

to music... I make playlists for people; they make playlists for me…having a love language that I

can share with people…I really appreciate that." Through these reflections, Bernadette stressed

that practicing self-expression in collaboration with others is especially energizing and positive, demonstrating that the tactic of expressing and bonding together is purposely embraced because of the unique benefits of its social nature. Discussion of the unique wellness benefits of expressing and bonding together exemplified in Bernadette's reflections was apparent in many young people's statements. For example, during her interview, Wolf, 25 years old (she), who often practiced art alone to process emotions, spoke about engaging in artistic activities with a friend twice a week as providing her with a sense of community. During an interview, Gabrielle, 22 years old (she), identified self-expression as essential to her wellness and spoke about involving other people in that expression, stating that "anything having to do with filming my own content and editing my own content [supports my wellness] … collaborating with other creative people on a project." Gabrielle also highlighted the importance of expressing herself creatively with others, using a quote she liked to communicate her sentiments on collaboration (see Figure 19).

Figure 19

We're all Supposed to be United

"Life is not a competition between men and women. It's a collaboration."- David

Alejandro Fearnhead

This shot was actually taken years ago when we shot for this project that was for a

university student short film. We just had such a good time together, and it made me

believe anything is possible. I really wanted to showcase this because, at the end of the

day, we're all supposed to be united, and we're supposed to work together and not feel

like we have to put each other down just to get where we are. And we were able to do just

that. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

Gabrielle's caption illustrates that the process of creating art with others is exceptionally

meaningful to her and has taught her about the benefits of collaboration and treating one another

with respect and dignity, even outside of a creative context. By experiencing joy in her university

film project, Gabrielle was able to boost wellness, learning that she could positively connect with

others as well express herself.

Conclusion, Strategy #1. Our collective discussed expressing yourself, defined as taking action

to externalize internal states as a way to process and manage those states, as an essential strategy

to foster their wellness. Youth collective members described participating in three tactics to

express themselves, processing emotions through self-expression, empowering yourself through

creative discovery, and expressing and bonding together, each of which uniquely contributed to

their overall wellness. In terms of wellness impact, these self-expression tactics were used to

improve youth's wellness in various areas, including emotional, self-mastery, and social

wellness. Expressing themselves made youth feel calm, powerful, and connected, sentiments

foundational to being well. While self-expression did not look the same for all, every youth

stressed the importance of having an outlet—for some, it gave them the will to live.

Strategy #2: Embracing Temporary Distraction

"You needed things to get away from everything; you needed something which you can do and

forget about everything." (Thor, 25 years old (he) [interview])

During their individual interviews, in collective spaces and in their art, youth in our study highlighted the power of participating in distracting activities such as daydreaming, listening to music, and working out as an important strategy to support their wellness. Collective members described participating in three tactics to embrace temporary distractions: escaping emotional processing through distraction, surviving traumatic contexts through distraction, and distracting your way to freedom. Youth turned to distraction as a strategy to gain reprieve from processing overwhelming emotions, to navigate traumatic contexts outside their control and to pursue freedom, all while pursuing a state of wellness. In the following sections, we will outline how young people strategically used these three tactics to embrace temporary distractions and move toward a state of wellness.

Escaping Emotional Processing through Distraction. Many youth described needing to "escape", "zone out", or "get away" from their emotions as essential to their wellness. Young people described that distracting themselves from emotions was a beneficial wellness tactic because it created the opportunity for them to experience a moment of relaxation and happiness regardless of chaotic circumstances. These brief moments of relaxation and joy benefited their wellness in the moment and helped position them in a better mental space which supported their future wellness. When discussing daydreaming as a distraction activity during her interview, Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) exemplified the benefits of escaping emotional processing through distraction for young people in our collective. Gabrielle noted the importance of "keeping yourself distracted and busy because, if you do that, you don't have to come to terms with

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reality…it's like a getaway or escape." She went on to explain how certain activities allowed her to distract herself, particularly from negative emotions: "Watching new films or TV shows, or even watching content creators. I feel like that helps me to distract myself, but also, it's like my happy place. It's like my zone to just be in another little world, and that's something that really helps me." While watching movies was central to Gabrielle's distraction practices, the activities youth turned to for the purposes of distraction varied greatly, with some young people similarly consuming art or media, and others turning to physical activities, social activities, or a combination. Hazard used his photo and caption (see Figure 20) to share how music served as an important escape from the pressure and chaos of his reality.

Figure 20

Into Another World

A little break away from the chaos of this world into another world to keep my mind in order. (Hazard, 20 years old (he) [photovoice exercise]

Listening to music by candlelight allowed Hazard to minimize outside distractions and truly immerse himself in the music, an experience he equates to entering another realm. Hazard also

described using music concurrently with other activities to distract himself from his emotional

processing and experience emotional relief. "Working out relieves a lot of stress and tension in

your body; I do that, and when I'm working out, and I'm listening to music, I just zone out, and

it takes my mind off things."[interview] Marcus Grant, 25 years old (he), simply explained the

collective's central argument when he argued that ultimately, he and other youth impacted by

foster care just need "an activity," a "mindless option" to wind down from high-intensity

emotions.

While engaging in various activities, youth across our collective described the power of

escaping emotional processing through distraction as a wellness tactic. This form of embracing

temporary distractions provided youth a momentary reprieve from overwhelming emotional

strain and transitioned them to moments of happiness, thus protecting their wellness in the

moment and creating a mental foundation for happiness in the future.

Surviving Traumatic Contexts through Distraction. For some youth, embracing temporary

distraction was viewed as a powerful wellness strategy, often described using words connected to

survival, like providing air and breath. For these youth, implementing this strategy often meant

embracing the tactic of surviving traumatic contexts through distraction to remain capable of

pursuing wellness in the future. For example, some youth described distraction as akin to

breathing. In her interview, Gabrielle, 22 years old (she), explained that "when there's a lot

going on in your life, you just need a breather". Dajanie, 18 years old (she) exemplified the

manner in which distraction can be used to survive traumatic contexts by sharing the story of

how when she was placed with her father, and he took away her major distractions, it was

equivalent to depriving her of oxygen:

My dad, he entirely killed my outlet, which was my phone, my only outlet. I mean, we

[my young brother and I] got pulled out of a domestic violence house [with their mother]

that we were in for almost two years. I need my friends, I need an outlet, I can't be here in

the house with seven other kids, three adults, locked in the house, suffocating.

While many teenagers would respond negatively to being deprived of their phones, Dajanie

recounted an extremely challenging situation as she attempted to process trauma and loss. After

witnessing violence against her mother and then being disconnected from her mother completely,

losing her source of distraction was devasting and suffocating. Dajanie shared that without an

outlet, she began acting out until she got access to a new form of distraction, books which

maintained her until she was able to move into a more supportive living situation. For many

youth in the study, the tactic of surviving traumatic contexts through distraction allowed them to

maintain a bearable level of wellness until they found the support they needed and were in an

environment in which higher levels of wellness could be pursued.

Distracting Your Way to Freedom. In addition to using distraction to escape emotional

processing and survive traumatic contexts, many youth considered their use of distraction as a

way to exert control over their lives. Using the distracting your way to freedom wellness tactic

was seen as a liberatory practice, providing youth with the freedom to shape their lived

experience in alignment with their desires and goals regardless of their circumstances. Thor, 25

years old (he), explained the liberatory power of purposeful distraction as a tactic in his remarks

about choosing to forget:

It is good to have something which you could do, and then you forget about everything

that happened in society or around you; just be free to do what you want. Then later, you

can come back to reality, but by the time you do that, you'll be free and happy again.

(Thor, 25 years old (he) [collective space])

In accordance with the views of the collective, Thor argued above that it was good to have the ability to choose to embrace temporary distractions as a wellness strategy regardless of the circumstances that surround you. Youth in our collective found it beneficial for an individual to have a wellness tactic they "could" use to distract themselves from negative experiences and make themself feel free. The statements of Alexis, 25 years old (she) further exemplified the collective's experiences of the utility of distraction. When she discussed listening to music as an escape from uncontrollable elements of her life, she demonstrated the liberatory usefulness of distraction as a tactic:

That's always been my little escape. If I was in like group home and stuff, I was putting my headphones on, laying back to listen to some music. It's always been, I don't know, like a big thing for me…Even before I ended up in foster care, it was my escape at home, too, from hearing all the yelling and stuff. I just put my headphones in and drown out the noise. (Alexis, 25 years old (she) [interview])

By using her headphones to escape, Alexis was able to exert control over her life, in this case of what she heard regardless of her circumstances.

Despite the significant positive impact of embracing temporary distraction had on youth's lives, youth expressed that distraction, as a wellness strategy, had to be used with caution. Analysis revealed that our collective viewed deliberately not using distraction to be as much of a liberatory practice as choosing to use it. During their interview, Bernadette, 19 years old (they),

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spoke about the need to recognize and be mindful of both the positive and negative impacts that utilizing distraction can have on wellness:

> I feel like when I get stressed out, I stress myself out to a point where I don't think clearly, and my mind is just a jumble of scribbles…[when I] distract myself in a way that's healthy [like through music], I can come back to this scribble of a mindset … and try to straighten it up…I feel like everyone has a double-sided coin when it comes to coping. There's healthy coping, and then there is not healthy coping. (Bernadette, 19 years old (they) [interview])

For Bernadette, choosing to distract themselves with music temporarily was a tactic that made them feel "secure in who [they were] and just secure in [their] being," in contrast to their past "unhealthy" coping strategies. However, Bernadette stressed the importance of coming back and straightening things up as essential to the practice being a healthy coping strategy rather than a detrimental one. This quote illuminates the theme that distraction could only be used to support wellness temporarily, which appeared across our dataset.

Similarly, during her individual interview, Gabrielle, 22 years old (she), discussed the need to limit using distraction when she explained her typical thinking process after using movies as an escape:

> You have to put yourself back into what's going on in the now and be like, "Okay. I just distracted myself for a moment in time. Now I need to figure out what's going on and how to go about it and not try to escape from whatever situation … is really bothering me that's on my mind" …Because I know, in a way, distracting yourself for a certain point of time might not necessarily be healthy for you. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [interview])

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For our collective, distraction could be useful as a tool for temporary escape, but as Gabrielle's

quote demonstrates, young people in our collective were aware that distraction does not

ultimately solve the root cause of distress. Gabrielle artfully depicted the collective's

understanding that distraction was not a long-term solution in one of her photographs, which she

shared with the collective (see Figure 21).

Figure 21

Always Light Somewhere

> For every problem you try to hide, let them go like balloons in the sky… even though
>
> there's darkness within this space, or even in this world for that matter, there's always
>
> light somewhere that you could find. But it's really up to you to find that at the end of the
>
> day. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

While choosing to use distraction was a liberatory wellness practice, young people also

understood that choosing not to use distraction was as well. Ultimately, our collective embraced

the belief that distracting your way to freedom was a powerful wellness tactic when it was used

and when it was dismissed.

Conclusion, Strategy #2.   Healing takes time, and youth impacted by foster care have often faced significant amounts of trauma. For these reasons, youth in our collective embraced the use of distraction as strategy to pursue wellness. Our collective turned to three different tactics to embrace temporary distractions: escaping emotional processing through distraction, surviving traumatic contexts through distraction, and distracting your way to freedom. These tactics allowed young people to use distraction and escapism to improve or protect their emotional, survivalist and self-mastery wellness by experiencing moments defined by happiness and peace, survival and resistance and liberation and choice. While distraction may not change circumstances or emotional reactions for young people, the strategy allowed them to temporarily improve their wellness and create a foundation for a future time in which they have the resources to implement life-changing strategies. Youth illustrate that distraction activities are far from a waste of time and instead are purposely chosen, temporary reprieves from emotional stress and disempowerment that are essential to wellness.

Strategy #3: Shifting to the Spiritual Realm

"I seek Jesus when I need something or just to call on Him, to talk to Him…He got me through being in foster care and molded me into the person I am today." (Peanut, 18 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

Participating in activities that connected them to the spiritual realm is a fundamental wellness strategy for young people in the collective, like Peanut, whose photo and caption are featured below (see Figure 22).

Figure 22

I Seek Jesus

I modeled this sweater that says 'Seek Jesus' for a Christian company. My spiritual

wellness is that I seek Jesus when I need something, or just to call on Him, talk to Him.

Jesus is my best friend, and He gets me through obstacles. He got me through being in

foster care and molded me to the person I am today. (Peanut, 18 years old (she)

[photovoice activity])

Tactics that youth used to connect to the spiritual realm varied greatly, since youth's conceptions

of the spiritual realm varied. Some youth in our collective, like Peanut, belonged to formal faith

traditions, others had self-defined spiritual practices, and some blended the two. These spiritual

wellness tactics included communing with nature, praying or manifesting, spiritually connecting

with others, and engaging with spiritual texts or objects. Across all these tactics were the

common benefits of feeling calm and happy, connected, and supported, and hopeful for the

future.

Communing with Nature. Young people in our collective had strong connections to the natural world that grounded them and made them feel connected to something larger than themselves. Like Bob, 26 years old (he), some youth turned to nature at times of great stress and felt more at peace with the universe as a result:

> Nature is one of my biggest things. For a long time, I remember when I was a youth, and I knew I was going to be incarcerated, I'd always go to the beach. Or when something big happened, like when I came out. Every time I go to the beach, and I feel like all of the worry gets washed away because I am staring out at something greater than me. I can't force the ocean to do what I want it to do, just like I can't force the universe to do what I want it to do. (Bob, 26 years old (he), [interview])

For Bob, connecting to the ocean allowed him to move past his impulse to control his reality, which had caused him to feel impotent, exemplifying a larger principal about the benefits of connecting to nature for our collective. Connecting to nature as a spiritual tactic improved the wellness of members of our collective by providing them with a sense of their place in the larger universe and a sense of peace.

Various ways of communing with nature resulted in youth connecting with something larger than themselves and gaining a sense of grounding regarding their place in the universe. Some youth, like Caden, 23 years old (she), enjoyed communing with nature through gardening. As Caden's caption illuminates, the simple act of planting and caring for her sprouts reminded her of a larger connection to the universe (see Figure 23).

Figure 23

From Seed to Root

When I started to see these little sprouts, it just made me feel really connected not only to

myself but to my hands and also my faith in God and just knowing that "Hey, it's going

to grow from seed to root, to tree to fruit. I'm not going to see the fruit the same day, the

next day." Just staying patient and being diligent and really watering it and doing the

necessary things. It was very therapeutic. When I would get up in the morning or when I

would think about it, just going to the plant and talking to it or watering it. That just

really made me happy to see the little sprouts. (Caden, 23 years old (she) [photovoice

activity])

Witnessing those sprouts grow provided Caden with a powerful sense of connection to herself and to the spiritual realm. Analyzing the art and words of collective members like Caden highlighted the immense impact the tactic of communing with nature had on the wellness of young people in our collective. The act of connecting with nature made our collective members feel a strong sense of connection to something larger than themselves a connection that instilled them with happiness and peace.

Praying or Manifesting. Praying or manifesting, which was described by young people as communicating their thoughts, desires, needs, and aspirations to the spiritual realm, was a similarly beneficial wellness tactic for youth with very different belief systems. For Thor, 25 years old (he), prayer was a significant component to his spiritual practice that allowed him to ask God for help (see Figure 24).

Figure 24

What my Heart Wants

This is just like me in my time alone, praying and asking for what my heart wants. (Thor, 25 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

In our collective space, Thor presented the above illustration of himself "praying and asking for what my heart wants" and noted that

> [God] is the one who I look up to, who is there to help me…When you pray, God is there for you, and then when he is there, he listens to everything you say. You have a problem; you just have to kneel down and go to the cross and pray.

Prayer was a way of requesting support during difficult moments for Thor and ultimately left him feeling heard and assisted, representative of a major theme regarding the wellness benefits across young people's experiences of praying and manifesting.

However, prayer was not the only manner young people directly communicated with the spiritual realm. Wolf, 25 years old (she), who had a negative relationship with organized religion, explained her use of manifestation in reaction to Thor and several of the other collective members' discussions of the power of prayer. She explained that manifestation is a similar but distinct practice from prayer. "I believe more in calling things to yourself… in the universe and a higher being … so you have to call things to yourself, versus praying" [collective space]. While using differing practices, several youth in our collective noted benefiting from these personal connections with the universe, often seeing their prayers or manifestations come true, which gave them hope for the future and a sense of support from something bigger than themselves, benefiting their wellness.

Spiritually Connecting with Others. While turning to the spiritual realm was often described as an individualistic wellness strategy strictly between a youth and the larger universe, for some young people, their spiritual practice also had a social component. Social connections could lead to new or deeper connections with the spiritual realm for some youth, while for other youth,

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connections with the spiritual realm influenced the manner they connected with others.

Fundamentally, the intersection of the spiritual and social resulted in young people feeling

deeply connected to others and the spiritual realm. For example, Tree, 21 years old (they),

explained that their spiritual journey was partly inspired by their connections with others, noting

that "one of my mentors gave me a crystal for protection," [collective space] which led to further

exploration of crystals in their photovoice submission (see Figure 25).

Figure 25

Climbing a Little Crystal Mountain

I like to call myself spiritual because I believe in auras, the third eye, those kinds of

things. I'm just starting my spiritual journey. I feel like I'm a cat just climbing a little

crystal mountain. I started discovering these things when I got out of the foster care

system. When I was in the system, I was always stuck in group homes, so I had a limited

amount of access to the outside world. (Tree, 21 years old, (they) [photovoice activity])

Many youth discussed that their spiritual practices were initially inspired or supported by someone in their social network. In his interview J, 26 years old (he), shared that like Tree, he was initially connected to his spiritual practice by communing with others, particularly his grandparents, who "were consistent in what they preached to me. They were doing it. That spoke to me, that spoke to my heart." This initial social nature of his spirituality has remained, with a strong portion of J's spiritual practice rooted in connecting with others. "I live my life based off a scripture. It says there's more happiness in giving than receiving." (J, 26 years old (he) [interview]) J then discussed how that scripture led him to commune with others and give to others through his career, noting that "[in] my job, we assist foster youth as well as formerly incarcerated youth…I'm helping them as far as job skills are concerned." J also explained that this scripture impacted his missionary work as a Jehovah's Witness and his personal acts as a friend. The stories of J and Tree are two of many examples of youth in our collective communing with others through spiritual practice to serve their wellness. For youth in our collective, merging spiritual and social practices resulted in deep feelings of connection.

Engaging with Spiritual Texts or Objects. For other youth, reflecting on their connection with the spiritual realm through engagement with spiritual texts or objects was an essential tactic that supported their wellness. Several young people in our collective exemplified this pattern by regularly reading the Bible:

> My daily Bible reading… grounds me…If you think about the definition of spirituality, it's really a way of life, an approach to life, and that really differs for all walks of life. Just for me, specifically, the Bible really helps me check me. Okay, working on myself: how are my thoughts? Because your thoughts control your actions. It just helps me to constantly work on myself. (J, 26 years old (he) [collective space])

While J's commitment to reading the Bible connected him to the spiritual realm, it also made

him feel more in control of his actions, a theme seen throughout the analysis of young people's

statements about spiritual texts and objects. For many youth, regular engagement with spiritual

texts or objects helped them adjust their behavior to align with their spiritual and personal goals.

Across various belief systems, youth in the collective noted that engagement with spiritual

objects and texts was central to the wellness strategy of shifting to the spiritual realm.

Figure 26

The Two Sides

I'm very, very spiritual, and I have a bunch of decks of tarot cards. The sun tarot card

represents success, enlightenment, and hope. The moon represents deception, secrets, and

intuition. The candle sets the atmosphere by highlighting the two sides of what life is.

Without intuition and facing deception from others (or maybe yourself), you can't attain

enlightenment and the success you so well deserve. (Bernadette, 19 years old (they)

[photovoice activity])

Bernadette used the photo and caption featured in Figure 26 to share their form of spiritual

reading, reading Tarot cards that similarly helps guide them as they navigate the world. J and

Bernadette's experiences reading spiritual texts represent how interacting with sacred objects,

from crosses to crystals, benefits the wellness of youth in our collective by making them feel

more spiritually and personally grounded.

Conclusion, Strategy #3.   In conclusion, young people in our collective used the

aforementioned tactics of communing with nature, praying or manifesting, spiritually connecting

with others, and engaging with spiritual texts or objects to turn to the spiritual realm and, as a

result, move closer to spiritual, emotional, and self-mastery wellness. While not all young people

held the same beliefs or used the same tactics to connect to the spiritual realm, they similarly

benefited from feeling connected to and inspired and supported by something larger than

themselves.

Strategy #4: Taking Time for Yourself

"I value my alone time more than anything else in the entire world. Alone time is when I get to

*be me, and alone time is when I get to recollect myself." (*Bernadette,19 years old (they)

[collective space])

Young people in our collective, like Bernadette, 19 years old (they), expressed the

immense value of embracing the wellness strategy of taking time for yourself throughout our

study. Taking time for yourself represents the actions young people pursued when they shifted

their entire focus to their personal development. Collective members explained that throughout

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their lives, applying the taking time for yourself tactics, practicing self-reflection, establishing new habits, and engaging in positive self-talk, made them well by improving their sense of self-confidence and self-love.

Practicing Self-Reflection. Collective members discussed the power of participating in self-reflection as a tactic to support their wellness throughout their individual interviews and in collective spaces. Additionally, their photos and captions often artistically featured the topic of self-reflection. Some youth formalized their self-reflection activities by establishing regular times and places for self-reflection, while others turned to self-reflection in a more ad-hoc nature. Universally, youth cited the power of self-reflection as a critical support to their self-mastery. Mimi, 20 years old (she), discussed in detail how joining a new social community encouraged her to practice regular self-reflection:

> [Organization name] makes me feel like me and has helped me find myself. Once you find one little thing [about yourself] you find another little thing. …I just really love the different perspectives… [Before joining] I was very set on who I was or who I thought I was… I was just being stubborn, not trying to let go of the old me, even though she was already gone. It was hard to let go of the old, so I could invite the new. (Mimi, 20 years old (she) [interview])

Mimi went on to explain that because of this self-reflection process, she has "completely changed the way I live my life" and feels more "grounded". Ultimately, Mimi avowed that those positive changes would not have been possible if she had not been inspired to reflect regularly on whom she wanted to be by her community.

Like Mimi, Tati, 22 years old (she), also benefited greatly in terms of wellness from practicing self-reflection. When asked about her current self-care activities, Tati explained that these habits were the result of a deeply reflective process:

> I only started doing this [yoga and other forms of movement] because I wanted to get out of my mentality of being lazy…at that time in life, I had an "I don't care" attitude. I don't know where it came from…I wouldn't do anything all day until I reached my late teen [years], early twenties…I had to realize what I'm doing was actually harming myself. (Tati, 22 years old (she) [interview])

Mimi and Tati's stories represent self-reflection's power in young people's lives. Both young people viewed taking time to reflect on their existing sense of self and behaviors as essential to moving toward their vision of who they wanted to be. For youth in our collective, the tactic of assessing who they were and defining whom they wanted to be was empowering and made them feel optimistic about themselves and their futures.

Establishing New Habits. As the previous section elucidates, self-reflection was often the first step for young people in our collective to move towards implementing change in their lives. The wellness tactic of establishing new habits refers to when young people in our collective purposely attempted to shift their behavior to better align with their goals. During a group session, J, 26 years old (he) shared the photograph and caption of himself featured in Figure 27, which launched an insightful conversation that represents our collective's experiences establishing new habits.

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Figure 27

You Can be Different

Have fun, be yourself. And don't let others stop you from doing you. That is me, the guy

in the back. I'm in a little suit and tie, wearing a pink lei. I've noticed growing up [that]

the men in my household and also a lot of men in my culture at times feel like we have to

be a certain way, we have to be macho, we can't smile. Society's expectations of us…like,

"No, you don't have to do what society's expectation of you is." You can be different.

You can smile, you can laugh, and as a man, you can communicate your feelings, you can

be silly. It's okay. (J, 26 years old (he) [photovoice activity]

Through his photo and caption, J demonstrated a level of comfortability in himself and an

embrace of particular social habits that go beyond patriarchal notions of masculinity. When other

members of the group expressed admiration for his self-confidence, J made it clear that actively

showing his emotions was a relatively new habit:

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It took a long time. The society's pressure on you can be very, very strong, as well as family sometimes, right? It can very strong. It probably happened around late high school. I just didn't care anymore. I'm just like, "Why am I going to care about how other people perceive me? I'm not a puppet. Why do I care about what other people think? I have to do me and make me happy."

Members of our collective like J described experiences of participating in progressive self-reflection and then deciding and attempting to establish habits. For youth, establishing new habits improved their wellness by making them feel empowered over their destiny and more in alignment with their personal goals.

The theme of establishing new habits to improve wellness reoccurred across the analysis. One youth, Bernadette, 19 years old (they), even committed to new habits in our collective space. Inspired by Dajanie, 18 years old (she) discussing doing her assignments on time as a strategy to manage her stress, Bernadette stated: "I just recently decided to go back to school again, and I'm making a pledge to myself that I'm going to do my homework on time and that I'm actually not going to stress myself out." Expanding on this point, Bernadette noted that they no longer wanted to be someone who procrastinated because it misaligned with their goal to live a low-stress life. Their new commitment to themself demonstrated an attempt to improve their level of wellness by attempting to implement habits that align with their self-image. Establishing new habits gave youth in our collective the sense that they were truly in charge of their destinies and fates and allowed them to move purposefully towards living the lives they envisioned.

Engaging in Positive Self-talk. Youth in the collective stressed that self-acceptance and affirmation were essential to wellness. Engaging in the tactic of positive self-talk improved wellness by reminding young people of their value and strengths, moving them closer to holding

a positive self-image. While engaging in positive self-talk was universally viewed as important

for wellness, the analysis revealed that youth had divergent experiences implementing this

wellness tactic. These divergent experiences are well represented by a polylogue sparked when

Tree, 21 years old (they) shared the photo and caption featured in Figure 28.

Figure 28

Wellness is to Practice Self-Love

My little sister likes to ask for my mirror to look at herself when she gets something new

to wear. She stares at herself while smiling happily, proud of how she looks. As I

watched her, a thought popped into my head, "When did I stop looking at myself in the

mirror like that? Why do I now have to convince myself that I am beautiful?" I became

jealous of my little sister, envious of what she saw in the mirror that I couldn't see in

myself. To practice wellness is to practice self-love. The whole meaning behind the photo

is just creatively depicting what my little sister sees in herself that just makes her so

happy. In the photo, I wanted to depict how I now understand to express my wellness,

especially to myself: I have to look at myself in the mirror and say positive things. (Tree,

21 years old (they) [photovoice activity]

Tree's photo, caption, and comments in the collective space explained that they were on a

journey to engage in more positive self-talk. Through self-reflection, Tree had identified that

they needed to address how they spoke to themselves to improve their wellness. In response to

Tree's aforementioned disclosure that they struggled with their self-image, Wolf, 25-year-old

(she), stressed the fundamentality of affirming oneself through positive self-talk to be well:

You really are your only biggest supporter. You really have to hype yourself up. You

don't want to be arrogant or anything, but even then, it really doesn't matter how it comes

off because people shouldn't dim how you feel about yourself. If you feel a certain way

about yourself, you should. That's my thing, especially being a foster youth, is we have to

cheer our own selves on. I'm going to do that all the time. [collective space]

Wolf clarified that, particularly for youth in care, wellness relies on starting from a place of self-

love and active development of self-esteem and explained that she has had to cut people out her

life who countered her positive self-talk. Duck, 35 years old (they) related to sentiments

expressed by Wolf about the need for positive self-talk and actively developing self-love. Duck

pointed out that positive self-talk and self-love can have significant impacts:

At least for me, it starts with loving self…with taking care of myself and nourishing

myself, and then hopefully that nurturing growth, and then it changes my environment, it

changes the people around me, and it changes things. [collective space]

For youth in our collective engaging in positive self-talk is a highly empowering act, an act so

powerful that it can shift the way you relate to yourself and the reality that surrounds you as the

above polylogue demonstrates. While young people have faced challenges implementing

positive self-talk in their lives, analysis revealed that engaging in self-talk was an important

wellness tactic because it was foundational to maintaining a positive self-image.

Conclusion, Strategy #4. Ultimately, youth in our collective practiced the strategy of taking

time for yourself to improve their wellness, particularly around self-mastery but ultimately in all

areas of their wellness. Embracing the wellness strategy taking time for yourself made young

people feel more grounded, more optimistic about their future and more positive about who they

were. While many youth reported struggling to implement this strategy regularly, they

universally embraced a self-growth mindset and utilized the tactics practicing self-reflection,

establishing new habits, and engaging in positive self-talk to move closer to their wellness goals

each day.

Strategy #5: Socializing and Connecting to Others

"Since a lot of us go through so much throughout our lives, we can really tell when someone

genuinely cares." (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [interview])

Socializing and connecting to others was an essential strategy for young people in our

collective's wellness leaving them feeling supported, blessed, and happy. Young people used a

variety of different tactics to implement this strategy in their daily lives, such as receiving social support from, serving, and experiencing joy with others.

Receiving Social Support. Young people in our collective benefited from connection with various supportive individuals who provided them with essential emotional support, advice, and resources. While some youth acknowledged that in the moment, they do not always fully appreciate the social support they receive, all youth saw great value in individuals taking an interest in them and supporting them.

For example, during his interview, Marcus Grant, 25 years old (he), shared that as a child, adults would provide him with the tangible resource of rides to the library, noting that "the library was a pretty good place" and that adults in his life were ensuring he was not "running the streets". While as a child, he didn't reap many benefits from playing on library computers, he now appreciates that adults ensured that he had a safe place to spend his free time. Providing rides to Marcus Grant during this critical life juncture improved his wellness by assisting him access to a joyful environment but also improved his wellness by preventing him from getting involved in activities that could have threatened his survival. Bernadette, 19 years old (they), similarly discussed their appreciation of the advice they received.

> My boyfriend and I have been together a very long time now… We fight with each other a lot of the time about me, mostly because I don't really recognize my poor taking-care-of-myself habits until he tells me about it…. It's a funny little back-and-forth we have. [collective space]

Bernadette noted that they are very good at caring for others but struggle to take care of themself, sometimes forgetting to eat all day, and as a result, their boyfriend now holds them accountable

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for self-care. Despite this advice devolving into an argument at times, Bernadette characterized the guidance to prioritize their personal self-care as beneficial for their wellness.

The theme of benefiting from social support in its various forms repeatedly came up in the data across various youth and various forms of data. During her interview, Caden, 23 years old (she) described how she benefits from advice from those in her network, particularly when it comes from lived experience. Caden noted the benefits she received from her mentor's professional and personal guidance:

Like my mentor says, "Oh, I used to do this, or I experienced this when I did this." I can learn from her past mistakes, or I can learn what she went through, and I can gain that knowledge so that when I'm going through stuff, I can try different techniques. (Caden, 23 years old (she) [interview])

For Caden, the benefits of receiving advice from her mentor were feeling less alone but also feeling more prepared for the events that arose in her life. Feeling prepared made Caden feel capable of taking care of herself in times of distress, thus establishing receiving social support as a critical tactic to improve wellness.

While some youth benefited from tangible support or advice, most youth noted benefiting from pure emotional support and encouragement during their times of need. For example, Gabrielle, 22 years old (she), discussed the immense benefits of receiving emotional support:

I was just in a support group for foster youth that had more to do with emotional health. It was cool because I've never been in one for foster youth. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she), [interview])

After years of feeling isolated due to her child welfare status, Gabrielle benefited so much from being supported emotionally by other foster youth that she wanted to be able to replicate the experience for other young people:

> Not having them [our parents] because they passed away when we [Gabrielle and her brother] were young, we had to go through so much personally, emotionally…it [the support group] really did wonders for me, and it made me want to one day run my own little support group where I participate in an organization where they help young people. [interview]

The unique nature of that type of social support made Gabrielle feel less isolated socially and helped heal the emotional pain of feeling misunderstood and alone. Descriptions of the wellness benefits of receiving emotional support, namely easing emotional pain were recurrent in the data. Similarly, to Gabrielle, Hazard, 20 years old (he), stressed the importance of emotional support in terms of addressing emotional malaise when speaking about the benefits of his relationship with his therapist. Hazard noted in his interview that "sometimes generally, we need someone we can talk to…Just someone that you can talk to without judgment, and he understands." Hazard valued the unconditional support of his therapist because of their ability to hold Hazard's emotional strain. The stories of Hazard and Gabrielle demonstrate that, at times, youth greatly benefited from having someone to help hold their emotional burdens. Analysis of study data made clear that the wellness of young people in our collective was improved by receiving social support in the forms of emotional support, advice, and resources from their network.

Serving Others. Young people were not only on the receiving end of social support. Many youth discussed actively pursuing opportunities to support and serve others. Young people greatly benefited from feeling connected to others through service and felt that contributing to

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the lives of others improved their own lives. Bob exemplified this type of thinking when he recalled

> I know people inspired me when I was growing up to be a better version of myself. Also, the other side of it is you give a little, you get a lot back. We give a little to each other, then we get a blessing in our own life. Just being able to give and take equally. That also makes me happy. That's really it. This is what makes me happy. Other people smiling or inspiring other people.

By paying social support forward, Bob felt connected to others and benefited emotionally through experiencing joy. In a similar vein, Marcus Grant, 25 years old (he) attributes his lived experiences to his realization that having positive relationships are beneficial to your wellness. Like Bob, Marcus Grant consciously serves others to support his social wellness:

> Living the way that I lived, grew me to be more sheltering of others. I take care of my little brothers and sisters, even though we're not related. If it's just foster, that's fine. It made me cherish those relationships on a completely different level. Then I see a lot of other people taking their relationships for granted. I'm just really appreciative that I can open my eyes and see what's really important.

In addition to supporting his siblings, Marcus Grant also took the time to be of service to those he hardly knew, as depicted in the photo and caption of Figure 29.

Figure 29

Wellness is Progress

I was helping a pastor move people's furniture, and they were moving into new locations; it was kind of my exercise and my way to get out. This was something that I saw because the gentleman had his mind focused on getting the goals so quickly, that he rented this room for $400 a month, which is more of a shed. The stuff on the walls is not his. We helped him clear out this space so that he could live there. This gentleman was coming off the streets, he was trying to get out of the weather, he was trying to become a lot more in tune with getting back into society. You know what? That gentleman is now doing very well. This photo reminds me that wellness is progress—changing the method, not the goal. (Marcus Grant, 25 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

Engaging in service deepened Marcus Grant's social connections and led to self-reflection and a new dedication to carrying himself through the world in a particular fashion, improving his wellness. For young people in our collective, being of service to others benefited their wellness by providing them with an opportunity to connect with others, to participate in positive, joyful outlets for their energy, and to reflect on the manner service had benefited their lives.

Experiencing Joy with Others. Young people also noted that relaxing and experiencing joy with others was an important tactic that benefited their social and emotional wellness. While this tactic encompassed many social activities, it is defined by the fact that youth described these activities as producing feelings of joy, calmness, and excitement. The experiences Tree, 21 years old (they), had with anime exemplified how this tactic benefits young people. Engaging with anime was one of Tree's major relaxation activities, supporting their wellness by making them feel "calm, "relieved" and "free". [interview] Tree enjoyed anime socially as well as independently, noting that: "I spend time with my brother. Sometimes we watch it together, or a new show would come out, and my friend will watch it, and then we'll talk about it later." [interview]

Dajanie, 18 years old (she), similarly discussed how experiencing joy with her social network greatly benefited her wellness:

> We laugh constantly. I call it a natural high, how some people are when they're on stuff, they are all laughing, and they're having a good time…. With [my boyfriend], it's a natural high. It's just there. He's a best friend to me. It's nothing but laughter and comfort.…I'm a very joyful person. I need to have joy in my life to be okay. [interview]

Data analysis demonstrated that most of our collective, like Dajanie, had a need for joy and that

one of the wellness benefits of socializing and connecting to others was fulfilling that need. As

the photo and caption in Figure 30 make clear enjoying a meal with his friends is about much

more than simply meeting a biological need for J, 26 years old (he). Rather, it fills a deep need

for joy, connection and support that eating alone would simply not fill.

Figure 30

Who Doesn't Like Food

Sharing a meal or breaking bread with others is and has often been a great way to

connect with others. I myself have gotten to know my closest friends even better when

eating a meal with them. I mean, who doesn't like food, right?! I like to say 'Friends are

Family' because since I was in foster care and was taken from my mother, I don't know

too many of my family members too well, and I'm not super close to the ones that I do

have connections with. It's like I've created my own family, so to speak. (J, 26 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

Experiencing a moment of joy with others helped J fill the void being disconnected from his family at a young age created. While youth in our collective experienced joy in a variety of different ways, analysis elucidated that social joy filled a unique wellness need for youth.

Conclusion, Strategy #5. Youth in our collective noted that socializing and connecting to others improved their social, emotional, and self-mastery wellness. Connecting with others improved young people's lives in many ways, from helping them access resources to improving their mood. Young people used a variety of different tactics to implement this strategy in their daily lives, including receiving social support, serving others, and experiencing joy with others. Still, regardless of tactic, young people shared in their insights that despite occasional conflict, socializing with others could exponentially increase the impact of their efforts to improve their wellness.

Strategy #6: Discovering Body Care

I'll go on a hike, and I'll walk a trail. I'll sit in my house, and I'll do reps, pushups, I'll do sit-ups, a lot of ab work, lunges. I got a whole list of things... It's a form of meditation for me for not just my mind, but my body. (Jasmyn, 26 years old (she) [interview])

Young people in our collective discussed embracing various physical activities, from relaxing baths to running until their legs burned, to discover how to care for their bodies and develop their wellness. Despite the diversity of activities, overarching analysis identified four tactics of discovering body care: curating body care activities, moving the body, embracing holistic body care, and attending to the body together.

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Curating Body Care Activities.   One of the most prominent tactics young people used to discover body care was taking the time to curate and adopt body care activities that meet their preferences and needs. Young people in the study emphasized that there were many ways to care for the body and that it was essential for them to discover and establish habits that worked for them in terms of their goals, personality, and context.

When asked to reflect on what wellness represents to her, Gabrielle, 22 years old (she), readily discussed the importance of finding a way to get active that aligned with her interests:

> [It's important to do] some sort of physical activity that brings you joy and fun. For me, that would be dance. I'm not a gym girl, I get bored so easily [and] I don't feel comfortable being in that space. But if it's anything dance-related or even just dance, I love that. (Gabrielle, 22 years old (she) [interview])

Gabrielle expanded on her body care habits, noting that they are connected to her personality as "not a gym girl" and that, in her opinion, physical wellness should be about pursuing joy. In addition to speaking of physical care preferences, some young people discussed the importance of embracing a hacking approach to their physical wellness by cracking a habit code. The art of Dajanie, 18 years old (she), in Figure 31exemplifies this reflective curation approach when finding ways to meet body care goals.

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Figure 31

Out of a Fancy Cup
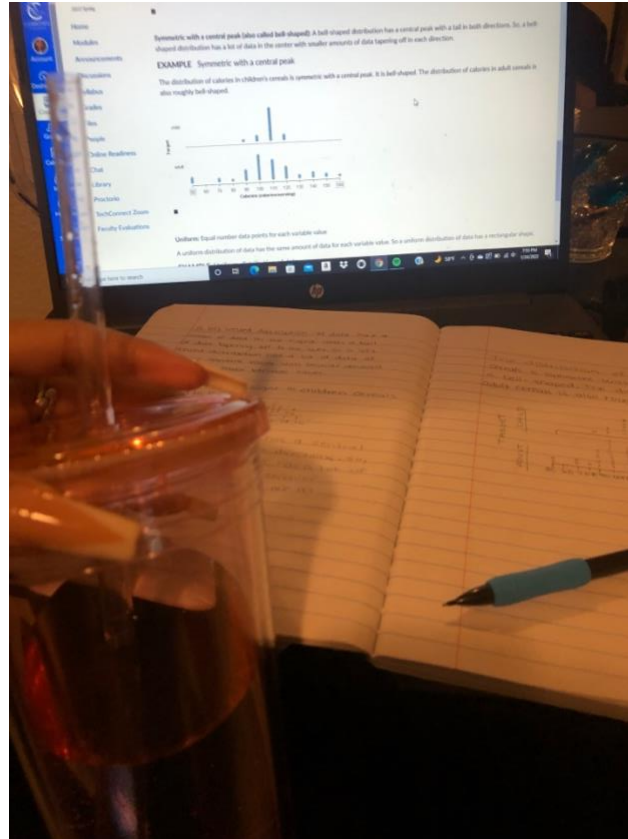
Staying hydrated is caring for my body and wellness. I drink a lot of water, and I've

realized [I] drink more water when it's out of a fancy cup instead of out of a water bottle.

(Dajanie, 18 years old (she) [photovoice activity])

Dajanie denoted how she adopted a particular habit of drinking water out of a cup rather than a

bottle based on the observation that switching vessels led to a behavioral change that was more

aligned with her goals. The embrace of a strategic approach to curating body care was evident

across the data from multiple youth highlighting the widespread use and benefits of this

approach. Peanut, 18 years old (she), similarly adopted strategic habits after self-reflection to

ensure she could accomplish her goal of improving her diet. During her interview, Peanut noted

that "I just started eating fruits and going for runs. Instead of eating junk food, I just eat mangoes and fruit when I want to eat junk food." Peanut detailed her strategies for achieving her nutrition goals and explained adaptive strategies for moments when this approach faltered. "For two weeks now [I just eat mangoes and fruit when I want to eat junk food]. It doesn't satisfy my cravings, but when I do want chips or junk food really bad, I just go to sleep." In this way, Peanut, like Dajanie, explains that she has discovered and adopted body care habits to reach her body care goals. Across the collective, curating body care habits supported young people to feel connected to their bodies and their body care goals, leaving youth feeling in control of and excited about their wellness trajectories.

Moving the Body. The vast majority of youth in the collective discussed moving the body regularly as essential to their wellness. Youth turned to many different activities to accomplish this tactic, with a portion of youth turning to multiple activities or stressing that any movement is good movement.

Figure 32

I Grew up Outside

Getting outside and being active definitely contributes to my wellness. I remember as a kid,

I grew up outside. Before I was in foster care, my mom would say, 'Go outside, go get

some fresh air outside'. My grandparents did the same thing… So, for me, that came easy

to me to go outside because I enjoyed it. I liked playing sports. I was a weird kid, picking

up grass, looking at worms, and stuff like that. I've just always enjoyed playing outside. (J,

26 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

J exemplified the importance of movement through his reflections on the photograph and caption

of Figure 32 during our group session, observing that

getting outside and being active definitely contributes to my wellness… Whatever activity

people like to do, you guys already know I love basketball, but biking, swimming, dancing,

whatever it is, but getting outside and being active, I think, is something that's important

that contributes to people's wellness. (J, 26 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

The adoption of the idea that any movement is beneficial to wellness was particularly relevant to

a segment of our youth who existed in contexts that made exercise and movement more

challenging. For example, Caden, 23 years old (she), who was pregnant at the time of her

interview, explained that she considered movement essential to her physical wellness but that her

perspective regarding how movement fit into her life had changed due to her new context:

> Physical health is definitely something that I'm still working [on]…I feel like I need to do
>
> more with my physical health now that…the condition that I'm in, it's just like pushing
>
> myself to get up and do things. When I wasn't pregnant, it was so easy to [say], "okay, I'm
>
> going to go to the gym," or "okay, I'm going to do this," and now it's like "All right, I just
>
> walked up some stairs I'm cool. I'm out of breath." …. And for me, it looks like this little
>
> ball, yoga ball I have. Bouncing on it now, doing exercises on it now. I can't really run or
>
> like do this type of stuff that I used to do. Now [I do] just even little exercises online, just
>
> something where I'm moving my body. [interview]

Caden's shifting physical condition due to her pregnancy also resulted in a shifting perspective

regarding the importance of focusing on moving your body in any way you can to support

physical wellness. While moving the body could take many shapes, its impact on the wellness of

members of our collective was universally positive regardless of life circumstances.

Embracing Holistic Body Care.   In addition to moving the body, analysis revealed the importance of embracing holistic body care as a wellness tactic through participating in activities such as eating nutritious food, hydrating, bathing, and sleeping. This tactic of body care discovery focused on maintaining the body and caring for it in its current state. Dajanie, 18 years old [she], explained that as a young person, she grew up in a home with few financial resources, so when she got her first job, she began investing in her body care in new ways:

> I would walk, I would go with my backpack, and I would come back with it on my [skate]board, completely full of face masks, all kinds of stuff for my hair, for the shower. I think at a point, I had bought two bins, and I filled them with snacks, granola bars, puddings, and stuff because I have a problem with losing weight a lot. I tried everything because I had the money [and] I was able to go out and get it. [collective space]

For Dajanie and other youth in our collective, embracing new holistic body care habits to address their wellness was an empowering journey. For Hazard, 20 years old (he), holistic body care was best addressed through nutritional strategies: "I eat foods with low carbs. Most of my dinners are protein and fruits. I also calculate the amount of calories in the foods I eat. Not like I'm on a health diet or anything, but it's just something I like to do." [interview] Hazard's enjoyment of managing his diet further exemplifies the pleasure youth experienced from their empowering body care journeys.

For some youth, the activities they considered important to body care were in opposition to society's typical focus on movement as the key to body care. For example, Duck, 35 years old (they) explained that stillness was essential to body care (see Figure 33).

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Figure 33

Where I Go to Breathe

This is where I go to breathe. I feel like taking care of my body started from the outside inward for me. I feel as though I had to address my environment before I was able to focus on my being. (Duck, 35 years old (they) [photovoice activity]

For Duck, finding a calm environment and breathing was essential to body care, even if that is not the most common approach. A subset of youth stressed the need for rest to be considered a form of holistic body care, and their statements led to the collective space being a site of reflection on the essential role of rest in body care. Most apparent in the data from collective spaces there was a unified embrace of an expansive definition of holistic body care that included rest, eating and other non-movement activities.

Attend to the Body Together. While young people primarily discussed physical wellness in individualistic ways at times, youth discussed their pursuit of body care in social terms. A segment of youth discussed consulting with or receiving advice from authority figures on manners to improve their physical wellness. Primarily, youth mentioned health professionals as providing important advice that they incorporated into their physical wellness habits: "I've been told by my doctors to always take fruits, and I have never dropped it. I eat fruits every day." (Hazard, 20 years old (he) [collective space]) Another youth shared that "I didn't really show a lot of care to myself as a woman when it comes to eating healthy and exercising until I found out some not too good news from my doctor" (Tati, 22 years old (she) [collective]). As Tati and Hazard's statements demonstrate, for a segment of young people, interactions with individuals who provide body care advice are meaningful and supportive as they strive to meet their wellness goals.

Youth like Marcus Grant, 25 years old (he) and Hazard, 20 years old (he) described the benefits of having a network of individuals with whom to pursue physical wellness in solidarity. Marcus Grant shared the meaningful wellness benefits of his new habit of working out with his friend:

> My buddy has just gotten this workout equipment at his house, and we live close to each other. So, we work out together. Typically, it's pressing or squats and pushups or sit-ups. That's about it. But it's more than just the workout itself; it's just the connection.

While Marcus Grant described himself as a relatively reserved person, connecting with his friend through physical exercise was meaningful to him, so much so that he even continued to participate in these joint workout sessions when he had long workdays or felt under the weather. Hazard also greatly valued the benefits of working with others to care for the body, which he

explained during one of our group sessions when presenting a photograph from his gym (see Figure 44).

Figure 44

We Push Each Other
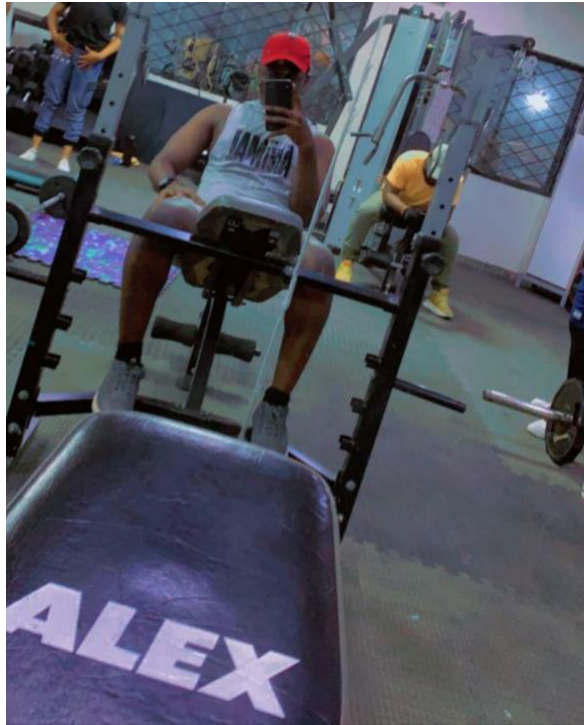
> To enjoy the glow of good health, you must exercise, what better way to do it than with your friends? I've met a lot of friends in this gym, where we come together, motivate each other, and try to achieve goals. Apart from maybe going there to be fit, I go there to meet others that are like me, which makes me well. We push each other. (Hazard, 20 years old (he) [photovoice activity])

He explained, "this photo… resonates with wellness and belonging because…we do stuff together. We push each other. Maybe if I'm getting tired, someone else pushes me, and if the other person gets it bad, we push like that." Hazard made it clear that his trips to the gym provided him with unique and especially impactful wellness because of its dual social and

physical nature. While most young people in our collective did not discuss their body care relationally, those who did experienced compounded wellness benefits, improving wellness improvements in multiple areas at once, which increased their motivation to move toward their wellness goals.

Conclusion, Strategy #6. Caring for the body was a wellness strategy that fundamentally served physical wellness. Still, as the case for all other wellness strategies, its impact broke into other wellness areas, such as emotional, self-mastery and social wellness. Young people's tactics for caring for the body were diverse, supporting young people's broad definition of physical wellness. Eating well, resting, moving the body, and taking time to understand one's physical wellness goals and habits were all activities youth used to care for the body. Despite the diversity of activities, overarching analysis identified four tactics of discovering body care: curating body care activities, moving the body, embracing holistic body care, and attending to the body together. This variety demonstrates the importance that physical wellness played in their lives. Regardless of circumstance, from pregnancy to life-threatening diseases, young people pursued physical wellness, and each young person in our collective did it on their own terms.

Section 5.2 Summary: Experiential Wellness Strategies

This section provided data on the wellness experiences of members of our collective, including providing an overview of the six strategies they embraced to move towards wellness and the manner these strategies impacted wellness. In summation, while self-expression did not look the same for all, expressing themselves universally made youth feel calm, powerful, and connected, sentiments foundational to being well. Our collective embraced temporary distractions, which allowed them to use escapism to improve or protect their wellness by experiencing moments defined by happiness and peace, survival and resistance and liberation

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and choice. Regardless of spiritual beliefs or tactics, youth in our collective benefited from feeling connected to and supported by something larger than themselves. While many youth reported struggling to implement it, embracing the wellness strategy taking time for yourself made young people feel more grounded, more optimistic about their future and more positive about who they were. Connecting with others through various tactics improved young people's lives in many ways, from helping them access resources to improving their mood. Young people in our collective discussed embracing various physical activities, from relaxing baths to running until their legs burned, to discover how to care for their bodies and develop their wellness. Through reviewing the six thematic groups of wellness strategies that youth established of expressing yourself; embracing temporary distractions; shifting to the spiritual realm; taking time for yourself; socializing and connecting with others; and discovering body care we have illuminated how young people in our collective experience wellness.

Chapter 5 Conclusion: On Wellness Definitions and Strategies

This chapter clarifies that young people impacted by foster care are deeply motivated to improve their lives and take meaningful strategic actions to improve their lives each day. Young people are cognizant of their personalities, beliefs, and contexts and make decisions to improve their wellness based on these realities. While young people benefit from support and resources, this chapter illuminates the insightful perspectives that young people have on their wellness, what it requires, and how to move toward it. In the next chapter, we will discuss these results further and explore their implications.

Chapter 6

Discussion

In the following chapter, I explore and contextualize the impacts of our collective rewriting and rerighting process in terms of the knowledge built on the conceptualizations and experiences of wellness for older youth impacted by foster care. We aimed as a collective to use the process of rewriting the narrative regarding the wellness of older youth impacted by foster care to correct inaccuracies and absences and to assert the right of youth to tell their stories and to build a future based on their stories. Contextualizing and exploring our study findings are an important step in that process. I begin by addressing the results in terms of youth's definition of wellness through returning to the rootedness framework and considering how our collective knowledge building has evolved our wellness theoretical framework. Through doing so, I emphasize the benefits and necessity of embracing youth analysis to create theoretical frameworks for social welfare research and practice. Next, I contextualize youth's definition and experiences of wellness by placing findings in conversation with current literature regarding the wellness of young people impacted by foster care. This section highlights the importance of centering youths' wellness practices and experiences when designating preferred youth outcomes in child welfare scholarship and interventions to ensure youth are supported in a socially just manner. Lastly, I summarize the larger implications of this study on social work scholarship and child welfare practice and policy by making the argument that social justice requires that child welfare policies and practices invest in the humanity of young people by centering their conceptualizations and experiences of wellness.

Embrace Youth Analysis to Create Theoretical Frameworks for Social Welfare Research

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A central goal of this study was to generate a theoretical framework that was based in the lived experience and embodied knowledge of youth impacted by foster care and could be applied to future scholarship concerning the wellness of older young people impacted by foster care. Our collective's exploration of wellness was founded in the poetic knowledge of womanist radical imaginers through our use of the rootedness theoretical framework. By starting with poetic knowledge rather than academic theories, we embraced a fertile relatable starting place to the collective meaning-making process rather than a theoretical endpoint. Rootedness was originally conceived as a multidimensional self-defined framing of wellness as an act of resistance against marginalization and an active step towards liberatory imagining. Five distinct but intersecting wellness dimensions made up the rooted framework: spiritual connectedness, corporal sustenance, creative expression, collective belongingness, and transformative efficacy. While the rootedness framework provided us with an essential starting point, through collective and youth-centered individual analysis I created the following reimagined the rootedness framework (see Figure 45), which defines wellness for older youth impacted by foster care.

Figure 45

Revised Rooted Framework

Note. A wellness framework for older youth impacted by foster care.

In a similar fashion to the original rootedness framework, youth's definition of wellness was inclusive of the principle that wellness is a multi-component individualized phenomenon. This is represented by the six distinct wellness pieces in the graphic that nest tightly together to create a mosaic of overall wellness. However, unlike the original rootedness framework, the revised framework depicts wellness as constantly evolving in terms of the significance of individual wellness components in a person's life. The evolving nature of each wellness piece is depicted in the figure by the multidirectional arrows on the borders of each wellness piece, signifying that each wellness component can grow or shrink in correspondence to its level of significance to a youths' overall wellness at any moment in time. While identifying common wellness components, youth argued that the extent each wellness component supported a youth's

overall wellness varied based on the nature of the youth and the evolving context the youth existed in.

In terms of wellness components, spiritual connectedness, corporal sustenance, collective belongingness, and transformative efficacy from the original rootedness framework map well onto the youth-defined components of spiritual, physical, social, and self-mastery wellness featured in the revised framework. While the titles and definitions of these components have minor distinctions, the central themes of these components align. Conversely, the revised rootedness framework differs from the original rootedness framework because it excludes the components of creative expression, which was central to youths' experiences of wellness but not their definition and transformative efficacy, with transformation being considered by youth as a part of the process of pursuing wellness across all areas rather than a wellness component in isolation. The revised framework also includes the components of emotional and survivalist wellness as a direct result of study findings.

The evolution of the rooted framework based on the results of collective analysis and youth-centered individual analysis of our diverse dataset highlights three essential theoretical points about the wellness of young people impacted by foster care. Young people's conceptualizations of wellness as a state are deeply fluid and contextual, with young people arguing in favor of a framework that honors the fact that young people's wellness, like young people themselves, are in a state of transition and growth. Secondly, wellness is reliant on wellness in several subareas, including social, physical, emotional, survivalist spiritual and self-mastery wellness. Thirdly, young people's conceptualization of wellness is non-hierarchal, standing in contrast to hierarchal theoretical frameworks of wellness commonly endorsed within social work practice, such as the popularized Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid (Dover,

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2016; Hale et al., 2019; Maslow, 1943; Noltemeyer et al., 2020).   The rootedness framework thus contributes to the theory regarding the nature of wellness for young people impacted by foster care, providing a foundation for future research in this area, including the development of wellness measures and interventions that align with how young people define wellness. Based on our experience as a collective, I argue in favor of shaping research studies around theoretical frameworks that are inclusive of youth experiences and knowledge as a way to make these ventures relevant to the population.

Center Youth Wellness Practices and Experiences When Designating Preferred Youth Outcomes in Child Welfare Scholarship and Interventions

A central goal of this study was to reright and rewrite narratives regarding the wellness of older youth impacted by foster care and central to that narrative are the outcomes that are used to measure and exemplify the wellness of these youth. Currently, child welfare scholarship and interventions use a variety of measures such as mental health diagnosis, homelessness, food security, and educational achievement to represent the wellness of older youth impacted by foster care. However, our approach to this inquiry aimed to provide young people with the opportunity to exert their rights over the wellness narrative and to rewrite the conversation regarding the outcomes used to measure and represent their experiences and wellness. The methodology of this study considered targeted analysis of young people's wellness experiences as foundational, considering these experiences as vital data regarding what experiences advance wellness for young people and as youth-centered indicators of the wellness of young people. Our collective's wellness experiences included the use six thematic groups of wellness strategies: expressing yourself, embracing temporary distractions, shifting to the spiritual realm, taking time for yourself, socializing and connecting with others, and discovering body care. Across youth's

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individual statements during interviews, polylogues in collective spaces, captions, and

photographs, it was clear that collective members regularly experienced transformative,

reflective wellness practice. Wellness did not just happen for young people in our collective;

instead, it was created through the purposeful actions they took that are represented by the six

thematic wellness strategies.

Young people in this study outlined in detail their experiences of wellness and, through

doing, not only rewrote conceptualizations of wellness but righted youth's power over their

narratives and futures by demonstrating their capability of manifesting wellness in their lives

regardless of context. While much of the literature on young people impacted by the foster care

system focuses on outcomes that highlight their self-sufficiency deficits or their general

disenfranchisements such as rates of homelessness or incarceration, through sharing their

purposeful experiences of wellness, young people in this collective highlighted their resistance,

their freedom dreaming and their thriving in ways not captured by those types of outcome

measures. This study demonstrates the necessity of utilizing a range of outcome measures that

can capture the full scope and nuance of how young people experience wellness if we aim to

support young people to be well on their terms. Using the six thematic groups of wellness

strategies identified through this study was an indicator that our collective members were

moving closer to their wellness goals, and the strategies could be utilized as wellness indicators

for future research and interventions for young people impacted by foster care. For example,

rather than solely measuring if older youth impacted by foster care were incarcerated or

unhoused and using those factors as the measures of their wellness, we could measure whether

youth regularly engaged in creative expression or had opportunities to participate in holistic body

care as a measure of their wellness in addition to survival and self-sufficiency oriented outcomes.

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Interventions could be aimed at shifting youth's access to the spiritual realm in addition to their educational outcomes.

Within their current contexts of disenfranchisement and oppression, young people in our collective demonstrated that they were capable of creating a world of wellness for themselves and that not only did they have a right to experience wellness on their terms but also, they had a right for their experiences of wellness to be recognized, highlighted, and appreciated. In alignment with the work of Christina Sharpe (2016), youth's wellness experiences drive home the point that young people have the right to be viewed as more than the subjected, to be viewed as powerful reflective actors who have goals outside of self-sufficiency, and it is essential that research and interventions use outcome measures that align with that narrative otherwise our support for youth will remain incapable of supporting their "all encompassing dreams of freedom" (Kelley, 2002).

Place Youth in Dialogue with Existing Child Welfare Literature

The definition of wellness and the experiential knowledge that resulted from the freedom dreaming of youth in this study includes insights that are not detached from existing child welfare scholarship. Our study makes a unique contribution to child welfare scholarship because it centers youth perspectives and analysis on wellness and when placed in dialogue with existing literature, our findings provide important context to existing data and vice versa. The following section will review each component youth identified as essential to wellness for young people impacted by foster care, social, physical, emotional, self-mastery, survivalist, and spiritual wellness, and place youth's conceptualizations and experiences in these areas in conversation with existing child welfare scholarship making clear the benefits of incorporating youth centered analysis in existing and future child welfare scholarship.

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Social

Our collective described social wellness as having the skills and abilities to socialize with others in a fashion that positively impacts your life and the lives of others and having access to a network of supportive individuals whom you relate and can socialize with regularly. Socializing and connecting to others was, unsurprisingly, an essential strategy for young people in our collective to experience social wellness, and young people used a variety of different tactics to implement this strategy in their daily lives, such as seeking advice from, receiving emotional support from, relaxing with, and serving others. Young people also experienced social wellness when pursuing activities that supported their wellness in other areas in social manners. For example, young people often participated in activities to support their physical wellness, such as working out with others which also supported their social wellness.

Research on the social networks of and the impact of social support on the lives of youth impacted by foster care provides support to our collective's findings on the importance of social support for this population and the manner young people experience social support. Research on youth aging out of foster care has shown that having social support may relate to a variety of positive psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Collins et al., 2010; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Geenen & Powers, 2007; McCauley et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2016). One exploratory empirical study on the social networks of youth transitioning out of foster care found that youth with mentors were significantly more likely to have graduated from high school or received a GED and significantly less likely to have experienced an episode of homelessness (Collins et al., 2010). A qualitative study found that foster youth themselves and the adults responsible for their care, child welfare workers, foster parents, and other key professionals, believed that it was important for foster youth to have a caring, long-term relationship with

someone as they move into adulthood and that having such a relationship may even be more important than receiving formal services (Geenen & Powers, 2007). In combination, this scholarship provides support for our collective's arguments that social support is an important component of wellness for young people impacted by foster care because of its direct impact on a variety of positive outcomes for youth. Additionally, our findings demonstrate that youth often experience social support as a form of tangible support to overcome challenges and implement positive habits in the areas of physical and emotional wellness, which provides insights on why social support is associated with a diverse set of positive outcomes.

In addition to providing nuance to the importance of social connection to wellness, placing our findings in conversation with existing child welfare scholarship also highlights the importance of our collective's findings regarding how young people access social support namely through regularly engaging in opportunities to build and interact with a supportive social network. Curry and Abrams (2015) called for more research on the ways in which the child welfare system can intervene to ensure youth are able to forge healthy attachments despite the disruptions of relationships they have experienced during their time in care. Samuels and Pryce (2008) called for additional youth perspective studies that can be used to guide child welfare practitioners in establishing a context that provides a range of opportunities for youth to experience mutual support and interdependence. The diverse tactics young people in our collective utilized to support their social wellness respond to the calls of Curry, Abrams, Samuels, and Pryce by demonstrating that young people are capable of building and using social support networks when provided with opportunities to connect with others through activities that they are naturally drawn like artistic and physical activities. In conclusion, when placed in conversation, our study findings and existing child welfare scholarship provide compelling

arguments regarding the central role social wellness plays in the wellness of older youth impacted by foster care, the association between social wellness and other positive outcomes for youth and the process that connects these factors, and youth's needs for opportunities to build and maintain their social support networks to be well.

Physical

Our collective defined physical wellness as inclusive of having healthy bodies free of disease and pain through freely and regularly participating in activities you believe serve the body, such as exercise, eating, resting, and bathing, based on your physical wellness goals. In terms of experiencing physical wellness young people in our collective described using various tactics to develop and maintain their physical wellness including curating body care strategies, moving the body, using holistic body care strategies, and collaborating with others to attend to the body.

Research has argued that due to a mixture of risk factors, such as lapses in preventative care before and while in care, young people impacted by foster care are at high risk of a variety of negative physical health conditions (Courtney et al., 2020; Deutsch & Fortin, 2015; Halfon et al., 1995; Kools, 1997). For example, Courtney and colleagues (2020) found that young adults transitioning out of foster care were less likely than a nationally representative sample of similarly aged youth to rate their health as excellent or very good (42.4% vs. 72.3%). Young people impacted by foster care have been shown to experience chronic physical health conditions in the areas of oral, ophthalmologic, physical growth, dermatologic and musculoskeletal health at high rates, with many youth experiencing multiple chronic conditions (Halfon et al., 1995). Research has also suggested that these high rates persist once youth transition to adulthood (Deutsch & Fortin, 2015; Hansen et al., 2004; Kools, 1997). The high rates of physical health

conditions experienced by this population provides important context as to why our collective of youth spoke in detail about the importance of pursuing physical wellness. A third of the youth in our collective explicitly discussed managing chronic health conditions during their individual interviews and group dialogue; however, youth were never explicitly asked to disclose this, so more youth could have been navigating physical health challenges. Our collective's focus on physical health demonstrates that young people impacted by foster care are not apathetic about their physical health and are invested in thriving in this area, providing evidence that poor physical health outcomes for this population are unlikely due to youth undervaluing its importance.

While providing context to youth's emphasis on physical health, it is important to note that child welfare scholarship on physical health rarely discussed directly engaging young people to identify manners to prevent and mitigate the negative physical health outcomes of this population (Deutsch & Fortin, 2015; Hansen et al., 2004; Kools, 1997). Rather, studies commonly identified a need to educate and provide resources to caregivers and advocates, which, while important strategies, do not acknowledge the powerful role young people can play in improving their physical health, which youth in our study highlighted. When placed in the context of existing literature, our study's findings demonstrate that young people transitioning out of foster care are particularly worthy of support in implementing strategies that support their physical health. This is because youth transitioning out of care are likely to experience poor outcomes, they care about their physical health, and they have important insights on strategies that can help them move towards physical wellness. Current approaches to supporting the physical health of young people in foster care have not demonstrated they can effectively address the needs of the population, and meaningfully engaging youth may be the shift in practice needed to make progress in this area.

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Emotional

Emotional wellness was described by our collective as being capable of feeling the full emotional spectrum (happiness, sadness, anger) but spending much of your time in a state of clarity, stability, and peace because you can understand, process, and manage your emotions effectively. Young people described experiencing emotional wellness by participating in a wide range of strategies from expressing themselves creatively, participating in purposeful distraction, turning to others for emotional support, and praying. While our collective did not define emotional health in terms of mental and behavioral health diagnoses, scholarship in these areas, a prevalent topic of child welfare scholarship, provides an understanding of the unique context in which youth impacted by foster care pursue emotional wellness and our findings provide insights regarding the ideal manner to support the emotional wellness of this population.

Child welfare scholarship supports that the mental health development and status of young people impacted by foster care is uniquely shaped by their experiences before and while in care and that former foster youth experience mental health problems at high rates (Aarons et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2020; McMillen et al., 2005; Oswald et al., 2010; Rubin et al., 2009). For example, Courtney and colleagues (2020) found that about a third of their sample of young people transitioning out of foster care screened positive for a mental health or substance use disorder and that youth in their study were about twice as likely than their same-age peers to have received counseling in the past year. Further, based on a systemic review Kang-Yi and Adams (2017) argue that youth aging out of foster care are at high risk of having behavioral health disorders.

Research on the unique impact of child welfare experience on the mental health development of young people impacted by foster care, in combination with the high prevalence

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of mental and behavioral challenges of this population (Aarons et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2020; McMillen et al., 2005; Oswald et al., 2010; Rubin et al., 2009), aligns with our collective's arguments that emotional health is an essential part of wellness for youth impacted by foster care. Additionally, the high rates of counseling use by young people impacted by foster care (Courtney et al., 2020) align with our findings that young people actively pursue strategies to develop their abilities to understand, process and manage their emotions. However, our collective's definition of emotional health is broader than the absence of behavioral health and mental health challenges. Our findings also demonstrate that young people utilize a broader set of strategies to develop their emotional health than therapy. Youth's experiences of emotional health include adopting strategies outside of counseling and other traditional mental health and behavioral health treatment, such as using art as a way to express and manage their emotions. Our findings support that young people are highly motivated to experience emotional wellness however, it also makes clear that not all young people utilize counseling or other formal mental health services to pursue emotional wellness, therefore, measures of emotional wellness and emotional wellness support accessible to youth must not be limited to those areas. Existing child welfare scholarship and our findings make clear that young people have high needs in the area of emotional wellness and are open to receiving support however, these supportive services must be representative of the diverse perspectives towards emotional wellness in this community.

Self-mastery

Youth in our collective conceived of self-mastery wellness to consist of viewing yourself as lovable, worthy, and powerful and acting in alignment with those beliefs. Youth in our collective experienced self-mastery wellness through practicing self-reflection, redefinition, and affirmation and through taking action towards their wellness goals in general. While there is

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minimal scholarship that assesses young people's sense of self-mastery in a manner that aligns with the conceptualization of young people in our collective, scholarship has examined elements of the component, such as research on self-sufficiency and self-esteem. This existing scholarship when combined with the findings of this study, demonstrate that there is a need for additional research to further define how young people experience self-mastery and the development of pilot measures and support services for young people in this area.

In terms of research on the self-sufficiency of youth impacted by foster care, findings are mixed. Courtney and colleagues (2010) found that two-thirds (66%) of their sample of youth transitioning out of foster care reported feeling "very prepared" to be self-sufficient. This lies in contrast to the qualitative work of Gomez and colleagues (2015), which found that young people transitioning out of foster care commonly felt a sense of helplessness and identified child welfare practices such as being socially isolated and deprived of opportunities to practice decision making with support as the causes. In comparison in the area of self-esteem, youth impacted by foster care have more consistently showed favorable outcomes. Courtney and colleagues (2020) found youth transitioning out of care to have relatively high levels of self-esteem and sense of control over their lives. For example, the mean scores of youth in Courtney and colleagues' sample (2020) when asked to rank the accuracy of the statement "what happens to me in the future mostly depends on me" and "I have many good qualities" were 4.4 with a standard deviation of .7 (response options ranged from 1, "strongly disagree," to 5, "strongly agree). Yates and Grey (2015) similarly found that their sample of 164 emancipated foster youth had relatively high levels of self-esteem, scoring on average 31.56 on Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (self-esteem scores on this scale ranged from 10 to 40 with higher scores connoting higher self-esteem).

In combination, this scholarship and our findings regarding the diverse set of activities young people participate to move towards a sense of self-mastery demonstrates that young people impacted by foster care range in terms of their sentiments in this area. It also demonstrates that further research with a wider range of measures is needed to fully understand youth's experience. This is particularly an important step if, as recommended by a segment of scholars, policy and program makers are to begin focusing additional attention on building self-efficacy among youth in foster care (Gomez et al., 2015). While our findings and existing scholarship demonstrate that despite experiencing adversities, young people impacted by foster care adopt ways of being that demonstrate impressively high levels of adaption additional high-quality support could benefit youth if implemented in a way that acknowledges there is a need to gather additional insights and improve supports over time (Yates & Grey, 2015).

Survivalist

For our collective members, survivalist wellness was inclusive of securing access to the minimum resources needed to support their existence, such as physical safety, stable housing, insurance, and wages. Young people in our collective experienced a sense of survivalist wellness when they engaged in a variety of wellness strategies, such as accessing essential resources through their social networks or distracting themselves from traumatic contexts that did not meet their most basic needs. A variety of research has addressed young people's access to vital financial resources by measuring youth outcomes in the areas of employment, housing security and financial stability and when this research is considered along with our findings it becomes clear that young people need access to tailored services that better align with their goals and experiences.

Research has demonstrated that young people impacted by foster care regularly experience economic hardships that make their basic survival difficult. Specifically, this research shows that significant amounts of young people impacted by foster care earn low wages and struggle to meet their everyday needs and living expenses (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2010; Dworsky, 2005; Macomber et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2014). Macomber and colleagues (2008) found that at age 24, young people impacted by foster care were employed at lower rates than youth nationally and youth from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, Macomber and colleagues (2008) found that the average earnings of these young people were substantially lower than youth nationally. Courtney and colleagues (2020) also discovered indicators of deficient economic resources finding that more than a quarter of their sample of young adults transitioning out of foster care qualified as being food insecure based on the USDA measure. Furthermore, Courtney and colleagues (2020) found that almost half of the young people in their sample had experienced an economic hardship, such as having their cellphone disconnected or not having enough money to pay rent in the last 12 months.

In alignment with previous scholarship, young people in our study acknowledged that having access to financial resources to meet to their basic needs was an important aspect of their wellness and that throughout their lives financial stability has been a significant barrier to their wellness. However, it is noteworthy that young people in our study did not discuss access to financial resources in isolation instead they connected access to financial resources to feelings of safety and stability and often stressed that having a sense of safety and stability was central to their financial stability goals and experiences. Scholarship around financial resources, such as Macomber and colleagues (2008), stresses that programs that serve youth impacted by foster care must continue to tailor to meet the needs of youth on various financial trajectories however, our

findings suggest additional tailoring based on youth's sense of stability and security may also be beneficial.

Our collective's lived experiences suggest that measuring young people's earnings or access to resources alone may not provide an accurate picture of how youth are experiencing their financial status increasing the risk of the child welfare system failing to identify young people who need support and failing to fully address young people's needs in this area. Findings from this study and previous scholarship indicate to fully meet the needs of young people, programs aimed at increasing young people's access to financial resources must measure and tailor services to align with youth's experiences and goals in the areas of stability and safety. Regardless of access to financial resources, young people have not reached wellness in this area until they feel a sense of safety and stability, and programs must be implemented in a manner that aligns with that principle.

Spiritual Wellness

Spiritual wellness, defined as identifying and maintaining a belief in something more significant than the self, which results in a sense of acceptance, peace, and support, was a powerful component of wellness for youth in our collective. Our collective members used a variety of tactics to pursue spiritual wellnesses, including communing with nature, praying or manifesting, communing with others over spiritual practice, and engaging with spiritual texts or objects. While youth in our collective had ranging spiritual beliefs and tactics for connecting to the spiritual realm, they universally described spiritual wellness practices as bringing them closer to wellness through making them feel calm and happy, connected to something larger than themselves, and hopeful about the future. These findings, when considered along with child welfare scholarship on the spirituality and religiousness of youth impacted by foster care,

highlight the significance spirituality plays in these young people's lives and the need for better data regarding how young people experience spirituality.

Research comparing the spirituality or religiosity of young people impacted by child welfare to youth, in general, has mixed results (Courtney et al, 2010; Courtney et al, 2020; Jackson et al., 2010). Jackson and colleagues (2010) found that 95% of their sample of adolescents in foster care believed in God, which was consistent with youth at the population level. In contrast, Courtney and colleagues (2020) found that compared to their same-age peers youth transitioning from foster care were significantly less likely to have attended a religious service in the past year. However, Courtney and colleagues (2020) noted that since the peer data was collected several years earlier their findings may be the result of the larger trend of decreasing connections to organized religion among youth. Our study's findings provide essential data to interpret these findings. Young people in our sample noted having powerful connections with the spiritual realm a finding well supported by the work of Jackson and colleagues (2010). However, our findings should not be viewed as discounting Courtney and colleagues (2020) rather, it provides another possible interpretation of those findings. Youth in our collective often described their spiritual connections in individualistic terms rather than institutional ones. These individualistic connections to the spiritual realm would not have been captured by an assessment of religious service attendance such as the one used in by Courtney and colleagues (2020). In combination, these findings suggest that measuring the religiosity or spirituality of young people impacted by foster care through measures that rely on youth connections to institutionalized forms of spiritual practices may not accurately measure the phenomenon. Therefore, Courtney and colleagues (2020) could represent a general trend towards lower rates of religious connection among youth in the modern era, a trend towards lower rates

of religious connection among youth impacted by foster care in the modern era, a shift in religious and spiritual connection source among youth impacted by foster or youth in general or some combination of the three. Ultimately, these findings call for the use of diverse sets of measures on religiosity and spiritual connection that can measure connection with organized religion as well as more individualistic religious and spiritual beliefs for young people impacted by foster care and more consistent data collection so trends can be better assessed.

In addition to research on rates of spiritual connection, child welfare scholarship has been conducted on the impact of religious and spiritual beliefs on young people's lived experiences and wellness. Jackson and colleagues (2010) found that adolescents in foster care utilized spiritual coping at high rates with over 80% of youth in their study finding spirituality to be a source of joy. Additionally, they found that almost half of their sample participated in activities they considered spiritual once a week or more. Our study's results which provide thick descriptions of how young people use spiritual practice to experience joy and cope emotionally, align with these earlier findings and provide the foundational data needed by practitioners to incorporate spirituality into their supportive services for young people impacted by foster care.

Our findings and the findings of previous scholars make clear that spirituality plays a central role in young people's lives and greatly impacts their wellness. However, this research also makes clear that current measures of spirituality may be rapidly becoming insufficient to measure this important factor in young people's lived experiences and must be refined to better align with the experiences of young people impacted by foster care today. As youth become less likely to practice their religiosity and spirituality in institutionalized ways, practitioners and policymakers must ensure that the protections and supports we provide for young people to connect spirituality protect the nuanced practices of young people today.

Conclusion

Child-taking is one of the most violent acts the state can take against its citizens, and the entire family, including the youth taken, is impacted by that violence (Briggs, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Roberts, 2019). Regardless of the reasonings or intentions of state actors through forcibly disconnecting a child from their family, the state does that child harm that is in uncertain terms irreparable. While there may remain significant debate regarding whether the child welfare system as we know should exist regardless of the results of that debate, the state has the responsibility to attempt to decrease the amount of harm it enacts on young people in its charge and to provide reparations to young people whom it has impacted. Mitigating harm and mending harm requires that the child welfare system practice in a manner that affirms the philosophy that young people have innate human value and deserve to be supported to move towards positive, dignified, and self-determined futures; however, historically and presently, the relationship between the state and youth in the care of the state sustains classist and racist ideas that dehumanize, disempower and harm young people. Young people impacted by foster care have been cast in the role of "problem" to be solved or "cost" to be minimized, resulting in policies and practices that focus on preparing youth for self-sufficiency rather than lives of wellness. Social justice requires that child welfare policies and practices invest in the humanity of young people by centering their wellness rather than centering their future costs to the state. Social justice requires that as a society, we see beyond the immediate ordeals youth face, transcend cynicism regarding what youth know and can accomplish, embrace hope for these young people's futures, and invest in an all-encompassing dream of freedom for them with them (Kelley, 2002).

Through investigating young people's definitions and experiences of wellness, we "rewrote" and "righted" the goals of the child welfare system in relation to older youth impacted by foster care to be in alignment with the freedom dreaming of young people it impacts. We "rewrote" and "righted" the narrative regarding what is owed to youth impacted by foster care to include support to not just survive but to thrive in alignment with the aspects of wellness they viewed as essential namely: social, physical, emotional, self-mastery, survivalist, and spiritual wellness. We "rewrote" and "righted" the narrative regarding youth's entitlement to control over the research, policies, and practices that impact their lived experiences, demonstrating that young people are equipped with the knowledge and capabilities to be the dream and the hope and to rise. Our results represent an essential first step in freedom dreaming of a society that supports all older youth to be well regardless of their familial statuses and relationship with the state. These results provide us with the knowledge of what wellness would be and require if, in alignment with the thinking of Audre Lorde, we abandoned the master's tools and instead "define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" (Lorde, 2007. p. 112).

> *You are a revolutionary and do not let anyone tell you differently. No matter what. We, as youth, who have experienced real shit, who are sick and tired of the stereotypes, the labels, the rules, the pressure, the reports, the inaction, the failures, and the oppression, want change. We have the voice and the power- We are the change.*

> -The Rooted Collective [collective space]

Study Consent

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Wellness as Rootedness Reconceptualized with Older Youth Impacted by the Child Welfare System

INTRODUCTION

Dominique Mikell Montgomery and community collective founders, under the sponsorship of Professor Amy Ritterbusch, from the Social Welfare department at the University of California, Los Angeles are conducting a research study. This study is being funded by the Stoneleigh Foundation and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). You were selected as a possible participant in this study because *you are between 18 and 26 years old, live in California, and have a history of involvement with the child welfare system as a teenager.* Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT A RESEARCH STUDY?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

Even though older youth in foster care receive special treatment, minimal research or policies have addressed their wellness experiences and needs. Our research collective, which consists of youth who were in care, artists, non-profit leaders, and myself, a UCLA student and researcher, has designed this study to address this gap. This study aims to provide youth like you the opportunity to define what wellness is and what youth in care need to accomplish it. Our research questions include:

- How do older youth in care define and experience wellness?
- How do youth experience their child welfare professionals centering or decentering their expressed wellness needs?
- How do young people think about the process of making practice and policy recommendations during the study?

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

Participation will take a total of about 18 hours over ten weeks.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- **Fill out a short questionnaire:** This questionnaire will ask questions about your background, such as your race and ethnicity. The questionnaire will be completed via an online survey.
- **Be interviewed:** Dominique Mikell Montgomery will ask you a few questions via an online video conference. For example, Dominique will ask you why you decided to participate in the study. The interview will last about 45 minutes and be audio-recorded.
- **Participate in ten virtual video conference group sessions:**
- Each session will be about 2 hours, be audio-recorded and occur weekly. We will pick a time based on what works well for everyone.
     - During the sessions, you and other young people will talk about wellness. Before 5 of those meetings, you will be asked to take photos and write short descriptions of your photos in response to prompts. For example, you will be asked to take a photo connecting wellness and feeling connected to others and to write a few sentences describing the photo. During the meetings, we will reflect and talk about the photos.
     - In the last few meetings, we will reflect on what we learned and create a film and recommendations list on how the foster care system can better serve foster youth. This film will be distributed through Better Youth Inc. Platforms and other targeted outreach channels collective members decide during our final group sessions.
- **Be interviewed again:** Dominique Mikell Montgomery will ask you a few questions via an online video conference after we finish group meetings. For example, Dominique will ask you about how you now define wellness for youth in foster care. The interview will last about 45 minutes and be audio-recorded.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

The risks possible from this study are mild emotional distress from talking about your wellness experiences. The study has been designed to give you complete control over how much and what you share to decrease that risk. All questions and activities are optional. We will also provide time for emotional processing during each group session.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

You may benefit from the study from having the chance to speak about your experiences with a group of peers. In addition, you may develop your communication, artistic, and leadership abilities through being a part of this study.

The results of the research may lead to changes in the current services offered to older youth in foster care and shifts in child welfare practice.

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of data security breaches.

Note: California law requires certain groups of people ("mandated reporters"), including, but not limited to, university researchers, to report to appropriate authorities the known or reasonably suspected abuse or

neglect of a child, elder, or dependent adult. Therefore, we will not maintain as confidential, information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any member of the program staff has or is given such information, he or she is required to report it to the authorities. For example, reports of a child currently being physically abused would need to be reported.

Use of personal information that can identify you:

Under most circumstances, we will not collect information that can identify you. In cases that we do collect that information (such as your full name), we will delete that information within 30 days of collecting it. The only personal information that can identify you (name, email address and phone number) will be kept on a paper document which will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked room.

How information about you will be stored:

Information about you will be kept on secure websites that use encryption, secure connectivity and other security measures. Any information we store for more than 30 days will only be labeled with a fake name or will not be labeled at all.

People and agencies that will have access to your information:

The research team, authorized UCLA personnel, and the study sponsor, may have access to study data and records to monitor the study. Research records provided to authorized, non-UCLA personnel will not contain identifiable information about you. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not identify you by name.

Employees of the University may have access to identifiable information as part of routine processing of your information, such as lab work or processing payment. However, University employees are bound by strict rules of confidentiality.

How long information from the study will be kept:

Research data with your personal information removed will be kept until research analysis is complete.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Your de-identified data may be kept for use in future research.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

You will receive $375 in Visa gift cards for participation in this study. You will receive these gift cards in 3 installments of $125 during Week 1, 5 and 9 of the study.

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

The principal investigator:

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to Dominique Mikell Montgomery. Please contact: Dominique at 831-601-8561 or dominiquem@ucla.edu. You may also contact the faculty sponsor for this study Professor Amy Ritterbusch at aritterbusch@luskin.ucla.edu.

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):
If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone:

(310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.
- You may review and request the deletion of any of your audio recordings.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

HOW DO I INDICATE MY AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE?

If you would like to participate in this study, you can tell the principal investigator.

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Note: All questions were open-ended.

1. We do not want to use your real name to label the information you share to protect your identity. What fake name would you like us to use instead? Note: Please remember this name because we would like you to use the same fake name for the whole study.
2. What month and year were born?
3. In your own words, how would you describe your racial and ethnic identity?
4. In your own words, what is your gender identity?
5. What pronouns do you use? (Examples: they, she, he, ze, no pronoun)
6. Are you currently still involved with the foster care system?
7. How many years has the foster care system impacted you in total?
8. Many of us have portions of our identity that are very important to us. Still, we don't always feel comfortable sharing with people or are not always allowed to openly share these parts of ourselves. Examples include being a parent, being a member of a specific religion, being a member of the LGBTQIA community, being in recovery, or having certain health conditions. Is there anything else about your identity you want to share? Please only share if you want to.

Appendix C

Demographics Information of Collective Members

Figure C1

Demographics Chart of Collective Members

Trait	#	%
Age		
18	2	13.33
19	1	6.67
20	3	20
21	1	6.67
22	2	13.33
23	1	6.67
24	0	0
25	4	26.67
26	1	6.67
Gender Identity		
Female	8	53.33
Male	5	33.33
Nonbinary/non- gender conforming	2	13.33
Pronouns		
She/her	8	53.33
He/Him	5	33.33
They/Them	2	13.33
Race/Ethnicity		
Black and/or African American	5	33.33
Mexican, Hispanic and/or Latino	6	40
Native American	1	6.67
Mixed; Mixed-Black and Latino; Mixed-White and Native American	2	13.33
Declined	1	6.67
Foster Care Status		
Currently in Care	6	40

Note. Contains demographic data of 15 youth who were recruited to join the research collective after its founding.

Figure C2

Demographics Chart of Collective Founders

Trait	#	
Age		
21	1	20
25	1	20
26	2	40
35	1	20
Gender Identity		
Female	3	60
Male	1	20
Nonbinary/non- gender conforming	1	20
Pronouns		
She/her	3	60
He/Him	1	20
They/Them	1	20
Race/Ethnicity		
Black and/or African American	2	40
Mexican, Hispanic and/or Latino	1	20
Native American	1	20
Mixed; Mixed-Black and Latino; Mixed-White and Native American	1	20

Note. Contains demographic data of 5 youth who founded the research collective.

Figure C3

Pseudonym Chart of Collective Founders and Members

Collective Founders
Elisabeth, 21 years old (she)*
Bob, 26 years old (he)
Michelle, 25 years old (she)
Duck, 35 years old (they)
Jasmyn, 26 years old (she)
Collective Members
Gabrielle, 22 years old (she)
Bernadette, 19 years old (they)

Hazard, 20 years old (he)
Tree, 21 years old (they)
Alexis, 25 years old (she)
Thor, 25 years old (he)
Marcus Grant, 25 years old (he)
Caden, 23 years old (she)
Dajanie, 18 years old (she)
J, 26 years old (he)
Wolf, 25 years old (she)
Victor, 20 years old (he)
Peanut, 18 years old (she)
Tati, 22 years old (she)
Mimi, 20 years old (she)

Note. Chart containing the pseudonym and basic descriptor information of each youth collective member. Youth with asterisk had no direct child welfare experience but was impacted by community level child welfare actions.

Appendix D

Interview Protocols

Interview 1 Topics

- What made you want to participate in this project?

    o What do you hope to accomplish by participating?

- When you hear the word wellness, what comes to mind?

    o What words come up for you?

    o What images come up for you?

- What do you do on the daily basis that makes you feel well?

    o What is the activity?

    o How did you become engaged in the activity?

    o Who supported or discouraged you from participating in this activity?

    o What about this activity made you feel well?

- What is one thing the child welfare system could do to help young people be well?

Interview 2 Topics

- What was the most memorable moment of your time in this study?

    o What happened during this moment?

    o Why was this moment memorable?

- What would you change about the way the study worked? What did you like about how the study worked?

- How do you define wellness for older youth in care?

- What do you think older youth in care need to be well?

- How would you like to see the child welfare system incorporate what you learned during this study?

- How do you think older youth in foster care should be incorporated in research or policymaking impacting them?

Appendix E

Photovoice Activity Prompts

Week 1: First Thoughts on Wellness

Week 2: Expressing your Creativity and Wellness

Week 3: Connecting Spiritually and Wellness

Week 4: Belonging and Connecting to Others and Wellness

Week 5: Caring for your Body and Wellness

Week 6: Being the Change and Wellness

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