Understanding Staff Influence on the Ecological Group Home Environment

by

Hilary Price Haseley

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Elizabeth Segal, Chair
Elizabeth Anthony
Cecilia Ayón

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ABSTRACT

In response to the need to accurately define group home types, this dissertation focused on providing a clear and distinct definition of the types of group home care, an articulated understanding of the role of group home staff, and an awareness of the impact individuals working in group homes have on the lives of the youth they serve and their influence on the group home environment. Using the qualitative research method Grounded Theory, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with staff who both currently work in group homes, and staff who have left the group home environment. The research question was "What is the influence of group home staff on the ecological environment of the group home?" Ecological framework was the overarching theory, and participants were asked questions regarding their relationships with youth and their impressions of staff impact within the group home. Data analysis influenced by Grounded Theory produced 5 themes: Walking into the unknown, in loco parentis with two sub- themes consanguinity and group home as a home, engagement with two sub- themes of staff/staff engagement and staff/youth engagement, staff impact on youth, with three sub-themes, managing transitions, loss and boundaries, and the final theme of supervisor support. The results indicate that staff do have an impact on the group home, both positive and negative. Also, the group home operates as an intricate ecological environment containing relationships and interactions that influence multiple internal systems. Currently there is a gap in the literature as it relates to clarity within definition of care settings. This dissertation provided a clear definition for the chosen research environment, non-locked, non-therapeutic group home. The results of this dissertation have implications for group home agencies and more broadly child welfare agencies and

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child welfare social workers in regard to hiring practices, training and supervision. This dissertation provides a springboard for a future research on the ecological group home environment and the people who work there and are responsible for the care of vulnerable children.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, who grew in my heart and forever changed my life in the best way possible. Mommy loves you past the moon. To my wife for her love and humor. To my parents for their unending cheer and support in all of my endeavors. My friends who listened to my stresses and strains, and my social worker supports for being a soft place to land when only social workers understand. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the children I've worked with in the past, present and future. I remember your faces, stories and each of you have a piece of my heart. "I'll choose you, and I'll choose you over and over and over. Without pause, without a doubt, in a heartbeat, I'll keep choosing you"- unknown.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Introduction

There has been a steady increase in children entering out-of-home care in the
state of Arizona over the past several years (AZ Department of Child Safety, 2014). As of
March 2017, there were 16,931 children in state monitored out-of-home care. (AZ
Department of Child Safety, 2017). Of these children, almost 11% are placed in group
homes, which is the third largest category of out-of-home placements in Arizona
(Children's Action Alliance, 2015). Although the foster care literature is vast, little focus
is placed on research specific to group homes and the individuals they serve. There is a
sizeable body of research on licensed foster parents and kinship/relative foster parents,
but group home care, if mentioned, is not clearly defined or discussed (James, Lansverk,
& Sylmen, 2004, Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid, & Lansverk, 2008). The gaps in
the literature surrounding group homes are the focus for this dissertation. This
dissertation sought to provide a clear and distinct definition of the types of group home
care, an articulated understanding of the role of group home staff, and an awareness of
the impact individuals working in group homes have on the lives of the youth they serve
and their influence on the group home environment. This dissertation begins to address
the above-mentioned gaps in literature, opens discussion for future training of group
home staff, and provides a foundation for future research.

Group Home Care

Group homes, also known as congregate care settings, have a long history, both in the
United States and internationally. A conversation about group homes cannot occur
without an understanding of the broader umbrella term of congregate care settings,
which includes emergency shelters and staff secured/locked settings, residential

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treatment centers and therapeutic group homes (Hyde, Kammerer, 2009). The congregate care setting as used in this dissertation is group homes. Each congregate care setting is unique and offers different levels of care and supervision. It is imperative that the research is clear in distinguishing which type of congregate care setting is being examined.

Unfortunately, the current literature provides little clarity when using the term group home. Lee and Barth (2011), discuss the multitude of group care settings within the child welfare system. Lee and Barth (2011) note the importance of defining and identifying the differences in group care as it impacts service delivery and program structure as well having an impact on outcomes. When all of the group care settings are lumped together, outcomes, whether negative or positive, are viewed as impacting the entire system, regardless of applicability based on type. It is crucial that the type of group home in focus be clearly defined. Clear definitions of type of care allow for clarity of the type of placement, the age range of youth in the home, and what types of services group homes provide.

Understanding the uniqueness of each group care setting, the different service provisions, and various outcomes will allow for child welfare social workers to make informed decisions when placing youth. The service provisions of each setting are immense. For example, when clarity in service provision and understanding of outcomes are lacking, a social worker might place a youth in a more restrictive environment than is necessary. Placing a youth in a home that is either too restrictive or not restrictive enough could be detrimental to not only the youth, but the entire group home environment and has a high likelihood of leading to a placement disruption. Outcome data that do not parse out the types of care included in the research add little to

child welfare literature in that such information does not provide direction for placement based on the child's needs and what the group home setting can best offer.

For clarity and to address the lack of clearly identifying the type of care, group homes in this dissertation were defined as non-therapeutic and unlocked facilities that house youth in the child welfare system. The working definition for this paper was influenced by the state of California's definition of group homes, "settings in which children are cared for on a 24-hour basis by hired staff members who reside elsewhere" (Cohen, p. 482, 1986). This definition can be applied to many group home settings, as there are very few settings where staff live on the premises full time (Jones, Landsverk & Roberts 2007). Moving forward the term group home will be used to represent the type of environment upon which this research is focused. Clearly identifying the type of congregate care setting allows for greater understanding and increases transparency within the social work and child welfare literature, as well as allows for a greater amount of research to be conducted on this specific setting.

Significance to Social Work

This research is significant to social work in multiple ways. Specifically, this research sheds light on the multi-level impact group home staff have on the ecological group home environment and the broader child welfare system. Group home staff function within each level of the ecological environment, on a micro level with direct youth contact, in the meso level serving as a bridge and advocate between the youth, the group home, and external groups such as schools and courts, and on a macro scale of influencing policy as it relates to placement preferences, length of time in placement and services specific to this group home setting. This research focused on an often-forgotten system, group homes, which is precisely why it is not only crucial to child welfare but an innovative addition to the research base.

Although staff working in group home settings might not have social work degrees, or consider themselves social workers, they often interact with social workers and play a significant part in the child welfare system. Group home staff can advocate and articulate specific needs of the youth they serve based on the extensive amount of time staff spends around the youth. Group home staff are often very knowledgeable about the youth and can be an advocate for them during decision-making regarding placement. Thus, this dissertation sought to provide social workers in child welfare with ways to better interact with staff as they serve as informants and advocates for the youth with whom they work. By understanding the impact group home staff have on stability within group homes, placement disruption can be decreased, and specific services can be enacted to address the needs of the youth and the overall group home environment. When stability is addressed, healthy relationships based in trust and longevity between staff and youth can be formed and fostered. This research can also inform policy because it examined group care and the issues surrounding it, specifically length of time in care when youth are incorrectly placed in group homes, and rules and regulations as they related to group home care. Gaining a better understanding as to the stability of group home staff can impact placement decisions, allow for better advocating on the length of time youth stay in group homes, and illuminate needs unique to this population, both staff and youth.

This research informs social work practice because it places emphasis and value on group home staff, and encourages social workers to interact, appreciate and utilize group home staff to better understand their impact on the group home environment. Drawing on the social work ecological framework, this research allows for each system to be taken into consideration and placed added emphasis on group home staff, which could be considered a forgotten system within child welfare. This research directly

impacts social work education, because it highlights this type of group care in social work programs, placing special emphasis on the important role group home staff play in child welfare. Additionally, this research directly informs training models for group home staff to ensure training based in grounded evidence.

Importance to the field

Youth reside in group homes for an extended period of time, and often spend their formative adolescent years in group homes, making stability an exceedingly important area of study in child welfare. Gathering information from group home staff in this dissertation provided an initial understanding into the reasons group home staff feel they increase or decrease stability in group homes. Knowledge and information gained begins to fill the substantial gap in the literature on staff impact of stability in group homes.

The child welfare literature base although established, has gaps in research based in evidence, few studies that bring innovation to the field, and are often not outcome driven, leaving the research base lacking in substance and innovation (Courtney, Collins, 1994; Aarons, Palinkas, 2007; Mildon, Shionsky, 2011). This dissertation brings innovation in that it is taking a qualitative approach to gain insight into a group that is crucial to the field, but grossly under examined. Allowing group home staff to share not only their struggles in their work but also their strengths and successes will provide balanced findings and provide a foundation for future research on this population.

Ultimately, the findings of this dissertation have potential to improve the experience of youth in group homes. Using the factors associated with stability that were identified from this research, group home agencies and child welfare agencies can work together to reduce turnover of staff, better train staff, and improve the group home staff

workforce. Improving these aspects of group home staff has the ability to directly improve the experience of youth living in said homes.

Summary of the Current Study

This dissertation was designed to explore the proposed research question: "What is the influence of group home staff in the ecological environment of the group home" Although there are clear definitions of licensed or non-licensed kin placements there is little literature differentiating group home placement types for youth in foster care. Often congregate care articles combine placements to include group homes, therapeutic group homes, and therapeutic foster homes, all of which are different types of out-of-home care (Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000). This study sought to provide clarity regarding definitions of group homes, the role of group home staff, and their impact on the ecological environment of a group home.

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A comprehensive understanding of the relevant literature associated with child welfare, group homes and placement stability is necessary to conduct future research and close the apparent literature gap concerning the role of staff in group homes. First, literature on the types of group home care, residents of group homes, placement disruption literature, risk and protective factors associated with placement disruption, assessment of group home effectiveness and policies related to child welfare and foster care will be discussed. Second will be a review of the literature on the special emphasis placed on prevention of disruption of foster and kinship placements.

Group Home Care

In the United States nearly one in five youth in foster care reside in some type of congregate care setting (Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007). It is important to understand the process by which youth are placed in group homes. Ashe and Cahn (1993) provide a clear framework to detail the child welfare process from removal to placement. They note there are child welfare procedures in all fifty states. Although the details of the process can vary across states, typically, the course of action begins with an individual making a report to a child welfare agency.

Upon receipt of the report, the child welfare organization, governed by the state can make decisions based on safety whether to remove the child(ren) from the home or setting noted in the report. Next, the state must establish its burden of proof using statutory criteria to determine if intervention is necessary. Intervention is primarily focused on ensuring safety for the child (Sullivan, 1994). Upon removal, the child is placed in out-of-home care, also known as foster care. Although the primary focus of child welfare systems is to secure conditions of life that protect children's health and

well-being, all too often due to severe safety risks, the focus narrows to simply getting the child out of harm's way. Once removal has been determined as the course of action, child welfare agencies rely on different forms of out-of-home care to provide safe and secure living situations.

Types of Out-of-home Care

A major gap in the literature is the clarification of the type of out-of-home care setting within a specific study. Thus, it is crucial for the field to have clear definitions of each type of out-of- home care so research can inform specific practice placements. Each out-of-home setting will be discussed below.

Out-of-home care can include but is not limited to foster placements, kinship placements, group homes, residential treatment facilities (RTC), therapeutic foster care, and therapeutic group homes (Hyde, Kammerer, 2009). Each of the aforementioned situations differs in terms of housing arrangements, number of residents and caregiver structure. Foster placements are typically licensed care providers who are not related to the child. These placements provide for the basic needs of the children placed with them and are considered least restrictive because they most resemble a family-like setting and the child lives in a house as opposed to a commercial building. Kinship placements are those where family or "kin like" members care for children. Kinship placements can be unlicensed care providers who do not have to be related to the children, although typically are related. Group homes, as previously mentioned are encompassed within the broad term, congregate care settings, which can include emergency shelters and staff secured/locked settings, as well as residential treatment centers (RCT). Examples of more restrictive environments are residential treatment centers, therapeutic foster homes, therapeutic group homes, hospitals and detention centers. Lee and Barth (2011) examined the multitude of congregate care settings, describing residential treatment

centers, therapeutic foster homes and therapeutic group homes as environments where trained professionals administer specialized services for youth exhibiting a variety of behaviors and unique needs. Therapeutic group homes and foster homes differ from residential treatment centers in one primary way; both therapeutic group homes and foster homes are actual homes within neighborhoods (Lee & Barth, 2011). Residential treatment centers are more likely to be in commercial buildings, often locked, that house youth. These more restrictive therapeutic placements are historically considered last resort placements for child welfare agencies (Gallegos, Roller White, Ryan, O'Brien, Pecora, & Thomas, 2011). Within congregate care settings, unlocked, non-therapeutic group homes can be considered the least restrictive. Group homes are considered in-between a more restrictive environment and foster homes (Cohen, 1986).

Child Care Worker

Congregate care settings cannot function without individuals working there. It is important to identity people who work in group homes and understand their role in the system. All out-of-home settings rely on staff to carry out their mission to serve as surrogate caregivers for the children placed there. The primary role of an employee working in a group home is to care for the children who reside in that home. Maier (1987) defines child care workers as "persons who provide a major portion of round-the-clock care, supervision, and resources for children or youths in a group-life situation". Child care workers' duties can be categorized into indirect and direct. Direct is defined by Maier (1987) as work that helps accomplish a multitude of tasks, general child rearing, including but not limited to provision of food and clothing, habit training; for example, personal hygiene and self-management by way of peer interaction and relationships. Indirect is the more managerial aspect of child care. Indirect care includes managing daily schedules, activities, working with parents, teachers, therapists all while writing

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and receiving reports evaluating the youths and their progress while in care. Maier (1987) states that in child welfare "of all the staff working in child welfare settings, child care workers are most directly involved in the children's lives" (p. 189). Maier (1987) goes on to define them as the "hub of the institution wheel and the most powerful mediators in the youth's lives" (p. 189).

Youth in Group Homes

Although youth in foster care are not the primary focus of this research, it is difficult to understand the context in which group home staff work without discussing the youth who live in group homes. It is important to understand where the youth are in their life journey and what that means in terms of the stability within their living environment. There is a large body of literature focused on youth in group homes, their experiences, and risk and resiliency factors associated with living in group homes. Reviewing the key aspects of this body of literature helps to illuminate the context and challenges that group home staff face.

 The literature base is comprehensive documenting group homes as being used as a last resort placement, a placement for youth with more "problems" and considered more restrictive and intense environments than foster homes (Courtney, 1993; James 2010). Some of these "problems" associated with youth transitioning to group homes are physical aggression, verbal aggression, assaults against adults and youth, property damage, negative police contact and non-cooperative behavior (Lee, Thompson, 2008). Although vast, this research does not parse out the types of congregate care settings. As noted by James (2011) there is a lack of research on the differences between group care settings, and targeted outcomes are virtually unknown. This lack of clarity surrounding the type of congregate care setting creates ambiguity as to the outcomes of the research and the impact of the findings when applied to different group home settings.

According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) group home placements are detrimental to children. Children in the NSCAW study were found to have poorer developmental outcomes than children in foster homes. It is important to note the NSCAW defined group homes as those that include residential treatment, which indicates a higher level of care, and the preponderance of increased needs of the youth placed there. The inclusion of residential treatment settings in studies on group homes does not provide accurate assessment of each group care setting.

Risk Factors

There are clearly identified risk factors associated with youth entering and aging out of foster care. Youth over the age of 12 who reside in group homes are more likely to age out of the system than to be returned to their parents or adopted prior to their 18th birthday (Hyde & Kammerer 2009). Youth who have aged out of the system after having been in group homes report that, while in a group home, they were fearful of violence against them by other youth and staff, inappropriate staff behavior, harsh and inappropriate punishment and poor/unsafe living conditions (Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007). Youth in group homes have reported high levels of emotional distress, low levels of self-esteem, and higher rates of depression, which is associated with substance abuse later in life (Atlshuler & Poertner 2002).

Atlshuler and Poertner (2002) also note youth in group homes are more likely to take more risks and have poor peer influences. They lack support networks, and lack concrete independent living skills. Youth exhibiting aggression, fighting, stealing and oppositional behavior experience more placements than other youth in foster care. (Leather, 2006). Newton, Litrownik and Landsverk (2000) conducted a longitudinal study of youth in foster care examining placement disruptions. They found a strong link

between placement disruptions and problem behaviors with not only immediate but long-term negative outcomes for children.

The fact that youth who enter the foster care system at 12 years of age are more likely to age out of care rather than be placed in a permanent family speaks to the relevance of staff stability. Youth could live in a group home upwards of six years. The length of time in care coupled with the high rates of turnover in placements means that youth have the potential to have a high number of caregivers. The increased risk for a high number of different caregivers suggests that development of relationship skills may be compromised for youth in out-of-home care. Youth who have aged out of the system report that group home staff turnover is high, and youth desired better, healthier communication with staff (Green, & Ellis, 2007). It is clear from the literature that youth are reporting high turnover rates and are directly impacted by changes in group home staff. Beginning to understand and identify aspects associated with staff working in group homes could begin to reduce the turnover and improve the experience for youth living in group homes.

Adolescence

The age range that the group homes in this research serve is typically 12-18. The age of the youth is an important aspect of this research as youth ages 10-12 enter into adolescence. It is well documented that there are many factors associated with adolescent development (Anthony, Stone 2010; Santrock 2014, Midgley, Anderman, Hicks 1995; Williams, Anthony 2013). Vital to this research is the transition from elementary school to middle school for adolescents. Adolescence in itself can be a difficult time, and compounding factors such as, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood influences and family structure all play a part in an adolescent's ability to navigate this timeframe of development (Anthony, Stone 2010; Santrock 2014; Williams,

Anthony 2013). Issues of puberty, body image, changes in social cognition, and more heterogeneous peer set come to light during the transition to the middle grades (Santrock, 2014).

The transition from elementary to middle school or junior high is particularly relevant to this research because of the stark differences between the two educational environments, and the similarities between middle school/junior high and a group home. There are clearly defined differences between elementary and middle school/junior high for adolescents. These differences include greater emphasis on teacher control in middle school, students being assigned to classes based on ability as opposed to effort, strict scheduling of classes, and overall more performance focused than elementary school (Midgley, et al., 1995). One of the most marked differences between elementary and middle school/junior high is the transition from one classroom with one teacher in elementary school, to multiple classes and multiple teachers per day in middle school/junior high (Midgley, et al., 1995). This distinct difference between the two educational environments, changes for youth in teaching staff and new mobility across courses, reinforces the necessity to examine stability in group homes.

Placement Stability Literature

There is a large body of literature within child welfare that examines placement stability for youth. The primary focus of this literature is on foster families, both relative and non-relative/kin, and the protective and risk factors of both foster parents and youth associated with increasing and decreasing placement stability. Several factors are associated with both increased and decreased risk of placement disruption. These factors include but are not limited to: kinship vs. non-kin foster care, age of child at placement, demographics of the caregiver, case manager involvement and the degree to which the child feels included and a sense of belonging (Holtan, Handegard, Thornblad, Arild Vis,

2013). It is well documented that kinship placements, meaning relative or family placements, are more stable and less likely to disrupt than non-kin, non-relative placements (Holtan et al., 2013, Koh, Rolock, Cross, Eblen-Manning, 2014, Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, Doreleijers, 2007).

Additionally, research has found that keeping and placing sibling groups together increases stability (Oosterman et al., 2007, Koh et al., 2014). More interesting, if a foster placement includes biological children of the foster parent(s) living in the home, there is a higher likelihood that a placement will disrupt due to the increased risk for jealousy and sibling rivalry (Holtan et al., 2013). Case managers who are more involved, have more direct contact, and have built strong rapport and support with their placements increases the strength of placement (Oosterman et al., 2007). Another protective factor is the association between biological families, foster families and the child. When all three parties work together and have positive associations, risk of disruption is decreased (Oosterman et al., 2007).

Protective factors associated with prevention of placement disruptions were illustrated by Oosterman et al., (2007) through a meta-analysis. The researchers found that age and previous experience were predictors of placement stability. Younger children, children who are better socialized and adjusted, and children with less severe maltreatment history are less likely to disrupt. Additionally, placement stability is increased when the reason the child came into care is neglect and neither physical nor sexual abuse (Oosterman et al., 2007). With that being said, Oosterman et al., (2007) found that a child's behavior is a stronger predictor of placement breakdown/disruption than some types of child abuse or neglect.

Newton et al. (2000) found that negative placement history resulted in both internalizing and externalizing behaviors for foster youth, and that children who are

aggressive/dangerous and disruptive are more likely to be moved. Although Newton et al. (2000) looked at youth in both foster homes and group homes, the behavior issues and placement moves occurred in both settings.

Characteristics of foster parents

Oosterman et al., (2007) note that foster parents who are warm, child-oriented, and have positive interactions with their foster child are more successful and had fewer placement disruptions. Information on foster parent age, marital status and length of marriage, income, religion and occupation is lacking in the literature. These factors could play important roles as they relate to disruptions or retention of placements, although more research is needed. There are clearly documented, specific and unique characteristics of foster parents that either increase or decrease placement stability. In the congregate care literature discussion of these characteristics among staff is virtually non-existent.

Stability in Foster Parents/Kinship Placements

As previously mentioned, there is a wealth of knowledge surrounding foster parents and their role in the child welfare system. The factors associated with stability in family homes are well documented: safety, nurturing, positive/supportive relationships, healthy attachments, competence, training, foster parent mental health and emotional availability (Chamberlain, Price, Landsverk, Reid, Leve, Laurent, 2008). The relationship between foster parents and the youth they are caring for can directly impact the length and stability of the placement. If the relationship between the placement and the youth is stable, the youth is able to explore his or her identity (Chamberlain et al., 1996). Specifically, adolescence is a time of identity formation that comes from separating from the family and relying more on peer interactions (James, Montgomery, Leslie, & Zhang 2009). If an adolescent has a stable relationship and stable placement,

the youth is better able to balance emotional needs during this developmental time. Risky behavior is less likely in adolescents who have lengthy stable nurturing relationships with their caregivers (James et al., 2009).

Stability impacts virtually all elements of a youth's life. Health, mental health and academic areas are each impacted by increased or a lack of stability in the home environment. In regard to school, academic performance is influenced by stability in the home. Children with consistent caregivers are less likely to drop out of school, be retained, and perform better on achievement tasks and better overall academically. Similarly, mental health is impacted by stability. Youth living in stable homes have more positive peer interactions and have increased prosocial skills. (James et al., 2009).

Within the foster care literature there are specific factors associated with the ability of foster parents to maintain stability within placements, decrease placement disruptions and create healthy relationships with the youth for whom they are caring. Providing foster families with increased training and therapeutic services for the youth in their home is one way to increase stability (Blakey, Leathers, Lawler, Washington, Natschke, Strand, Walton, 2012). Although there are identified methods to increase stability and lessen placement disruptions, on the whole, outcome studies are lacking (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, Localio, 2006). Rubin et al. (2007) point to screening methods prior to placement to ensure each child is appropriately placed in an effort to decrease placement disruptions. Screening tools could be beneficial to ensure the child's needs are being met by the placement, as well as illustrate the need for a higher or lower level of care.

It is clear from the literature that placement disruptions are detrimental to children. The primary literature base focuses on youth in foster homes, with little mention of youth in group homes. Although there are placement disruptions in group

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homes, there are youth that stay in the same group home for long periods of time, potentially from the age of twelve to eighteen. There is little in the literature on the characteristics of group home staff, their turnover rates, and their impact on the youth in the group home. Most mention of staff in group homes comes from youth aging out of care and reporting on their experiences while in care. Placement disruptions are influenced by multiple factors, making the phenomenon of multiple placements and high staff turnover crucial elements to examine when talking with staff working with youth in group homes.

One can postulate that a departure of a group home staff could be as detrimental to a youth as a disruption of that youth from a group home. It would appear the next logical step in the research would be to examine group home staff, their unique characteristics and contributions to group homes and children in child welfare.

Evaluation of Group Care

There is a scant amount of literature on non-locked, non-therapeutic group home effectiveness. There is a larger body of literature as it relates to therapeutic group homes, which can be locked facilities and are considered a higher level of care than the group homes focused on in this dissertation. James (2011) reviewed treatment models associated with group homes and residential care within child welfare. Although the research focused on group homes that provide therapeutic intervention, the author notes the vitally important aspect of distinguishing the types of group care in order to assess each type for effectiveness. The author calls for more rigorous studies to be conducted on therapeutic group care because of the issues surrounding defining the multitude of types of group care (James, 2011).

Similarly, Lee and Barth (2011), attempt to define various group care settings within the child welfare system. Lee and Barth (2011) note the importance of defining

and identifying the differences in group care as it impacts service delivery and program structure as well as outcomes. If all of the group care settings are lumped together, outcomes, whether negative or positive impact the entire system, regardless of applicability. Cohen (1985) examined group homes in California through qualitative interviews. This qualitative study looked at group homes that were providing therapeutic intervention and group homes providing treatment. The staff reported wide ranges of opinions on the quality of care provided, from excellent to poor care with over half of the staff (54%) rating the quality of care as fair or poor (Cohen, 1985). Definitions for selecting quality of care markers ranged from excellent to poor in the study were generated from questions such as "What is your opinion about the general level of quality of care for adolescents in group homes?" (Cohen, 1985, p. 485) Additionally, issues surrounding turnover were discussed. Cohen (1985) found that 80% of the workforce had been in their positions less than one year, with the average length of stay being 14.1 months, which is noted by the author as "particularly troubling". Among the conclusions outlined for improvement from the assessment of the quality of group home care in California was the recommendation to improve benefits and training for staff in an attempt to reduce turnover.

Jones, Landsverk and Roberts (2007) took a unique approach to examining effectiveness of caregiving within residential care. Although their research focuses on residential treatment facilities, the caregiving model the authors identified as 'child care worker' closely aligns with the target population of this research, group home staff. The authors define childcare workers as workers who do not reside in the home, are poorly paid, have a high propensity towards turnover, and are not surrogate parents but more of a paraprofessional member of the treatment team (Jones et al., 2007). The authors compared childcare workers to house parents, which they defined as live-in workers that

create a "family like" environment more closely aligned with a traditional home environment (Jones et al., 2007).

The authors compared the two types of staff based on length of time in job and found that childcare workers' turnover was significantly higher than the turnover of house parents. It can be derived from the findings that the house parent model, which more closely resembles a home environment, reduced staff turnover. This house parent model directly impacted the ability of staff to care for youth longer and develop more meaningful relationships with the youth in an attempt to help the youth on a deeper level. It is clear from the limited literature on the assessment and effectiveness of different types of group homes that the examination of staff is virtually non-existent. The primary focus of assessment and effectiveness literature is on residential treatment facilities, with sporadic mention of staff's impact on the environment.

Policy as it relates to the placement of children

There are both federal and state policies related to the placement of children involved in child welfare. These policies were enacted in an attempt to address the ever-growing number of children lingering in foster care indefinitely (Phillips & Mann, 2013). The vast majority of these policies are focused on the adoption of youth in the child welfare system. Most adoption laws are at the state level, though there are some federal laws that apply to adoption. The Aid to Dependent Children- Foster Care Act of 1961 (ADC-FC) was a federal grant to provide incentives to states to create state-based child welfare agencies (Phillips & Mann, 2013). ADC-FC was amended to provide aid to orphan and needy children as well as adding funding for foster care (Phillips & Mann, 2013). ADC-FC helped formalize foster care, and out of ADC-FC came Title IV-B, enacted in 1961, which created the foundation for foster care in the United States. (Phillips & Mann, 2013). The 1980's brought the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of

1980. This act sought to address the problem of children lingering in foster care and created a platform for social workers to address permanency in a timely manner (Phillips & Mann, 2013).

The Multi-Ethnic Placement act of 1994 (MEPA) was enacted to address a concern of delayed permanency for children of color. Promoters of MEPA believed adoption should be a color-blind process, as long as the adoptive placement provided a safe appropriate home. (Phillips & Mann, 2013). President Bill Clinton passed the Adoption Safe Family Act (ASFA) in 1997. ASFA was put in place to reduce the amount of time children spent in foster care, placing timelines on permanency, and creating concurrent permanency planning goals (Phillips & Mann, 2013). Although good intentions abound, ASFA has not served youth in group homes well, as they are more likely than not to age out of care

Another important federal mandate regarding placement and permanency of youth is the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978. ICWA requires active efforts be made to prevent the breakup of the Indian family and provides strict placement guidelines regarding Indian children (Hollinger, 1988). Under ICWA, a non-ICWA compliant placement must be proven necessary with good cause before deviating from the ICWA placement guidelines. The guidelines prioritize placement with extended family first, other members of the child's tribe second, and other members of Indian tribes third. If there is not a viable option in any of those groups, placement with a non-Indian family is done. Good cause must be proven in order to deviate from ICWA placement preference (Hollinger, 1988). Although there is policy related to foster youth, the policy is heavily focused on achieving adoption in a timely manner. The policies that address racial and ethnic issues are beneficial for youth, although the translation of these policies into the "real world" does not always mean that youth are going to be placed in

homes that mirror their ethnic background or meet ICWA standards. Underlying all of these policies is the goal for permanency, which recognizes the need for stability.

There is little policy surrounding the placement of children in group homes. If stability were the focus, a more forceful effort through policy to get children into adoptive homes or to reunify them with their families would be the focus of policy related to group homes. Ultimately, based on the increased risk factors and poor outcomes for youth in group homes, the ideal situation would be to have every child entering foster care placed in a foster home, and achieve permanency as swiftly as possible. Policy could be enacted to increase funding and campaign for recruitment and retention of foster families, which would reduce and potentially eliminate the need for group homes.

Theoretical Approach -Ecological Framework

The chosen theoretical framework for this research is the Ecological framework. This framework was chosen because of the flexibility and multidimensional approach it allows. Ecological framework creates a dialogue between systems and sheds light on the impact systems have on each other within an environment. In this case, Ecological framework paired nicely with the chosen environment, group homes and allowed for deeper understanding and discovery of this complex setting. The ecological framework postulates that there is constant engagement between individuals and their surrounding environment and there is mutual interaction between individuals and the various systems within their environment (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, Larsen, 2010). Within the ecological framework each system is unique, and people do more than simply react to an environment, they act on their environments, which in turn shapes not only other's responses, but shapes the environment itself. (Hepworth et al. 2010). A key aspect of the ecological framework is its emphasis on culture. The heavy emphasis placed

on the interaction of individuals and their environments allows for deeper understanding of differentiations in culture and allows for researchers and social workers alike to better understand the distinctive characteristics of their clients and research participants (Segal, Gerdes, Steiner, 2016). Payne (2014) discusses appropriateness of fit as it relates to individuals and their environments and that using an ecological framework allows for developing an understanding of the way in which individuals fit within their environments.

The use of an ecological framework calls for wide-ranging assessments of individuals, environments and social problems to ensure that the connections and influences between individuals and their environment are understood (Hepworth et al. 2010). In order for the interactions between people and their environments to be efficacious, adequate resources and supports must be in place. If adequate resources and supports are not available the reciprocal relationship is no more, and success for the individual and the community may disappear. Using the perspective of the ecological framework provided the opportunity for the staff and setting in which they worked to be examined in a more holistic way, ensuring all elements were addressed within the environment. Therefore, an ecological framework begins to shed light on the unique characteristics associated with group home staff and what their interactions on multiple levels look like in the group home environment.

Ecological framework relates to each research question because it positions the staff within the environment and allows for a holistic representative picture to be gathered. Ecological framework allows for stability to be examined at the microsystem, macrosystem and meso system levels. The microsystem level, as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994), is the face-to-face level, the interpersonal relations and interactions that capture complex interactions on a closer level. The microsystem will be

examined in the stability of the relationship between the youth and the group home staff, and the staff amongst themselves. The face-to-face relationship staff have with youth and other staff could be telling as it relates to stability in the group home. The macrosystem level is the overarching system within which the micro and mesosystem work (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Macrosystem analysis allows for examination of group home stability within the greater child welfare system. The impact of stability can be examined and how it relates to placement disruption, length of time in placement and the overall function of group homes within the child welfare system as a whole. The meso system, which is the system that illustrates the linkages between multiple systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), facilitates exploration of the stability of the group home environment as it interacts with both the micro and macro levels. Stability was examined on a more individual basis with child welfare social workers and on a more macro level with policy makers and legislation related to foster youth. Using an ecological framework allowed for in-depth examination of multiple levels of relationships and allow for the parsing out of each relationship to identify stability or a lack thereof in the entire system.

A Useful Example of the Ecological Framework in Child Welfare

Ecological framework was used in the seminal piece by Belsky (1980) to inform child maltreatment. Belsky (1980) demonstrated that child maltreatment occurs through multiple forces at multiple levels, the individual, family, community and culture, all levels within which the individual is embedded. Belsky (1980) took an historical approach while using an ecological framework, beginning with identifying antecedents to why parents abuse their children. Using the ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner (1994) that includes micro, macro, and meso systems to look at the family system, community, individual and child welfare system provides a comprehensive approach to

examining stability in group homes. Although Belsky (1980) does critique the ecological framework because it may not take into consideration the actual development of each system within the framework, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) framework is more concerned about the context in which the development occurs. The use of the ecological framework to provide an etiology of maltreatment allows for each area of individuals' lives to be taken into consideration. Coatsworth, Pantin and Szapocznik (2002) provide an ecodevelopmental perspective that suggests multiple aspects of their ecological systems influence youth as they mature through the developmental stages. Ecodevelopmental perspective as put forth by Coatsworth et al., (2002) is derived from the ecological framework as well as structural family therapy in that it supports and places emphasis on the interrelationship between the youth and their multiple systems and that in order for an intervention to work reciprocation and the interdependency between the systems must be acknowledged and addressed. The ecodevelopmental perspective addresses the limitations of the ecological framework by stressing the importance of the interconnectedness of each system. Group home staff play a major role in the meso system and this research will inform the depth to which the staff interact on a micro and macro level.

Summary

Although the literature surrounding foster care is far reaching, there are apparent gaps in relation to group home staff and their impact on the group home environment. Particularly absent in the literature is discussion of staff and the impact they might have on stability in the lives of the youth in group home care. Defining the type of group home in focus, the youth it serves, and illustrating the parallels in the foster care literature open the door for in depth examination through qualitative interviews. The interviews that were conducted explored the unique characteristics of group home staff

and the effects those group home staff have on stability for the youth within the homes. The purpose of this study is to help to address the clear gap in the literature on group home staff and their role in the ecological group home environment.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was the chosen overarching research methodology for this study. Crafted by Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory was developed for the purpose of constructing theory grounded in data (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Since its creation, grounded theory has been a path further divided by a handful of researchers. Charmaz (2006) introduced constructivist grounded theory, which focuses on social situations as the formational unit of analysis and focuses on a postmodern perspective that emphasizes reflexivity and removal of the researcher as the all-knowing (Creswell 2013). There are two prevalent methodologies to grounded theory, systematic which derives from the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998), and constructivist grounded theory, formed by Charmaz and Clarke (Creswell, 2013). Constructivist grounded theory was the driving form of grounded theory used in this research. Constructivist was chosen based on its more flexible process in data collection, analysis and theory development. Constructivist grounded theory places less emphasis on structure and is more interpretative. It places more emphasis on the unique attributes of the research participants' accounts of their worldviews, studying the *how* and *why* of meanings constructed by participants and the co construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory is appropriate for this research because it takes an inductive, open-ended, evolving and comparative approach (Charmaz, 2014).

Grounded theory is one of many qualitative methodologies, but it carries several unique distinguishing figures that make it appropriate for the proposed research questions and this research. One of the unique characteristics to grounded theory is that the concepts of the theory derive from data collected during the research process and are

not formed a priori. The formation of theory based on the data allows for flexibility and recursiveness and calls for the researcher to follow the lead of the data and be open to concept development (Strauss and Corbin, 2015). Constructivist grounded theory also addresses one of the primary critiques of grounded theory, observer neutrality, and allows for the researcher's positionality, perspective and interactions to be taken into consideration as part of the research process (Charmaz, 2014).

Another unique aspect of grounded theory is the interconnectedness of data collection and data analysis. Upon initial data collection, analysis is completed; concepts that arise from initial analysis inform future data collection and analysis. Data collection and analysis then continue to inform the research process in its entirety (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Using grounded theory allows researchers to examine and reexamine issues and focus on areas that are emerging and in need of investigation. Constructivist grounded theory incorporates analysis of actions and processes rather than structures and themes and places heavy emphasis on inductive analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The non-linear approach allowed by constructivist grounded theory makes it an appropriate choice for this research, as the research can go in several directions and the theory will allow for any of the emerging directions to be explored. Additionally, the emphasis is placed on theory construction as compared to a more traditional approach of applying a preexisting theory to data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory can uncover meanings that drive actions in individuals and groups, and it considers emotions and logic to form theory, all based in data (Strauss and Corbin, 2015). There are several data collection methods paired with grounded theory with the intent to obtain "rich data" (Charmaz, 2014). For this research the primary form of data collection will be what Charmaz (2014) refers to as "intensive interviewing" through the use of semi-structured in-depth interviewing with probing, questions.

Sample Population

The target sample population was staff from any unlocked, non-therapeutic group home, and staff who left that group home setting within the past two years. The primary inclusion criteria for this research was staff who currently work in group homes and staff who have worked in group homes and left their jobs within in the past two years. Staff and former staff who have recently terminated employment were recruited through snowball sampling. There were two groups of participants. Those who currently work at group homes, and those who left their jobs at group homes within the past two years. Each groups sample size was dependent on saturation, maximum variation and recruitment abilities, with eight participants who currently worked in group homes and two participants who had left a group home within the past two years. Creswell (2013) notes that narrative methods focus on the lives of a small number of individuals, or potentially a single person, so a sample size of no more than ten is appropriate for this research. It is not uncommon for qualitative research to have small sample sizes. Sandelowski (1996) illustrated the value of small group and single case studies. Sample size as it relates specifically to grounded theory is based on saturation, which occurs when information has fully developed and begins to reoccur.

Coupled with saturation, maximum variation is another sampling strategy defined by Creswell (2013) as a sampling strategy used to document variations of individuals based on specific characteristics. Inclusion criteria are the main specific characteristics driving maximum sampling. Employing the use of maximum variation will ensure that a holistic picture of the population is achieved by focusing on repeated characteristics and themes. Study participants must have been working in a group home or have left a group home position within the past two years. These specific criteria for

participants make the sampling purposive. Purposive sampling further ensured the research questions were addressed. See appendix 1 for demographic information.

Recruitment

Recruitment took place over a nine-month period, ranging Recruitment began June 3, 2017, and the interviews took place between June 26, 2017 and February 15, 2018. Recruitment occurred primarily directly after completing my social work duties. I recruited all seven participants directly, and three participants in directly through community partners professional and academic networks. Participants were contacted via email, telephone and in person to coordinate and schedule interviews.

In addition to the direct recruitment in group homes, there were two major recruitment pushes in an attempt to access a larger group. First, I reached out to colleagues with whom I received my MSW in an attempt to access their professional and social networks. I did this via social media, sending them my recruitment material. Next, I reached out to faculty at Arizona State University in the School of Social Work and asked them if they would disseminate my recruitment script to their current students. Both of these methods proved fruitful in recruiting people who currently work at group homes as well as one individual who left a group home. This coupled with my in-person recruitment provided me with seven research participants. The final three participants were recruited in directly through community networks. Four participants provided contact information for potential participants after their interview. Unfortunately upon contacting those individuals no interviews came to fruition. The original intended sample population was individuals who currently worked in and recently left a group home. The definition of the group home was important to inclusion criteria, which was that of a non-locked, non-therapeutic setting. This specific group home setting was chosen as it is the most common among congregate care placements and characteristics

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of youth differ very little from youth in foster homes. Higher levels of care, those that are more restrictive such as therapeutic group homes, residential treatment centers and detention centers are environments formulated to address behavioral or emotional concerns related to youth. These settings can range from neighborhood homes to locked professional facilities.

Expanding inclusion criteria

When recruitment issues arose, inclusion criteria were examined when two potential research participants who had left a job at a group home showed interest but had previously worked in facilities of higher levels of care. The decision was made to move forward with both interviews even though the participants worked in a higher level of care setting. While only two participants in this dissertation worked in a higher level of care, their interviews proved interesting informative and added depth to the data.

See table 1 Demographic Information

Participants	Gender	Race	Experience in Years	Number of Youth in GH/Gender	Currently Employed	GH Type
Participant 1	Female	White/Caucasian	1	5 girls	No	Therapeutic
Participant 2	Female	White/Caucasian	2	3 boys 2 girls	Yes	Nontherapeutic
Participant 3	Female	Black/African American	2	5 girls	Yes	Nontherapeutic
Participant 4	Female	Hispanic	10	8 boys	No	Nontherapeutic
Participant 5	Female	Hispanic	2	10 girls	Yes	Nontherapeutic
Participant 6	Male	Black/African American	1	10 boys	Yes	Nontherapeutic
Participant 7	Female	White/Caucasian	6	19 girls	No	Therapeutic
Participant 8	Female	Black/African American	3	3 girls 2 boys	Yes	Nontherapeutic
Participant 9	Female	Black/African American	2	6 boys 6 girls	Yes	Nontherapeutic
Participant 10	Female	Hispanic	17	10 girls	Yes	Nontherapeutic

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of ten in-depth interviews spanning a nine-month time. The interviews occurred at differing locations, based on the preference of the participant. Two interviews were conducted in restaurants, four interviews were conducted in the group home in which the participant worked, one in a public library, three were via telephone. Each interview was audio recorded with consent of the participant. Interviews were scheduled directly with the participant via email or telephone and confirmed with the participant the day before. The length of the interview ranged depending on the participant's dialogue, but most interviews took one hour to complete with the shortest interview being forty-two minutes and the longest being ninety minutes.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person, and with permission from participants were recorded via audiotape and transcribed. Interviews were conducted in the most natural setting possible. Data were collected during initial interviews, and if needed, follow up interviews were conducted. Participants were made aware of the potential for follow up interviews prior to giving consent to participate. Contextual information was collected in the form of demographic information. An interview guide was created drawing on principles described by Charmaz (2014) as they relate to constructivist grounded theory and intensive probing interviewing (Appendix 2) This interview guide was used during each interview to ensure consistency.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended, non-judgmental questions that allowed the participant to answer freely. The interview guide was continually assessed throughout data collection, per constructivist grounded theory, to ensure proper

information was gathered (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), obtaining data that is expansive and rich will allow for a stronger analysis and ability to see emerging theory. The interviewer was an active listener during the interview and followed the participant's discussion with input both verbally and non-verbally, ensuring that any pertinent information be followed up on, clarified and explored more deeply during the interview (Charmaz, 2014). The interview guide contained questions that probed for information and asked the participating to provide specific examples to allow for maximum understanding of the participants experiences.

Interpretations were made from the data with regards to what the staff were saying about their experiences while working in group homes using constructivist grounded theory methodology.

Interviewing Method

There are several data collection methods within qualitative inquiry, specifically, structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and focus groups (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). Semi-structured interviews are defined by Gill et al., (2008) as interviews that have key questions to define specific areas while allowing participants to expand on their experiences. Semi-structured interviews can be seen as flexible in comparison to structured interviews yet provide more structure than unstructured (Gill et al., 2008). Semi- structured interviews were chosen over focus groups, which are defined by Gill et al., (2008) as being used to generate information on collective views and the meanings behind those views. Although focus groups can be beneficial, they are not the most appropriate option for this research for several reasons.

A primary reason for foregoing focus groups was that each group home in focus has its own operating procedures, mission and goals as a group home. It would be difficult to ascertain a collective view from group home staff that each work at a different

group home. Additionally, it is possible that two staff from two different group homes participating in a focus group could have youth they serve in common, if a youth was previously at a different group home. There could be bias based on the youths shared experience of the previous group home. An additional reason was to protect information about the young people, as it might have been possible that actual names and identities could come out during a focus group session. Semi-structured interviews provide the best data collection approach, as they are individual, and flexible, allowing for each participant personal experience to be clearly articulated.

Researcher Positionality

Grounded theory allows for and encourages the acknowledgement of the researcher within the research process. It is crucial to discuss my positionality as a researcher and what I bring to the research. I see myself in several ways as it relates to this research. I am an educated woman and I both research and work in child welfare. Although I have not directly experienced child abuse, through my work and education I have learned about the multidimensional concept of child abuse. I have also seen the lasting effects of child abuse on an adult in my family. I worked for the Department of Child Safety, and I currently work for a Guardian Ad Litem as a social worker. My time with the Department of Child Safety directly impacted my views on group homes, as I saw how much impact and control staff had over the youth they worked with.

 I was a foster parent and adopted my daughter from foster care. Experiences in my life and work directly impact my position as a researcher. My goal as a researcher is to improve the group home system, for both staff and youth, as I have seen the detrimental effects a negative group home environment can have on youth. I see myself as being child focused. In every situation I try to see the child first and see my role in

child welfare as keeping children safe. Children are the primary focus of my research and this study and all of my work are aimed at making the lives of children safe and stable. I understand that my views are not shared by all. Other child welfare social workers may be more biological family focused, more foster family focused or a mixture of the two. I tried to remain aware of my biases and opinions throughout the research process.

Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory was the primary framework for the analysis of the data. Coding influenced by grounded theory can be seen as providing the structure of one's data analysis and it can serve as the bridge between data collection and the emergence of a theory to explain the data (Charmaz, 2014). Illustrated in two phases, Charmaz (2014) details phase 1 as the initial phase, where each line and segment are named, leading to phase 2, where the most pertinent or frequent codes are selected to organize the larger body of data. Phase 1 coding involves a close read of the data with the researcher being open to any and all directions the research may go (Charmaz, 2014). Initial codes are flexible, comparative and centered in the data. The researcher is continually examining codes from the initial phase of coding to determine their fit within the data (Charmaz, 2014). For this research, phase 1 was line-by-line coding, which is giving a name to each line in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Line-by-line coding was used because of its flexibility, and it allows the researcher to remain open and aware of the data. After the initial coding phase I moved to phase 2 and began to identify what the codes mean within the body of data. It is noted by Charmaz (2014) that codes from the data are constructed and are derived in relation to what the research participant is saying.

Moving from line-by-line coding in phase 1, focused coding takes the initial codes and uses them to compare meanings to determine future categories, identify gaps and

allow for the emergent process of grounded theory in its entirety to continue (Charmaz, 2014). Axial coding can then occur, which is seen as a step further than initial and focused coding as it looks at relationships between themes and then begins to show the rich relationship between the themes. Line-by-line, focused coding and axial coding are the chosen methods for this research. Line-by-line coding encourages the researcher to take a deeper closer look, coding actions or behaviors. Moving to focused coding, the researcher examines everything to see commonalities, identify themes, defines the themes. Axial coding then takes those themes and looks at the relationships between themes.

One of the primary ways researchers make sense of the codes generated from analysis is through memo writing, which is the analysis of early codes that emerge from the data and the body of data as a whole (Charmaz, 2014). Memo-writing allows for the researcher to make notes about the data, collect thoughts based on codes, compare and contrast ideas and keep a running log of any changes or issues with the data (Charmaz, 2014). There are several ways a research can do memo-writing such as through keeping a journal, which creates a 'memo bank' to ensure the memos created do not get lost (Charmaz, 2014). For this research, a memo journal was created and any and all memos were documented during the entire research process to inform the research project.

After each interview, memos were made and contained reflections about the interview questions, what worked well, what needed to be reworked and what themes were emerging. Memo-ing also took place during transcription of the interviews to ensure thoughts were not lost during the data analysis process. Data was kept in a locked cabinet on the downtown ASU campus, as well as digitally on a password protected computer.

Trustworthiness

There is an extensive amount of literature that speaks to the way in which quantitative research studies are rigorous. I employed a constructivist approach in regard to establishing rigor in qualitative research. In accordance with constructivist thought, knowledge is created, as opposed to discovered, and is a product of the perspective of the observer (Padgett, 1998). In quantitative research rigor comes from addressing threats to validity, such as internal and external validity (Strom-Gottfried, & Krysik, 2007). In qualitative research the terminology formed by constructivist methods outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) differs but rigor remains vital to legitimizing results (Lietz, Langer, Furman, 2006).

Rigor in qualitative research is achieved through ensuring findings are representative of what participants reported (Lietz et al. 2006). This speaks to trustworthiness, which is achieved when findings are closely aligned with the actual accounts of participants (Lietz, et al., 2006). Shenton (2004) lays out several categories to address rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative studies. The four categories are transferability, confirmability, credibility and dependability. Each of the four addresses a corresponding area of quantitative research: transferability addresses external validity/generalizability; dependability addresses reliability; credibility addresses internal validity; and confirmability addresses objectivity (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

Transferability, which speaks to the ability for a reader to relate to what they are reading, can be addressed according to Shenton (2004) by ensuring the researcher has obtained substantial information regarding the location of research to allow for the reader to fully understand the context of the participants. Transferability was addressed through obtaining rich data during data collection to allow for a full depiction of the research area.

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Confirmability

Confirmability speaks to the researcher's objectivity, which Shenton (2004) addresses through the use of peer debriefing. Confirmability is addressed through peer debriefing and places emphasis on the notion of consultation with both experts and other researchers to ensure the researcher is putting forth the voice of the participants and not that of the researcher. Peer debriefing and peer scrutiny as noted by Shenton (2004) is an important part of qualitative research. Allowing for scrutiny of the research by others invites new perspectives and has the opportunity to enhance the research project. Peer debriefing was employed in this research by the researcher consulting with the dissertation committee and colleagues to address confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is addressed by Lietz, et al. (2006) who note that to increase credibility the researcher can give primary voice to the participant through the use of substantial quotes, as opposed to overpowering the data with the researcher's voice. Using substantial quotes in written work allows for readers to have direct quotes and information provided from the participants, as opposed to the researcher's interpretation of the data, which increases credibility in qualitative research. Grounded theory calls for the use of memo-ing while analyzing data; an audit trail is similar to memo-ing. The creation of an audit trail describes each step taken by the researcher and a note on the researcher's reflexivity on each step (Lietz et al. 2006). As previously mentioned, audit trails were addressed in the form of memo-ing, a common practice in grounded theory, and one that increases the strength of data analysis and keeps the researcher on track, addressing credibility to ensure the voice of the participant is clear, as opposed to the voice of the researcher. A memo-journal was created, and memos were documented throughout the life of the research project.

Dependability

Dependability, which speaks to the ability for a reader to relate to what they are reading, can be addressed according to Shenton (2004) by ensuring the researcher has obtained substantial information regarding the location of the research. Description is provided to allow the reader to fully understand the context of the participants. Deep description also helps the reader to recreate the study if so desired. Dependability was addressed during the interview with probing questions and ensuring adequate information was gathered regarding the participants.

Human Subjects Protections

Multiple areas of ethical protection were addressed to ensure participants' information was handled appropriately as it pertains to data collection and analysis, publication and storage. Also issues of informed consent, voluntary participation and vulnerable populations were addressed. Before data collection occurred, I worked to create and foster rapport with potential participants. Because this study follows grounded theory, the sample was homogeneous in that both groups of participants, those who currently work in group homes and those who recently left, have common shared experiences (Creswell, 2013). Although the groups could share common experiences, their reasoning for the common shared experiences may be different, based on their employment status at the time of the interview. Beginning with data collection, the inclusion criterion was any adult, over the age of 18. The study did not include any participants under the age of 18. This protected against researching children who are a vulnerable population.

All research materials and data, audio recordings, transcriptions, etc. were stored in accordance with IRB procedures, in a locked filing cabinet at the university to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Data will be kept for a prescribed amount of time in

accordance with IRB upon completion of the project and destroyed when appropriate. Qualitative data software was used for transcription, and kept on a password protected website, Trint, and the computer used to store the data was password protected.

Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop (2012) discuss informed consent as it relates to qualitative research. They note that informed consent needs to be an on-going agreement that is continually renegotiated throughout the research process. This continual renegotiation occurred during research collection on this study. Miller et al. (2012) also discuss ethical issues surrounding recruitment and obtaining research participants. It is vitally important to ensure that coercive and controlling tactics are not used to recruit participants for this study. Within qualitative research, the relationship between participant and researcher is often lengthy, and ethical issues could arise at any point during the research study. There was no monetary remuneration for participating in this study, and interviews did not interfere with the staff member's daily tasks nor were they conducted during working hours.

In order to address any ethical issues, continual assessment of the participants' understanding of consent, and ability to stop participation at any time were crucial to ensure appropriate ethical decisions are made. Creswell (2013) provides suggestions for consent verbiage and documentation of consent given. Per Creswell (2013) consent for this study included participants being made aware that they have the ability to withdraw consent at any time, of the purpose of the study and procedures surrounding data collection, how confidentiality was to be assured, any risks associated with the study, and any known benefits. The focus of this study was not what Creswell (2013) considers "high risk" nor included vulnerable populations. No children under the age of 18 were interviewed, no prisoners, no special group of people, i.e. Native Americans, individuals

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who are HIV positive, were targeted or excluded. Participants were made aware that their interviews would be recorded with an audio recorder, transcribed and analyzed.

The population for this research was adults over the age of 18 who have worked or are currently working in group homes. Group homes typically house children ages 12-18. Although this research was not conducted on the youth in the home, it was possible during data collection for identifiable information regarding the youth to arise. If a participant did discuss youth either by name or by situation, no identifying information was transcribed regarding the youth and any and all information regarding the story was unidentified to ensure protection of minors who had not given consent to involvement in this study. In addition to the initial request for participants to not use real names of youth, when participants were asked to share specific stories I reminded them to not use real names of youth. Ensuring confidentiality is a vital aspect of any research study. Confidentiality, and rendering cases anonymous is especially important when dealing with interviews in narrative form, as this research study did. Any and all identifiable information was removed from the participants' narratives. Participants were assigned numbers for coding purposes to further ensure anonymity.

Areas specific to this research that needed to be addressed to ensure confidentiality surrounded participants' disclosure of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Any and all identifying information surrounding the name of a work place, co-workers, supervisors and staff was removed to protect individuals and organizations who had not given consent to participate.

CHAPTER 4

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF GROUP HOME STAFF

Introduction

Data from the ten interviews were analyzed to address the research question "What is the influence of group home staff in the ecological environment of the group home?" Aligned with the theoretical framework of this study, several themes emerged through rigorous coding and analysis of the data. The themes that emerged from the data are as follows: walking into the unknown, in loco parentis, which includes two sub-themes of consanguinity and the group home as a home, engagement, which was further refined into two sub-themes, engagement between staff members, and engagement between staff and youth. Another theme that emerged from the data was staff impact on youth, which was also broken down into three sub-themes, managing transitions, loss and boundaries. The final theme that emerged was supervisor support Participants were randomly assigned numbers one through ten to protect anonymity and are referred to by their number throughout the dissertation.

Walking into the unknown

Each research participant was asked the question "What if anything did you know about group homes before working in one?" Overwhelmingly, individuals knew very little about group homes prior to actually working in one. There were three people who worked in group homes previously, one participant who worked as a child welfare case manager prior to working in the group home and one previous foster parent. The theme of the impact for new staff of walking into the unknown developed when participants described their previous knowledge of group homes. The following quote by participant two illustrates how little the participant knew about the job:

I had no idea what a group home was, or even foster care. Hardly knew anything

about adoption or the child welfare system... But the way it was presented to me

was I get to go out with high schoolers and be a counselor and take them on fun

excursions and it just it was a dream job for me. So that's actually what I said to

them when they hired me I said this is my dream job and they laughed at me. So

that's how it was. I found it on indeed.com. It was pretty random.

It is concerning that the job was portrayed to this participant as something

seemingly less than it was. This person knew virtually nothing about not only the group

home setting but also about child welfare as a whole. This participant, and others, later

went on to say they realized the job was much more than they originally had anticipated

and been prepared for.

Participant seven reported not knowing anything about the whole system prior to

working in it and quickly realizing the job was much more than babysitting. Below is

participant seven's response regarding what he/she knew about the job prior to starting

it.

Don't know, just driving kids around, put'en em in school, hanging out. There's a

lot more to it.

This theme is further illustrated by participant four in the quote below when

asked what if anything he/she knew about group homes prior to working in one.

Nope, because I studied sociology and psychology in school so you kind of talk

about you know diverse populations and the oppressed, but I hadn't learned

about foster care or anything, really didn't know much about it I didn't know

anything about group homes. I had a totally different picture of what it would be.

Participant three talked about knowing of group homes from movies. The

following quote illustrates cultural stereotypes of group homes in our society. Often

times group homes are portrayed in a strongly negative light in the media. Having only movies as a point of reference for what a group home is a stark contrast to what the job fully entails.

> Just that movies. You know you saw it on the movies and I didn't even know they existed. Yeah. So, I came in like oh this exists?

Participant seven was both the owner of the group home and an employee, so hiring practices and recruitment of staff was discussed. I was able to ask questions specific to hiring. This participant listed the requirements as being: over the age of eighteen, having either a high school diploma or GED, a fingerprint clearance card, driver's license, current CPR and first aid and two years of work experience with children. Participant seven discussed at length the arduous process of finding a candidate that meets all the criteria. Below is his/her description of hiring the right person for the job.

> I've been fortunate in getting staff but when you have to go through that process of hiring them it's hard to get a good staff. You know what I'm saying. You're gonna call many many people… right now I posted with one hiring company which…excellent now because [they] gather all the other applicants and put them under one and sends them to you. It saves you a lot of time instead of going through Career Builder and Indeed and everybody else. So now so that's great so [they] will send you like 100's of applicants which is great. And you have a lot to choose from all right. So the thing is that you know you have certain criteria that you tell the applicant they must meet before they can apply. You know to be considered for an interview and they'll check yes then when you call them they don't have that or else some applicants don't even have a driver's license, or their license is suspended. I can't use you…I need you to take the kids on outings and

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like that. You know we do a lot of that... so I can't use you if you don't have that. Then you'll ask them do you have your fingerprint card? Do you have your First Aid CPR? "uhh my first aide just expired", "oh um I don't have a copy of my fingerprint card I have to get that". OK that's not too bad they can get a copy of it. But usually they really don't qualify in most cases the applicants who apply for the job do not qualify. We may have a handful of applicants that qualified. What happens is that for whatever reason you'll find those applicants recirculating over and over again in the industry.

It appears that online websites for job postings is a primary way individuals find job openings in group homes. Group homes are bound by state regulations as to the qualifications and requirements for hiring staff. Beyond the basic requirements, group homes can go through the vetting process to find the best candidate based on their experience and interviewing skills.

This theme of walking into the unknown was prevalent within the data and was reflected in the job hiring problem as well. If finding qualified job applicants, even with minimal requirements, is so difficult, it might follow that candidates would know little about the jobs in part because employers are limited in providing information in order to hire. Although participants reported knowing very little about working in group homes, when they began doing the job, they realized their preconceived notions of simply driving kids around and babysitting were far from what the job actually entailed. In reality the staff were more like parents than babysitters.

In Loco Parentis

The theme of in loco parentis and its subthemes consanguinity and the group home as a home developed when participants talked about their roles, relationships and feelings towards the group home. In loco parentis which is Latin for "in the place of a

parent" (Merriam-Webster, 2018) is the overarching theme that includes parenting responsibilities and duties group home staff do on a daily basis and encompasses the staff's feelings related to those duties.

Participants reported in loco parentis duties including waking youth up in the morning, feeding them meals, dispensing medication, going to school meetings, and helping with homework. When participants talked about their daily responsibilities, they listed them off in a relaxed manner, most participants reflected on their responsibilities fondly. Participant two referred to the term parent of the house when detailing the daily shift.

> Yes. I explain it to people as like I'm the mom. You know. We come in and I go in at 1:00 on school. You know school schedule at 1:00 o'clock get snack ready, any of the laundry that needs to be done. Make sure everything is prepared until the girls start rolling in, the girls will start coming in from you know high school age to the elementary. Then they have snack. We get homework done. And I start dinner, they're doing chores, showers and it's pretty busy all the way until about 6:30. 6:30 have a snack and they have free time if they were doing good, they watch TV, lounge around do whatever they need to finish homework and then 7 o'clock is quiet time for the little ones. At eight o'clock lights out, older girls 8 pm quiet time, 9 o'clock lights out. Yeah. It's a busy day. It goes by super quick.

The above quote illustrates the daily tasks of this staff, preparing meals, managing different bed times and ensuring the necessary chores are completed for the day. These tasks align with the in loco parentis theme. Another poignant quote illustrates the delicate balance of managing the intimate details of staff performing in loco parentis duties while maintain the professional role of a group home staff. Participant three discussed the emotions associated with being an in loco parents group home staff.

You become a little family I mean you're living there like I was putting girls to bed; I was singing girls to sleep. My supervisor warned me in the beginning like just about boundaries. But boundaries are so hard with children that you're like putting to sleep. They're scared of the dark and yeah I don't know. So. I feel like you definitely do turn into a little family and they look up to you and they're watching your every move because they don't know, they don't have a lot of healthy adults in their life and so if you are a healthy adult that cares about them I think you could have a huge impact.

It quickly emerged from each participant who represented the theme walking into the unknown that the job was more in depth and more difficult than they imagined, but also more importantly in the end they understood the crucial role they played in the lives of the youth they cared for. The learning curve was steep for the participants who were new to the child welfare and group home environments, but they caught on quickly and reported they were able to do their jobs effectively. By participants detailing their daily tasks they clearly dispelled any myths that group home staff simply babysit children, or that working in a group home is like summer camp, and clearly defines their work as in loco parentis caregivers.

Not many people get it they're like oh it's just a job you babysit and I'm like it is not that at all and there like oh you haven't even been there a year. And I'm like you don't understand I'm with these kids 12 hours a day I buy their underwear I buy their clothes. I sit there and listen to them in court talk about what they did. We have a very intimate relationship on such a different level that you don't. I don't think I have this kind of relationship with my own mom and I don't sit here and talk about that personal of stuff like, Hey I failed the polygraph let's talk

about it. You know so it's. It's, it's hard. But I mean. It comes with the territory. I would not change at all.

The above quote from participant eight is poignant and powerful and a reminder of the depth and importance of group home staff.

Consanguinity

Participants reported instances where they reiterated that in the group home consanguineous relationships are formed between them and the youth, hence the development of the sub-theme of consanguinity. Consanguinity is defined as a connection, or close relation (Merriam-Webster, 2018). It was clear staff take their role seriously and understand the needs of the children they are caring for and sought consanguinity with the youth in the home. In the quote below participant ten was detailing a situation where one youth was not getting along with the rest of the youth in the home.

> I mean the kids can't stand to be around her it could be something as simple as baking cookies she doesn't want anybody else to help just her and I said baby it can't be that way I said we are all family here I said, and they want to be involved in the cookies and the cookie tasting just like you so you gotta open up your heart and stop that you gotta let them in.

Similarly, participant one discussed her consanguineous relationship with youth and her view on

her role as a group home staff.

> While you're here. You're mine and I'm going to love you and you're gonna be my little person.

Finally, the following quote from participant five illustrates the rich consanguineous relationship that grew in a group home and the powerful sense of home that can develop in this environment.

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They are so loving, children are so loving, they are so caring, they just want the

love they just want to be loved and you can just give them the slightest little

something and they are so grateful for it... they are so thankful for it you know so

it just makes me want to give them even more and [one child] even told me you

know you really spoils us and I said well that's all I want to do is just love on you

spoil you and point you in the right direction, I said just want to keep you safe

and let you know there is safeness and you know when I say no that's a reason I

have to say no.

Group home as a home

Several participants talked about the environment of the group home, and how they

strived to make it as home like as possible. These comments formed the sub-theme of

group home as a home. Participant three discussed the family focused environment in

which they worked, illustrating the theme of group home as a home.

That I will praise on it but it's very family oriented. You know it's not like when I

say it's not structured it's not structured like a business like they know we work

there. But they know this is their home. They don't have to ask to get water. They

don't have to ask go use the bathroom. They get up they go this is their house, so

we treat it as the same. You know we have our desk to do the important stuff, they

know not to touch stuff is locked up. However, they have access to every whatever

they need and that's what I love about it because it gives them that you know like

hey I know I'm not home right now but this is my temporary home and I don't

have to use the white board to say I'm going to go use the bathroom or I'm

checking out. You know that's what I like because I've seen when I went to go like

the crisis center and it looks like a little prison for these kids and they're not at

fault for why they're here now and to give them that that positive atmosphere.

Like even us as staff like we forget we're at work because it's like these are our kids like we will claim them even if they're nasty we claim them as ours... I love that. I love the job. I don't want to leave it.

Group home staff not only provide care for the children, they also manage the house, from either assigning chores or doing the cleaning as well as daily house maintenance. They also cook each meal. The number of youth residing in each group homes in this study varied ranging from five to twelve youth. The daily requirements of running the group home itself were discussed by participant six in this quote below. This quote also illustrates the daily in loco parentis theme.

A typical day well when school is in it is kind of quiet, but you still have cleaning to do the wash, you know keeping everything loaded up like I said I needed to stop at the dollar store to get things just making sure everything is stocked making sure fridge is stocked, got everything it takes to make the meals from the menu for that week, it's busy just keeping the house clean, keeping clothing clean, and uh picking up children and taking them to their different outings when they get out of school if they have things they have to do, like today I have to take one to a girl scout meeting, so um that's my day for today of course taking the children, other than that I'll get back at some clothing, loads of clothes to wash, it's always something to wash.

Grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and coordinating schedules were among the many duties described by research participants as part of their daily tasks to keep the group home running successfully.

There are two general models for staffing a group home. There is the twenty-four-hour rotating shift model and the model where the staff live in the home. All but one of the group homes in this study subscribed to the rotating staff model. The one group

home that did have a staff that lived in the home also had rotating hourly staff, so the live-in staff had a break. The rotating staff model has the potential for staff to have differing rules and expectations. The participant who lived in the group home also owned it. The rationale for living in the group home was that it enhanced stability and consistency for the traumatized child.

> Like I was talking about separation anxiety. The kids already traumatized just from being taken away from their parents for whatever reason...they need some type of stability and consistency in their life. Yeah, so because I'm there and not just me because my other staff is there she's been there almost as long as I've been, there is consistency, they develop a bond, and these are the type of things that really help a child being to trust again...you know I think it's important to really be there for the kids like I said consistency, stability more of the family unit. [these kids] talk about how important we are in [their] life and how [they'll] miss us, we're [their] family and we're family and that's how it should be. I mean that's as hard as it is as an adult it's for the kids and so you have to be an adult. And sometimes it's not easy but it's what the kids need.

The theme of consanguinity was strongly associated with the above quote from participant seven. This live-in model worked for this specific group home but may not work for all group home settings. I asked each research participant what impact they felt the live-in model had on the group home environment. The answers were mixed. Some felt it would be beneficial, while others couldn't wrap their heads around how it would work. Participant five noted,

> The girls group home that I work with...they do have a live-in couple, but they also have overnight staff...and the kids call them mom and dad. How do I feel about it? First off, the overnight is not a sleeping shift. I can't imagine how that

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would work. I have a hard time wrapping my head around it. That would be

emotionally draining.

Below is another perspective on fulltime live-in staff from participant two,

I've heard about that. You know honestly, I think it would be good if that staff is

really passionate about it. I see the staff that are live-in weekend and they get

really burned out...but imagine if they had that to face day in day out knowing

month after month.

And finally, another proponent of live-in staff from participant nine,

Well I think it's a great idea, yeah that's a really great idea... I think it would give

the kids the sense of knowing that that person is always going to be there even if

so-and-so doesn't come in like that is like the one person you can count on you

know they would be able to, you know they're going to spend more time with the

kids so they're going to develop a stronger relationship and bond and trust with

the kids. I just think it's a great idea.

If there were to be more live-in staff working in group homes there would need to

be clear expectations as noted above but in general, it seemed like something the staff

were open to and could see the benefits it could have on the youth.

Engagement

The theme of engagement developed from the data and two sub-themes emerged

as well. One sub-theme was engagement between staff, and the second is engagement

between staff and youth. The sub-theme of engagement between staff emerged when

staff discussed communication at each shift change. This engagement period between

staff is essential to the group home setting because there are so many moving parts with

staff and youth. There was also an underlying theme of honesty that surfaced within the

sub-theme of engagement between staff and youth.

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Engagement of Staff/Staff

The sub-theme of engagement of staff with staff occurred primarily during the beginning and end of their shifts, as illustrated in these two quotes, the first from participant six, and second from participant two.

I walk through to make sure the house is OK. Me and my staff we'll brief real quick, he shows me anything that he notices or we talk about what ever happened over the night. Go through my emails.

I get here at 5:00 a.m. I usually spend like 15-20 minutes with the staff who's here kind of just getting filled in on how the night went if people did chores. If anyone had attitude and people will come home from therapy and group at night and so they'll let me know, so and so came home in a bad mood. Something may have come up something have happened so-and-so got into a fight with so-and-so or so-and-so to their chore. They let me know how dinner went because sometimes I'll start dinner in the crock pot and they will be like they hated it or yeah dinner was great they loved it ate all of it. So they will let me know. Really. If anything was weird if someone got sick someone hurt someone stepped on a nail or anything. Really that's it. If there were any calls or anything like that I need to handle.

The engagement period between staff is vital to the overall functionality of the group home as illustrated above. There are many moving elements in keeping the group home running, and it is important for continuity of care and the overall function of the house for all staff members to be on the same page. It is also crucial for staff to know what happened in the previous shift for documentation purposes for licensing, this is illustrated by participant five in the quote below.

So it's just kind of getting everybody where they need to be so that I can look over

the reports from the day before, go over the daily progress reports before, shift

change reports, and as a manager I need to make sure the bed checks were done

timely... overnight staff is required to do an hourly bed check and they put it in

the computer you know their findings and where everybody was at so making

sure that was done and they weren't missed.

Communication is essential, as illustrated in this quote below, to ensure consistency in

regulation within the house according to participant one.

I believe like having really good communication and be to be able to back up your

other staff. So if you say, you know [they] couldn't do this. I come in, [they] still

cannot do this. You know. Having that teamwork, ability that consistency we are

one, we aren't two, we aren't dividing the house. That's what makes an amazing

staff. Knowing their roles and this is what you're going to go by.

Staff with Youth

The second sub-theme of engagement is staff with youth. This sub-theme

emerged when participants were asked about positive and negative staff relationships

and how these relationships were built. The aim of this research was to examine the staff

impact on the group home environment. It was important to understand how staff

interacted with the youth they were caring for and to determine what impact those

interactions had on the environment. Participants had strong feelings about what makes

a good staff, what makes a "bad" or negative staff, and how that relationship impacts the

group home environment.

Primarily staff talked about positive relationships they had with youth and

reported the majority of youth they worked with liked them, and they had strong positive

relationships. Several ways these strong relationships were built was through rapport

building, active listening, being genuine and real with the youth. Participant three listed the below ways they engage with youth in their home.

I care. I try to engage and involve myself with them as much as possible. I mean I'm obviously at every court every C.F.T (Child Family Team) every med check every doctor's appointment everything. But I ask how group went I ask how therapy went I ask how their visit went sometimes it doesn't go well. And they hated it sometimes it went great and they want to talk about it. I just I want to be involved like some people are going to video games and I ask what are you playing what are you working on did you beat that level? And I just try to actually care and show interest in them.

The below quote from participant ten discusses the importance of the staff person being genuine, and the positive impact it had on the relationship with the youth being cared for. Participant ten also illustrated the importance of treating the youth with respect and honoring them as individuals from a strengths perspective.

I always treated them with respect and like I already had a lot of faith and hope in them instead of them coming and some of our girls did come in from probation. But like instead of treating them like oh you've already done so much wrong I treated all of the girls as if they were children that maybe have made mistakes but that everything that they had done was for forgivable. You know I just treated all my girls with respect. And also I got a lot of humor into the job cause I felt like it was just so serious. I just really like I was really terrified the first couple months but then when I felt more comfortable with the job I really just like embrace my goofiness and I was usually like the only white person in the whole house. They would all call me like a white girl the goofy like weird nerdy person and I just like embraced it. That's who I am. I think that resonated with girls even if I was like

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kind of annoying to them still that I was like treat them with respect as like being honest with them like real like yeah I feel like the realness and the genuinely is what helped girls respond positively to me. I just never came in like looking to get people in trouble like looking to look down on anybody like yeah just had a lot of respect for all of them they truly I still care about them so much.

Several participants talked about rapport building through being a listener, and being open to the youth when they were ready to share. The first quote from participant two is below.

A good relationship with a kid, you know I like to think I built a good relationship with all of them, with all of them and giving them their space when they are in a bad mood when they don't want to talk about it respecting that and like ok I'm here when you want to talk I think that is the biggest thing, the biggest thing you know um it just yeah, being here to talk to them when they want to talk and when they don't you know knowing when to go into redirect something umm they need to feel like they are in control, everybody is telling them what they can do can't do and rules and just have some control of their life.

Participant four discussed what a positive relationship looks like for him/her:

That they actually let me in, you know will actually come in and sit down and talk to me and say hey you know this happened today somebody said something to me um really made me feel a certain way, um we have one kid here that is so private you know so when he actually will come in and and when he closes the door I know that he wants to talk he wants to share um I've had kids over the years that you know I sit them down and we will talk and I don't judge them I don't judge them, you know it's like dude I've been there.

Finally, participant one defines a good staff member as:

A good staff member to me is somebody who is able to really relate to the children someone who can really understand the child someone who takes the time to talk to the children. To really engage in them play games with the children listen to the children

It became clear from the data that group home staff understand the complex lives of the youth they care for and recognize the importance of respecting the youth as well as supporting them. The staff also understand the importance, power and responsibility that accompany the positive relationships formed with the youth. The below quote from participant five illustrates the reciprocal positive relationship between a youth and the staff.

By being honest number 1, being real with them, talking with them, communication I tell them is everything, I said you must communicate, no shaking heads, we need to use our mouth to speak, you need to look me in my eye when I talk to you, I need to do you the same way let's give each other mutual respect, I said I don't care how young you are, you deserve respect, I as old as I am as big as I am I deserve respect I always get this right up front with the kids I tell them I'll never tell you anything if I don't know what I'm talking about I said I'll never lead you with false hope, and they have found that to be true, if I tell them something I do my best to carry through with every ounce of it, I really don't tell them anything till I know it's cemented, cause I don't like seeing kids disappointed.

Building positive relationships through engagement, realness and honesty can be seen in this quote from participant eight, talking about the strong positive relationships with the youth in the home, and how that positive relationship can lead to the youth confiding in them, often times with information that is incriminating.

Kids come home, and they failed polygraphs and they come home crying like I'm so sorry and I'm like don't be sorry to me and they will disclose to me and I'm like why me, like why not your therapist, why not parole, why not probation, why not your S.O. (Surveillance officer) why me. why not your mom and I mean again like it breaks my heart because they tell me I had 17 more victims but then I'm like it is such an honor. No it's a privilege that I have that relationship. And it's just so touching. It is what keeps me going. Why I love it 100% I tell people like the bad days are bad but the good days are so so so good yeah they outweigh the bad.

The above quote illustrates how a positive relationship can lead youth to look to a group home staff for support during some of the hardest times in their lives. When group home staff engage with youth in a positive, real, honest way, the staff share that incredible relationships can form.

Staff Impact on Youth

This research sought to examine the impact staff have on the ecological group home environment. The bulk of the interview questions surrounded staff relationships, and participants were asked to describe what positive staff relationships and negative staff relationships looked like within their group homes. Additionally, participants were asked the impact on the group home when a staff person left the home, and what the impact was, positive or negative, while working in the home. The theme of staff impact on youth emerged and contains three sub themes, managing transitions, loss and boundaries.

Managing Transitions

Several staff talked about transitions of youth leaving the home as well as staff leaving the homes and how that impacted the relationships within the home and the larger group home environment. Overall the data revealed that staff who had a more

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positive relationship with youth in the home were more successful in managing transitions of youth and staff leaving. Participants were able to clearly identify the impact staff had on the group home environment. Beginning with the impact a positive staff has on the home, participant ten said this:

So it's relationship with the kids is big, it's big in their success it's big in their compliance it's big in um having that healthy relationship with them and being supportive of them.

Participants discussed the impact a positive staff member leaving the group home has on the environment. Staff managed these situations differently as illustrated below. This participant took a real-life approach to staff who have left the group home when processing the staff's exit with the youth. This quote by participant two also illustrates that the impact of a positive staff person leaving may only affect a handful of youth in the home, but those youth are impacted negatively.

We've had staff that (huh, laughs sarcastically) have been let go because of things that they chose to do. Yeah. And typically, it's not that bad as a group because we have 10 kids in each home. So it doesn't affect the whole house but it may affect one or two [kids] that they're really close [to]. And normally we just explain to them that life does have a lot of change. You got to adapt to it. We just coach them through it, most of it was negative but we just try to teach them how life is. You can't always expect things to go your way the person to be there all the time because things happen that's pretty much what we do.

Each participant was asked several questions about situations in which staff members left the group home. There were two participants that reported they had no staff members leave in the homes they worked in but were able to postulate on the impact of a staff leaving. There were also several participants that reported low turnover

rates but were also able to extrapolate on the impact of a staff leaving. The quote below from participant nine exemplifies the intricate roles staff play in the youths' lives, and the great impact a staff member leaving has on them because of the background of the youth in group homes. Also, that the staff person may only be present in the youths' lives for a short time, and the exit may be swift and not allow for a therapeutic or appropriate transition.

> [it's] huge [it] breaks my heart. The girls have such a hard time because of failed attachments in their lives that they would begin to feel attached to staff and even a staff that they didn't necessarily become attached to but like saw every day for a week in a row it was like and especially if the staff member didn't say goodbye to a child before leaving it set them back a lot. I think in their ability to trust adults in the whole environment of the home would change when a staff left. I mean whether the staff was good or bad I think these [kids] just lacked consistency from adults in their lives and seeing people just come and go without caring about saying goodbye it was really hard to see.

The importance of a transition and or keeping the youth in the home aware of staff leaving is discussed in the following quote. This quote from participant ten illustrates the significance of communication and transparency if possible with youth to ensure a stable environment during a transition.

> There wasn't a high turnover and they were not likely to leave.... But I think that there were situations in which people I mean there was no choice there whether it be a health issue or whether something else came up and they were gone...so I guess...It really just depends on the staff member. It really depends on the situation in which they left. I think the more open the staff can be about what's going on and not keeping secrets from the kids and not hiding things. I mean it's

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tricky because if it's your own personal life and you don't want to share, you want

boundaries and you don't want to share if there's something going on with your

family and you can't come to work and you're out leave for six months. You know

that can be challenging but it really was helpful for the kids when they knew, or

they could expect something was going to happen somebody is going to leave.

They're going to be on maternity leave for six months and then they're going to be

back in six months you may not still be here, but you can still say goodbye we can

still plan some sort of a ritual around a going away party that kind of thing.

The idea of doing a ritual or some type of goodbye ceremony may be helpful in

aiding the transition, which multiple participants pointed out as being difficult, stressful

and emotional for the youth. Similarly, setting the group home up for success with

transparency in scheduling and routine is beneficial to keeping a steady environment if

they are going to be changes in staff. This consistency in letting the youth know who is

present each day was only discussed by one participant, participant ten but seems to be a

beneficial procedure for a group home.

[If a staff has to leave unexpectedly] that's very, very rare. For the most part you

are preparing [the youth] and letting them know as much as you possibly can

about what to expect. I mean we posted our schedule two weeks in advance. But

you know you've got people who call off sick that have their own kids in their own

families and you have people who come in and cover on call staff, but we honestly

always had it posted so that the kids could see who to expect on each shift who

was coming when they were coming. The consistency the predictability it's all

crucial for them.

There were several participants who talked about low rates of staff turnover in

their group homes. The longer a staff is in a group home the longer they have to build a

relationship with youth, whether it be positive or negative. Participant eight discusses the lack of turnover in the quote below.

> You know we don't have a lot of staff turnover either, we really don't in fact a staff over the years he's actually been here longer than me, 11 years. The [kids] like him his relationship with the kids is good... you know we had one staff here that was an asshole just really hard on the kids and they were glad to see him leave, yeah they were glad to see him leave you know now at some of the other houses um I've seen you know staff that leave and it does influence the kids they kind of feel kind of feel deserted.

Loss

Due to the often-high turnover rates of staff and youth alike in group homes, managing the loss of a staff or a youth with the remaining members within the group home is a sub-theme that emerged within the staff impact theme. While no participant discussed a set protocol for managing the loss of a staff or youth, participant three framed staff change to the youth they worked with in a real-world way, reinforcing that the group home is a temporary placement while their family of origin is involved with child protective services.

> I always look at the kids that they get a little bit worked up about it because they see somebody else walking out of their lives. It's not the staff's fault that they leave because like we tell the girls this is only temporary it's not long term you're not supposed to be here long, and you know the staff you know life changes and we go. It doesn't really rock it too much, but you do see the changes in the girls. In their attitudes and how they feel. But everybody else is just trying to you know keep going and moving forward. You know we try tell them hey it's just temporary. It's not long term.

This quote from participant nine illustrates that the reactions in the home differ when a less than favorable staff leaves as compared to a more well-liked staff.

It all depends on the staff if they were a horrible staff they are happy they're gone.

It was a good staff some of them get sad.

The below quote from participant seven discusses the loss that is felt when a staff leaves from both a staff and owner perspective and how when a staff with a positive relationship leaves the home it does impact the youth.

I've been very fortunate with myself even though my one resigned last week but my staff...if it's a good staff person the kids constantly ask for the staff, [they say] I miss this person I miss that person when are they coming back? So you know the children deal a lot with separation anxiety and that is one of the things that impact [and the same can be said for] good staff [the kids] they are still going to experience that separation...Most definitely it has an impact on me because now I have to start the routine over again of hiring a staff and there's a lot that goes into hiring a staff such as in any company. But I think in our case it's just more in and in depth in more detail oriented because we are dealing with children because it's all about protecting a child.

Boundaries

When participants talked about strained staff youth relationships it was often in regard to a lack of boundaries staff had with youth. Participants were able to articulate that when staff had healthy, appropriate boundaries with youth the environment was more positive as compared to staff who had unhealth, inappropriate boundaries.

A negative staff relationship can take the form of blurred boundaries and has a clear impact on the group home. As discussed previously, boundaries are essential within the group home environment. Participant five reported a staff relationship in which

boundaries had been crossed between the house manager and a youth, leaving the rest of the youth out, and how that situation impacted the entire group home environment.

Yes, this one is she's the house manager. You know not understanding your role. I understand there's going to be kids that call you auntie or grandma or something like that. But when you have a kid call you mom and you call her your daughter. But you're not doing it to the other girls [in the home]. That's going to hurt. You know and when you tell [that staff] like hey that is not OK I understand you want to let them call you that but when you're giving her more freedom in certain areas you're letting her off the hook when this girl so clearly, they need to be disciplined. You know and you're just showing her hey I'm a cool mom with no structures. Whenever there staffs there we try to be the back bone she's like oh I need a call my mom, it's like no that's not your mom you know sorry…Where do we draw the line? That's you know kids you're going to get hurt because what if that staff that house manager gets moved to another house or say she gets a better opportunity somewhere else. Mom's gone now. You know what I mean. So that's, that's a very messy very messy boundary. So, you know we try you know and I see like in this field in social work you see a lot of people come into these type of work fields and they don't know. They don't know what they are doing. You know it's not just babysitting. It's not you know, you're really dealing with somebody's life.

Naturally youth will have reactions to staff they feel are a negative influence in the group home. The below quote from participant three discusses when a staff lacks boundaries and how the youth use the lack of boundaries to their gain.

[a negative staff effects the house] dramatically, kids as you know they can read you really well yeah they know when a staff is in it for the money or they're in it

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because they love the job. I've had numerous of staff in it just for the money. And kids take advantage of that they manipulate it they find grey areas. And they have that staff eventually go to their side and now it's the staff and the kids vs. the house or the company. In our past[we] had staff buying alcohol or cigarettes, marijuana stuff like that. Or let them get away with little stuff and it's our company is big on growing and breaking habits and teaching young men responsibilities adult life. When you have a staff that's going against that its really, really tough. And you're essentially hurting that kid making matters worse you're not helping them out. So, it's really tough. When you get those type of people in this field which there's a few sadly that there's quite a few of them. Yeah.

The way a staff interacts with the youth impacts the group home environment. The below quote talks about the difference in staff and the impact each staff member has on the house specifically during staff shift changes. Also described by participant six is the effect of a staff not meeting the youths' needs and having more relaxed boundaries.

Big time we've seen that in just if a staff goes to another house. We see how a dramatic change in the house is...or say if the staff isn't like, I've noticed it like I said the weekend staff. Weekend staff is more lenient then the weekdays. So, the whole atmosphere... it changes and sometimes for the good. I've seen the girls like more at ease and then when there's a certain staff there they're more like frustrated or flustered and it's just cause how that staff is. Even when my former employee... when she left all the girls were really sad because she gave a lot of structure and she was you know she had structure plus caring. So, she was really good at what she did. So, the new house manager came in and the girls didn't know how to handle her. And it's been probably going on a year and a half

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already and the girls still don't know how to handle this house manager. Just

because it's different you know. Less structured. So, you know, and I always tell

people these kids need structure. They're not used to it. So, if we don't give it to

them we're taking them back to the same thing they just left. So, they want that.

Even though they don't say they thirst for it.

The following piece of an interview with participant ten details a staff and youth

relationship and how pervasive the avoidance of the staff was within the house.

> Interviewer: So this negative relationships that he had with the youth impacted
>
> the whole group home?
>
> Participant: The whole house the whole house. Instead of them all being out and
>
> interacting with each other like playing video games or watching TV around on
>
> the computer. They're all in their rooms or outside so that they don't have to
>
> interact with him.

The inequality of attention among the youth with the staff has a direct impact on

the youth, and the group home environment as a whole. The impact of a negative staff

was explained by this participant during their shift change, when youth would bypass

one staff for another so as to not interact with that staff member, showing a clear dislike

for the staff. Participant four was honest with the staff member and told him how the

youth were feeling and why they were bypassing him and unwilling to work with him.

> Definitely negative. Yes, him and I did we did overlap you know two to three
>
> hours, so they would bypass him and come to me and of course he did not like it
>
> and let me know that. You know he did not like that and that if he said one thing
>
> if he told them to do something that they shouldn't be allowed to come to me and
>
> I was like yes that's true. But let me tell you that they don't like you and they don't

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respect you. So that's I think that's your issue that you need to work on with them. I mean I don't know what else to say.

Several participants discussed the youth's reaction to staff they dislike in the group home and how they addressed concerns with a staff member who wasn't working out. Specifically, participant four had this to say about assessing group home staff.

That's the indicator, you're gonna know if somebody is right for this position within the first 2-3 months and at that point you need to sit them down and say hey how are you feeling how are things going and my boss has said that give them a try you'll know within the first couple of months if they are going to be an appropriate fit or not ...the kids will make the comment, "they don't give a shit they're just here for a paycheck" they pick up on it right away, (participant snapped her fingers) they really do so...yeah the kids I think they have to be able to build a relationship with the kids cause the kids are gonna be the ones that will make the call.

It is clear the staff influence the group home environment, and that influence impacts the youths and their behavior, as illustrated in the quote below from participant six.

yeah, yeah because...what I see the kids is if there is a negative vibe going on [in the home] and they make a poor choice they tend to blame that [on the group home] you know it does, it makes it does make a huge difference.

Overall, group home staff recognize the impact their relationships have on the youth. They reported seeing the impact negative staff had on youth, and when those staff left, the impact their departure had on the home. Staff also recognized that positive staff impact the home and when they leave the impact is equally as great.

Differences within the two groups

After data analysis, it was discovered that there were similarities and differences between the eight group home staff in the lower level of care and the two in the higher. Two primary differences were presented during the interviews when staff discussed situations in which they felt unprepared to deal with and how they were handled. Staff working in higher-level care facilities reported getting extensive training and needing extensive experience before being hired as well as a strong sense of supervisor support and supervision. Staff in traditional group home settings reported getting very little training either during the hiring process or throughout the course of their work. Only the state mandated training for licensing was discussed as on-going training. No training on trauma, parenting or evidence-based practice was discussed by traditional group home staff. The themes of in loco parentis and respective sub themes, engagement and respective sub themes as well as staff impact and respective sub themes were all present in all ten participants. The theme of walking into the unknown was not present in the two individuals who worked in higher levels of care.

The unprepared situation

In the traditional group home settings, when asked about situations where the staff felt unprepared, there was no mention of support from supervisors or staff, in fact, one individual who left the group home noted the lack of supervisor support as a primary reason for leaving. To ascertain in-depth experiences of the staff, each participant was asked to describe a time when he or she felt unprepared to deal with a situation in the group home. One participant who worked in a non-therapeutic group home described a situation in which there was a death of a sibling in the group home. When asked about support from the group home for the staff, participant four had this response:

Interviewer: Did you process it with anyone?

Participant: I mean I went home and I cried because I mean it was just so emotional I just felt so bad for him. So I did cry. I told some of my family members you know one of the boys you know he lost his brother and it's just so sad. And when I say it's so because a few days before I had also told my family about you know how he talks to me like there was a big deal that he actually talks to me. Yeah. And so they already knew who I was talking about when I said do you remember the boy I told you about well his brother just passed away yeah. So you know I just I talked with them about that and expressed how bad I felt for him.

Interviewer: And you didn't have a unit meeting you didn't have like damage control a support meeting There was nothing there? There was nothing?

Participant: No no no no no. There was none of that. And as the shift went on my co-worker was having it affect him more and I could see that. And he's a smoker and he kept going outside to smoke and I was like you know if the if you need to step away like I'm ok like we're OK. And so, he did he you know left for a little bit maybe half hour 45 minutes. And as I told you I was texting the house manager to see how the boy was and I asked him if again I could stay on like a few more hours. I said because so-and-so you know he's not dealing with this well and my group manager's response was Why like what's wrong with him. He didn't tell anybody because we were told we were not allowed to tell the boys in the home. And I just didn't understand his response of why he was worried that he told the kids even though I clearly said you know he you know that he knows the boy. So I said well he's processing his grief I said and we didn't tell anyone anything. I didn't understand why his concern was whether we were following his instructions instead of your employee your subordinate is not okay. So that was

another thing. And the next day the owner and the administration did come over the next day and they said nothing to me about anything. I later got a text saying to make sure that I made I made him food and made sure that he ate and my response was OK I will but it's ok if he doesn't eat because that's part of grief like it's going to be OK If he doesn't eat like it's normal to have a loss of appetite it's ok. Like I mean he doesn't. I mean he's a teenager when he's ready to eat he'll eat.

Participant four went on to say that this situation was one of the driving forces in leaving the job at the group home. Participant four reported feeling as if there was no support from upper management, in not only this situation but many others during the course of employment. is This participant expressing wanting to do the best at the job and sought support from the upper management, which was not well received and ultimately contributed to leaving the job.

Another participant in a non-therapeutic group home reported a time when a youth threatened to rape the participant. Below is participant six's description of the event.

No we had that one kid who threatened to rape me. That completely caught me off guard. And that was a little concerning especially because we reached out to crisis. We reached out to the police. We reached out to everyone begging for help and no one would help us. Crisis admitted he needed to go somewhere else. [Everyone] refused to take him because he had beat up the guards and placement was like well there isn't anywhere for us to take him I'm like he can't stay here. He's threatening to rape me and the police said until he actually does they couldn't do anything which I later found out is not true. And they should have taken him because based on that threat. They should have taken him. And he told the police that he's like yeah leave me here with [the staff

person]. And I was like oh my god. And so not that I was unprepared just it did frighten me a little bit but then I had the boys like willing to stay out there with me, which it sucked for me and it really broke my heart that I needed to rely on teenage boys to be what DCS should have been. What the police should have and crisis should have been. It shouldn't have come to me relying on my 250 pound 15 year old and my 200 pound 16 year old to protect me against another kid in a house. And I don't know what I would have done because he was twice my size. He easily could have held me down and done whatever.

Participant six went on to say that their boss who was also the owner of the group home did very little to address this situation. The above participant reported that the biggest issue she has is with their boss, also the owner of the group home and how they see their roles differently. They reported feeling little support and being on a different page in terms of how to treat the youth in the home and how to run the group home. Below further illustrates the frustration and disconnect with the owner of the group home participant six worked in.

But that's probably the hardest part. And it's frustrating because we were friends first and then now we're like business people together. And I've just I've lost all respect for him and I just. I know he sees this as like cash flow coming in and not as I see this like my family. These kids are my heart. I love them so much that he really just sees it as a kid is a bed and a paycheck. We had a kid sneak out and go AWOL and it broke my heart I cried. I was omg we got to get that kid back is probably here, or here. We've got to check like call the police and he's like I will have another kid out there tomorrow morning and I'm like it's not about filling the bed and getting a check. This kid is out there somewhere like what? So we just have different viewpoints on it and it's hard because I feel like I'm more

emotionally invested in this because I'm here with these kids daily and he is not. So it's probably easier for him to detach whereas me I see that as a kid a person. My heart!

The two aforementioned stories belong to two staff who worked in group homes that met the original inclusion criteria of non-locked, non-therapeutic. The following situation in which participant nine felt unprepared occurred in a therapeutic group home setting.

> And there was a one time that I didn't realize what exactly was going on through this girl's head but we were waiting for the emergency response team to come and get her because she was expressing suicidal ideation and running away and throwing rocks her behaviors very unstable we didn't know what was going on and she ended up like jumping me actually. I don't know how it happened, but we were closer to the house. So there is a lot of support there but somehow she was able to jump on my back and kind of beat me up in a sense. I think we were just kind of as a team not prepared. I mean for that kind of situation, when they got her off me really quickly and emergency teams came really quickly but I was really shook up...Yes. Like it's something I'm never going to forget because I think it's like that moment where I was like am I going to be a social worker or not. I didn't want to come in the next day but I came in and my girls had like this big sign for me and they all signed it and were like please don't leave us like. And they were crying when I walked in because they thought I was going to leave and the girl who actually ended up jumping me also wrote me a letter and she was like it wasn't because of you it was just like I didn't know what to do. I was trapped. So it was like my supervisor did debrief with me and I felt very

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supported and I was like this could work you know like the good outweighs the

bad.

This unsettling event in which the group home staff member was physically

attacked is clearly upsetting, but the staff person reported feeling supported by not only

the supervisor, but the youth in the home, and in fact this situation reaffirmed the

participant's desire and drive to be a social worker.

Supervisor Support

A key difference that emerged between the two participants who worked in a

therapeutic setting and the other eight who did not was an emphasis on supervision and

supervisor support. Both participants reported having excellent supervisors, in fact one

became a supervisor after working as a residential counselor in the therapeutic group

home. Below is a quote from participant ten about the importance of supervision. From

this difference and within these two participants the theme of supervisor support

emerged.

> So I would have regular supervision with residential counselors like you would as
>
> a therapist or a social worker as an intern with your supervisor so we would meet
>
> regularly. I would say things can get chaotic and so sometimes it felt like you're
>
> just putting out fires so you're discussing more issues than you are the positive.
>
> But you have to remember that a lot of the staff that came to that facility I don't
>
> think there was anyone hire that didn't have at least a bachelor's degree and most
>
> of them had a wealth of experience in group homes before they came to my
>
> facility so it's not like they needed coaching so much on how to build
>
> relationships or work with the kids. They knew how to do that already. It was
>
> more about specific interventions. What's not working. What can we do
>
> differently? Hey I'm seeing you now countertransference going on here. Let's talk

about why that kid is triggering you what you can do to you know treat them differently. That kind of thing.

This next quote illustrates a positive relationship between participant ten and their supervisor while working in a therapeutic group home, and the importance of as well as the lasting relationship the two formed.

We had a supervisor. She supervised I think 8 other's staff. She was amazing. I still keep in contact with her. She did really care about us, in training us a lot of the other supervisors did not. So I was really lucky. She spent a lot of time training me. But that was like more one-on-one. We didn't receive a lot of group training at all. It's like you go into the job like I went into work knowing that she had my back that she felt confident in me. It could make me cry just like totally had my back and to this day like she wrote my recommendation for grad school and just everything. She really helped me in that job I wouldn't have lasted as long without her.

This emphasis on the importance of supervision could stem from the level of education and experience of therapeutic group home staff. As illustrated above, often times the hiring criteria for a higher level of care are more stringent.

Differences in hiring criteria

The hiring criteria for a non-therapeutic setting are: either a high school diploma or a GED, a driver's license, fingerprint clearance card, CPR, First Aid and two years' experience with children, as reported by a group home owner in this study. Both participants who worked in therapeutic settings had at least a bachelor's degree, one completed a master's degree and the other was in the process of completing her master's. Their educational background and previous experience provided them the knowledge of

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the importance of supervision and support while working in a stressful therapeutic group home setting.

It is interesting that in both sets of interviews there were traumatic events, in the non-therapeutic setting a staff member was threatened with rape, and a youth's sibling died. In the therapeutic setting a staff member was jumped. One might think that more traumatic events would occur at a higher level of care because of the increased needs of the youth. In this research, albeit a small number of settings were covered, but that turned out not to be the case.

Reoccurring Themes

The only themes that were not present in both groups of participants was walking into the unknown and supervisor support. One can postulate that the theme of walking into the unknown did not emerge in the staff who worked in a therapeutic setting because of the stringent hiring criteria. Both groups of participants talked about the importance of engagement, both with youth and staff, in loco parentis and staff impact;. Below participant nine talks about the importance of engagement and parenting.

I mean I think it's really important that communication always has to be there. It's like parenting but much more challenging cause you've got more adults and more kids. And so everybody has to be on the same page. We all have to know what a treatment plan is for a particular kid. What we did at [the facility] is we had primaries we had essentially two residential counselors that were essentially in charge of a particular child which helped because then if the staff wasn't sure what their behavior plan was let's just say it wasn't posted or it wasn't in the folder it wasn't somewhere where they knew where to get the information even though we always had everything posted everywhere but they would know to go to that primary and speak to them kind of like their parents so to speak about. OK

is this child allowed alone time as a privilege because they're on the highest level and they've earned that or is it is that child allowed an extra 15 minutes of videogame time...the rewards that all the staff have to sort of be on the same page to know. I mean also you've got a population that really has needed to. Is needed to. Like I don't want to say manipulate because that sounds negative, but they have survivor's survival skills learned. But they can be detrimental in a group home environment. And so, in order to avoid splitting in order to avoid some of the other negative behaviors that don't really positively impact the child you have to have really great communications. So, you know our residential counselors were really good at like leaving messages for the clinicians. It's something I mean they would definitely we have like daily notes that they would take so they would write down the basics of their shifts, so you could always look in the shift log to see what had gone on and on a day to day basis. But if it's a bigger or more pertinent like issue or a crisis they will leave the therapist's messages. They would leave things in their mailbox. There are just many. I mean we would even use text messaging as a way just to communicate with one another... communicating constantly on all levels really.

This notion of communication was reoccurring, and the clear theme of engagement emerged within group home staff regardless of the setting. Similarly, the themes of in loco parentis and staff impact were universal among the data.

It was enlightening and refreshing as a researcher to discover that the level of care within a group home does not dictate staff relationships and or the impact staff have on the group home environment. While all but one theme was present in the group of staff who worked in a therapeutic setting, there were differences in the two groups as it relates to the hiring requirements of education level of staff and on-going training.(See

table 1) While both non-therapeutic and therapeutic settings provided the same basic care, it appeared from the reports of staff who worked in therapeutic settings that they felt more supported, and more prepared because of their education and training to handle the demands of a therapeutic group home and the theme of supervisor support emerged within these two participants. One notion that rang true across the board for all participants was that they all understood the significance of building healthy relationships with youth, providing safe and secure settings and fostering growth within youth.

CHAPTER 5

LIMITATIONS

Recruitment as a Major Limitation

The initial sample size goal for this research was twenty participants, with ten participants who currently worked in a group home and ten participants who had left the group home within the past two years. Recruitment was a multi- step process. Being that I work in this field, I am in group homes multiple times a month with staff who fit the inclusion criteria for participation. Recruitment occurred in-person after completing my social work duties, as well as by email, telephone and via social media to group home staff, community partners and academic networks.

Recruitment began June 3, 2017, and the interviews took place between June 26, 2017 and February 15, 2018. In addition to my recruitment in group homes, there were two major recruitment pushes in an attempt to access a larger group. First, I reached out to colleagues with whom I received my MSW in an attempt to access their professional and social networks. I did this via social media, sending them my recruitment material. Next, I reached out to faculty at Arizona State University in the School of Social Work and asked them if they would disseminate my recruitment script to their current students. Both of these methods proved fruitful in recruiting people who currently work at group homes as well as one individual who left a group home. This coupled with my in-person recruitment provided me with seven research participants.

In an attempt to meet my original participant goal, I reached out to two of the largest group home organizations in the state, unfortunately both reported they were unable to work with me due to previous research engagements. I also joined a foster and adoptive parent social media page and posted my recruitment information there to see if any foster or adoptive families knew group home staff. I was able to do this because I was

a foster parent but understand this may not be a feasible recruitment option for all researchers. I also did not use the contact information that I have as a child welfare social worker blindly; I only recruited people who I had seen in person or had direct contact with as to ensure I wasn't abusing my privileges as a social worker.

Coupled with accessing my networks, I did extensive research on social media and hiring websites to identify any forums or groups for my targeted population. I was able to find one group, the Arizona Group Home Coalition, but was unable to reach them. I did sign up for their emails and it appears they hold trainings for group home owners. I also asked several of the research participants if there was any type of network for group home staff. I was unable to identify any specific social networking groups for individuals who previously worked in a group home.

Individuals who currently worked in group homes were more readily available for this research. I was able to ask group home staff in-person if they were interested in participating and followed up with an email or phone call to set up an interview. The problems with recruitment came when trying to find individuals who had left a group home within the previous 12 months. After each interview, I employed snowball sampling by asking the current participant if they knew anyone who had left a group home. This proved unfruitful in several ways. If the person was able to think of an individual who had left the group home, they were often unwilling to provide their contact information without consulting with them first, which is understandable. Although several participants identified individuals, I was unable to reach those people for several reasons. The major barrier to contacting possible participants was that the research participants didn't have contact information for their former colleagues, and or didn't have consent to give that to me. Even when I followed up with the research participants, they had no further information to provide.

Initially this research focused on the specific group home setting that was non-locked, non-therapeutic, the lowest level of restriction group home. Due to recruitment issues, when a potential participant reached out who met the criteria for previously working in a group home but worked in a home with a higher level of care, a decision was made by myself in consultation with my committee members to proceed with the interview. In fact, two of the three research participants who previously worked in a group home worked in one with a higher level of care.

As both a researcher and a social worker in this field, I found it important to strike a balance during my recruitment to ensure I was not creating an overburden for potential research participants. This dual relationship was the reason I chose not to offer incentives for participants. The lack of incentives could also have led to reluctance in participating. Being that the interviews could take up to two hours, some individuals may have been more inclined to participate if they had been compensated in some way. I knew that I would be back in their group home in my professional social worker capacity in approximately six months and did not want to create an imbalance or awkward situation in which an incentive was exchanged for their participation and cooperation. I also chose to only pursue potential participants for two weeks, reaching out a total of five times. If I was unable to reach the participant after the two weeks, I ceased recruitment efforts.

I know first-hand how busy group home staff are, and that directly impacted my recruitment approach so that I did not cause stress and strain on the staff. There were several people who said they would be willing to participate when asked in-person, but an in-person interview never came to fruition. This could have been because they were too busy or felt the need to say yes to participate because I asked in-person. This was an emotional process as a researcher. I would get excited at the prospect of a potential

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research participant, only to be discouraged when the recruitment attempt failed. I even got so far as to arrive at an in-person interview to find out the participant was unavailable. That experience was particularly disheartening as a researcher, but it did spur a change in IRB protocol to allow for telephone interviews, which allowed for subsequent interviews to be done telephonically and increased the reach of recruitment out of state.

This inability to find people who previously worked at a group home was unexpected. I knew that turnover was high from my experience as a social worker, but I didn't know that when individuals left group homes they essentially became invisible. Within research there are populations defined as a hard to find groups (Salganik, Heckathorn, 2004, Abrams, 2010). Hard to find groups historically have been individuals with HIV/AIDS, IV drug users or sex workers (Abrams, 2010). Some recruitment tactics for hard to find populations are similar to those that were used for this research. For example, eliciting a community organization or social service agency and using gatekeepers to gain access to participants are two ways to find hard to reach populations (Abrams, 2010). For this research I sought out two major group home agencies that had public information in an attempt to recruit current staff. One agency responded saying they were unable to participate in additional research at this time and the other did not return emails or phone calls. Gaining access to gatekeepers is something researchers do to access hard to reach populations, and this strategy was employed for this research when I asked in-person for staff to participate. Research has shown, which parallels my experience in this study, that gaining access to gatekeepers is difficult to obtain and maintain (Abrams, 2010). In the future offering incentives to participants could also increase participation. No incentives were offered to participate in this research.

For future research, it may be productive to ask youth who have aged out of group homes if they have contact with staff from their previous placements. If former foster youth were to be utilized it would be crucial to ensure they were over the age of eighteen. Several research participants talked about keeping in contact with youth they previously cared for, so it may be that youth have contact information or information about this hard to reach population. This experience was surprising because the contacts I had at the beginning of this research did not prove as abundant as I presumed them to be. Being a child welfare social worker only got my foot in the door, bigger roadblocks were discovered when trying to find individuals who left the group home. Even the three individuals interviewed who left a group home did not have additional participants to provide.

An overarching limiting issue as it relates to recruitment is that of confidentiality. My job grants me direct access to group home staff. I have their contact information and see them on a regular basis. Someone who did not have the same access may have a difficult time accessing not only people who have left, but also people who currently work in group homes. There is not a public list of group home addresses and contact information. The two large agencies I reached out to have public websites with contact information. Confidentiality, although a strength for protection of individuals, is a common barrier to reaching hard to reach populations (Abrams, 2010). The primary focus of child welfare is to protect children; therefore, their placement information is kept extremely private. The sample for this research consisted of seven individuals who currently worked in group homes and three who had left group homes.

The recruitment issues I faced could mean several things to this research. It could mean that an individual who worked at a group home, and now no longer does, realized group home work was not for them, and left to pursue a new field all together. This

notion could be beneficial for the group home environment, if the staff member was unhappy one could postulate it impacted their ability to do their job and they would directly impact the group home environment. On the other hand, individuals may have left a group home for another job with better benefits and pay. Several research participants mentioned the idea of pay and benefits, that a driving force for people leaving is the low pay and lack of benefits associated with the job. In this case whether the staff left on positive or negative terms would impact the group home environment. Thus, recruitment, and particularly the challenges with finding staff who had left the groups homes within the previous two years, proved to be a limitation in conducting this research.

While recruitment issues were a limitation in this study, the sample size and participants produced strong findings and clear themes emerged from data analysis that provided great insight into the impact group home staff on the environment as well as the greater ecological group home environment. Participants were open and honest and shared their experiences and those stories have value. As a research I was disheartened at the challenges I faced during recruitment, as a child welfare social worker, I was uplifted and encouraged during interviews with participants to hear that group home staff love and truly care for the children in their homes.

Limitations of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is one of the most frequently debated, discussed and disputed research methods (Walker & Myrick, 2006). This contention surrounding grounded theory, coupled with the confusion and debate surrounding definitions and procedures, can be a limitation to the research design. One limitation is that it can be difficult for a researcher to set aside any and all notions of previous theoretical ideas to allow for emerging theories to develop (Creswell, 2013). This research is based in constructivist

grounded theory, which allows for the understanding that the researcher is not bias free. Having an understanding of my biases and my positionality, memo-ing and peer debriefing allowed me to keep my biases and positionality in check. There are also limitations with grounded theory in data analysis. It can be difficult for researchers to know when categories have been fully saturated and when a theory is fully formed from the data. Throughout data collection I assessed the data and my memo-ing to ensure saturation was being achieved. As I started to see themes develop I would address them in future interviews. I also reached out to two participants after the interviews were completed to ask follow-up questions regarding themes. Unfortunately, I was not able to reach either participant for further questions, which aligns with my recruitment issues, but acts as a limitation. To combat this limitation I used peer debriefing, defined by Padgett (1998) as the convergence of multiple perspectives that can provide greater Peer debriefing through the discussion of my findings with child welfare researchers, professionals and social workers in my network provided me a fresh perspective from outside parties and allowed me to come back to the data and address any needs for realignment. This concept is similar to peer debriefing, which involves engagement with individuals who have knowledge of the area of interest but are not involved with the study (Lietz et al. 2006).

Goulding (1999) names several misconceptions of grounded theory. One is grounded theorists do not give appropriate attention to data collection and the quality of data amassed. This misconception illustrates the misinterpretation of the goal of grounded theory. Another limitation grounded theory presents occurs during data analysis if one places too much emphasis on identifying codes and failing to explain how the codes relate to one another (Goulding, 1999). Similarly, one of the key components of grounded theory is the constant assessment within data collection and analysis.

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Goulding (1999) notes that sampling based in theory should drive the researcher to collect more participants and only present theory once all categories are saturated, researchers could potentially present categories that are not fully developed because there has not been a fully exhaustive search for participants and analysis of categories.

Additional Limitations

This study was self-report, which can be limiting in what information is shared. Self-report has a long history of controversy as a method of data collection. Johns and Miraglia (2015) note that inaccurate memory, inflation of self-presentation and bias can all be negatively associated with self-report. Because this dissertation is comprised of self-reported data it could be an overrepresentation of individuals who were satisfied with their work. Coupled with the struggles associated with finding individuals who left a group home, the respondents who participated in this study may have been skewed more positively. This limitation was addressed by having two groups of participants, those who currently worked in the group home and those who left. Adding the individuals who left the group home was a way to provide alternative perspectives and provide a more comprehensive examination of the experience of working in a group home.

This dissertation included interviews that occurred during once during one point of time, which can be a limitation because it is only one point of data collection. One way to address this limitation for this study was the incorporation of two participant groups, one group who currently works in a group home and one group who left their job at a group home within the past 2 years. Although both interviews of the respective groups only occurred once, their different points of view based on their current position added depth and provided a unique perspective on group home staff.

The sample size for this dissertation was ten participants. Creswell (2013) recommends for studies using grounded theory a sample size of twenty to thirty to ensure saturation.

Charmaz (2014) notes that a very small sample size, for example less than ten, can produce in-depth interviews. This dissertation through the use of grounded theory sought not for generalizability or representation of the greater population, it sought for ampleness and saturation of the data, per Charmaz (2014). While there were only ten interviews conducted, the in-depth nature of the interviews yielded powerful information and several strong themes emerged from the data.

No research is without limitations, this dissertation had several unique limitations as they related to recruitment and retention. This research sought to examine the influence group home staff have on the group home environment and the participants, even with the aforementioned research limitations, were able to share insights that would inform prospective and new staff.   Such information can be helpful. If we can get to a place where people who are appropriate and fit the criteria are applying for these group home jobs, we could decrease the staff turnover and therefore stabilize the environment for youth who are in an incredibly unstable time in their lives.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This research sought to examine the impact group home staff have on the ecological group home environment. Ten in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed using Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). Five primary themes emerged from the data: walking into the unknown, in loco parentis, engagement, and staff impact on youth. Within the theme of engagement two sub-themes emerged, engagement with staff, and engagement of staff with youth. In loco parentis had two sub-themes also, consanguinity and group home as a home. Staff impact on youth had three sub-themes, managing transitions, loss and boundaries. Finally the theme of supervisor support emerged. The goal of this chapter is to discuss the meaning of the themes that evolved through analysis under grounded theory, evaluate how ecological systems theory coupled with ecodevelopment theory apply to the group home environment based on the data, outline research limitations, discuss implications for social work practice, and propose directions for future research.

Themes

Walking into the unknown

The theme of walking into the unknown was an interesting development within the research. This theme has multiple implications for the future of group home staff. The first implication was that several individuals felt they were misled during the application process. This could lead to increased staff turnover if newly hired staff are misled as to what the job truly entails. Second, because it was discovered that individuals who have worked in a group home and have left are a hard to reach population, any form of mentorship and or consultation with experienced former employees before accepting a

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group home staff job would be extremely difficult. The notion that individuals knew very little about child welfare, and even had misconceptions is supported within the research surrounding public opinion of the child welfare system. On a broad scale, the general public has misconceptions about foster care, believe there is poor morale among child welfare workers, and think foster parents only foster for monetary gains (Leber, Lecroy, 2012). It was difficult to find research on perceptions specific to child welfare group homes within society. This lack of representation is also not surprising as there is a lack of clarity within the research about group homes in general. There is little differentiation on level of care within studies examining congregate care (Webster et al., 2000) as previously mentioned in the literature. This dissertation provided a clear definition of the specific group home examined. Interestingly, the two participants who worked in higher levels of care did not discuss the theme of walking into the unknown. This was due primarily to the fact that individuals working in higher levels of care needed more training and experience as compared to those working in a non- therapeutic setting. This dissertation also discovered that the participants who worked in non- therapeutic settings knew very little about their jobs before starting them. This information can be used to inform group home hiring practices, better educate new employees and begin to start a broader conversation about group homes, dispelling myths and providing proper information.

In loco parentis

The theme in loco parentis was a prevalent and overwhelming theme within the data. It has two sub-themes, consanguinity, and group home as a home. Group home staff play an important role within the child welfare system, and as illustrated previously in the literature, are often overlooked and underutilized. Although group home staff are

not technically parents of the youth in their care, they are considered parent substitutes, with the legal term "In Loco Parentis" which is Latin for "in the place of a parent." In the southwestern state where this dissertation research took place, in loco parentis is defined as grandparents, step-parents, relatives, neighbors or other adults who might sometimes need to step in to assume the custody and primary care of a child when the parents are unfit to do so. (A.R.S §25-415). This term of in loco parentis truly fit what the participants were describing when they discussed their job directly working with youth. It encompassed the daily activities, relationship and function of a group home staff. Group home staff are with the youth fulltime, they perform traditional parenting rolls, and are tasked with keeping youth safe while meeting their needs. The participants of this study clearly loved and cared for the youth within the homes.

Consanguinity

The data revealed that group home staff members embody their role as temporary parents and took pride in their influence over the youth in their care and the sub-theme of consanguinity emerged. Participant after participant discussed cherished relationships with youth, learning what youth like to eat for dinner, purchasing their clothes, and tending to their needs emotionally, physically and academically. These staff-child relationships mirror parent-child relationships and given the in loco parentis role of the staff, they should. Group home staff acknowledged that youth are in their care often times only months, sometimes shorter, but the reciprocal impact of youth on staff and staff on youth is powerful, and the familial relationships and bonds that are built are important and meaningful within the group home environment therefore illustrating the consanguineous relationship between group home staff and youth.

Group home as a home

The theme of group home as a home is important, as several of the quotes illustrated. These children live in the place where the group home staff work. Several participants noted that differentiation. They were aware that they were entering these children's temporary homes and the importance of entering in a positive head space and acting accordingly. The notion of home, one that is safe and healthy is appropriate and modeling a safe and healthy family can be beneficial and enriching for the youth. None of the participants talked in a negative or in a disparaging way about the families or origins of the youth. It was clear that these staff, although aware of the home base they provided, were not out to replace biological families and previous home settings.

One interesting element of this theme group home as a home, is that one group home staff not only worked in the group home but also lived there. The literature calls this the house parent model, as it most closely resembles a traditional home environment, and is the most beneficial to the overall function of the house (Jones et al., 2007). The house parent model as illustrated in the literature allowed for stronger staff child relationships, and reduced staff turnover as compared to the twenty-four-hour rotating staff method that is more prevalent both in the literature and this data (Jones et al., 2007). While the literature on group homes, and specific group home settings is limited, this dissertation provides a beginning for parsing out settings, providing clear definitions and understanding the roles of group home staff. It also furthers the discussion of the benefits and disadvantages of both a full-time live-in staff and the twenty-four hour rotating staff methods of care.

The findings of this dissertation can also be shared with child welfare social workers to further illustrate how much group home staff care about the youth in their care, opens doors for staff to be a strong advocate for the youth they care for. The theme

in loco parentis and its sub-themes can be used to inform the greater child welfare workers and agencies of the positive relationships and environments that are formed between staff and youth within group homes.

Engagement

The theme of engagement closely aligned with the critical social work skills of rapport building, active listening and meeting clients where they are (Hepworth et al., 2010). Although not trained as social workers, the group home staff took an active and intuitive approach to relationship building and showed care and concern for the relationships they created. The theme of engagement was central within both staff/staff relationships and staff/youth relationships. Staff/staff engagement proved crucial for the flow and organization of a group home, to ensure staff were on the same operating page, as well as ensure licensing regulations were followed. Staff/youth engagement emerged as a crucial element in forming a positive relationships and striking harmony and balance within the home. Multiple staff reported that negative staff/youth relationships impact the environment and can deeply divide houses. The topic of engagement and relationships can be found in the foster care literature. There is a large focus on foster parent/foster child relationships as it relates to placement stability within the child welfare literature. Placement stability is crucial, and stability is enhanced by foster parent training and education, understanding emotional development of youth and addressing needs of foster parents (Chamberlain et al., 1996, James et al., 2009).

The literature on foster parents is more extensive than that of group home staff, but the duties of the two groups are incredibly similar, with both groups serving in loco parentis. This close similarity allows for cross over training and support from foster parents to group home staff. It is clear group home staff have a great impact on the group home environment, providing them with as many tools as possible to better do their jobs

will only benefit the youth and the group home as a whole. Foster parent research has discovered several factors associated with stability in foster homes, safety, nurturing, positive/supportive relationships, healthy attachments, competence, training, foster parent mental health and emotional availability (Chamberlain, Price, Landsverk, Reid, Leve, Laurent, 2008). Some of these stability factors associated with foster homes were discovered in this dissertation, specifically safety, nurturing, positive/supportive relationships were seen in the themes in loco parentis, and engagement. This correlation between foster homes and group homes specifically through engagement and relationship sheds light on the similarity of the jobs, and the vital importance for increased examination of group home care.

Staff Impact on Youth

Staff were asked a line of in-depth questions about the impact of staff as a whole have on the group home environment. The theme of staff impact emerged and three sub-themes emerged, managing transitions, loss and boundaries. Participants were able to clearly identify situations and specific staff who strongly influenced and impacted the group home. The majority of staff told stories of strong positive relationships between themselves and youth and shed light on staff who struggled with managing transitions, addressing loss and having issues with boundaries.

Managing transitions

Child welfare can be seen as a revolving door. Families, staff, child welfare case managers all come and go and often the transition periods are nonexistent. Participants talked about the stresses and strains within the house when staff left. Regardless of the opinion of the staff prior to their departure, the simple act of them leaving influenced the house and staff reported doing their best to manage the transition. Most staff framed the

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transition in a natural way, telling the youth things happen, people leave and reminding the youth the situation is not permanent.

Loss

Participants discussed issues surrounding staff turnover and managing youth in the home during times of change. Similar to managing transitions, staff discussed youth processing their past trauma with staff and managing the loss of caregivers in the home.

Boundaries

Participants in this dissertation were able to quickly and easily identify staff who had poor boundaries and the negative impact that had on the group home environment. Behaviors and attitudes such as bad attitudes, inappropriate punishment, favoritism, inflexibility and burnout were all elements that comprised staff who had a negative impact on the house. Participants reported youth bypassing negative staff, or simply staying in their rooms when the negative staff was present. They also reported that when a staff member with poor boundaries left the group home, youth often were excited and relieved. The research participants in this study acknowledged that youth were able to identify staff who were simply in the job for the money, and not there for the love of the job or the youth. It was clear from the findings that staff who have poor boundaries and negative attitudes and behaviors while working in a group home have a heavy negative effect on the ecological group home environment.

Ecological Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is ecological framework. The ecological framework was chosen based on its flexibility and ability to assess in-depth multiple levels of an environment (Hepworth et al., 2010, Segal, et al., 2016, Payne, 2014). For this research, the group home is seen as an ecological environment with multiple interacting elements. These multiple elements include staff, youth entering and

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transitioning the home, service providers coming and going, DCS case managers making

monthly visits, and juvenile probation officers checking on youth. Each of these entities

interacts within the ecological group home environment. The center of the ecological

group home is the youth in the home.

Figure 1: Ecomap
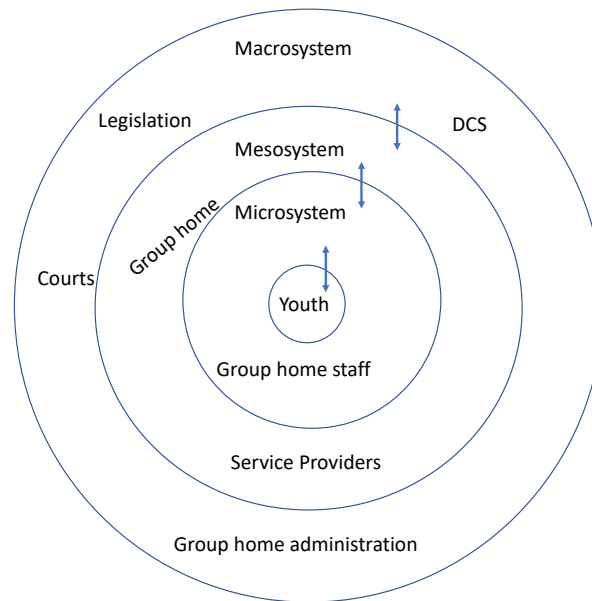
Microsystem

The microsystem contains the relationship between the youth and the group

home staff and this system allows this relationship to be examined. This relationship is

ever changing, reciprocal and important to the ecological group home environment. This

relationship impacts not only the microsystem, but the mesosystem and macrosystem in

that staff have the ability to talk to child welfare workers and generate reports for court

and probation. The participants in this study talked about their relationships with youth

in the microsystem. These were the close caring relationships where staff spoke fondly of

the youth in their care. It is important to note that the youth being cared for were

typically adolescents. The ecodevelopment theory developed by Coatsworth et al., (2002)

takes the ecological framework one step further suggesting multiple aspects of youth's

ecological systems influence them as they mature through developmental stages. There is

a vast body of literature on placement stability for adolescents within foster homes. A

large focus of that literature is on the relationship between foster parents and youth and

how that impacts stability. The literature identified that if an adolescent feels stable in

the foster home, the youth is better able to balance emotional needs during this

developmental time (James et al., 2009). Risky behavior is less likely in adolescents who

have lengthy stable nurturing relationships with their caregivers (James et al., 2009).

While this dissertation cannot ascertain the long-term benefits of stability of group home

caregivers on the youth in their care, it opens the door for further research and strongly

encourages the use of the ecodevelopment theory to assess the staff-child relationship.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem, which links interactions between the micro and macro systems,

contains the group home environment, DCS, and interacts with both the microsystem-

youth, and the macrosystem, primarily made up of courts and service providers. The

mesosystem is also where we see themes from the data, specifically staff/staff

engagement. Staff/staff engagement is seen in the mesosystem in the influence staff have

over the house with the rules and structure. If staff differ in their parenting, rule setting

and structure it directly impacts the entire ecological group home environment. The

mesosystem interactions were seen when staff discussed attending court hearings for the

youth in their care, attending child and family team meetings, child welfare meetings and

school meetings. Staff are often active participants in these meetings due to their vast

knowledge of the youth. Ensuring staff are made aware of these meetings, invited and

attending them has the potential to benefit the youth, if staff appropriately advocate for

them. On the other hand, if staff have a strained relationship with the youth, staff ability

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to function within the mesosystem could be detrimental to the youth in that the staff does not properly advocate for the youth's needs. Staff/staff relationships are also an element of the mesosystem and impact the environment of the house. Several staff talked about negative staff/staff interactions, and how both youth and staff tried to avoid negative staff at all costs. If there is a caustic staff in the house it impacts not only the staff/youth relationship, but the staff/staff relationship and has the potential to influence the youth with the broader child welfare agencies, through improper advocacy. The group home itself is an ecological environment based on the relationships formed within the home. Multiple staff reported that the relationships staff had with youth directly impact the environment. There are also multiple people that interact with the ecological group home environment within the mesosystem. In addition to child welfare workers, there are service providers, mentors, therapists, tutors, Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) social workers, attorney social workers, attorney's juvenile probation officers, teachers, each of these individuals have an impact on the environment.

The mesosystem is a crucial system within group homes and group home staff have the greatest level of functioning within this system, calling for future research on group home staff within the mesosystem to further understand the lasting impact group home staff can have on youth and the environment.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem consists of the larger governing bodies associated with child welfare, government, DCS as a government agency and each group homes specific policies. The macrosystem impacts each subsequent system when policy changes, funding changes and leadership changes occur. Specifically within the macrosystem, group home policies and procedures for hiring and training staff are included and directly impact all other systems. Funding increases and decreases, policy changes

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through legislation and personnel changes within child welfare agencies have the potential to directly impact each subsequent system within the ecological group home environment. Individuals who work with youth within the mesosystem as listed above, service providers, mentors, therapists, tutors, Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) social workers, attorney social workers, attorney's juvenile probation officers, teachers, also impact the macro system. These individuals are generating reports based on their interactions with youth that are submitted to the court system. These providers and attorney social workers are also impacted by governmental funding, rules, requirements and regulations set forth by juvenile court. Juvenile probation officers are also impacted by the macrosystem when juvenile court sets forth mandates impacting youth in group homes.

Group home staff have influence over each system within the ecological group home environment while at the same time, these systems have influence over the staff whether it be by regulations or as obstacles. Group home staff have the potential to influence parties within the macrosystem through lobbying for legislation, voting and advocating for youth and the needs of their group homes. Group home agencies and owners existing in the macrosystem directly influence each system. Choices made by group home agencies and owners influence who is hired, who they are trained and in turn directly influence the group home environment.

Ecodevelopment Theory

While ecological framework examines the intricate relationships and interactions within an environment, as previously mentioned, ecodevelopment perspective focuses on the developmental aspect of youth and the interconnectedness of the multiple systems (Coatsworth et al.,2002). Ecodevelopment theory is discussed in this dissertation within the microsystem. Although youth perspectives were not included in this data, staff were asked to reflect on relationships with youth. While staff did not report youths' age being

a factor in their relationships, ecodevelopment perspective enforces the importance of understanding the developmental stage and maturity of youth in the home. Staff were asked the ages of the youth in their homes, which ranged from nine years old to eighteen years old. The ages span the developmental stage of adolescence, and stability is a major aspect of adolescent development. Child welfare literatures shows that adolescents in stable foster homes do better in virtually every arena of development (James et al., 2009). While there is a wealth of literature on placement stability within foster homes, this current research adds to the sparse literature of what impact group home staff have on the ecological group home environment, and that group home staff in fact do impact the group home environment in both positive and negative ways. This research sheds light on the intricate ecological group home environment and begins the conversation of analysis and increased understanding of the developmental stages of youth in the home.

Grounded Theory and Ecological Framework Ecomap

This dissertation used both grounded theory and ecological framework as foundations for analysis, data collection and discussion. In an effort to illustrate the reciprocal relationships that emerged through data analysis, a summative ecomap was created applying the themes from the data within their respective systems. The microsystem contains the theme of in loco parentis, and its sub-themes consanguinity and group home as a home. These themes occurred on a more direct level, within the house and speak to the relationships between the staff and youth. The mesosystem contains the theme of engagement, with both staff/staff engagement and staff/youth engagement. The mesosystem also contains the theme staff impact and subsequent sub themes. Staff/youth engagement can also be seen within the microsystem but relates to the mesosystem in that is influences the group home environment and influences the macro environment with staff providing input on youth progress and behavior to courts,

child welfare agencies and service providers. The macrosystem contains the broader child welfare agencies, courts and legislation, and group home agency with each system within the macrosystem having the ability to impact the mesosystem and microsystem. Finally, the exosystem contains the theme of walking into the unknown. This theme emerged from the data when participants knew nothing about the system and therefore had little to no influence over it. These individuals do impact the system though, once they become involved as group home staff. See figure 2.

Figure 2
Grounded Theory Themes Summary Ecomap
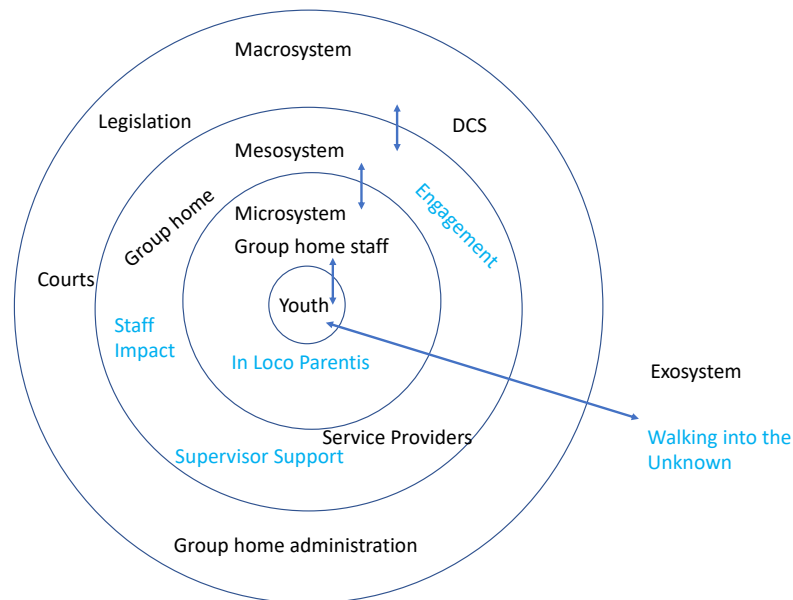
Implications for practice

There are several key practice implications from this research: the need for a stronger understanding of the importance of group home staff by child welfare workers,

the need for increased training of group home staff, increased focus on group homes as it relates to policy, further discussion on the level of group home care, and finally increasing the understanding of ecodevelopment theory within the group home setting. This research focused on group home staff, and the impact they had on the environment. Group homes operate within the larger child welfare system. Child welfare case workers are mandated to visit the youth on their caseloads every month in the group home. Child welfare workers need to understand that group home staff play a vital role in the group home environment and need to be seen as a key player within the child welfare system.

As previously mentioned, group home staff are underrepresented in the child welfare literature (James, Lansverk, & Sylmen, 2004, Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid, & Lansverk, 2008). An area of concern from the data in this research was the lack of supervisor support as reported by staff. Foster parents are well equipped with licensing workers and a licensing agency to support them during the fostering process. While group home staff do have supervisors, group home owners, managers etc., they reported feeling as if these individuals were not assets in their job. Social workers interacting with group home staff need to understand the stresses and strains this population undergoes, as well as ways to support them during each interaction. It would not be difficult to implement a short line of strengths-based questions from child welfare case managers geared towards group home staff to assess the group home environment.

Several participants discussed the stresses and strains on the group home when a staff exits the home environment. Individuals involved in the child welfare system are no stranger to loss, transition and change. When any member of the group home environment leaves, the environment is altered. This research discovered there was very little infrastructure to support the remaining individuals in the home, youth and staff alike. If the group homes were to have some type of ritual or closing activity to perform

when not only a staff leaves, but when youth transition as well, this could benefit the overall environment of the home. There is a wealth of information on group process within social work literature. If group homes were to adapt some of the techniques for closure, the adjourning stage in group process (Hepworth et al., 2013) it could improve the transition and allow for closure in a healthy way. To ensure the process is group home specific as each environment is different, the staff and youth could come together to discuss options to ensure the process is holistic, inclusive and appropriate for each individual involved. In reality group homes go through each stage of group process, often times each stage in one month, or one week. Implementing a closing ritual or practice allows for the individuals within the environment to process the transition in a healthy way.

Additionally, although child welfare workers were not the focus of this research, several participants reported a lack of support and or presence from child welfare workers. In order to address this concern, child welfare workers could add two or three questions related to strengths of the group home, and group home staff to their standard requirement of safety questions. For example, "what do you think is going well this month in the group home?", or "what is working well for this youth in this group home?" and "what can I do as the child welfare worker to improve this group home environment?". In fact, it may be beneficial for every individual that enters a group home to have a strengths-based protocol as it relates to the group home staff and youth, to ensure minimal disruption. Therapists and mentors can gain great insight into the group home environment by asking staff strengths-based questions, and then following up with the youth during their time together. Also, attorney social workers can use strength-based questions to obtain useful information that can be used to better advocate for youth in court proceedings.

Increasing the focus on group home staff within child welfare has the potential to influence policy. Group home staff have the ability to report the effects length of time staying in a group home has on youth. If child welfare workers and group homes work together, length of time in care/group homes can be addressed with the intent of reducing time in care for youth. This study proved innovative in several ways. Not only did it shed light on the impact of group home staff within the ecological group home environment, it also discovered that individuals who have left the group home fall into the population of hard to reach. This research also provided clarity in regard to group home settings and was able to illustrate similarities and differences within two clearly defined group home settings.

Finally, this research provides a base for practice implications as they related to the ecodevelopment theory, specifically identifying the strengths and areas of concern as they related to adolescent development within group homes and the impact of staff relationships on adolescent development. These findings provide a platform for extensive future research. There is a lack of research on group homes within child welfare. This research adds to the discussion, which is in its infancy. It provides clarity within the level of care, impact of staff on the ecological group home environment, and an in-depth look at the ecological group home environment.

Future research

This study provides a spring board for future research and carved several paths for next steps. It is prudent to begin examining the recruitment issues that arose during this dissertation. Individuals in focus for this research fell into the definition of a hard to reach population. There are specific recruitment tactics to reach these people, and although several of them were used for this study, there are others that can be employed for future research. Finding these people and asking them in-depth questions about why

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they left the group home, what they are doing now and what impact they felt they had on the group home environment will add another perspective to the literature base.

Another path for future research is to work with youth who have aged out of group homes. While there is scant literature on youth's specific perspectives on group home staff, interviewing youth who aged out of care while living in a group home adds yet another layer of depth to the analysis and understanding of the ecological group home environment. It may also be interesting to do a two-pronged study, using one group home, and interviewing staff who currently work there and youth who have aged out. This could be done by taking an ethnographic approach with in-depth analysis of one group home from multiple points of view.

This research sought to provide clarity in regard to the definition of care provided by each group home. While the original intent was to only have non-therapeutic, non-locked facilities, there were two facilities that were therapeutic within the study. It would be beneficial to conduct interviews with more therapeutic facilities, and even higher levels of care like detention centers and juvenile correctional facilities to determine what, if any, impact more restrictive levels of care have on staff/youth relationships.

Finally, it would be beneficial to gain the perspective of child welfare workers and biological parents. Participants talked briefly about the child welfare workers, and the data were mixed on their feelings towards child welfare workers. It would be interesting to see how child welfare workers feel group home staff impact the group home environment, and what role child welfare workers feel group home staff have in the greater child welfare system. This could be a mixed method approach asking child welfare workers quantitative questions such as amount of times they contact group home staff, coupled with qualitative questions on their knowledge of youth/staff relationships and their thoughts on staff impact. Although this study did not focus on parents, the

theme of parenting/group home as a family emerged. It would be interesting to interview biological parents of youth who are placed in group homes to get their thoughts on the impact the group home has on their child and on their family.

While there is much room for growth within the child welfare literature surrounding group homes, this research furthers the discussion on the importance of relationships with group homes. Specifically, this study shed light on the differences and similarities within levels of care, provided clear definitions of levels of care within group homes, applied ecological framework to the group home, and discussed the impact group home staff have on the ecological group home environment. This dissertation sought to examine the ecological group home environment. There five several themes that emerged through grounded theory data analysis; walking into the unknown, in loco parentis with the sub- themes of consanguinity and group home as a home, engagement, with focus on staff/staff and staff youth engagement and staff impact on youth with sub-themes of managing transitions, loss and boundaries. The final theme that emerged was supervisor support. These themes emerged through rich description and although in their infancy within this dissertation, provide a solid platform for future research. This dissertation shed light on the fact that group home staff do in fact influence the ecological group home environment and that the ecological group home comprised of intricate relationships that are everchanging, and influential across multiple systems.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Appendix A
Demographic questions

1. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Trans male
   d. Trans female
   e. Genderqueer
   f. Intersex
   g. Other

2. Age:_____

3. What age were you when you started working at the group home?

4. What age were you when you left the group home?

5. What level of education have you completed?

    a. Did not complete high school
    b. Graduated High School
    c. GED
    d. Technical or Professional School beyond high school
    e. Some college or education beyond high school (other than professional school)
    f. Completed an Associate's degree
    g. Graduated college (Bachelor's degree)
    h. Some graduate school beyond a Bachelor's degree
    i. Graduate degree (e.g., MA, MS, MBA, MSW, MD, PhD, DDS)

6. As far as your current work status, which of the following choices would be most accurate:
    a. Employed full time (greater than 35 hours per week)
    b. Employed part time
    c. Not employed by looking for work
    d. Not employed but not looking for work
    e. Student
    f. Disabled
    g. Retired

7. Do you consider yourself to be Latino/Latina or Hispanic?   Yes   No

8. Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background?
   a. White or Caucasian
   b. Black or African American
   c. Asian
   d. Middle Eastern

e. Native American
    f. other

9.   What is your current marital status?
      a. Single, never married
      b. Married
      c. Cohabiting/living together
      d. Separated
      e. Divorced
      f. Widowed

10. How many staff work in the group home?

11. What shift do you typically work?

12. How long have you worked at the group home?

13. How many youth live in the group home?

14. Do you have children of your own? If yes how many?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CURRENT GROUP HOME EMPLOYEES

Appendix B

Interview questions for current group home employees

- Can you tell me about how you came to work at this group home?

- What, if anything, did you know about group homes prior to working in one?

- Could you describe a typical day for you as a group home staff?

- What has been the most helpful to you during your employment at the group home?

- What training/education did you receive before working at this group home?

    o Follow up question: did you receive any training specific to working with youth?
    o Any additional training?

- What training/education did you receive while working at the group home to prepare you to do your job?

- If staff have left the group home since you've worked there what effect, if any, does them leaving have on the house as a whole?

    o On youth?
    o On other staff?

- Can you describe a positive relationship you had with a youth in the group home you work in?

- Share with me a time you felt you made a positive impact on a youth in the group home

- Can you share with me about the way relationships between youth and staff impact the home environment

    o Positive relationships/attachments
    o Negative relationships/attachments

- Can you share with me of an example of what a positive staff/youth relationship looks like?

- Can you share with me an example of what a negative staff/youth relationship looks like?

- Can you share a time where you felt unprepared to deal with a situation in a group home?

- What, if any, problems or challenges have you encountered while working at the group home?

- After working at a group home, what advice would you give someone who has just accepted a position at a group home?

- Did you have any philosophical views on child welfare before working in a group home?

- Can you tell me about your views of the child welfare system now that you're working in a group home?
- Where do you see yourself focusing as it relates to the child welfare system?

- Where do you see yourself in two years?

- Is there anything else I should know to understand your experience of working at a group home better?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PREVIOUS GROUP HOME STAFF

Appendix C

Interview questions for previous group home staff

- Can you tell me about how you came to work at the last group home you worked at?

- What if anything did you know about group homes prior to working in one?

- If you recall, can you tell me how you learned to interact with the youth?

- What training/education did you receive as it relates to working with youth before working at this group home?

  - Any training specific to working with youth?

- What training/education did you receive while working at the group home to prepare you to do your job?

- Could you describe a typical day as a group home staff?

- When you look back on your time at the group home, are there any positive events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe those events?

- Can you describe a positive relationship you had with a youth in the group home you worked in?

- Can you share with me about the way relationships between youth and staff impact the home environment?

  - Positive relationships/attachments
  - Negative relationships/attachments

- Can you share with me of an example of what a positive staff/youth relationship looks like?

- Can you share with me an example of what a negative staff/youth relationship looks like?

- How much impact, if any, do you think group home staff has on the youth they work with?

- Can you share a time where you felt unprepared to deal with a situation in a group home?

- Who was the most helpful to you during your employment at the group home?

- What contributed to you leaving your last position in a group home?

- What if any, problems did you encountered while working at the group home?

- Do you keep in contact with any one from the group home you previously worked at?

- Where do you see yourself in two years?

- Did you have any philosophical views on child welfare before working in a group home?

- Could you tell me about your views of the child welfare system now since working in a group home?

- Where do you see yourself focusing as it relates to the child welfare system?

- After working at a group home, what advice would you give someone who has just accepted a position at a group home?

- Is there anything else I should know to understand your experience of working and leaving a job at a group home better?

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

APPENDIX D
Informed Consent

Understanding Staff Influence on the Ecological Group Home Environment

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Elizabeth Segal in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to understand the experiences of staff who work in group homes and the experiences of those staff who have left a group home within the past 12 months. I am recruiting individuals, 18 years and older to participate in in-person interviews which will take approximately 1- 2 hours. There will be the initial interview, and there is potential for a follow up interview if needed. The follow up interview is expected to take no longer than 30 minutes. We expect about 20 people will participate in this study.

The interview will be audio recorded and any information collected from participants will be stored on a password protected computer, and any physical materials and audio recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office on the Downtown campus at Arizona State University. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know, Any and all data collected will be kept and stored securely for 4 years. After 4 years any and all data will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to stop participation at any point during the interview process without penalty. Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Your name, contact information and place of employment will be retained for follow up purposes but will be kept confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be known.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team: Dr. Elizabeth Segal, Principal Investigator; and Hilary Haseley, Co-Investigator. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Social Behavioral IRB. You may talk to them at (480) 965-6788 or by email at research.integrity@asu.edu if:
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

If you have any additional questions concerning the research study, please call (480) 620-0344 or email, hhaseley@asu.edu or Dr. Segal, at esegal@asu.edu

Elizabeth Segal, PhD- Principal Investigator
Hilary Haseley, MSW- Co-Principal Investigator

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RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

APPENDIX E
Recruitment Script

Hello, I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Elizabeth Segal in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to understand the experiences of staff who work in group homes and the experiences of those staff who have left a group home within the past 12 months. I am recruiting individuals, 18 years and older to participate in in-person, or phone interviews which will take approximately 1- 2 hours. There will be the initial interview, and there is potential for a follow up interview if needed. If needed, the follow up interview will take approximately 30 minutes. We expect about 20 people will participate in this study.

The interview will be audio recorded and any information collected from participants will be stored on a password protected computer, and any physical materials and audio recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office on the Downtown campus at Arizona State University. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. Any and all data collected will be kept and stored securely for 4 years. After 4 years any and all data will be destroyed. Your name, contact information and place of employment will be retained for follow up purposes but will be kept confidential.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to stop participation at any point during the interview process without penalty. Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Additionally, your work place information will be deidentified. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be known.

If you have any additional questions concerning the research study, please call (480) 620-0344 or email, hhaseley@asu.edu or Dr. Segal, at esegal@asu.edu

Elizabeth Segal, PhD- Principal Investigator
Hilary Haseley, MSW- Co-Principal Investigator