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JNEL's mission is to improve nonprofit education and leadership through the publication and dissemination of peer-reviewed manuscripts centered on professional practice, research, and theoretical discussions. Publishing articles that contribute to the development of theory and practice is a guiding principle of the publication. ***JNEL*** solicits high-quality manuscripts from authors inside and outside of academia. Authors are encouraged to submit manuscripts (relevant to nonprofit education and leadership) that present quantitative and/or qualitative research findings; conceptual or theoretical discussions; or program best practices.

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Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership

2025 • Volume 15 • Number 3

Special Issue on Foster Care and Adoption

Book Reviews

Editors' Notes

Roseanne M. Mirabella and Bok Gyo Jeong

In this special issue of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, we turn our collective attention to one of the most complex, sensitive, and consequential areas of nonprofit practice and public service: foster care and adoption systems. These systems sit at the intersection of state responsibility, nonprofit service delivery, and community care, shaping the lives of some of the most vulnerable children, families, and caregivers. This issue invites scholars, educators, and practitioners to critically examine not only how these systems function, but also how they may simultaneously serve as mechanisms of care and sources of harm.

The focus on foster care and adoption is both timely and necessary. Across national and local contexts, child welfare systems are increasingly scrutinized for their structural inequities, historical legacies, and outcomes for children and families. Nonprofit organizations play a central role in this ecosystem—as service providers, advocates, intermediaries, and innovators—yet their work is deeply embedded within broader institutional frameworks shaped by public policy, funding regimes, and societal norms. As such, understanding foster care and adoption systems requires an interdisciplinary and critically engaged approach, one that integrates nonprofit management, social work, public administration, and community-based perspectives.

This special issue makes a unique contribution to nonprofit education and leadership by foregrounding the ethical, institutional, and pedagogical challenges associated with child welfare systems. It pushes beyond traditional managerial or programmatic analyses to engage with deeper questions of power, accountability, justice, and lived experience. In doing so, it aligns with the evolving direction of nonprofit and philanthropic studies as a field—one that increasingly emphasizes reflexivity, critical inquiry, and the centering of marginalized voices.

At the heart of this issue is the powerful framing articulated in the special editors' introduction, "Confronting Systems of Care and Harm," by Irizarry, Meyer, and Mirabella. Their work challenges us to reconsider the dual nature of foster care and adoption systems. While these systems are designed to provide safety, stability, and support, they also operate within structures that can perpetuate harm, particularly for historically marginalized communities. The authors highlight how child welfare systems are not neutral mechanisms of care but are shaped by social, political, and economic forces that influence whose families are deemed "at risk," whose children are removed, and whose voices are prioritized or silenced.

A key insight from their framing is the importance of confronting the paradox of care and harm as coexisting realities. The notion of "systems of care" must be critically interro-

gated to reveal how interventions intended to protect children may simultaneously disrupt families, reinforce inequities, and reproduce systemic injustices. This perspective calls for a shift in how nonprofit leaders, educators, and students understand their roles—not merely as service providers within established systems, but as agents capable of questioning, reforming, and reimagining those systems.

Another central theme is the need to center lived experiences, particularly those of youth, families, and communities directly impacted by foster care and adoption. Traditional academic and policy discourses often privilege institutional perspectives, data metrics, and professional expertise. In contrast, this special issue emphasizes the importance of listening to and learning from those who have navigated these systems firsthand. This shift has significant implications for nonprofit education, suggesting the need for curricula that incorporate experiential knowledge, critical reflection, and community engagement.

The contributions in this issue collectively underscore the importance of examining accountability in new and more holistic ways. In the context of foster care and adoption, accountability extends beyond compliance with regulations or performance metrics. It involves ethical responsibility to children and families, transparency in decision-making, and responsiveness to community needs and critiques. Nonprofit leaders operating in this space must navigate complex accountability relationships—upward to funders and regulators, downward to service recipients, and outward to the broader public—while grappling with the moral dimensions of their work.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this special issue offers important insights for the future of nonprofit education. It challenges educators to prepare students not only with technical skills but also with the critical capacities needed to engage with contested and complex systems. This includes fostering an understanding of historical and structural inequities, developing ethical reasoning, and cultivating the ability to work collaboratively with communities. It also calls for interdisciplinary approaches that bridge nonprofit management with fields such as social work, public policy, and human rights.

Moreover, this issue contributes to broader conversations about the role of nonprofit organizations in addressing systemic challenges. Foster care and adoption systems exemplify the ways in which nonprofits operate within, and sometimes reinforce, institutional arrangements shaped by the state. At the same time, nonprofits have the potential to advocate for reform, innovate alternative models of care, and amplify community voices. The tension between these roles—service provision and systemic change—is a recurring theme throughout the issue and one that is central to the field of nonprofit studies.

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation to the special issue editors—Irizarry, Meyer, and Mirabella—for their leadership, vision, and commitment in bringing this important issue to fruition. Their thoughtful curation and framing have created a space for meaningful dialogue and critical engagement, advancing both scholarship and practice in significant ways.

We also offer our sincere thanks to the contributing authors, whose work reflects a high level of scholarly rigor, creativity, and dedication. Their contributions not only deepen our understanding of foster care and adoption systems but also challenge us to think more critically about the role of nonprofits in addressing complex social issues. Together, the special issue editors and authors have created a body of work that will serve as an important resource for educators, researchers, and practitioners alike.

Finally, we hope that this special issue will inspire continued reflection, dialogue, and action. The challenges associated with foster care and adoption systems are profound, but they also present opportunities for learning, innovation, and transformation. As a field,

nonprofit education and leadership must continue to engage with these issues, equipping current and future leaders with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding needed to navigate and reshape systems of care.

In this spirit, we present this special issue as both a scholarly contribution and a call to action—inviting our community to confront difficult questions, embrace complexity, and work toward more just and equitable systems for children, families, and communities.

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Co-Editors-in-Chief
Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership

Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership 2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. x–xxv
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13490

Editorial

José Luis Irizarry, Seth J. Meyer, and Roseanne M. Mirabella

Introduction to the Special Issue

Confronting Systems of Care and Harm

Advancing Nonprofit Education, Leadership, and Praxis in Foster Care and Adoption

The *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership* (*JNEL*) has long advanced the study and practice of ethical, evidence-based, and engaged leadership. With this special themed issue on foster care and adoption, we invite readers to confront one of the most complex, ethically fraught, and consequential arenas where nonprofit organizations operate: the systems of child welfare and family regulation.

Across the United States and internationally, nonprofit organizations play pivotal roles in the delivery, management, and advocacy of foster care and adoption services—often in tandem with, or contracted by, government entities. This relationship has a substantial impact on the children in the United States because in 2023 alone, 343,077 children were in foster care (AFCARS, n.d.). Yet as contributors to this issue make clear, these roles are not neutral, nor without deep moral responsibility. The work of fostering and adopting children is saturated with histories of colonialism, racialized surveillance, and carceral logics, as recent abolitionist scholars such as Dorothy Roberts (2022) and Alan Dettlaff (2023) compellingly demonstrate.

This issue emerges at a time when movements for abolition, family preservation, and community-based care are gaining momentum (i.e., Thriving Families, Safer Children and their national initiative to keep children and families together and strengthen family well-being over family separation policies [Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2025])—and when the traditional narrative of foster care as a system designed to "save children" must be critically interrogated. The emergence of this special issue also occurs as we are seeing an influx in, greater need for, and appreciation of critical perspectives (i.e., Benson, 2022; Eikenberry et al., 2025; Meyer & Moore, 2025; Mirabella et al., 2024; Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2024; Wright et al., 2022) that emphasize multiple identities and perspectives (Blessett & Meyer, 2025; Colvin & Meyer, 2025; Companion & Rivera, 2026; Evans, 2026b; Galego, 2026; Irizarry et al., 2026; Meyer 2023; Meyer & Benenson, 2023; Roodra, 2015) in multiple sectors and in-

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dustries (Bharath et al., 2024; Evans, 2026a, Meyer, 2025; Settles & Buchanan, 2024), public service education and training (Gottlieb & Eikenberry, 2025; Irizarry, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2024; Mirabella & Nguyen, 2019; Mirabella et al., 2023; Philips, 2024), and civic engagement, social justice, and social equity more broadly (Berry-James et al., 2021; Blessett, 2018; Irizarry, 2026; Irizarry et al., 2025; Meyer et al., 2024a, 2024b; Williams & Duckett, 2020).

The relationship between and among the nonprofit sector, government entities, and private sector contractors providing child welfare and family regulation services needs to be more prominently prioritized and addressed in the fields of public administration and nonprofit studies, which to date has historically underresearched these relationships and implications. This is imminently required, given the number of families being targeted by arbitrary, cruel, and inhumane federal administrative procedures that without due process are separating families, resulting in American children of documented and undocumented immigrants, many of whom haven't violated the law, being left alone in the United States (potentially in foster care or thrown into the adoption systems), or forced to be deported with their parents (National Immigration Project, 2025; Santana, 2024), reminiscent of previous policy eras, but this time on steroids. For instance, in 2011, it was reported that there were 5,100 foster children in care due to the detention and/or deportation of their parent(s), and at the time an additional 15,000 children were expected to enter care for the same reasons over the next five years (Gavett, 2011; Jackson, 2011; Johnson, 2017). While more updated data on the number of children that would enter the foster care system due to parental detention and/or deportation seem to be unavailable, a recent report by the Brookings Institution and Center for Migration Studies estimates that due to more aggressive enforcement of immigration laws, "about 66,000 children would enter the foster care system, at an annual cost to taxpayers exceeding $400 million" (Lisiecki et al., 2025). Analysis of US laws and policies at the immigration-deportation-family separation nexus have even noted how US immigration and deportation policies may constitute crimes against humanity when undertaken as a systematic attack or widespread massive and frequent targeting of specific civilian populations identified by distinguishing features, nationality, or ethnicity (Frye, 2020, pp. 368–370).

We must move beyond the idea that child welfare is about saving children from their families. The spirit of "child welfare" should be about ensuring that families never have to be separated to begin with. That is not just a vision for a better foster care system—it is a call for a better world, in which the nonprofit sector plays a critical role.

Centering a Nonprofit Lens

Throughout the world, and particularly in the United States' decentralized child welfare system, nonprofit organizations play a critical role in almost all aspects of the child welfare system (Appleton, 2005; Boswell, 1998). In many states, the primary contracted providers of services like foster care and adoption are nonprofit organizations. For example, in New York State, nonprofit organizations provide care for more than 80% of the children and youth in foster care (Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services, 2025). In this ecosystem, nonprofits serve as case managers, service providers, educational institutions, legal advocates, and sometimes even residential care providers. They operate within power-laden funding streams, contractual relationships with the state, and intersectoral networks that shape outcomes for children and families. Yet nonprofit studies, public administration, and social equity scholarship have often under-examined the roles and responsibilities of these organizations in sustaining or challenging systemic inequities.

Through this special issue, we challenge scholars in the fields of nonprofit studies and public administration to recognize their crucial role in undertaking research on and developing critical program, procedural, and policy responses to issues regarding the administration of foster care and adoption. Within this process, we challenge the fields to question our theoretical frameworks to understand if and how they apply to the current lived experiences of those within the child welfare system. This special themed issue is meant to serve as a clarion call for this neglected yet quite critical area of administration. To begin addressing the disciplinary neglect of child welfare and the role of nonprofits in policy and service delivery, we encouraged potential contributors to address the following questions in our call for papers:

- How do nonprofits both mitigate and perpetuate harm?
- What ethical dilemmas do nonprofit leaders face when operating within family-regulation systems?
- How can intersectional, abolitionist, and community-centered approaches inform more just and equitable nonprofit practices?
- How can nonprofit education and leadership development better prepare justice-centered public servants to engage critically with foster care and adoption systems?
- What pedagogical frameworks and practices can support transformative learning around equity, abolition, and ethical care within nonprofit and public service education?

While we were unable to answer all of these questions within one special issue, we continue to use these questions to guide us beyond one special issue and towards a more comprehensive literature around foster care and adoption.

An Invitation and a Charge

This special issue is intentionally diverse and interdisciplinary in form, including peer-reviewed articles (DeMasters et al., 2025; Nelson et al., 2025) autoethnographies that provide analytical perspectives on child welfare and adoption (Berry-James, 2026; Irizarry, 2025; Kurtz, 2025; Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025; Ruiz, 2025), and book reviews of landmark abolitionist texts (Allen & Irizarry, 2025; Sweeting, 2025). It centers scholars with lived experience, practitioners, and academic voices across disciplines such as nonprofit management, social work, public administration, sociology, and education. Our hope is that this special issue serves as both a resource and a provocation—an invitation to nonprofit leaders and educators to reflect on their own positionality within systems of care and control. Through this complex web, we challenge academics and practitioners to:

- Move beyond charity frameworks toward solidarity-centered support
- Center family preservation and community healing
- Advocate for policy change and abolitionist alternatives where necessary
- Acknowledge and interrupt complicity in systems of harm
- Develop new pedagogies to prepare justice-centered public servants and nonprofit leaders
- Elevate the issues and opportunities in the child welfare system and help advance efforts to truly pursue the best interest of the child—as these children are among our most vulnerable.

Among those most profoundly failed by current systems of care are LGBTQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, and those living at the intersections of poverty and marginalization. LGBTQ+ youth comprise as many as 30% of youth in the system compared to just 11.2% of youth outside of it (Baams et al., 2019; Children's Rights, n.d.; Kidsave International, 2025; Lawyers For Children, 2025; The Trevor Project, 2021). According to All Children–All Families (n.d.), approximately one in three children in foster care identify as LGBTQ+. Almost half of LGBTQ+ youth (44%) reported entering care as a direct result of their identities, with close to two thirds of transgender youth experiencing family rejection (Children's Rights, n.d.). Once in care, these youth continue to face disproportionate harm, ranging from placement disruptions and verbal and physical abuse to exclusion from affirming placements and exposure to placements that lack basic protections (Armstrong, 2024; Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; McCormick, 2018; The Trevor Project, 2021). These experiences are linked to elevated rates of homelessness, survival-based behaviors, and mental health crises, perhaps explaining why nearly 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+ (Children's Rights, n.d., p. 1; Kidsave International, 2025). Additionally, the LGBTQ+ community at large suffers disproportionately in terms of starting families given the challenges the community faces pertaining to having and raising children either biologically, through foster care and adoption, and/or assistive reproductive technologies (Naylor, 2018), as well as through additional adversities placed for those with non-heterosexual-sex-based gender identities, especially gender nonconforming and transgender individuals to be who they are in all aspects of life, including in access and equity to health care, employment, and social services (Bharath et al., 2024).

Youth with disabilities face similarly dire outcomes. Estimates suggest that between 22% to 33% of children in foster care have a physical, emotional, and/or cognitive disability, yet foster care systems routinely fail to identify, accommodate, and/or support these needs, and the needs of those caring for them (Children's Rights, 2006; Platt & Gephart, 2022). Studies have found that children living with disabilities within the child welfare system in the US are more likely to be abused and neglected, with anywhere between 22% to 70% being maltreated (Lightfoot et al., 2011, p. 2070). Children living with disabilities consistently experience higher rates of abuse in the child welfare system than those without disabilities, though prevalence varies by type of maltreatment such as physical abuse (2.1 to 3.79 times more likely) and sexual abuse (1.8 to 3.14 times more likely) (Lightfoot et al., 2011, p. 2070) with some reports indicating that those with intellectual disabilities are seven times more likely to be abused (Shapiro, 2018). Dion et al. (2018) reported similar findings in Canada noting that children living with intellectual disabilities were found to "experience more severe maltreatment and were more often referred to ongoing child protection services" (p. 175). Youth with disabilities experience significantly more placement disruptions and spend longer periods in care, often nearly twice as long as those without disability. This may be due to the lack of access to the specialized services and stable placements necessary for well-being and development for these youth (Platt & Gephart, 2022).

Poverty remains a powerful driver of family separation and child welfare involvement (Dettlaff, 2023; Kidsave International, 2025; Roberts, 2022). Rather than focus on the best interest of the child, helping families in need, and keeping families together, the child welfare system fails miserably by "respond[ing] to circumstances of poverty with punishment—charging families with neglect, investigating them without consideration of extenuating circumstances, removing children from their parents, and in some cases, arresting the parent instead of providing concrete, responsive support" (ACLU, 2023, p. 3). State-level variations exist. For example, states with more stringent or higher requirements to substan-

tiate claims of child abuse and neglect lead to fewer children being removed from the home while states with more restrictive welfare state systems lead to more child placements in foster care (Raz & Sankaran, 2019, p. 1530).

Families of color, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latino communities, are more likely to be surveilled, criminalized, and separated under the guise of neglect—a term too often used as shorthand for poverty (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022). Poverty is systematically synonymously used for child neglect, as "… research now suggests that simply being a member of a marginalized community may be used as a litmus test for determining if maltreatment occurred, or if parenting approaches were unacceptable" (Yang & Ortega, 2016, pp. 517–518). Kidsave International (2025) highlights these inequities starkly: Black youth account for 22% of those in foster care but only 14% of the U.S. child population; Latino children comprise 23% of youth awaiting adoption but only 20% of those adopted; and Indigenous children are overrepresented at a rate of 2.6 times greater than their proportion in the population.

Given the overrepresentation of minority children in the child welfare system and the limited placements with culturally and racially representative placements, more attention is needed on transcultural foster care placements, a problem not unique to the U.S. but also found in other countries such as Canada (Daniel, 2011), likely due to the unique histories and legacies of racism and colonial constructions of these populations (Benson, 2022; Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2023). Legislative efforts alone may be insufficient to address this problem as research has shown how The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) passed in 1978 failed at achieving its two primary goals: a) placing indigenous children in tribal home placements or with relatives, and b) placing indigenous children with "same-race/ethnicity caretakers" when compared to non-American Indian children (Francis et al., 2023, p. 527). While the issue of who has rights in this regard continues to be litigated, the most recent ruling by the supreme court upheld the ICWA in *Haaland v. Brackeen* (Frederick & Ditzenberger, 2023) ruling that Native children should not be unjustly separated from their families and protect against the erasure of Tribal identity, culture, and sovereignty. The unique issues that come from transcultural and transracial placements adds additional complexity to the trauma that children experience and the understanding of family structure (e.g., Roodra, 2015).

Foster youth have also been found to continue to suffer disproportionately once out of care and transitioning to adulthood with some studies reporting that foster youth have "… higher rates of homelessness, less housing stability, poorer neighborhood quality, and more reliance on public housing" (Berzin et al., 2011, p. 2119). This may contribute to the continuation of the cyclical nature of engagement with child welfare systems, or generational foster care. Increasingly children are removed from their homes due to unstable housing with 25,000 removed for housing-related circumstances in 2019, again demonstrating the punitive instead of the supportive response of the system to the crime of poverty of families in need (ACLU, 2023, p. 3). Adding insult to injury, few also know that in many instances, led by efforts at the state level (where child welfare systems are managed), the federal government is essentially reimbursed by billing parents who forcibly had their families separated for child welfare services. For example, a parent in Louisiana was reported owing "$78,843 for foster care" services and parents in "six states that shared data with NPR—Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming" owing $68 million in total in 2019 (Shapiro et al., 2021). This charge for the families continues the cycle of poverty instead of helping create a situation where families have the financial resources to care for their children.

Taken together, these data reveal a system that not only fails to protect but actively reproduces harm. The way the child welfare systems works, especially in tandem with other systems such as law enforcement and immigration in relation to family separation perpetuates violence to children and families, particularly in terms of mental and emotional distress (Naseh et al., 2024). Nonprofit leaders, educators, and public administrators must move beyond acknowledging disparities to interrogating and transforming the systems that create and sustain them. This involves confronting and weighing the long-lasting harm to children and families caused by the stated and intended goals of the child welfare system in light of the actual and moral failings of practices and their impacts (Raz & Sankaran, 2019). The harms caused and failings of the system don't just go away once family reunification occurs (where possible) or when a child ages out of foster care. These harms and failings perpetuate a cycle of injustice, harm, and social inequity on children and young adults long after their time in care and long into adulthood (Munson et al., 2011).

Several scholars have proposed a way forward for public administration. For example, Rebecca Padot (2014) advanced frameworks grounded in public administration that better contextualize foster care's complexity. Naylor (2021) explored social equity and LGBTQ rights with emphasis on foster care, adoption, and assisted reproductive technology. That said, far more research and dialogue is needed. It is not enough to seek inclusion within broken structures. We must center abolitionist, trauma-informed, and equity-driven care that affirms the dignity and full humanity of every child.

Themes Across This Special Themed Issue on Foster Care and Adoption

The articles, autoethnographies, and book reviews in this issue reflect a rich range of critical and interdisciplinary perspectives, aligning with themes originally outlined in the call and expanded through the thoughtful work of our contributors.

Several contributions take abolitionist and critical race approaches, exposing how foster care functions as a carceral institution disproportionately targeting Black, Brown, and Indigenous families (Allen & Irizarry, 2025; Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry, 2025; Ruiz, 2025; Sweeting, 2025). These pieces interrogate the limitations of reform and uplift visions of community-based care, mutual aid, and family preservation.

To start this special issue, DeMasters et al. (2025) explored the administrative burden experienced by parents within the foster care system. Using a three-round Delphi-study, DeMasters et al. (2025) found that there were three kinds of costs in the foster care system that inhibit reunification: compliance costs, learning costs, and psychological costs. These costs led to parents seeing the foster care system as punitive. To combat this administrative burden, nonprofits should audit the burden put on parents within the system, implement more trauma-informed care, and help parents understand their rights.

Secondly, Nelson et al. (2025) used qualitative research to explore the impact of openness on 25 Americans who were adopted through private adoption. Using a 2x2 matrix of communicative openness and structural openness, she identified four groups in her study: Open Group, Mixed Openness Group, Closed Group, and Reunion Group. The authors found the importance of openness on the adoptee's sense of self. Family situations with more openness allowed adoptees to explore the fact that their family was different more directly. Based on this research, Nelson et al. (2025) recommend that professionals help prepare families for openness in adoption, including training and education on what openness in adoption looks like.

Unique to this special issue, we offer six autoethnographic pieces from academics and professionals who have diverse experiences within the fields of adoption and foster care. These pieces show the humanity of foster care and adoption. It reminds us that when we discuss foster care and adoption, it is not just about theory and politics; there are real people involved in the policies and procedures that we research and the organizations we support. Through this special issue, we emphasize the human experience and encourage researchers and practitioners to use this perspective as a jumping off point when discussing foster care and adoption. Table 1 provides an overview of the six autoethnographic pieces.

Table 1

Autoethnographies

Author	Title	Brief Description
Irizarry, J.I. (2025)	Reimagining Nonprofit Praxis in Foster Care: Through Lived Experience and Radical Hope	Through the framework of radical hope, Irizarry (2025) presents his experience as a youth in foster care to identify how nonprofit organizations can help those in foster care thrive. This process is supported through trauma-informed care, policy focused on family healing, and representative leadership.
Ruiz, R. (2025)	From the Frontlines: A Personal and Professional Reflexive Analysis of the U.S. Foster Care System	Ruiz (2025) uses his experience as both a child within the foster care system and a social worker to analyze how the system creates harm, especially for children of color. His call to action finds that nonprofits, educators, and policymakers are perpetuating harm on those in the foster care system and proposes a call to action to focus on healing, equity, and family preservation.
Berry-James, R.M. (2025)	No Place Like Home: An Autoethnographic Journey of Resilience and Foster Care	Berry-James (2025) uses her own experiences of both being abducted and being in foster care to explore the history of foster care and advocate for empathy, family supports, community healing, and solidarity.
Meyer, S.J. (2025)	Private Adoption and Nonprofit Studies: An Autoethnographic Perspective	Meyer (2025) is able to use his experience to discuss his journey as an adoptive parent. Through his journey, Meyer discusses the complex ethical issues around private adoption and proposes a way for nonprofit studies to join the discussions of nonprofit adoptions.
Kurtz, L. (2025)	My Journey Through Child Welfare: From Sister to System Reformer	By looking at her experiences growing up with many foster care siblings to working in the foster care system, Kurtz (2025) makes recommendations on how nonprofit studies can better support those working in foster care with their research.
Mirabella, R. (2025)	From System Budgets to Lived Bonds: Reimagining Nonprofit Education Through an Autoethnographic Journey in Three Acts of Care	Using her experience as both an adoptive parent and a professional within the field of foster care, Mirabella (2025) digs into her extensive professional history to explore how budgets in foster care can be used to support children and families instead of harming them.

Throughout, contributors confront not only historical legacies (e.g., orphanage systems, Indigenous family separation, racial capitalism) but also contemporary challenges:

- Aging out and transitions to adulthood
- Privatization and nonprofit accountability
- Permanency planning and ethical dilemmas in adoption
- The psychology and sociology of family dynamics across foster, adoptive, and biological relationships

Overall, a key takeaway from this special themed issue is articulated by Raz and Sankaran (2019), when they asserted that "we can make clear that foster care must be a tool of last resort, reserved for the most serious cases of child maltreatment in which there is imminent risk of harm to a child" (p. 1530).

As guest editors, we are humbled by the courage, scholarship, and lived experience embodied in this collection. The topics, themes, and questions explored in the contributions to this special themed issue are, as Williams and Duckett (2020) have noted elsewhere, "salient ones, especially when reflecting upon the past practices of administrative evil and administrative racism and their present-day implications embedded within the politically charged and polarizing environment that impacts both policy and practice" (p. 1041). In curating this issue, we sought to help the disciplines of public and nonprofit administration confront supposed systems of care that often result in harm to children and families while providing initial steps needed to advance public service and nonprofit education, leadership, and praxis in our child welfare systems. We do this by amplifying critical analyses of current foster care and adoption systems, while also illuminating pathways toward community-based, preventative, permanency, equity-driven, and abolitionist alternatives.

Closing Remarks

In shaping this issue, we recognized that the themes identified above cannot be fully understood without also considering the personal and professional standpoints from which we engage this work. As editors, we therefore turn to our own lived experiences and interpretive approaches to ground the scholarship in the human realities it seeks to address. Contemporary interpretive research approaches are increasingly prioritizing and valuing the lived experience of individuals as valid contributions to sensemaking and knowledge generation such as autoethnographic approaches (Chang, 2007; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Stahlke Wall, 2016; Wall, 2006). Consistent with such approaches, we offer autoethnographies (Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry, 2025; Kurtz, 2025; Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025; Ruiz, 2025) to highlight how personal experience can enhance our understanding and facilitate innovative, unique, and applicable contributions to social science in ways that address "a gap in traditional research where the researcher's own voice is typically not overtly included as part of the research" (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021, p. 198), and that is inter- and cross-disciplinary, challenges the old ways of doing things, and promotes innovation to address the challenges of today and tomorrow (Meyer & Elias, 2023; Mirabella et al., 2025).

Our analytical autoethnographies ground our shared vision for this special themed issue on foster care and adoption in the specificity of our own lived, professional, and scholarly experiences. Each co-editor reflects on their positionality, the personal stakes they carry into this work, and their hopes for the future of child welfare, public administration, and nonprofit practice in the foster care and adoption arena. These autoethnographic contributions call for an informed and intentional approach to social equity and social justice at the

nexus between child welfare systems and the nonprofit sector in ways that disrupt the status quo and ignite reflexivity and innovation (see Blessett, 2018; Wright et al., 2022). They bring in the "lived experiences and 'street knowledge'" (Philips, 2025, p. 176) acquired to help inform and reshape the discourse, theory, policy, instruction, and praxis of modern-day child welfare and public service education and practice. This is consistent with informing future practices and how we train and develop the next generation of public servants through self-reflection, sensemaking, and ways of communicating and practicing our craft in nonprofit education programs (Evans et al., 2022; Gottlieb & Eikenberry, 2025; Irizarry et al., 2024), social work PhD programs (Hudson et al., 2017), and public service programs more generally (Irizarry, 2022; McDonald et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2025).

We invite you to read these autoethnographies not only as introductions, but as calls to action—starting points for deeper inquiry, accountability, and transformation in the spirit of the recognition that "what gets written influences what gets read, taught, cited, and pursued for further research" (Evans, 2023). Together, these contributions elucidate the multidisciplinary and intersectional nature of foster care and adoption, and the urgent need for public servants—particularly, nonprofit educators, practitioners, and leaders—to engage with humility, accountability, and a commitment to social justice.

It is our hope in creating this special issue to begin much needed conversations around these issues and others. Each of the editors of this special issue have been connected to foster care and adoption issues through some aspect of their personal and professional lives, as clients (those in care and their families, and potential caregivers), caregivers (foster families, guardians, adoptive parents, and many others), program administrators, social workers, and scholars. It is our determined belief that discussion of these issues in the public administration and nonprofit arena is long overdue. The administration of foster care and adoption services for children, youth and families, including both policy and organizational perspectives, demands urgent attention by all of us. We hope that the contributions of this special themed issue on foster care and adoption will spark necessary conversations in classrooms, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and policy spaces—and that they will inspire continued work toward equity, justice, and abolitionist futures in child welfare and beyond.

Co-editing this issue is an act of reclamation. The stories curated and included in this special issue are not only evidence of trauma or archives of harm, but blueprints of resistance, fulfillment, and transformation. May this special issue on foster care and adoption challenge us to build systems not just of survival, but of love, justice, and radical possibility that truly centers the brilliance of the youth we claim to serve.

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https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-12522
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 1–30

"There Wasn't Enough Time In the Day"

Assessing Administrative Burdens Experienced by Parents in Florida's Privatized Child Welfare System

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Abstract

Parents with children in the child welfare system face administrative burdens when seeking reunification, particularly in privatized systems where services are contracted to nonprofits. Using the administrative burden framework, this study analyzed three rounds of data from 30 parents in Florida's privatized system. Interviews identified the burdens parents faced, and sequential surveys determined which were most common and their difficulty level. Findings show parents experience psychological costs, such as stigma and stress, affecting their willingness to comply with case plans. Compliance costs result from conflicting tasks and poor communication with professionals. Learning costs arise from information asymmetry. As a result, parents view the child welfare system as punitive rather than rehabilitative. Practical implications for nonprofit leadership in privatized settings are discussed.

Keywords: *Foster care, child welfare system, birth parents, administrative burdens, reunification*

Introduction

Currently in the United States, over 400,000 children have been temporarily removed from their homes and placed in the child welfare system due to abuse, abandonment, and neglect (Children's Bureau, 2022). When an initial allegation of child maltreatment is made, state governments and their nonprofit partners step in and, when necessary, temporarily take custody of the child. Birth parents (herein referred to as

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parents) are given robust case plans, detailing required behavior change before reunification is possible. This process, legally known as a dependency case, is a strenuous and emotionally charged experience for those involved (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Neoliberal approaches to public service provision in the 1990s led to privatization of social services, with assumptions that private entities, like nonprofits, would reduce oversight costs and streamline services (Sandberg & Russo, 2024; Young et al., 2020). However, administrative efficiency was prioritized over the citizen's experience, resulting in streamlined service provision for citizens deemed worthy and increased costs for others.

Social safety net programs administered by the government and local nonprofits are often characterized as imposing administrative burdens such as superfluous paperwork and long wait times (Holcomb et al., 2022). These administrative burdens occur when administrators impose excess administrative requirements by regulating how individuals seek public services (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). In turn, this regulation impacts individuals' personal experiences with government and its nonprofit partners.

Research shows that those involved in the child welfare system, such as case managers and foster parents, often bear administrative burdens from working within or being subject to the system (Hwang & Han, 2017; Karatekin, 2014; Wiley & Berry, 2018). Social service professionals report spending 50% to 75% of their time on paperwork and feeling stress and emotional exhaustion from their day-to-day work (Ellett et al., 2007; Kim & Kao, 2014). Foster parents similarly report secondary traumatic stress from working with foster children, experiencing long wait times in dependency court, and difficulty learning such a complex system (McWey et al., 2015; Shdaimah & Alexander, 2018; Whitt-Woosley et al., 2020). Children involved in the system frequently incur the most significant consequences, enduring prolonged physical, mental, and behavioral challenges resulting from both the parental abuse that precipitated their system involvement and their experiences within state care (Engler, 2020; Maguire et al., 2024; Rosenberg & Kim, 2017).

In addition to child welfare professionals, foster parents, and the children themselves, there is a fourth group whose perspective is of equal importance: parents. Parents occupy a unique role within the child welfare system and have a complicated relationship with state actors given that they are seen as the culpable party. Research shows that populations like parents carry a social stigma or negative social construction as a consequence of their actions (Castellano, 2021). Unfortunately, this negative characterization can extend past social convention and permeate government and organizational policy thereby saddling parents with greater administrative burdens (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Parents report experiencing difficulty navigating the system and feeling set up to fail due to the seemingly endless tasks required of them and the emotional toll the process takes on them (Edwards et al., 2023). Failure to ameliorate these burdens, particularly in the context of privatized systems, will continue to have an adverse impact on parents seeking to regain custody of their children.

The primary research question for the current study is: In a privatized child welfare context, what administrative burdens experienced by parents inhibit reunification? To answer this question, a three-round Delphi study was conducted through the lens of the administrative burden framework and social construction theory. For round one of data collection, the authors interviewed 30 parents who had dependency cases adjudi-

cated in the state of Florida, one of the few states with a wholly privatized child welfare system. Interview data were used to identify the administrative burdens experienced by parents in terms of costs. The administrative burden framework conceptualizes administrative burdens as compliance costs (e.g., wait times and paperwork), learning costs (e.g., effort it takes to acquire knowledge about a system), and psychological costs (e.g., stress, stigma). The range of burdens identified were then used as items in rounds two and three of data collection where successive surveys asked parents whether they had experienced the burden personally and its difficulty level. These iterative rounds of data collection are central to the Delphi study design and were used to confirm consensus among parent experiences.

The parental experiences identified in this study were not unexpected: the psychological costs were prominent and traumatic, information asymmetry fueled learning costs, and compliance costs often left parents feeling that dependency was punitive as opposed to rehabilitative. However, the novelty of this research is that those findings are situated within the context of privatization where the nonprofits serve as the administrator. Privatization should work toward solving the bureaucratic burden, according to new public management approaches justifying outsourcing public services to third-party providers (Young et al., 2020). These findings demonstrate that parents struggle with the same burdens within privatization and, thus, are consistent with literature on public systems. Debilitating administrative burdens persist even within the context of privatization.

Literature Review

Administrative burdens within citizen-government interactions have long been documented as a barrier to service uptake (Fox et al., 2020; Kronebusch & Elbel 2004; Remler & Glied, 2003). When vulnerable populations seek government assistance, they are immediately subject to checklists to complete and paperwork to fill out in order to receive services. Such burdens can be found in nearly every facet of government operations—from the tax system (Book et al., 2021) to immigration (Heinrich, 2018), from disaster recovery (Duffy & Shaefer, 2022) to criminal justice (McDonald et al., 2023). Research has also documented administrative burdens in social safety net programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) as they are providers to our most vulnerable populations in their greatest time of need (Fox et al., 2023). The consequences of administrative burdens are substantial; research has found that they prevent program enrollment, exacerbate racial and health inequities, as well as contribute to psychological and physiological adverse outcomes (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022; Herd, 2015; Herd & Moynihan, 2020). Recognizing the negative impact of burdens, recent calls have been made by the federal government to identify and reduce burdens to ease government-citizen interactions (U.S. Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, 2022).

Administrative Burden Framework and Social Construction Theory

Theories within the public administration domain can be used to help make sense of how and why administrative burdens are created by administrators and thereby incurred by citizens. Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan, creators of the administrative

burden framework, contend that any situation where the government structures how individuals seek public services is an opportunity for burdens to be imposed on citizens, leading to inequities (Herd et al., 2023; Herd & Moynihan, 2018). According to the framework, burdens fall into three categories: compliance costs, learning costs, and psychological costs, see Table 1.

Table 1

Components of Administrative Burdens

Learning costs	Incurred when searching for information or trying to understand a system or program. For example, researching eligibility criteria for program participation.
Compliance costs	Incurred from adhering to rules and discretionary demands from administrators. For example, paying fees and efforts made to meet program requirements.
Psychological costs	Emotional toll incurred from citizen-government interactions such as stigma, stress, frustration, and loss of autonomy or power. May be the result of or in tandem with compliance and learning costs.

Source: Adapted from Herd & Moynihan, 2018

Costs also have distinct characteristics in that they are distributive—meaning less advantaged populations incur greater burden, consequential—meaning burdens impact citizens' opinions of government, and constructed—meaning they are the result of particular beliefs or attitudes (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). The framework largely mirrors the social construction theory of target populations. This theory posits that certain populations with shared characteristics are stereotyped and constructed by society as positive (constructed as deserving and honest) or negative (constructed as stupid and selfish) (Ingram & Schneider, 2015). Society's construction of a population has downstream impacts on policy; for example, "advantaged" populations, like the elderly who receive Social Security, are more likely to experience oversubscribed benefits whereas "deviant" populations, such as those with criminal justice involvement, are more likely to experience oversubscribed burdens (Ingram & Schneider, 2015). Social construction plays into the larger policy agenda because officials create policy platforms that punish "deviants" (e.g., being "hard on crime") and elevate "dependents" (e.g., allocating money for public schools). Together, these theories contend that upon engaging with the government or its nonprofit partners, a citizen will be positively or negatively socially constructed by these entities, and subsequently face administrative burdens based on that social framing.

Administrative Burden Framework Applied to the Child Welfare System

The administrative burden framework has been applied in a variety of contexts, critiqued, and expanded. The framework has been used to understand housing policy (Linos et al., 2020), social safety net programs (Barnes, 2023), human capital

(Christensen et al., 2020), healthcare administration (Herd & Moynihan, 2021; Kyle & Frakt, 2021), and most recently, the child welfare system (Edwards et al., 2023). The child welfare system is distinct from many other mechanisms of government in that citizens are involuntarily subjected to government intervention, like the criminal justice system, rather than voluntarily seeking benefits from it.

Once an allegation of child maltreatment has been made, the state investigates the allegation, and, if substantiated, removes the children from the home and places them in state care. Parents who admit or consent to maltreatment allegations are given a case plan they must complete before the court will consider reunification. Case plans are comprised of tasks and goals meant to address the initial reason for removal. A typical case plan may include maintaining stable housing and income, complying with weekly drug screens, attending child visitation, and completing a number of required services or classes such as substance abuse treatment, parenting classes, domestic violence classes, and therapy. Parents may also be expected to adhere to other requirements based on mental health assessments that indicate additional services are needed. Only about half of dependency cases end in reunification and children spend, on average, 20 months in state care before they are discharged from the system (Children's Bureau, 2022). That is to say, the dependency process is long and tedious for parents seeking reunification. They are involuntarily subjected to a government system with enormous compliance requirements they must adhere to or risk their parental rights being terminated.

The child welfare system is well suited for evaluation through the lens of the administrative burden framework to elucidate the administrative burdens incurred by parents and further understand them in terms of costs. Only one study used the framework to evaluate the parent experience and involved interviews of low-income mothers at various stages of the dependency process in Rhode Island, a state with a public-run child welfare system. Results showed that parents experience substantial compliance, learning, and psychological costs and raised concerns about racial inequities resulting from involuntary system involvement (Edwards et al., 2023).

Parent Experiences in the Child Welfare System

Parents' experiences with dependency are shown to be complicated to navigate and traumatic to endure. At the point of child removal, parents have escalated interactions with child protective investigators leading to parental resistance and even greater state surveillance (Cancian et al., 2013). Research further states that mothers experience strong emotional reactions following child removal including feelings of ambiguous loss and having increased rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Nixon et al., 2013; Sankaran et al., 2018). Mothers have described the trauma of removal as "unbearable" and report increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kenny et al., 2015, p. 1161). Even after child removal, parents continue to have a charged emotional experience in dependency. Parents deal with social stigma and judgment (Fong, 2022) as well as fears of punitive state surveillance of their parenting (Fong, 2020). Dependency involvement also impacts parents' personal networks of support and creates distrust among community members (Roberts, 2008). Such stigma isolates parents from their friends and family, forcing them to navigate this difficult process largely on their own.

As parents seek to comply with case plan tasks, such as completing parenting classes and maintaining stable income, they run into additional barriers. Parents complain

of inadequate services received (such as substance abuse treatment), long lag times in the process, and logistical difficulties managing employment while completing services at the same time (Ogongi, 2012). A study of mothers with dependency involvement reported that mothers view their case plans and subsequent state surveillance as an "unrelenting" burden as they try to adhere to punitive compliance requirements (Sykes, 2011, p. 453). Adhering to case plan tasks puts great demand on parents' schedules as they try to maintain employment, housing, child visits, clean drug screens, and classes. Parents are further burdened by the common practice of concurrent or dual case planning, whereby parents are required to work toward reunification while simultaneously facing the possibility of losing their parental rights.

Even after parents complete their case plans and reunify with their children, their state involvement has lasting impacts. Dependency court records will always be tied to their name and can add to a narrative about parents' current and future aptitude to parent (Fong, 2020). Emotional impacts to parents also persist long after cases are closed. Concern has been raised of the long-term impacts of this trauma on mothers, which can exacerbate existing disadvantages and contribute to intergenerational trauma (Kenny, 2018).

Administrative Burdens in a Privatized Context

Administrative burdens are not always at the hands of government entities; in states with decentralized services or privatization, administrative burdens can come from nonprofits contracted by the government. In child welfare, only two states (Florida and Kansas) have system-wide privatization except for the initial investigation (Elgin & Carter, 2020). Texas is currently in transition to wholly privatized services by 2029 (Dey, 2023). In these states, local nonprofits are contracted to provide certain services to the entire state or to a specific geographic area (Woodward, 2021). Descriptive studies indicate that these performance-based contracts with incentive payments "show some promise" (Bald et al., 2022, p. 226), , however literature remains limited on whether the de-centralized structure leads to better outcomes compared to publicly run systems (LaBrenz et al., 2020).

In Florida, the Department of Children and Families has contracted all services (except for investigation and referral) to 17 lead agencies or local nonprofits in its community-based care model. Florida allocates funding to these agencies by giving each one "a predetermined percentage of the overall child welfare budget" (Elgin & Carter, 2020, p. 1610). Lead agencies also utilize sub-contractors for services. In this model, local nonprofits are given discretion to facilitate the dependency process to best serve their communities. Given the leeway they are afforded, nonprofits have the same power as governments to create administrative burdens and are equally responsible for helping citizens shoulder burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2018).

In summary, administrative burdens are a persistent component of any government or nonprofit interaction with its citizens. The severity of these burdens is, at least in part, determined by society's view of a particular population and whether they are seen as deserving or undeserving of public assistance. Parents with children in the child welfare system are negatively constructed by society. Identifying administrative burdens experienced by parents within a privatized child welfare system is a unique context to evaluate as there is limited research and pressing need to understand barriers parents face.

Methods

A three-round Delphi study was conducted to understand administrative burdens experienced by parents seeking reunification in Florida's privatized child welfare system. Delphi studies are used to determine consensus among subject matter experts through multi-round data collection (Nasa et al., 2021). Participants are iteratively asked about a single phenomenon to distill collective opinion (Brady, 2015). This design is appropriate for the current study as it captures the nuanced experiences of parents while synthesizing those experiences across the entire sample. The iterative design also gives the subject matter expert voice more authority because it allows parents to refine and validate their responses each round.

For the present study, a three-round Delphi study included sequential interviews and two surveys. The subject matter experts in the study were parents who completed reunification in the Florida child welfare system. Round one of data collection (interviews) was used to identify administrative burdens experienced by parents in their pursuit of reunification. A list of burdens experienced was generated from the interview data and served as the items in two follow-up surveys. Surveys were used to determine consensus among participants (i.e. which burdens were most commonly experienced) as well as determine burdens' level of difficulty for parents. This study was approved by the University of Florida's Institutional Review Board.

Recruitment and Sample

Due to the sensitive nature of state involvement, parents are a difficult population to access and recruit (Malet et al., 2010). Given this, the present study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit a sample size of 30 participants. Recruitment support came from nonprofits contracted by the state for child welfare services as well as other nonprofits who interact with parents. Nonprofits were emailed a recruitment flier and asked to pass along the information to those who may be eligible. Study participants were also a source of recruitment support as they often referred other parents they personally knew to the study. Prospective participants completed a Qualtrics screening survey to determine eligibility and were contacted if eligible. Inclusion criteria required that participants must: (1) be at least 18 years old (2) be a parent (biological mother or father) who regained custody through a reunification case within the last 10 years, and (3) have had a dependency case adjudicated within the state of Florida. It is understood that by limiting the sample to only those who have reunified that those who attempted and failed to complete reunification were excluded. If this study were to include those participants, the data yielded would extend past the scope of the research question as parents would likely discuss termination of parental rights, adoption, permanent guardianship, and burdens associated with a change in case plan goal. The given study is therefore limited to only those participants who have regained custody in order to identify similar burdens experienced by parents who reached the same case plan goal.

Thirty parents were ultimately recruited for this study with a 100% response rate for all three rounds of data collection. The sample was primarily women, see Table 2. Almost 70% of the sample was between the ages of 30 and 39. The racial makeup was primarily White, but also included those who identified as African American, Hispanic, and Mixed. Nearly 70% received government assistance.

Table 2

Sample Demographic Information

	% (*N*=30)
Gender	
Female	90%
Male	10%
Age	
20-29	20%
30-39	67%
40-49	10%
50-59	3%
Race	
White	63%
African American	23%
Hispanic	10%
Mixed	3%
Government Assistance	
Received	67%
Not Received	33%

Parents were also asked specific questions about their dependency case, see Table 3. Half of the cases were adjudicated in Southwest Florida, and the remainder resided throughout Florida. Cases were an average of 19 months in length and involved an average of two children. Reasons for child removal varied and several cases had more than one reason for removal. The most common reasons for removal were parent substance abuse and neglect related to domestic violence. Many cases had more than one reason for removal. At the conclusion of data collection, participants were provided a $150 digital Walmart gift card sent via email for their participation.

Table 3

Case Factors

	% (*N*=30)
Florida Region Case Adjudicated in	
Southwest	50%
Southeast	30%
Central	10%
Northwest	7%
Northeast	3%

Table 3 (cont.)

	% (*N*=30)
Number of Children in Case	
1 Child	37%
2 Children	30%
3 Children	27%
4 Children	7%
Reason for Child Removal	
Substance abuse	67%
Neglect (domestic violence)	37%
Physical abuse	23%
Housing instability	23%
Incarceration	7%
Neglect (unspecified)	7%
Abandonment	3%
Case Closed	
Within last 5 years	83%
6–10 years ago	17%

Duration of Case: 4–48 months

Data Collection and Analysis

Round 1: Interviews

For round one of the study, 30 semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with parents to identify administrative burdens experienced when seeking reunification. The interview instrument was modeled after existing instruments that focus on barriers to social services uptake (De Schacht et al., 2019; Macleod et al., 2017; Placzek et al., 2021). Questions were also created to mirror the administrative burden framework's conceptualization of costs and social construction theory's dimensions of power and connotative perception of populations. Prior to data collection, the interview and survey instruments were reviewed by two parents (who aligned with the sampling frame but did not participate in the study itself) to ensure the language used was clear, sensitive, and appropriate for the population.

Phone interviews were no longer than 45 minutes and were conducted in accordance with the predetermined interview instrument. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed using the transcription service, TEMI. Data were de-identified and paired with participant identification numbers to protect participant identity. A 2-person team reviewed and made modifications to the transcriptions for accuracy. Digital recordings of interviews were destroyed after all three rounds of data collection was completed.

For analysis of interview data, Nvivo software was used. A preliminary review of the data was first completed using thematic analysis to identify all administrative burdens (as defined by Herd & Moynihan, 2018) mentioned by parents. Thematic analysis

was appropriate as it allowed for the burdens experienced to emerge from the data (Saldaña, 2015). The list of experienced burdens was reviewed for duplications and resulted in a final list of 41 distinct administrative burdens, see the Appendix. Those 41 burdens served as the items for both surveys.

For the in-depth analysis of the interview data, a 2-person team coded the interviews through directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A theoretically guided codebook was created and tested on three interviews; adjustments were made to the codebook before being applied to the remainder of the data (Saldaña, 2015). Ten interviews were team-coded and debriefed to corroborate the codebook (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The remaining interviews were divided, individually coded, and debriefed by the team.

Round 2: Survey 1

The 41 burdens generated from the interviews served as the items for survey one. Participants were asked to rate each burden on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating the burden's level of difficulty. Participants could select N/A if they had not experienced the burden. The inclusion of the N/A option was vital to adhering to the Delphi study design of iteratively asking participants about the same items. In essence, participants were asked (1) did you experience the burden, and (2) if so, select difficulty level and if not, select N/A. Participants received the first survey via email to complete on Qualtrics. Response rate was 100%.

For data analysis, responses were exported to an Excel spreadsheet. Items were first reviewed to determine what percent of the participants experienced each burden, i.e. the number of N/A responses was reviewed for each item. Consistent with Delphi methodological research, a threshold for consensus was set at 75% (Diamond et al., 2014). Items where less than 75% of participants experienced the burden were determined not to meet the threshold of consensus. In the first survey, two items did not reach the threshold for consensus: (1) "My case manager lost my paperwork" and (2) "I had difficulty finding services that were court-approved."

Items were then reviewed for their level of difficulty according to the Likert scale. To determine the percentage of participants who selected a particular difficulty level, the number of responses for that difficulty level was divided by the number of participants who experienced the burden.

Round 3: Survey 2

After all participants had completed the first survey, a final Qualtrics survey was sent to participants via email. The second survey mirrored the first survey. Participants were again asked to rate each of the burdens on a 5-point Likert scale. Participants could again select N/A if they had not experienced the burden. Response rate was 100%.

For data analysis, responses were again exported to an Excel spreadsheet and reviewed in the same manner as the previous survey. Items were first reviewed for a threshold of consensus. In the second survey, two items did not reach the threshold for consensus: (1) "My attorney did not advocate enough for me" and (2) "I had difficulty finding services that were court-approved." Only one of these items did not meet the threshold of consensus in both the previous survey and in this survey. One new item did not reach consensus. All three of these items were designated as not reaching con-

sensus because they were not experienced by 75% of the participants in one or more of the surveys.

The percentage of participants indicating they experienced a given burden varied between surveys by an average of five percent. It was expected that parents would have difficulty recalling their experiences both due to the time that had lapsed since their case as well as the emotionally charged nature of the subject. For this reason, responses from both surveys were averaged together for analysis, see the Appendix for survey results.

Findings

This three-round Delphi study revealed a consensus among participants that parents seeking reunification experience (in order from greatest to least) psychological, compliance, and learning costs. The nature and intensity of these costs are delineated in the forthcoming section, providing a nuanced understanding of the parent perspective.

Psychological Costs

The most widely experienced costs and most difficult to navigate for parents were psychological costs. Every psychological cost identified from the interview data met the threshold for consensus and was indicated as a high level of difficulty in survey responses, see Table 4. The psychological costs chronicled by parents demonstrate the emotional load they carried throughout the dependency process.

Table 4

Psychological Costs With a High Level of Difficulty

Psychological Costs	% of Participants Indicating High Level of Difficulty
I felt loss and grief	90%
I felt sadness	90%
I felt stress and anxiety	89%
I felt fear	86%
I felt anger and frustration	83%
I felt guilt and shame	79%
I felt that others looked down on me and thought less of me	77%
I felt I had no voice	76%
I felt that I was judged based on what was written in case records about me rather than who I believe I am as a person	73%
I felt an invasion of privacy	72%
I felt embarrassment and humiliation	69%
I felt alone and without support	64%
I felt emotionally unstable and out of control	61%

*Listed items (1) met the threshold of 75% consensus and (2) 50% or more of participants indicated the items were very difficult or extremely difficult to experience

Parents experienced profound emotional distress during and after their dependency case, including sadness, fear, anger, and shame. Further, parents were exposed to frequent stigmatizing interactions, leaving them feeling belittled. It is also worth noting that psychological costs were sometimes preceded by or experienced concurrently with learning and/or compliance costs.

Debilitating Sadness

Parents reported feeling persistent despair and hopelessness due to their involvement with dependency. Multiple participants disclosed frequent thoughts of suicidal ideation: "This process can make even the strongest women I know, myself included, suicidal." One mother reflected on the early days of her case, "When they took her, I didn't wash her clothes for the first six months. I slept with her clothes every night to be close to her. It was depressing. It was really depressing." Parents' sadness was compounded by the grief of being separated from their child. Eighty-seven percent of participants made references to the emotional toll that took on them: "The depression set in when I wasn't waking up hearing 'mommy.'" Of all the administrative burdens identified by parents, experiencing loss and grief was indicated to be the most commonly experienced and most difficult to deal with of any of them.

Many parents also reported that their distress was severe enough that it required clinical interventions such as therapy or prescription medication. For at least two parents, their strong emotions led them to be, what is colloquially referred to in Florida as, "Baker Acted," at the time of child removal. The Baker Act is a Florida law that regulates involuntary emergency mental health examinations.

Fear and Disempowerment

The fear parents experienced was primarily rooted in a lack of power over what happens in their case, a sense that everything was out of their hands, and they (and their children) were at the mercy of the system. Parents expressed fear around their children's placement and whether they would be in a safe and stable environment; this was especially prevalent among parents of special or high needs children. Parents also had fears about attending court, having to step into an environment with esoteric language and formal, unspoken etiquette. As one mother recounted,

> I felt so intimidated going to court. Every time I would get in there, literally, my chest was just shaking. I didn't show much of how scared I was, but trust me, inside I was shaking.

Parents also expressed that due to a baseline distrust with their case managers and the court, they feared that their progress on case plan tasks would be misunderstood or incorrectly reported, leading to further delays to reunification.

Blinding Anger

References to anger were most commonly mentioned when parents referred to the earlier days of their case, including child removal and specifically regarding arraignment proceedings when parents had to respond in court to the allegations. Parents recalled strong resentment of and objection to the state's position. As one mother said, "In the beginning of the case, I really didn't wanna cooperate because I was just so angry with the fact that these people had me going through this." Parents indicated that with time, their anger for the process had dissipated. However, in the interviews, par-

ents often and easily re-entered that state of anger while recounting their experiences. Recognizing the rise of her own emotion, one mother remarked, "All I remember is the anger. I'm actually getting angry right now just thinking about it."

Embodied Shame, Guilt, and Stigma

Parents indicated an overarching or persistent feeling of shame and guilt throughout their case. The wording of "shame" and "guilt" was almost always mentioned in tandem, as parents relayed their feelings of regret over their behavior. One participant said, "You just hold that guilt of knowing you could have been a better mom." Others mentioned blaming themselves and expressed feelings of embarrassment and humiliation for the position they had put their children in.

While some of the comments around shame and guilt were self-generated and the result of personal reflection, a significant portion of them were the result of stigmatizing interactions parents had with others. Parents mentioned comments from case managers, judges, attorneys, family, and friends, that constructed them as a guilty party deserving of collective and personal shame. One mother recalled a judge saying to her, "You're never gonna see your child again. You're not capable of being a mother." Parents described being referred to as "criminals," "monsters," "addicts," and "bad people." Receiving such stigmatizing comments made parents feel deeply misunderstood and defensive. One mother said,

> They were always looking down on me. I may as well have sold my kid off to sex traffickers the way they treated me. And I'm just like, "I know it's bad, but it's not as bad as y'all are making me feel."

Parents also expressed their frustration with being referred to in reductionist terms and how difficult it was to change people's minds. One participant commented,

> The hardest part was getting people to view me as a different parent than what was originally written. It didn't matter how much I did. It didn't matter how far I went. They wanted to see me the way I was portrayed in the original paperwork: a substance abuser, an abusive partner, and obviously not a good mom. That was something I had to fight throughout the entire four years.

In most cases, the external stigma was met with strong pushback from parents, but in some cases, parents began to consider whether the stigmatizing statements held any truth. One mother recalled wondering if she should have voluntarily terminated her parental rights if she "really was such a bad mom."

Lasting Impacts

Parents reported psychological costs persisted after they regained custody, and their dependency case was closed. They expressed that the experience "stayed with them" and they would "never be the same again."

Parents often felt some level of paranoia that they would be subject to future involvement with the state with one mother saying, "we still have to look over our shoulders today." Several parents expressed distrust of police, doctors, and teachers. One mother whose child was initially removed from care at the hospital shared her discomfort with medical settings,

> I will never go to the hospital the same way. I will always have my guard up. And I will always be anxious because I'm just thinking like, "They're probably going to think of something and take my kids away." So that's one thing that I think will scar me forever.

Parents also commented on how their experience with dependency impacted their emotional connection with their child. In some cases, especially those where the child was removed as an infant, parents struggled to re-establish their parent-child bond due to the separation. One mother said,

> I feel like I missed out on a lot. My baby is about to be four years old, and I feel like I'm still fighting for a spot in her life. I mean, I'm her mom and I know she loves me. I know that she's attached to me, but still she's more attached to her godmom because that's who she woke up with every day for the first year and a half of her life.

Parents with adolescent children similarly struggled with their parent-child relationship but experienced the added layer of the teen having vivid memories of the experience themselves. One mother shared,

> This has honestly traumatized my kids to this day. They speak about it often. It made them think that we don't care about them, and they say that outright…We're the ones that have to fix that now, you know?

A small portion of the participants whose children experienced abuse at the hands of their foster parents commented on their compounded and continued feelings of shame and guilt for unintentionally subjecting their children to additional abuse while in state care.

Compliance Costs

In pursuit of reunification, parents experienced heavy compliance costs such as being subjected to unreasonable abuse investigations, adhering to conflicting and excessive case plan tasks, and having difficulty interacting with child welfare professionals. See Table 5 for compliance costs participants identified as the most difficult to experience.

Table 5

Compliance Costs with High Level of Difficulty

Compliance Costs	% of Participants Indicating High Level of Difficulty
The initial investigation resulting in child removal was conducted improperly	77%
I had to wait a long time between court hearings	69%
I experienced poor or inadequate communication from my case manager	63%
I had multiple case managers	61%
My case manager had outdated or inconsistent case information	54%
I had to wait a long time for my case manager to send referrals	53%
I had to complete too many drug screens	52%
My case plan was not individualized to my needs	52%
I experienced poor or inadequate communication from my attorney	50%

*Listed items (1) met the threshold of 75% consensus and (2) 50% or more of participants indicated the items were very difficult or extremely difficult to experience

Initial Investigation and Removal

Ninety-two percent of participants believed the initial investigation resulting in child removal was conducted improperly. Most participants indicated this stage of the dependency process was very difficult or extremely difficult to navigate. Parents reported feeling "misunderstood" and retrospectively wondering why their child was removed at all. As one mother said,

> My baby had to be three weeks. She wasn't even a whole month yet. [My partner] got really irate and it turned into him putting hands on me. A family member called the police on him and when the police arrived, they said I failed to protect my child. How are you gonna say I'm the one who failed to protect her? It was really heartbreaking.

When describing the circumstances of child removal, parents overwhelmingly used inflammatory language such as their child being "illegally taken" and the dependency process being like "paying ransom to a kidnapper." Parents admit that the charged nature of the initial investigation and removal substantially impacted their willingness to comply with the case as a whole.

Case Plan Tasks

Parents experienced a variety of administrative burdens related to case plan tasks including scheduling conflicts, limited personal resources, and poorly designed case plans. Parents expressed frustration that their case plan tasks were not always tailored to their needs or the circumstances that led to removal, such as having to take domestic violence classes when the child was removed for housing instability. Even when parents were willing to complete their assigned tasks, the tasks were not always feasible. Parents had to abruptly take off work to complete random drug screens, asking for leniency from jobs they were often very recently employed at. They traveled long distances for child visitation, often at the mercy of public transit or they resolved to walk. One mother commented, "They literally make us jump through hoops like we're circus elephants." Some parents who had financial support opted not to seek employment at all because they saw their case plan tasks as a full-time job.

Parents also questioned the value of case plan tasks, reporting that tasks felt like a list to check rather than an avenue to substantive behavior change. Parents often lamented being reduced to what was reported on paper rather than how far they felt they had come, resulting in a resignation to the process. "You just have to smile and wave" as one father aptly put it. A mother shared a similar acceptance of the process,

> At one point, I just was like, you know what? I'm tired of fighting with these people. I'm just gonna do whatever it is they ask me to do. I don't care if they tell me to dive into a hundred-foot lake, whatever it is, I'll do it. I can't even swim, but I'll do it. Anything to get my daughter back.

Interactions with Child Welfare Professionals

Parents identified case managers and attorneys as the child welfare professionals they had the greatest difficulty with. Ninety-five percent of participants experienced poor or inadequate communication with their case manager. Case managers were reportedly difficult to get in contact with, constantly changing due to staff turnovers, and often working from outdated information. Parents spoke of the consequences of poor communication on themselves—"case managers do not realize how traumatic it

is for parents not to have consistent communication with them"—as well as on case progress as a whole—"if they would communicate effectively with us, the reunification process would go by so much quicker and smoother." One father even remarked that he initially thought the poor communication was a purposeful and punitive function of the system that he was expected to overcome to prove rehabilitation rather than a deficiency in staff performance. Case manager turnover also contributed to poor communication; at times parents were unsure who their case manager even was because it changed so often. When participants were asked what would have improved the dependency process for them, better communication from case managers was the most common response.

Another critique of case managers was a seemingly double standard with communication expectations. Parents felt they had to accept case managers' slow response times, but that if they acted in a similar manner, it would have been counted against them. As one mother said,

> When I called her, she was like "I'm in court all day. I'm in a meeting all day." She did not have a pep in their step. But when she got around to my name and it was time to see what I had completed, oh I better have X, Y, and Z done.

Eighty-seven percent of participants had poor communication with their attorneys as well. Parents experienced so little communication with their attorneys they often could not remember any meaningful interactions they had with them. Some recall speaking with their attorney briefly before court to prepare for hearings, but most did not interact with their attorney at all outside the courtroom.

Difficulty with child welfare professionals served as a primary compliance cost for parents because of the effort required just to get in contact with their case managers and attorneys and because this poor communication served to further complicate parents' case plan compliance. When parents could not get their questions answered or the support they needed, it impeded their ability to move the case forward.

Learning Costs

Parents experienced learning costs including information asymmetry, seeking out information on their own, and leaning on their personal networks to make sense of the dependency process. Only two learning costs met the threshold for consensus as well as being designated a high level of difficulty: parental rights and independent problem solving, see Table 6.

Table 6

Learning Costs with High Level of Difficulty

Psychological Costs	% of Participants Indicating High Level of Difficulty
I was not informed of my parental rights	71%
I felt like I had to figure everything out on my own	54%

*Listed items (1) met the threshold of 75% consensus and (2) 50% or more of participants indicated the items were very difficult or extremely difficult to experience

Parental Rights

Not being informed of or educated on their parental rights was a major difficulty parents identified. For many parents, it was not until the end of their case that they came to understand the breadth of their rights. Among others, parents reported wishing they had understood their rights to child visitation, participation in child medical and educational decisions, and the option to fight abuse allegations to begin with. As one mother said,

> They never really explained my rights to me as a parent. I never knew what I could do, what I couldn't do, when I was allowed to go over to see my kids or when I had to leave. I was asking all these questions because I wasn't informed, but no one would get back to me until a month later and by then it didn't matter.

Independent Problem Solving

Without adequate help from child welfare professionals, parents took it upon themselves to acquire knowledge about the dependency process. They reported asking questions, making calls, relying on the internet—"I Googled everything," and even studying the law—"I read myself blind reading Florida statutes wondering what was going on." Parents also looked to their own communities who had experience with dependency to get an insider's perspective. One parent recalled talking to other moms at a halfway house she was staying at, another parent relied on her religious community saying, "Luckily one of my church friends had just become a case manager and she quickly got to work helping me. I received more help from people outside of my case than from my case manager."

While few learning costs were identified and reached the threshold of consensus, the ones that did have tremendous impact on a parent's ability to work toward reunification. When parents lack understanding of the dependency process, how it changes, and their role within it, it impedes their ability to comply and advocate for themselves and their children.

Discussion

This study sought to better understand the experience of parents seeking reunification in a privatized child welfare system where service provision rests with local nonprofits. The three-part Delphi study centered subject-matter experts who had completed reunification. Using the administrative burden framework's conceptualization of burdens as costs, this study identified myriad burdens incurred by parents and further delineated which burdens were most commonly experienced and most difficult for parents to navigate. While the findings of this study are within a privatized context, they also mirror the difficulties parents experience in centralized child welfare systems, demonstrating that both structures similarly underserve parents and findings can be transferred to other state systems. The findings are reviewed in the context of scholarship and translated into takeaways for nonprofit leaders working in privatized child welfare settings. Educators may use these tips to frame lessons on ameliorating administrative burdens for groups socially constructed as deviants and, thus, more likely to experience oversubscribed burdens.

The current study showed that psychological costs, such as fear and grief were, by far, identified as the most common and difficult cost for parents in dependency. The

emotional toll experienced was persistent from the point of child removal through reunification and continued well after cases closed. This finding is supported by recent literature that documented the range of negative emotion parents experience following removal including "grief, loss, anger, and despair" (Healy et al., 2023, p. 8). Another key finding of the current study was the psychological cost of stigma. This is particularly concerning because public health literature shows that shame and stigma leads to negative outcomes (Dolezal, 2021), such as exacerbating disparities (Brewis & Wutich, 2019) and decreasing motivation for positive behavior change (Vartanian & Porter, 2016). Stigmatizing comments received from child welfare professionals, court-appointed staff, and parents' own communities unfairly added to parents' emotional load, often leading parents to an even greater defensive posture to the process. Literature confirms this idea that populations who are viewed negatively by society for their actions, such as parents in dependency or those formerly incarcerated, experience greater social stigma than others (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Schofield et al., 2011). One study used criminology literature to understand dependency because parents are viewed so similarly to those with criminal justice involvement (Broadhurst & Mason, 2017). Given the profound emotional impact of dependency, nonprofits with direct contact with parents should mitigate these costs by acknowledging the complexity of the parent experience and ensuring trauma-informed practice among their child welfare professionals (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020b).

The compliance costs parents incurred were primarily related to the initial abuse investigation, case plan tasks, and poor communication with child welfare professionals. Parents experienced great difficulty with the initial investigation, often expressing that it was improperly conducted or incomplete in its assessment. Their objection to it was so high, it often impacted their willingness to comply in their case as a whole. Interestingly however, in the late '90s the Florida Legislature's research arm researched parents' opinion of child abuse investigations and, at the time, 85% of the 189 respondents felt their investigator was fair and objective, serving as a stark contrast to the 92% of respondents in the current study who felt their investigation was conducted improperly (Turcotte, 1998). Such disparate results may signal that parent perspectives have changed over time. While the studies have substantive differences that preclude a general comparison, this difference in parental responses presents an opportunity for a deeper dive to understand the change.

Complying with case plan tasks was another primary complaint from parents as they were often conflicting, inapplicable to parent needs, and difficult to physically attend due to transportation limitations and excess demands to their schedule. This finding is strongly supported by a similar study on administrative burdens experienced by parents which chronicled excessive wait times, unreasonable case plan requirements, scheduling conflicts, and parents' limited personal resources (Edwards et al., 2023). A final compliance cost of note is poor communication with case managers and attorneys which was a nearly universal complaint from parents and identified as a persistent barrier to timely reunification. Efforts to mitigate these compliance costs include reviewing guidelines for investigative practices, designing case plans tailored to parent needs, creating peer-support groups, providing resources to alleviate logistical challenges, and providing workforce training for child welfare professionals to support their relationship with parents.

Parents also experienced learning costs navigating a system they were largely unfamiliar with, relying on their own resourcefulness and personal connections to fill in gaps of knowledge. It is possible that, to some degree, imposed learning costs are a deliberate feature of the system rather than a flaw. Case managers may want to see parents take ownership over their case plans and work autonomously to show their commitment to reunification. Information asymmetry of parental rights, however, is a concern. Even within dependency, parents maintain decision-making power regarding a child's medical care and education. In Florida, they also have the right to a court-appointed attorney to help them navigate the complexities of the system. Protecting a parent's right to informed due process should be a primary priority in dependency.

Considering each of the administrative burdens identified above, what is ultimately revealed in this study is that parents view the child welfare system as punitive as opposed to rehabilitative. Literature clearly states that populations society deem to be undeserving or deviant will incur stigma from their community and government, and consequently, will incur punitive administrative burdens compared to populations society deems deserving of help (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Conceptually, parents in dependency fall into this pattern of stigma and burden, and empirically, the current study demonstrates parents' lived experiences reflect that. This critique is not a new one. Research has been raising alarms about the child welfare system's oppressive regulatory control (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2022), racial bias and disparities (Cénat et al., 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2022), and the pipeline from poverty to the child welfare state (Berger & Waldfogel, 2011; Fong, 2017). Some go as far as to call for the abolition of the system entirely (Dettlaff, 2023; Polikoff & Spinak, 2021).

Florida's decentralized approach to child welfare hinges on the belief that nonprofits within a community are best suited to serve the families in that community (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.a). The current study, however, shows that parents experience excess burdens even within this community-based care model, a finding that provides an opening for nonprofit intervention. If privatization affords nonprofits wide discretion to administrate the child welfare system, then it also affords them wide discretion to improve it. As the administrative burden framework asserts, less burdensome alternatives exist and are possible where there is political will and administrative capacity for change (Herd & Moynihan, 2018).

Practical Implications

This is only the second study to apply the administrative burden framework to parents in the child welfare system (See Edwards et al., 2023). As such, the study contributes to nonprofit management research. It is the first of its kind to evaluate the parent experience with administrative burdens in the context of a privatized child welfare system. The majority of burdens identified in this study (excluding those related to court proceedings) are at an organizational level rather than a governmental one. Programmatic change should aim to alleviate costs incurred by parents or shoulder the burden with them through three practical takeaways.

First, nonprofit leaders should audit their bureaucracies both logistically and in the context of the "spirit of" the burden. The main priority of the dependency process is to provide an opportunity for parents to rehabilitate with the tools and resources required to engage in that behavior change. Parents' personal accounts would indicate that this rehabilitation is often thwarted by bureaucratic requirements that hinder rather than

support their efforts. While case plan tasks are set by the court, they are coordinated by nonprofit staff, providing an opportunity for leadership to evaluate whether their procedures for parent accountability function as boxes to check or genuine efforts to facilitate parent growth. Nonprofit staff should be encouraged to exercise wide discretion to provide tailored assistance to parents and mitigate the "abundance" of burdens they bear (Toros, & Falch-Eriksen, 2021, p. 1593).

Second, nonprofit leadership should implement staff evaluations of trauma-informed care training. In Florida, as in other states, case managers are extensively trained through higher education, certificate training, and supervised work experience to understand how parents' personal histories of trauma contribute to their involvement in dependency. However, parents still report feeling profoundly misunderstood and bearing severe psychological costs, signaling a possible training deficit for child welfare professionals. Given that case managers are already provided trauma-informed care training, the recommendation for addressing parent concerns is to implement evaluations of this training. Such evaluations should be used not only to measure case managers' knowledge of trauma-informed care, but, more importantly, to identify and measure how case managers report implementing and acting on that knowledge in their work, particularly with parents. It is acknowledged that child welfare professionals already bear significant burdens in their work, however, measuring practical use of their knowledge is paramount to determining the effectiveness of training.

Finally, nonprofit leadership can reduce information asymmetry by implementing standard procedures to strengthen parents' understanding of their rights. This recommendation is supported by literature that criticizes the child welfare system for often minimizing or ignoring parental rights (Ainsworth & Berger, 2014) and advises practitioners (not just attorneys) to advocate for parents' rights (Grant et al., 2023). It is expected that some questions of parental rights will be case-dependent and must be left to an attorney to review and advise, however, some parental rights are absolute and should be repeatedly expressed to parents. For example, unless a parent's rights are legally terminated by the court, they retain the ability to make educational and medical decisions for their child. Nonprofit leadership should work with staff who make frequent contact with parents to create procedures for frequently reviewing parental rights.

Conclusion

By design, the child welfare system is family-centric and puts resources toward the family and child's best interest as determined by the state and its partners (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.b). For the vast majority of dependency cases, supporting parents is part of what is in the family's best interest. Parents and children are inherently a package deal and, as such, deficient support for one impacts the other. If parents are not given the tools, resources, and time it takes to create a safe and stable home, the child will likely not have that safe and stable home (at least not one with their parents). The parent experience within the dependency process has been largely overlooked by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike. This study sought to address that and highlight the difficulties parents experience when seeking reunification. What was revealed is that parents incur a variety of burdens from excess case plan tasks to emotional distress, and ultimately view the system as punishment for

their actions rather than support for reunification. A system such as this that implements punitive measures hurts more than just the parent, it also hinders the child's right to timely reunification.

In Florida and other states with a decentralized child welfare system, nonprofits play a pivotal role in the way their systems are oriented towards parents and are empowered to adjust that orientation at will. Nonprofits can and should consider the compliance, learning, and psychological costs that are imposed on parents by their organizational policies. Further, they should evaluate whether these burdens serve to move families closer to reunification or punish parents for the past. In this evaluation, nonprofits will surely find that some imposed burdens are purposeful and have value, but they are likely to find that many others do not meet such criteria.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this study is the diversity of the sample. First, the data are limited to the parent experience and does not account for the perspective of child welfare professionals, foster parents, children, parents who were not successful with reunification, or other interested parties. While this is a limitation, it was also a deliberate study design choice as the authors sought to solely isolate the parent voice. Thus, justifications for the administrative burdens imposed by these nonprofits are not provided, as reasonable as they may appear. The sample is also limited due to homogeneous demographic factors and the overrepresentation of participants from Southwest Florida.

The second limitation is that parents' recollection of their experiences was inconsistent. The Delphi study design requires that participants are asked the same or similar questions in iterative rounds of data collection to determine consensus. In the case of this study, parents were asked three times about the administrative burdens they experienced and their responses each time did vary. Most notably, participants were given the exact same set of items in both surveys and asked to indicate whether they experienced the burden in their own dependency case. Item responses differed from the first survey to the second by an average of five percent. A single item ranged as much as 14% between surveys.

A third limitation worth noting is that while all parents who participated in this study must have had at least one case that closed in reunification, some parents had multiple dependency cases. Such cases may have closed in permanent guardianship or termination of parental rights or are currently ongoing. Parents were explicitly instructed to limit their answers in this study to only those related to cases closing in reunification, however, it is possible that parents spoke of other experiences within dependency. Where it was clear they were talking about an open or otherwise resolved case, the data were excluded.

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Appendix

Survey results

Administrative Burdens	Exp*	Not at all difficult	Slightly difficult	Moderately difficult	Very Difficult	Extremely Difficult
Compliance costs						% (*N*=30)
I had too many case plan tasks	97%	30%	3%	40%	7%	20%
I had to wait a long time for my case manager to send referrals	97%	13%	17%	17%	7%	47%
I had to comply with excessive home safety requirements	97%	30%	13%	20%	13%	23%
I had to wait a long time between court hearings	97%	7%	7%	17%	17%	52%
I had to complete case plan tasks that were not helpful to me	97%	18%	7%	29%	7%	39%
I experienced poor or inadequate communication from my case manager	95%	17%	3%	17%	13%	50%
I had to complete too many drug screens	94%	33%	7%	7%	7%	44%
I had case plan tasks that conflicted with one another	92%	25%	14%	18%	25%	18%
I did not have reliable transportation	92%	43%	7%	14%	0%	36%
The initial investigation resulting in child removal was conducted improperly	92%	19%	0%	4%	8%	69%
I had multiple case managers	90%	25%	11%	4%	11%	50%
My case plan was not individualized to my needs	90%	15%	22%	11%	19%	33%
My child's placement was far away from me	89%	27%	12%	31%	4%	27%
I experienced poor or inadequate communication from my attorney	87%	31%	8%	12%	8%	42%
My case manager had outdated or inconsistent case information	84%	23%	12%	12%	12%	42%
I had to pay out-of-pocket for case plan tasks such as drug screens or classes	82%	39%	9%	9%	9%	35%
I did not have a reliable phone and/or computer	80%	54%	13%	17%	4%	13%
Visitation with my child was often canceled or rescheduled by their caregiver	80%	22%	13%	17%	13%	35%
The classes I needed to take were full	77%	39%	17%	17%	13%	13%
Learning costs						
I had difficulty finding and securing housing	95%	38%	10%	14%	17%	21%
I had to rely on family and friends for help on how to complete my case plan tasks	92%	15%	15%	23%	8%	38%
I felt like I had to figure everything out on my own	90%	14%	14%	18%	11%	43%
I was not provided resources to set up services myself	89%	30%	11%	19%	7%	33%
I was not informed of my parental rights	88%	14%	4%	11%	18%	54%
I had to search the internet for help on how to complete my case plan tasks	85%	46%	17%	17%	13%	8%

*Exp refers to the average percent of participants who indicated they experienced the burden from surveys 1 and 2

Survey results cont.

Administrative Burdens	Exp*	Not at all difficult	Slightly difficult	Moderately difficult	Very Difficult	Extremely Difficult
Psychological costs						% (*N*=30)
I felt loss and grief	99%	3%	0%	7%	7%	83%
I felt anger and frustration	99%	3%	7%	7%	3%	80%
I felt that I was judged based on what was written in case records about me rather than who I believe I am as a person	99%	7%	0%	20%	3%	70%
I felt that others looked down on me and thought less of me	99%	7%	3%	13%	10%	67%
I felt embarrassment and humiliation	99%	7%	10%	14%	3%	66%
I felt an invasion of privacy	97%	7%	7%	14%	14%	59%
I felt fear	97%	7%	0%	7%	7%	79%
I felt sadness	97%	7%	0%	3%	14%	76%
I felt guilt and shame	95%	10%	3%	7%	7%	72%
I felt stress and anxiety	95%	7%	0%	4%	7%	82%
I felt alone and without support	93%	18%	11%	7%	18%	46%
I felt emotionally unstable and out of control	92%	21%	4%	14%	7%	54%
I felt that I had no voice	90%	10%	7%	7%	10%	66%
Items that did not reach consensus in one or both surveys						
My case manager lost my paperwork						
I had difficulty finding services that were court-approved						
My attorney did not advocate enough for me						

*Exp refers to the average percent of participants who indicated they experienced the burden from surveys 1 and 2

Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-12524
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 31–57

Impacts of Structural and Communicative Openness on Psychological Safety in Adoptee Experiences

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore how different types of adoption openness relate to the lived experiences of 25 U.S. adult individuals who were adopted as children. A deductive qualitative coding approach was used to analyze transcripts of 25 semi-structured interviews with adult adoptees. The interviews were analyzed using concepts of adoption openness, including both structural and communicative openness, and perceived psychological safety. Using a thematic analysis, this study found that openness in adoption, especially communicative openness, is deeply relevant to positive adoptee identity development and the strength and quality of family relationships. Openness was also positively related to adoptees' reported sense of psychological safety. These findings suggest that nonprofit executives, program officers, social workers, and others who work to provide appropriate adoption education, regulation, and support, should encourage openness among the adoption triad.

Keywords: *Adoptee, structural openness, communicative openness, psychological safety*

Introduction

Open adoption involves both structural and communicative openness (Brodzinsky, 2005). Structural openness includes sharing biographical information and involves in-person or other types of contact with biological family (Berge et al., 2006). Communicative openness involves transparency and open dialogue regarding adoption within adoptive and biological relationships (Brodzinsky, 2005). Openness in

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adoption is complex and tends to exist on a continuum, with the pattern of openness and secrecy often fluctuating over the lifespan for all members of the adoption triad: the adopted individual, the birth relatives, and the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant et al., 2008; Wolfgram, 2008). Closed adoptions, however, function differently. In a closed adoption, no identifying information passes between the child's adoptive and birth families (Grotevant et al., 2019).

Since the 1970s, structural openness in adoption has become increasingly common, particularly in Western nations like the United States (Grotevant et al., 2014). The National Council for Adoption (2022), a nonprofit adoption advocacy organization, collects private adoption data in each state because it is not collected through any federal agencies. Research done by the National Council for Adoption indicates that in the United States, approximately half to two-thirds of domestic infant adoptions now incorporate some degree of openness, varying from occasional updates via letters and photos to regular face-to-face interactions between birth and adoptive families (Neil, 2012; Vandivere et al., 2009). However, the prevalence of open adoption in the U.S. differs across adoption types: private domestic, foster care, and international (Crea & Barth, 2009; Seymore, 2014; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Private domestic adoptions tend to have the highest level of contact between birth relatives and adoptive families, while foster care adoptions are generally less open, despite expectations that older children might be more likely to maintain contact with their birth families (Crea & Barth, 2009). Openness in international adoptions is much less common due to challenges such as geographic distance, language barriers, cultural differences, and legal complexities; however, openness in this context is growing (Seymore, 2014). Furthermore, the nature of openness may change within individual families over time, with elements like frequency of contact, participants in openness, and types of contact all potentially shifting (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Nonprofit adoption agencies play a significant role in determining the level of openness practiced in adoptive families, as found by MacDonald & McSherry (2011). This is noteworthy, considering that there are over 3,000 adoption agencies in the United States, both public and private, many of which are nonprofit (Nolo, n.d.). Furthermore, the way in which open adoption education is presented seems to impact the practice of openness within adoptive families. When adoptive parents choose higher structural openness because of agency and/or social worker promptings rather than for the well-being of the adopted child, they are less likely to maintain openness after placement (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). While Colorado and Rhode Island have legal requirements regarding the discussion of prospective adoptive parents' understanding of structural openness in home studies, as far as we know, no states currently require in-depth training or education regarding communicative or structural openness (Children's Bureau, 2023).

Research indicates that open adoption is preferred over closed adoption for promoting the psychological well-being of adoptees (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Siegel & Smith, 2012). By promoting positive self-esteem, a stronger sense of identity, and close familial bonds, open adoption practices contribute significantly to adoptees' overall psychological well-being and resilience (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant, 2020; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Both structural openness and communicative openness have been shown to positively relate to adoptee adjustment and identity for-

mation (Brodzinsky, 2015; Grotevant et al., 2019; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Ranieri et al., 2022). Studies show that communicative openness, in particular, is strongly related to positive outcomes for adoptees, such as higher self-esteem, stronger adoptive identity, and decreased externalizing behaviors during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Brodzinsky, 2006; Horstman et al., 2016; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). Research also suggests that knowing one's biological family, regardless of the frequency of contact, helps adoptees feel a stronger sense of belonging within the adoptive family (Siegel & Smith, 2012; Wrobel et al., 2003). Furthermore, research indicates that openness supports closer relationships between adoptees and their adoptive parents, while secrecy often leads to negative interpersonal outcomes, including loneliness and attachment issues (Feeney et al., 2007; Ranieri et al., 2022; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Despite its apparent benefits, open adoption is not without challenges, including potential feelings of confusion or "otherness" (Neil et al., 2015; Siegel & Smith, 2012). These potential risks, however, are typically outweighed by the positive impacts on adoptees' well-being. Given the profound influence of openness on adoptee adjustment and family dynamics, this study highlights the relevance of open adoption not only for nonprofit agencies working with adoptive families but also for social workers across various fields. For example, adoption-specific mental health and child welfare services, which emphasize trauma-informed and attachment-based approaches, may help to address core issues such as loss, identity, and grief (Atkinson & Riley, 2017; Penner, 2023). Therefore, adoption support services can further help families navigate the nuances of open adoption.

In order to apply and foster psychological safety to adoptive families through these support services (Neil et al., 2015; Grotevant, 2020), we propose that families function as organizations, each with unique dynamics. As organizations have been referred to and researched as a type of family structure, we will also rely on this background to view families through an organizational lens.

Background and Theory

Structural Openness

The definition of "open adoption" has changed over the last several decades. Prior to the early 2000s, much of the research that discussed open adoption referred to "structural open adoptions," where adoptees have direct contact with biological relatives (Brodsinzky, 2005). A structurally open adoption supports an adoptee's direct contact and relationship with biological family members and can range from biographical information being shared to in-person or other types of contact with the biological family (Berge et al., 2006; Grotevant et al., 2019).

Earlier studies of structural openness were marked by the concern that contact with biological family members may confuse adoptees or lower their self-esteem (Grotevant, 2020). However, research by Wrobel (1996) called this assumption into question and suggested that adopted children who were given information about their biological families benefited from an understanding of their adoption. Furthermore, adoptive parents in structurally open adoptions not only demonstrated more empathy toward the birth parents and their child, but also felt they had a secure relationship

with their child (Grotevant et al., 1994), showing that this type of openness benefits adoptees as well as their families.

Communicative Openness

Communicative openness creates an environment where adoption can be discussed within an adoptive family, and communicative openness can exist independently of structural openness (Brodzinsky, 2005). In this type of structure, adoptive parents recognize their child's dual identity and provide the support needed for their child to develop a healthy sense of self (Brodzinsky, 2015; Jones & Hackett, 2007). Research indicates that open communication yields positive emotional exchanges between adoptive parents and adoptees, contributing to higher self-esteem (Brodzinsky, 2015; Reese et al., 2007). Furthermore, adolescent adoptees who felt that their families had more open communication reported higher levels of trust toward their parents, experienced less alienation from them, and reported better overall family functioning (Kohler et al., 2002).

Interestingly, Brodzinsky (2005) found that adoption communicative openness may be a more important predictor of an adoptee's self-esteem than structural openness. This outcome suggests that communication with adoptive parents about adoption may be more related to developing a positive identity than having direct contact with biological family members, which is encouraging for adoptees and their adoptive families who are unable to locate or contact the adoptees' biological relatives. Communicative openness can also be present with structural openness. Studies indicate that biological parents who share stories about their reasons for relinquishment with their adopted children facilitate deeper connections with those children (Hays et al., 2016) and joint storytelling by adoptive and biological parents builds trust and camaraderie (Koenig Kellas, 2005).

Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety has been primarily studied within the workplace. Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety as a shared belief held individually as to whether a workplace is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking. In a psychologically safe environment, individuals believe they won't be shamed or reprimanded for asking questions, taking risks, or expressing themselves, which fosters confidence to engage in experimentation necessary for learning and growth (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006; Kahn, 1990).

Edmondson (1999) introduced the following scale to measure levels of psychological safety within a team:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

8. It may be hypothesized that adoptees experience a deep need for psychological safety.

Since adopted individuals' birth heritage differs from their adoptive families, more effort is required from adoptive families to help them feel accepted and supported, so they feel safe enough to not only confidently engage in the process of understanding their birth story and identity, but also take risks and express themselves in society in adulthood (Brodzinsky, 2015). We hypothesize that there is a connection between the degree of openness in adoption, both communicative and structural, and the perceived psychological safety experienced by adults who were adopted as children.

Psychological Safety Within Adoptive Families

Organizations that cultivate a psychologically safe environment greatly benefit their members. Psychological safety allows individuals to cope with significant change, achieve shared goals, and contribute to the organizational structure more effectively. This is due in part to the fact that members who experience psychological safety can focus on problem-solving and goal-achievement instead of protecting themselves from perceived harm that may come from asking questions or raising difficult topics (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006). Continued learning is also an important part of psychological safety in the workplace. Carmeli et al. (2008) described outcomes related to interpersonal relationships and psychological safety: "The findings suggest that positive work relationships are a key relational mechanism that contributes to perceptions of psychological safety and learning behaviours in work organizations" (p. 81).

A meta-analysis on psychological safety revealed that psychological safety is especially important "in hazardous work contexts where speaking up and providing feedback is imperative in order to reduce errors and improve safety" (Newman et al., 2017, p. 528). This may be applicable within adoptive families, not connected to physical safety hazards but rather to challenging emotional and social situations. While the success metrics within an adoptive family may not be to reduce errors and improve safety, engaging in frequent and open conversation can contribute to healthy family functioning (Rueter & Koerner, 2008), with a shared goal of preserving relationships rather than reducing errors.

Applying Existing Frameworks to Psychological Safety in Adoption

A recent study applied Family Systems Theory to organizational leadership concepts to create a Corporate Family Model that aims to treat dysfunction in the workplace (Wilke, 2015). The corporate family was conceptualized this way: "Rather than consisting of a bunch of individuals doing their own thing, a corporation joins people together into one, united entity," similar to how families function (Wilke & Wilke 2010, p. 12). While examining how psychological safety impacts adoptive family functioning, we will liken adoptive families to corporate families. For example, as communication within organizations impacts group functioning, so too does communication within adoptive families. The Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) suggests that "creating a shared social reality is central to family functioning," and that families employ different communication dimensions to achieve such functioning (Rueter & Koerner, 2008, p. 716). This is particularly important to adoptive families, which inher-

ently have additional relationship dynamics and communication structure as a result of structural and/or communicative openness about adoption.

Reuter and Koerner applied FCPT to adoptive families and found that communication styles uniquely impact adoptees: "Controlling parenting without communication is much more detrimental to adopted children than to nonadopted children" (Rueter & Koerner, 2008, p. 726). In a study of 143 adult adoptees, Hortsman found that adoptive parents who demonstrated a conversation-orientation communication pattern were more likely to engage in open adoption communication, which made adoptees less likely to show a preoccupation with their adoption (Horstman et al., 2016). This is supported by earlier studies which found that adoptees express more security and confidence in exploring their adoption when adoptive parents establish flexible and open communication and that adoptees may reflect their adoptive parents' opinions about openness (Siegel, 2012; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011).

An additional family communication model exists for adoptive families: the Family Adoption Communication Model (Wrobel et al., 2003). It establishes three phases of communication encountered by adoptive families: (a) adoptive parents provide children unsolicited information, (b) adoptive parents address children's curiosity by answering children's questions, and (c) adoptive children take control of finding their own information to satisfy their curiosity.

It is possible that movement through each phase coincides with levels of psychological safety experienced by an adoptee. In the first two phases, communication about adoption is led by the adoptive parent. The third phase is led by the adoptee. Wrobel notes that not all families experience each phase. Some may pause or stop altogether. When applying the concept of psychological safety, one could surmise that successful open communication and conversation orientation in the first two phases from an adoptive parent establishes the psychological safety necessary for an adoptee to initiate their own information seeking. The opposite could also be true: that limited communication in the first two phases leads to a lack of information that motivates an adoptee to search for answers about their birth families on their own.

Current Study

While numerous studies have explored how the level of adoption openness (structural and communicative) in early life might be related to the development and well-being of adoptees, few have focused on impacts of adoption openness expressed by adoptees during adulthood. This qualitative study has three main objectives: (a) to better understand adult adoptees' retrospective evaluations of their early adoption experience, particularly the present impact of growing up in their adoptive families; (b) to evaluate adoptive family processes through a workplace-team framework, aiming to explore the relationship between openness in adoption and themes associated with the construct of perceived psychological safety; and, (c) to contribute new perspectives to the field of adoption research that may lead to future studies.

Methods

Interview data for this study comes from a publicly available, top-rated open-adoption podcast (Nelson & Nelson, 2021-present). Transcripts of 25 interviews from

this podcast were selected because they fit the sample frame for this study: adults who had been adopted as children, in both open and closed adoptions. The first author is a co-founder of the podcast and conducted 24 of the interviews used for this study with the other co-founder of the podcast. One other author conducted one of the interviews as a volunteer with the podcast. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the first author's university to use these previously collected interviews for research purposes. Participants were born between the early 1960s and the late 1990s, and were primarily female (female, $n = 21$, 84%). Most were in their late 30s or early 40s at the time of the interview. Most were placed for adoption as infants; however, seven participants ranged from age one to four years old at the time of placement. Eight of the participants in this study were international adoptees and twelve were transracial adoptees. Only participants who were adopted in the United States were included.

Participants were recruited through an open call by the podcast and through posts on the podcast's social media accounts. About half ($n = 13$) of the interviewees self-selected by responding to the open call and contacted podcast volunteers to participate. The other half were contacted directly by podcast volunteers because of adoption-related content they posted on social media ($n = 8$) or because of personal connections ($n = 4$).

Interviews for this study were conducted between June 2021 and July 2023 and recorded via Zoom ($n = 24$), apart from one interview, which was conducted in-person and captured with audio-recording equipment. Open-access transcripts from these interviews are available online. Links to redacted transcripts are available upon request from the first author. For the use of this study and this paper, identifying information has been redacted, and participants are referred to by pseudonyms. The semi-structured interviews were conducted following an interview protocol (see Appendix). The interview protocol encouraged participants to share their individual adoption stories. Interviewers asked questions regarding communication and structural openness in adoption, challenges faced by participants relating to adoption, and thoughts on what participants wished adoptive parents knew. All interviews were approximately an hour long.

Qualitative analysis was guided by a codebook developed using Brodzinsky's (2005) Adoption Structural Openness (ACO) framework, Grotevant et al.'s (2007) conceptualization of structural openness in adoption, and Edmonson's (1999) psychological safety scale. These frameworks provided theoretical foundations for coding participants' retrospective experience as adopted children.

Structural openness was coded based on the type and extent of contact with birth families (Grotevant et al., 2007) during childhood. Categories ranged from "no contact" (or closed) to "contact with meetings," which included face-to-face contact during childhood. Additional categories included "contact without meetings," describing exchanges such as through letters or phone calls, and "stopped contact," where early contact with birth families ended before adulthood. A separate category, "reunion in adulthood," captured experiences of reuniting with birth family members after childhood, providing a way to account for differences in structural openness across the lifespan.

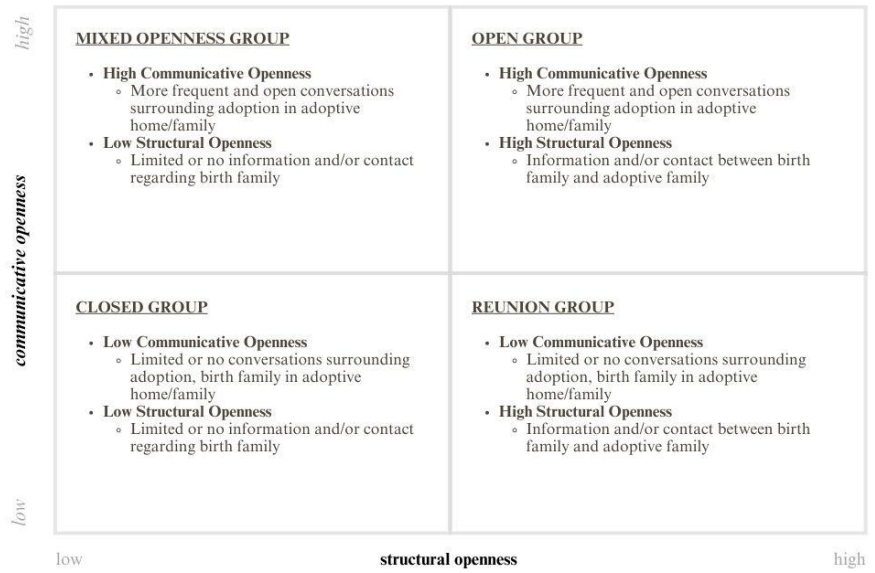
Communicative openness, based on Brodzinsky's (2005) ACO framework, focused on parent-child discussions about adoption-related topics. Codes identified instances of adoptive parents' willingness to engage in open, developmentally appropriate dis-

cussions about adoption, promote the adoptee's dual connection to both adoptive and birth families, and offer empathy for the adoptee's feelings about adoption. Related subcategories included parental comfort with birth-family communication, as well as empathy for birth relatives. Additionally, separate analyses explored openness in reunions with birth relatives that occurred during childhood versus adulthood.

To analyze the intersection of these two themes, participants' levels of structural and communicative adoption openness were mapped onto a 2x2 grid (Figure 1). This framework categorized participants into four groups: Mixed Openness Group (low structural/high communicative), Closed Group (low structural/low communicative), Open Group (high structural/high communicative); and Reunion Group (high structural/low communicative). Adoptee experiences were coded for levels of structural and communicative openness, and patterns and themes were identified for each group.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Levels of Structural and Communicative Openness in Adoption



Psychological safety, as described by Edmonson (1999), was coded to capture adoptees' perceptions of their emotional security within their adoptive families. Subcategories included the ability to take risks, ask for help, or express differences without fear of negative consequences. Examples of psychological safety were further conceptualized by open codes, identifying specific instances where participants either (a) did not feel psychologically safe to express themselves or inquire about their adoption, (b) felt psychologically safe to express themselves or inquire about their adoption, (c) received negative communication about their adoption and biological family, or (d) received positive communication about their adoption and biological family.

Additional open codes were identified for related experiences, such as responses of adoptive parents when participants made mistakes; moments when participants felt valued for their unique selves; encounters when participants felt supported by adoptive family members; instances where participants felt safe asking adoptive parents for help; examples where participants felt safe taking risks, being different, and bringing up problems and/or tough issues with adoptive parents; and instances where a lack of psychological safety was expressed. Additional codes emerged from the data for the circumstances remembered from childhood home life, childhood expressions that may have illustrated deeper feelings regarding adoption experiences, societal perceptions witnessed by participants, experiences seeking support and/or connection, willingness to volunteer information, and other adoption expressions regarding feelings of trust and validation.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed for each code to ensure consistent identification of codes. Coders iteratively refined codes by comparing coded segments within and across interviews, ensuring consistency through intercoder agreement checks. For five interviews, an average intercoder reliability score of 0.83 was reached, after which the remaining 20 interviews were coded. To ensure coders were coding transcripts similarly, each transcript was reviewed by another author. Coding decisions, reached jointly by the authors, were noted in the coding software to ensure consistency throughout the process.

Results

Participant narratives closely aligned with the study's *a priori* codes, as evidenced by all 25 participants (100%) discussing both structural and communicative openness, and 24 (96%) sharing experiences related to psychological safety. Communicative openness emerged as the most frequently discussed theme ($M = 5.04$ references per interview). Negative communication about adoption was mentioned slightly more often ($M = 2.36$) than positive ($M = 1.73$). Participants also described a range of experiences related to the perceived psychological safety in their family environments, with a lack of psychological safety reported more often ($M = 3.61$) than feelings of security ($M = 2.77$) (Table 1).

Table 1

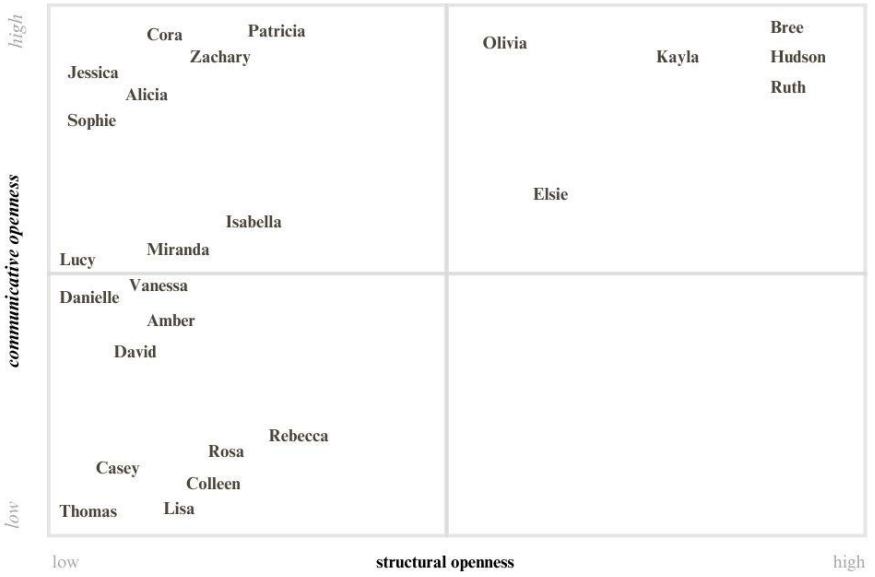
Numerical Content Analysis of Qualitative Coding

Theme	No. references	No. interviews	% interviews	Avg. no. references per interview
Theme 1: Structural openness	123	25	100	4.92
Theme 2: Communicative openness	126	25	100	5.04
Theme 3: Psychological safety	117	24	96	4.88
Sub-theme A: Lack of psychological safety	65	18	72	3.61
Sub-theme B: Presence of psychological safety	47	17	68	2.77
Sub-theme C: Negative adoption communication	33	14	56	2.36
Sub-theme D: Positive adoption communication	26	15	60	1.73

Interviewees were placed into one of four groups based on the levels of communicative and structural openness in their adoptive families (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Placement of Interviewees in Groups based on Communicative and Structural Openness of Childhood Adoption Experiences



Note: Names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

Findings from the thematic analyses are presented according to the openness-level groups. Quotes are shared with participant pseudonyms, type of adoption, and whether they were adopted pre- or post-1990, as reference to whether openness was more commonplace at the time of their adoption (Henney et al., 1998).

Mixed Openness Group: Low Structural, High Communicative

Nine of the 25 participants in this sample experienced low structural openness and high communicative openness. Seven of the nine participants in the Mixed Openness Group were born during the 1980s and 1990s, while one participant was born in the 1960s and one in the 1970s. Six of the participants in the Mixed Openness Group were transracial adoptees, and four of those six were also international adoptees. Themes observed in the Mixed Openness Group include open conversation surrounding adoption in the home, including adoptees "always knowing" their adoption stories, curiosity surrounding the identity of birth family, and adoptive parents expressing the desire to help adoptees connect with birth family in the future.

Communicative Openness in Mixed Openness Group (Low Structural, High Communicative)

Narratives regarding adoption shared some elements in this group. Adoptees in this group "always knew" their adoption stories. Dialogue about adoption was open and comfortable, shared often in the adoptive homes of those in this group. Lucy (international adoptee, post-1990) said, "My mom would always tell me the story of adopting me." Jessica (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "We always grew up knowing we were adopted. It was just always something that was very normal to us."

Most of the narratives adoptive parents shared were positive, although some adoptees were told neutral narratives. Alicia (private adoptee, pre-1990) said the narrative her adoptive parents shared was "very factual. It wasn't talking about emotions." Alternatively, when Patricia (private adoptee, pre-1990) asked her adoptive mother when she first told her she was adopted, her adoptive mother's response was, "It was the day after you came home with us," at six weeks old. The conversations around adoption were remembered as "always normal" and "comfortable" by those in this group.

This open dialogue regarding adoption also affected thoughts and actions regarding adoption reunion in this group. Isabella (international adoptee, pre-1990) said that her adoptive parents were open with her adoption information, but that what they knew was limited. She said, "My parents' openness about my adoption enhanced my ability to say I needed help [with search and reunion], and they supported me."

Many adoptive parents in this group offered to help adoptees with search and reunion from the time they were young. "I had this real urge to find my biological family," Cora (foster care adoptee, pre-1990) said. "I always wanted to, and my adoptive parents always supported me in that." Similarly, Patricia said, "As a child of course I wondered what my [birth] parents looked like, but I never had that void in my life where I needed a mother or a father. I was always curious about what they looked like, and do they like the same things I like. That curiosity never went away." Patricia went on to discuss how her adoptive parents supported her curiosity. "As I was growing up, my mom and dad said, 'Someday if you want to find your birth parents, we'll help you,'" she said.

Structural Openness in Mixed Openness Group (Low Structural, High Communicative)

While those in the Mixed Openness Group did not experience structural openness during childhood, many in this group did go on to find their birth family in adulthood with the support of adoptive family members. Those who reunited with their birth family moved to the Open Group in adulthood, continuing to practice communicative openness while moving toward structural openness as well. Some in this group expressed sadness at the lost opportunity to build relationships with birth family during childhood. Jessica said, "If I had grown up knowing my biological family in any capacity, I think it would have drastically changed my life and theirs."

Many in this group were curious to know more about their birth families. These feelings escalated when some participants became parents. Adoptive parents helped and encouraged adoptees to connect with birth family members. Zachary (international adoptee, post-1990) said that he appreciated his adoptive parents' well-meaning help with his search for his birth mother but wished that it had been "at my own pace" as he wanted to take things more slowly early on.

Psychological Safety in Mixed Openness Group (Low Structural, High Communicative)

The Mixed Openness Group demonstrated higher levels of psychological safety than the Closed and Reunion Groups. Edmondson's psychological safety scale's measurement for whether "being different" was safe on a team resonated most with this group.

Adoptees in this group expressed close bonds with adoptive family members. The more cohesive adoptive homes described by the Mixed Openness Group were classified as places where children felt "loved," "equal," "normal," and "accepted." Zachary said, "I was fortunate enough to have family and friends who didn't see me differently because I was adopted." Likewise, Patricia said, "I always felt as loved as my siblings. We were never treated differently from each other." A feeling of unconditional love and acceptance was described when Miranda (private adoptee, pre-1990) said her adoptive parents "always stepped out of their comfort zone and always had my back." Patricia said that the one time she remembers being teased on the playground about being adopted, she had a quick comeback and wasn't bothered by the encounter. "When you treat things as being normal then they are normal," she said. Sophie (international adoptee, post-1990) said that her adoptive mother used movies and songs to start conversations that built psychological safety, saying, "Even though we look different, you're always in my heart."

Many adoptees in this group expressed that, while they felt accepted and cohesively part of their adoptive families, outside of the home they experienced struggles with handling racial and/or cultural differences in communities where they stood out as "different." Miranda said that being different from others was "always in the back of my mind…I struggled a lot with trying to figure out who I was as a Black woman, where I fit in." While discussing the challenges of being raised in a colorblind home, she shared that she felt that, even though her adoptive family looked at her "the same, society didn't, so when I was outside [of my home] it was a very difficult reality check."

Some participants shared ways they were able to connect to their heritage and embrace their differences. Zachary said that every summer he went to a cultural camp that connected him to his birth heritage. "It was a big, big part of my life," he said. Isabella said her adoptive mother planned celebrations for holidays in her birth country to keep her connected to her roots.

Those who were raised in families that looked similar to their biological families seemed to feel less outside scrutiny. Cora said that, because her adoptive family and her biological family were each composed of persons of the same racial identities, "no one knew that I was adopted unless we told them."

Edmondson's scale also measures whether mistakes will be held against individuals. No evidence in this group indicated fears of this nature. On the contrary, Cora shared how her adoptive family rallied around her after she became pregnant as a teen, which she perceived as a mistake, helping her feel loved unconditionally by her adoptive family. Many in this group felt safe sharing grief with adoptive parents, and adoptees in this group demonstrated more confidence in their adoptive parents. Patricia said of her adoptive parents, "They weren't jealous people, they just really felt like love is something you can have with more than one person."

Adoptees in this group were more likely to feel comfortable sharing a spectrum of feelings and experiences. Jessica said that she experienced grief and trauma in addition

to joy and that the feelings "can coexist. It doesn't have to be one or the other." Others in this group illustrated this broad spectrum with multifaceted experiences of adoption challenges and support systems. Sophie and Cora both experienced physical sickness as children that their adoptive parents speculated may be related to adoption trauma, but their adoptive parents felt unsupported by medical and adoption professionals in efforts to find help for their children.

Closed Group: Low Structural, Low Communicative Openness

Ten of the 25 participants in this sample experienced low structural and low communicative openness during childhood. Adoptees in the Closed Group were predominantly older than others in this sample, with all but one participant being born in the 1980s or earlier. Three participants in the Closed Group were adopted in the 1960s. Six participants were adopted in the 1970s and 1980s. One was adopted in the early 1990s. Four participants in the Closed Group were adopted by families of a different race than themselves, and three of these individuals were also adopted internationally. Themes observed in this group include no or limited conversation surrounding adoption in the home, guilt surrounding questions, concern for adoptive parent feelings being prioritized over questions regarding one's identity, and feeling "missing pieces" of one's identity.

Communicative Openness in Closed Group (Low Structural, Low Communicative)

Discussions about adoption in adoptive homes were limited or non-existent in this group. Some transracial adoptees knew they were adopted because they "looked different" from their adoptive families. Rosa (international adoptee, post-1990) said, "A question people ask me a lot is, were you ever sat down and told that you were adopted? No one told me. I just knew. [Because] I looked very different than my adoptive parents, I never had that discussion with them." Casey (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that adoption was "never" spoken of in her adoptive home. "I did not feel I was allowed to ask questions…I definitely felt that it was taboo, and I would be hurting someone or get in trouble for asking these questions." Other adoptees had infrequent conversations around adoption. Amber (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "My parents were okay with not talking about [adoption]…I could tell from a very young age that it was an uncomfortable conversation."

Additional challenges in communication included language barriers. Thomas (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that there was a language barrier between his adoptive mother and him and that it created a "separation between the two of us." He said, "I wish she would have asked some questions, like, do you want to know more information about your birth family? Do you have any desire to search?"

Structural Openness in Closed Group (Low Structural, Low Communicative)

Adoptees in the Closed Group sometimes delayed searching for birth families to spare adoptive parents' feelings. David (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that as he grew older, he became curious "to discover where and who I'm from," but that he also worried about disappointing his adoptive parents. He expected that his search for his birth family would be "crushing" for his adoptive parents, and delayed searching until they passed away. Thomas said, "I knew that if I ever even mentioned wanting to search or look for my biological mom, my adopted mom would never have understood. I can say

with certainty that she never would have supported it. It would have devastated her... and so out of respect for her, I didn't search," until after she passed away. Lisa (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that she often thought about searching for her birth parents, "but at the same time I knew how my adopted parents would react to it." She delayed her search because of these worries on behalf of her adoptive parents' feelings.

As a child, Casey would write about what she imagined or hoped for her eventual reunion with her birth family, but would always destroy her writings to make sure her adoptive parents didn't find them.

Psychological Safety in Closed Group (Low Structural, Low Communicative Openness)

This group demonstrated lower levels of psychological safety, with many participants expressing a lack of trust in their relationships with adoptive parents. Thomas said, "I wish [my adoptive mother] had been more honest with me…after she passed away, [I found that] she hid some details from me, which was hurtful." Rebecca (private adoptee, pre-1990) said her adoptive parents deceived her about the identities of her birth relatives as well. She said, "I felt very guilty asking my mom and dad questions."

Colleen (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that, as a child, she knew where her adoptive parents kept her adoption information hidden. She would look through it when they weren't home, hoping to learn something, but never discussed adoption or felt comfortable asking questions about her birth family with them. This lack of communication and psychological safety eroded trust and psychological safety with her adoptive parents. When Colleen grew older, she said that her birth mother lied about her birth father's identity. She discussed her inability to trust any of the parents, both adoptive and biological, in her life.

Some adoptees in this group indicated that they felt insecure or uncertain about relationships with adoptive families. Rosa said that her adoptive parents would find food in her closet. Before her adoption, she experienced food insecurity, and although she had been adopted and no longer went hungry, she was struggling to feel trust and safety in her adoptive home. She said losing connections to "identity and culture is something I've always struggled with."

Multiple participants in this group said that aspects of their adoptive family felt "pretend." Rosa said her adoptive parents were instructed by adoption professionals to "pretend" she spoke and understood English, which was not her first language, and she would eventually integrate. Casey said that her adoptive parents were also instructed by adoption educators to "just move on and pretend" that adoption was not part of their story.

The adoption language used by adoptees in this group differed from other groups. Adoptees in Groups 1 and 3, experiencing more communicative openness, were more likely to share frustration with the term "real" mom/dad being used to refer to birth parents, while adoptees in the Closed Group were more likely to use the term "real" parent when referring to birth parents. Danielle (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "I remember holding my mom's hand as a little kid in the store, and I remember peering around a corner, thinking, my real mom might be standing there."

Adoptees in the Closed Group were more likely to discuss struggles with self-worth, identity, and confidence. Adoptees in the Closed Group also demonstrated lower confidence in love and acceptance of adoptive parents. These results are consistent

with other qualitative research indicating that secrecy within adoptive families often leads to strained relationships and issues with identity and trust (Passmore et al., 2006). Rebecca said that after her adoptive parents had a biological child, "I had this concept where I just wasn't good enough." She felt it amplified her feelings of rejection. David felt that because he was adopted, "I had something to prove."

Some adoptees in this group discussed experiencing higher levels of trust with persons other than adoptive parents. Vanessa (international adoptee, pre-1990) said that her adoptive grandparents never treated her differently and helped her feel like a legitimate member of her adoptive family. Casey said, "Although I know my parents didn't necessarily like me telling other people I was adopted, it didn't bother me to talk about it with other people. I just didn't talk about it with [my adoptive parents] because I felt I wasn't allowed to."

Open Group: High Structural, High Communicative

Six of the 25 participants in this sample experienced high structural and high communicative openness during childhood, placing them in the Open Group. Three adoptees in this group were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The other three were born in the late 1990s. One adoptee in this group was adopted internationally. Themes observed in this group include adoptees feeling empowered and confident expressing their true selves, adoptive parents being open to and listening to concerns of adoptees, adoptees feeling a sense of belonging in both their adoptive and birth families, and adoptees feeling supported by and encouraged by adoptive families in making and strengthening connections with birth family.

Communicative Openness in Open Group (High Structural, High Communicative)

Adoptees in this group expressed confidence in both their adoption story and personal identity. Bree (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "I always felt confident as an adopted person." She felt that the "open exchange" in her adoption enabled her to "move forward with confidence." Ruth (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "My parents had provided me with information that was age-appropriate about my adoption, so I knew this was always a part of my story." Elsie (private adoptee, post-1990) said, "I always knew the general story from when I was little, and then as I got older [my adoptive parents] made it more age-appropriate and told me more and more. I don't personally feel like I have any trauma or anything, again because I was given such a stable beginning."

Olivia (private adoptee, post-1990) said, "I always knew I was adopted, and this was my story. My parents were super good at telling us from day one, 'You're adopted, this is what we know, what questions do you have?' and they answered them. They supported us whether or not we wanted to reach out." Bree's adoption was always very open, during an era where adoption was almost always structurally closed. She said her adoptive mom shared pictures and messages from her birth mom regularly, "keeping it normal" throughout her childhood.

Structural Openness in Open Group (High Structural, High Communicative)

Adoptees in this group had ongoing relationships with birth family members. Many spent time with birth parents without adoptive parents present, especially as they grew older. One shared how she would fly to another state to spend a few weeks with

her birth family each summer. Another said his birth mom moved in with his family for a period while he was young.

A unique aspect of structural openness in this group included birth family members embracing adoptees as well as their adoptive families. Bree said, "My [birth] grandma would always send gifts for my sisters when she sent me presents, like for Christmas, she would send my sisters presents too." Ruth said that her birth mom would take her sibling, who was also adopted but had a less open adoption, along with them when they would go on outings. "My birth mother was kind of like birth mom to both of us in a sense," she said. Hudson (private adoptee, post-1990) said that his birth mom was "always there."

Adoptive parents supported adoptees in strengthening relationships with birth family members as well in this group. Ruth said that when contact with her birth mom was less consistent, she would struggle. Her adoptive parents listened to her concerns and encouraged her to reach out herself. "That's really the point at which I started taking more ownership of the communication between us," she said. Hudson likewise said his adoptive parents empowered him to take the reins in his relationship with his birth family as he grew older.

Adoptive parents in this group helped adoptees connect to their roots. Kayla (international adoptee, pre-1990) said, "I really wanted to learn my language, so my mom helped me figure out a way to study and learn Spanish." Ruth shared that her adoptive dad gave her gifts to help her connect to her birth heritage. When Kayla went to her birth country, her adoptive mother asked if she wanted to stay with her birth family rather than in a hotel with her. These examples of connecting with culture and birth family correlated with adoptees in this group feeling a sense of belonging in both their adoptive and biological families. Bree said, "I always felt like I belonged in both places, feeling like I had more people to love that loved me."

Psychological Safety in Open Group (High Structural, High Communicative)

High levels of psychological safety were demonstrated in this group. Adoptees felt psychological safety in talking with adoptive parents, knowing their adoptive parents would stand up for them, advocate for them, and embrace their differences.

Some adoptees in this group expressed discomfort with being different, saying that being different "felt weird." Other adoptees in this group were unsure of when to share information about adoption and when to set boundaries with sharing information. Olivia said, "I always had a little bit of trouble like when someone says, 'Oh you look just like your dad,' do I say, 'Well actually I'm adopted,' or do you just smile and say, 'Yeah I get that a lot, thanks,' and move on. It wasn't necessarily like a negative it was just kind of weird." Elsie said, "I always wanted to look like someone. That was always a big thing growing up. I would look at my parents or my family and be like man, I don't really look like anybody." When she reunited with her birth mom in adolescence, she felt a "shift in the air" and "knew" her birth mom was in the room before seeing her.

Ruth appreciated that her adoptive parents "didn't pretend like differences didn't exist." Hudson said that he never felt pressured to pursue his adoptive parents' interests. "Never, not once did I ever feel guilty, and not once, did I feel ashamed because [I had different interests]. They let me grow up and be whatever I wanted to be."

Some adoptees in this group shared feeling "normal," like Hudson, who said, "None of my family ever treated me differently because I was adopted." Others said

that they felt "special" and "loved" as an adopted child. Bree said, "I always felt I was special." Olivia said, "I always had a really good experience being adopted. I thought it was the coolest thing ever, I was like, wow, I'm so loved, my mom and dad wanted a baby so badly that they adopted me, and my birth family wanted to give me a better life so they placed me into my family."

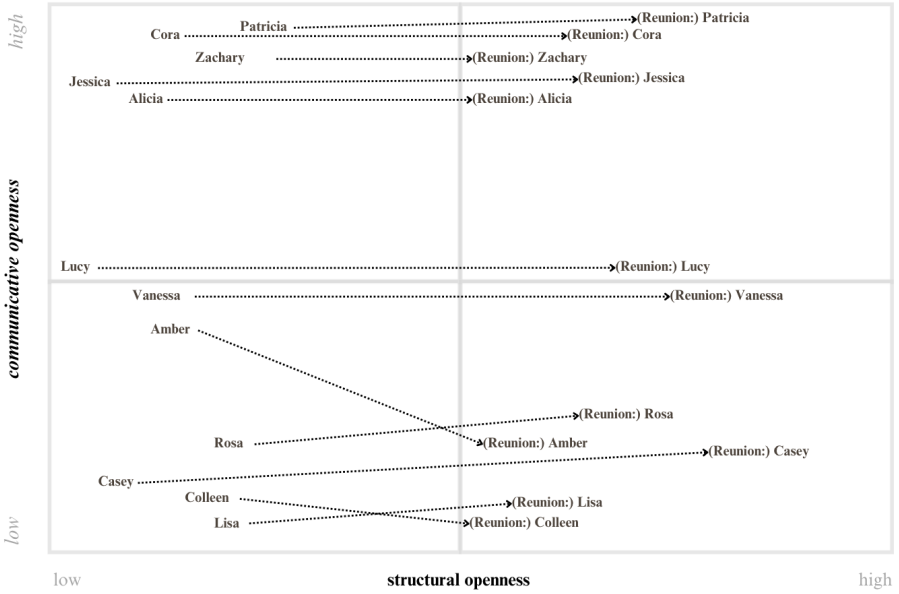
In this sample, all adoptees in this group have maintained relationships with birth family members in adulthood.

Reunion Group: High Structural, Low Communicative

The Reunion Group is distinct, because no participants experienced the combination of high structural and low communicative openness during childhood. This group experienced low structural communication during childhood, and then, with reunion experiences in adulthood, shifted to more structural openness (Figure 3). Those who experienced higher communicative openness were incorporated into the Open Group in adulthood, while those who experienced lower communicative openness with adoptive families in reunion created the Reunion Group, with high structural openness and low communicative openness.

Figure 3

Reunion Experiences in Adulthood: Mapping Transitions of Childhood to Adulthood Experiences with Communicative and Structural Openness



Note: Individuals who did not continue reunion relationships or who waited until their adoptive parents' deaths to search were not included in the Reunion Group.

While no adoptees in this sample experienced this combination of openness during childhood, six of the 10 adoptees in the Closed Group experienced both reunion and some level of suppressed communication regarding reunion with their adoptive parents. Adoptees in reunion in this group indicated lower levels of trust in adoptive parents, particularly when seeking and maintaining connections with birth family. Some expressed feeling disloyal and/or guilty for connecting with their birth family. All participants in this group struggled with communication about adoption reunion with adoptive parents.

One participant avoided telling her adoptive mother she was in reunion with her birth mother for ten years. Another said that her adoptive mother closed off when she discussed her reunion with her birth mother. "[My adoptive mom] was very good about not telling me outright but she did have a conversation with my husband…she was like, 'I really don't want to hear about that,'" Amber (private adoptee, pre-1990) said.

Some adoptees in this group shared that reunion conversations with other adoptive family members, including grandparents and siblings, reflected more support than conversations with adoptive parents. Despite her adoptive parents' lack of support in her search, Lisa (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "When I told [my adoptive siblings] that I was going down this path to find my birth relatives, they were so supportive." Vanessa (international adoptee, pre-1990) said, "With finding my birth family, it's been hard because I know feelings have been hurt." She went on to say that, while her adoptive parents have been less understanding, her adoptive grandmother was supportive of her search, telling her, "You're our family, but you have every right to want to know where you come from." Vanessa felt "very grateful" for this validation and support.

Participants who did not continue any birth family relationships after an initial reunion were not included in the Reunion Group because they did not practice "structural openness" with birth family members in adulthood. Participants who waited until the deaths of their adoptive parents before initiating a search were also not included in the Reunion Group, because there was no communicative openness, or lack thereof, with adoptive parents regarding reunion experiences. Additionally, some participants are still searching for birth family members or are waiting to determine whether to search.

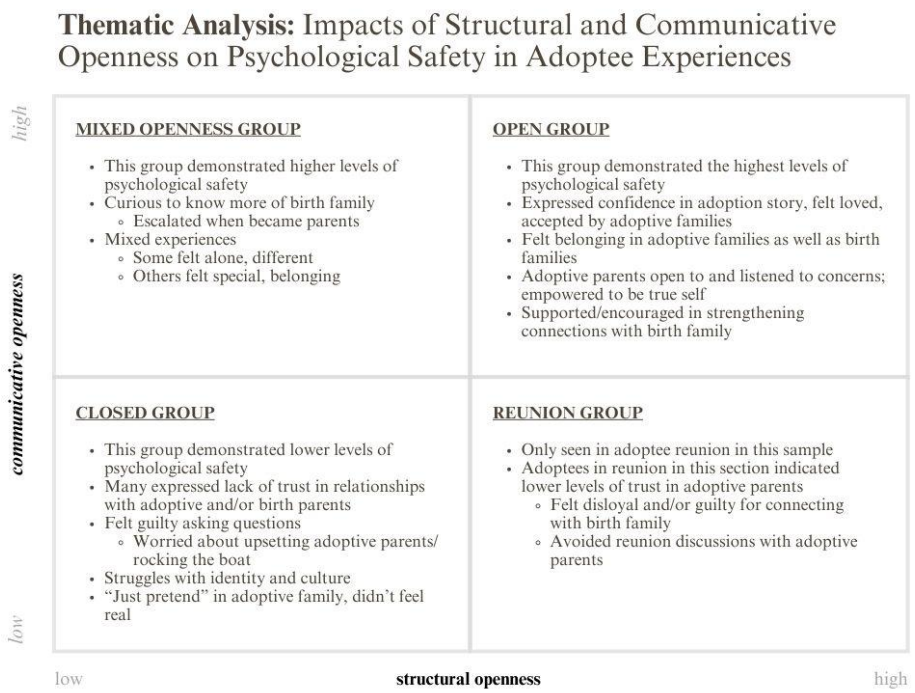
Themes emerged regarding how each group compared in manifestations of psychological safety (Figure 4).

Discussion

While previous research has highlighted the importance of both communicative and structural openness in helping adoptees build healthy relationships within their adoptive families (e.g., Siegel & Smith, 2012; Wrobel et al., 2003), this study expands on that by exploring how psychological safety within adoptive families is associated with both forms of openness using 25 qualitative interviews with adult adoptees. A key finding of this study is that psychological safety is associated with increased openness. Communicative openness, in particular, was associated with increased cohesion between adoptive and birth families and a strengthened sense of self for adoptees (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Horstman et al., 2016; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011).

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework Regarding General Impacts of Structural and Communicative Openness on Psychological Safety and Adoptee Experiences



Individuals who were adopted expressed varying levels of psychological safety with adoptive families. Those who experienced higher levels of communicative openness indicated higher levels of psychological safety (as seen in the Mixed Openness and Open Groups, where communicative openness was higher, and particularly with participants in the highest quartile of communicative openness), expressing confidence in their uniqueness and assuredness that adoptive parents loved them unconditionally. This aligns with past research suggesting that adoptees in open adoptions experience increased psychological wellbeing (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Individuals who were higher on the spectrum of communicative openness also demonstrated higher feelings of trust and safety within adoptive families. Higher communicative openness seemed to correlate with higher confidence and feelings of belonging. The Open Group (high communicative openness and high structural openness) in particular demonstrated consistently high levels of psychological safety, expressing feeling connected to and loved by both adoptive and biological family members, thus indicating that a combination of high communicative openness and high structural openness may result in optimal psychological safety for adopted individuals.

Individuals who experienced lower levels of communicative openness indicated lower levels of psychological safety, as seen in the Closed Group (low communicative

openness and low structural openness) and the Reunion Group (low communicative openness and high structural openness in adult reunion). Furthermore, participants in these groups were more concerned with pleasing adoptive parents, discussing ways they hid aspects of their personalities from adoptive families. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that secrecy in adoption may be associated with loneliness and attachment struggles (e.g., Feeney et al., 2007; Grotevant, 2020; Ranieri et al., 2022; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Being different was a struggle discussed by adoptees in all four groups. Past research likewise suggests that feelings of "otherness" are a challenge for many adoptees (e.g, Neil et al., 2015; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Those in families with higher levels of communicative openness were more likely to discuss their feelings regarding being different with adoptive parents, while those experiencing lower levels of communicative openness were more likely to hide their feelings and avoid challenging discussions. Those who were able to connect with birth family members and/or their cultural heritage seemed more comfortable with their differences than those who did not. Those who felt connected with their heritage during childhood experienced higher degrees of communicative openness.

This study supports previous research suggesting that communicative openness is the more important form of openness for building stronger relationships between adoptive parents and adopted individuals (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant, 2020). To be clear, structural openness has also been found to be important, both in this study and by others (e.g., Berge et al., 2006; Grotevant et al., 2019). The results of this study also support families striving to support adoptees when structural openness is not possible. Furthermore, more open communication may be associated with increased willingness to accept help from adoption support services (Neil et al., 2015; Grotevant, 2020). The findings suggest that when discussions are open and honest, adoptees tend to feel that adoptive families also care for their birth families, which solidifies confidence that adoptive families care for adoptees themselves.

In structurally open adoptions this sometimes meant that, as children, adoptees spent time with birth family members, building relationships and strengthening relationships independent of adoptive families. In structurally closed and communicatively open adoptions, adoptive parents told adoptees that they would support them in search and reunion. Regardless of experiences with reunion, adoptees who felt comfortable talking openly about adoption with adoptive parents were more likely to express confidence in their personal identity. The experiences shared in this study also support Grotevant's findings that openness correlates with increased empathy and more secure relationships between adoptees and their families (1994).

Adoptees experiencing higher levels of structural and communicative openness were most likely to feel like their adoptive parents loved and cared for their birth family. This correlated with higher expressions of high self-worth. Experiences shared indicated that adoptive parents felt trust and respect with and for birth parents, with many stories of adoptees spending time with birth parents apart from adoptive parents. This echoes past research suggesting that when adoptive parents build empathetic relationships with birth parents, relationships with adoptees become more understanding and secure as well (e.g., Grotevant et al., 1994; Wrobel, 1996). Participants who experienced high communicative and low structural openness usually indicated that adoptive par-

ents spoke kindly and respectfully of birth parents, except for one adoptee sharing that her adoptive father seemed to disapprove of her birth father because "a man should step up." Overall, adoptive parents who encouraged high communicative openness were supportive of and engaged in reunion efforts and spoke compassionately of birth mothers, with frequent assurances of the love that first families felt for adoptees.

Past research indicates that adoption storytelling by both birth and adoptive parents is particularly powerful in building deeper, more trusting relationships (e.g., Hays et al., 2016; Koenig Kellas, 2005). In the current study, those who experienced low structural openness and low communicative openness were most likely to share memories of adoptive parents disparaging birth parents. While there was generally little discussion of adoption in this group, some did remember adoptive parents speaking about struggles birth parents faced without kindness or respect. Disparaging remarks regarding birth family correlated with adoptees feeling guilty for seeking connection with birth family members, keeping secrets regarding search and reunion from adoptive parents, and adoptees struggling to make secure connections with others, both in families and other relationships.

Professional Support

As past research indicates, the way in which adoption professionals present open adoption impacts adoptive family culture regarding openness (e.g., MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). This study submits that more efforts are needed to better prepare families to practice both structural and communicative openness. In this sample, many adoptees shared how they perceived the support their adoptive parents received from adoption professionals. All adoptees who shared how they perceived agency support of their adoptive parents suggested a lack of support. While those in the Closed Group most frequently discussed the lack of training and education they perceived their adoptive parents received, some participants in the Mixed Openness Group also felt that their adoptive parents were ill-prepared. Miranda, a transracial adoptee, discussed the lack of racial sensitivity training for her adoptive parents. Lucy discussed how her adoptive parents did not understand the importance of helping her connect with her cultural heritage as an international adoptee. These results are consistent with research indicating that few adoptive families receive suggested long-term adoption support services (Atkinson & Riley, 2017; Brodzinsky, 2015).

Exploring the impacts of openness education may help guide future legislative action regarding openness training requirements. Additionally, an enhanced understanding of open adoption can better guide nonprofit adoption programs' education efforts (e.g., Henney et al., 2003). In this study, Olivia discussed how, as an adoptee who is also an adoptive parent now, the agency she worked with trained prospective adoptive parents to understand that, while "everyone can be a good [parent], not everyone can be a good adoptive parent," suggesting that adoptive parents help adoptees feel comfortable having conversations about their similarities with their birth families and "being okay with supporting [adoptees] in [their] thoughts and feelings."

Nonprofit executives, program officers, and staff members can learn from this study to provide more and better professional support. Improved structural openness training is needed, ensuring that adoptive parents understand how and why openness benefits adoptees. Adoption-specific, attachment-based and trauma-informed servic-

es may also help adoptees better address challenges and grief (e.g., Atkinson & Riley, 2017; Penner, 2023). Furthermore, family communication training may help adoptive families better meet the needs of adoptees (e.g., Horstman et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

This study, while offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of adult adoptees, is not without limitations. Analysis was exploratory in nature and, thus, not intended to be generalizable. Sampling limitations include the small selection of interviews of only U.S. adoptees who were mainly female (84%). Nor did it include participants who lived in a foster-care setting for an extended period of time or were adopted later in childhood. In fact, research calls for additional care and oversight for visits between those who are adopted later in childhood and their biological family members (MacDonald, 2021). For children who experienced abuse and neglect, visitation may not be appropriate. Loxterkamp (2009) calls for important nuance when considering visitation:

> ...the predicament emerging from such cases of early maltreatment is that contact, the very thing that is meant to provide a remedy for harm, can itself be harmful and the likely cause of enduring emotional and psychological damage, even when it appears to be going well or well enough. …Clear and detailed plans won't be adequate safeguards and written agreements won't prevent misunderstandings if there is unawareness of the significance of certain harmful aspects of contact. (p. 429)

Parents and social workers who support children in this category should proceed carefully to ensure that any visitation or contact that takes place is not creating risk for additional harm.

The authors acknowledge that their personal experiences as either adoptive or foster parents, as well as the podcast's focus on open adoption, may have influenced the framing of the study. To mitigate these biases, the authors 1) examined interview data to identify the challenges and possible risks of open adoption and possible benefits of closed adoption; and 2) selected interviewees with diverse experiences to capture a variety of perspectives.

Although the study sample is both small and not representative of the adoptee population, the cohesive nature of the individual groups is notable. No outliers were noted, although participants who experienced communicative openness at the mid-levels, including Isabella, Miranda, Lucy, Vanessa, Danielle, and Amber, demonstrated more variance in communicative openness than participants at the higher and lower ends of the spectrum. Participants experiencing mid-level communicative openness shared both experiences of communicating with adoptive parents about adoption (some through reading adoption books during childhood, others through occasional conversations regarding adoption) as well as experiences of feeling alone, unable to share feelings, and uncertainty about reactions adoptive parents may have. Future research examining how mid-level communicative openness differs from higher and lower openness in a larger sample may be helpful in better understanding how this group may differ. Additional research is needed to explore how communicative openness correlates with the development of identity and connection with both birth and adoptive family members. Further exploration of how psychological safety connects

to familial relationships, and particularly adoptive family relationships, will further benefit the conversation surrounding communicative openness.

Well-informed adoption programs at nonprofit agencies rely on research to better guide both policy and practice, enabling adoption professionals to tailor practices to best support adoptee needs. This study did not directly explore the relationship between the adoption agency and the lived experiences of the adoptees, but the findings are useful for adoption professionals at nonprofit adoption agencies. Additional research is needed to determine how the discussion and treatment of birth parents impacts adoptee perceptions of self and connections with both birth and adoptive families.

Conclusion

As openness continues to become more prevalent in adoptions, an enhanced understanding of how openness best serves adopted individuals can better direct policy in this arena (Grotevant, 2020). The findings in this study reiterate the importance of both structural and communicative openness in adoption relationships. In particular, the importance of communicative openness was emphasized by the findings in this study.

A more informed understanding of how psychological safety is established and maintained in homes and families can improve training and education for adoptive parents, with the ultimate goal of offering more support for children and their families. Based on this study, there seems to be a connection between communicative openness and psychological safety in adoptive families. Additional research is needed to explore this connection further.

Social workers, curriculum developers, and trainers at nonprofit organizations and adoption agencies can assess the health of their openness training for prospective adoptive parents based on a few criteria. A good goal is for the prospective adoptive parent to come away from trainings understanding:

1. The benefits of open adoption for their adopted child
2. The difference between structural and communicative openness (to address future changes in structure or communication frequency with biological family members)
3. How to address their concerns about openness (this may require agency involvement, or referral to additional resources)

Post-adoption support can help families navigate challenges and prevent adoption disruption as well (Bryan et al., 2010). Adoption agencies can host adoption support groups, or refer families to local resources.

Adoption openness education and prospective caretaker trainings aimed at helping adoptees connect with birth families as well as culture and heritage will likely also support stronger connections and bonds with adoptive families. Additionally, this study indicates that greater support is needed from adoption professionals. Adoptee-focused education and training throughout the licensing process will better equip adoptive parents and caretakers to best meet the needs of the children in their care.

Authors' Note

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the participants on the podcast who shared their experiences. We also express sincere thanks to Jeffery Thompson and Ashley Larsen Gibby for the valuable feedback they provided for this paper.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

This Appendix outlines the questions that podcast participants were asked over the course of their interviews. Not all questions were asked in each interview. Questions were selected from this list according to the subject's individual experience in adoption. Podcast hosts also utilized professional judgment to ask questions not included on the list, as relevant to the conversation.

1. Did you grow up with an open or closed adoption?
    a. How do you think this affected your childhood and adulthood?
2. How did your adoptive family talk about adoption while you were growing up?
3. What do you wish your adoptive family and/or community had known in retrospect?
4. What has helped you in working through any emotions or challenges related to your adoption experience?
5. Were there ways your adoptive family helped you connect with your culture/heritage?
6. What would you hope adoptive families would do to support adoptees in connecting with their birth families or cultures?
7. What have you struggled with regarding adoption and what do you wish others understood?
8. Do you have any thoughts on how adoptive parents can better support adoptees and biological parents?
9. What are some of the biggest challenges you feel the adoption community faces? Any thoughts on solutions/changes?
10. (If applicable) What has the reunification process looked like for you?
    a. How has finding your first family affected your sense of identity?
    b. What has helped you in working through the complicated emotions during reunification?
    c. What are your thoughts on helping adoptees navigate biological family relationships?
    d. What would you hope adoptive families would do to support adoptees in searching?

Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13298
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 58–72

Reimagining Nonprofit Praxis in Foster Care Through Lived Experience and Radical Hope

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Abstract

This autoethnography interrogates nonprofit praxis in U.S. child welfare systems through the author's lived experience of repeated placements and aging out. It contends that benevolent narratives obscure cumulative, state-produced harms that pathologize difference, sever relationships, and reduce youth to deliverables. Bridging scholarship on social equity, administrative burden, and psychological safety with storytelling, the analytical autoethnography reframes foster care as a system of power in which nonprofits function as paradoxical actors—at times reproducing bureaucratic harm, at others serving as lifelines that restore agency, access, and belonging. Advancing radical hope as praxis, the author calls for trauma-responsive practice; leadership by people directly impacted by the system; and funding, metrics, and pedagogy aligned with healing, family preservation, and flourishing. Reimagining nonprofit praxis in foster care requires rejecting case processing as a proxy for success and building organizations that help young people not merely survive, but thrive. This manuscript also curates accessible resources for readers working in contexts where equity content is restricted.

Keywords: *Social equity, trauma-responsive practice*

Carrying the Case File: Processed, Not Prepared

In many ways, I remain a foster kid 19 years after aging out. This identity has followed me from shelter placements to group homes, courtrooms, college campuses, and into professional spaces. I've carried this identity into my work as an educator, scholar, and advocate. For the third time in my life, at age 9, I entered the NYC foster care system and aged out at 21. Shuffled through more than 15 placements and three different foster care agencies, I was left to navigate adulthood without a real roadmap for what

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came next. My experience was emblematic of Goodsell's (2004) classical dilemma of bureaucracy—I was a case to be processed rather than a person to be cared for. At 18, the system attempted to declare its job done, having seen me through high school because college wasn't their responsibility. But through my own advocacy in family court, I fought to remain in care until age 21—when family court jurisdiction ended and I would have completed most, if not all, of my college education. While still underprepared for discharge, with a state-declared case completion, I was left to assemble a life the child welfare system had done little to prepare me for. This autoethnography shares part of my story, and throughout provides readers with additional resources to explore, especially for those in places and spaces where such content is under attack, banned, and otherwise inaccessible.

Diagnosed, Displaced, and Determined

This special issue on foster care and adoption in the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership* is not merely a scholarly endeavor; it is, for me, a personal reckoning with systems that both failed and shaped me. Working on this special themed issue is a long-awaited goal of mine, and I am so happy to be reminded that it is never too late to do something. In my case, this means getting back into the realm of advocacy and change for youth in need.

This special themed issue also affirms the voices and acts of resistance of young people—especially those made vulnerable by systems that pathologize difference, whether racial, neurodivergent, sexual, or spiritual (for additional autoethnographic analyses in this special issue see Berry-James, 2025; Kurtz, 2025; Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025; Ruiz, 2025). Youth in care are too often forced to navigate a system that fails to recognize their full humanity. For instance, the system diagnosed me as a problem that needed correction or a broken child who needed to be fixed. Upon entry into foster care at age 9, I was immediately identified as problematic or abnormal, with attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity disorder, and a host of other deficiencies. These diagnoses were used to identify what the system interpreted as "broken" and was working to "fix," rather than attempting to understand what a profound traumatic impact foster care has on a young child, especially when it was their third time in care—a reality I only learned about later in life which they should have known and been aware of the moment I reentered the child welfare system.

The initial nonprofit foster care service providers [NPFCSPs] overseeing my foster care services (both of which no longer exist in their previous forms) either failed to or were unable to honor my personal agency—the ability to define my own path and express my needs along the nonlinear journey through which I crafted my identity. When I was about 15 or 16 years old (if memory serves me right, and if I correctly retroactively understand and interpret the communications I still have on old emails), rather than support and assist me when they lacked placements, the first NPFCSP instead attempted to place me in a juvenile detention facility, because as a minor, I needed to be supervised. In my mind, this is supervision akin to that provided to a hospital patient or prison inmate. This system failure, to me felt like a personal attack, a punishment for the crime of being neurodivergent, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, a person driven by what the system considered to be an alternative faith with child welfare services contracted to a catholic affiliated NPFCSP, and/or because I was outspoken

and adept at self-advocacy. Like so many in care, it was through struggle and survival that I came to name myself: in faith or doubt, in gender or fluidity, in love and desire. Accordingly, while recognizing that I was a child in need, I refused the ascribed labels such as criminal, deviant, or queer/abnormal, and worked with attorneys from a local nonprofit as well as other community nonprofits to reject the "care" and the future the system wanted to impose on me for a more self-determined future because the reality at the time communicated anything but care. These actions resulted in my being homeless for some time—having to fend for myself in the streets while checking in daily with my attorneys until they could get my case moved to another foster care agency more able to accommodate my needs.

Naming Myself, Reclaiming Power

Shortly before and initially during my transitions between NPFCSPs (when I was around 15-16 and again between 17-18), my performance in school plummeted and my connections with those closest to me suffered. Not only did I perhaps feel the most alone in my personal life, I worried about the threat of the issuance of a bench warrant for my arrest because my foster care agency wanted to report me as a runaway. As documented most recently by Roberts (2022), runaways tended to be arrested as if they had committed crimes, regardless of the legitimate maltreatment, neglect, abuse, and harm they may have suffered in their current placements. Looking back, I am uncertain if such a threat was real—or worse, actually sought and or obtained—but this was no way for a child—or a young adult—to live. Irrespective of whether it was an actual threat, realized event, or a misunderstanding as a result of the limited sensemaking capabilities of a youth in care, what remains true is that as an adult—an accomplished practitioner and scholar—my understanding of the situation remains unchanged, and the scars and trauma perpetually linger. I remain thankful to those at Lawyers for Children [LFC] and the Hetrick Martin Institute [HMI] (and so many others outside of the child welfare system) for being there for me and helping me navigate one of the most difficult times in my life. Such nonprofit organizations and their extended communities provided a lot of hope in dark times.

Ultimately, I went from one religious NPFCSP to another, and later to a third NPFCSP that offered agency-operated boarding homes (AOBHs), group homes, and supervised independent living programs (SILPs) for LGBTQ youth and young adults. This last NPFSCP was in many ways a blessing, because as I got older, it became harder for the child welfare system to accommodate a young person with my needs. My journey, like that of so many others, was one of piecing together, resisting, and reimagining. I questioned imposed labels, experimented with various expressions, and slowly arrived at identities I could name, inhabit, and claim as my own. These acts of naming and becoming were rooted in self-discovery, self-determination, and empowerment—each forged in defiance of systems that too often deny such autonomy and agency.

Narratives that Erase and Systems that Harm

The dominant narrative of foster care is often told through the lens of well-meaning intervention: saving children, managing risk, ensuring safety. But from inside the system, those stories feel hollow—not only for those children, but also for their families

and care providers who endure psychological distress and face other costs imposed by administrative burdens and compliance requirements, as documented in this special themed issue (DeMasters et al., 2025).

These narratives also fail to acknowledge that identity is not something merely discovered or inherited. For many of us who experience foster care, identity is shaped through resilience, reflection, and relationships—formed not in isolation, but in response to trauma, survival, and connection. While not specific to identity construction and development, DeMasters et al. (2025) illustrate how the negative emotions, psychological toll, and stigma impact parents and families before, during, and after family separation, as well as long after family reunification. Their findings imply that the child welfare system distorts perceptions of identity and worth—from those outside the system looking in, by administrators looking down, and by those within the system struggling to make sense of their place in the system and in civil society more broadly. This understanding of identity as consciously constructed, rather than passively received, continues to inform my professional practice and perspective (see Davis et al., 2026; Evans et al., 2023; Irizarry, 2022, 2023, 2025, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026f; Irizarry et al., 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2026f).

While the literature documents the harms inflicted by the child welfare system on parents, families, and communities, my own lived experience, along with my professional work, shows how these dominant narratives tend to erase the trauma of being torn away from your home, your family, and the only world you've known (see Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry et al., 2025a; Ruiz, 2025). They obscure the pain of advocating for your own rights, especially when those tasked with representing you fail to listen or show up. They silence the indignity of being told that your needs and desires (as you feel and understand them), education, and emotional and mental health aren't priorities, that you're too difficult, or that reunification isn't possible—because you are uninformed, ill-informed, or unworthy, and not because your family is incapable of love, but because the system is incapable of care.

From within the child welfare system, the harm inflicted wasn't theoretical. It was delivered in the name of help, but experienced as deliberate harm—daily and unrelenting. And it wasn't additive; it was cumulative. Each trauma intensified the next, compounding isolation and accelerating harm (see Berry-James, 2025; Ruiz, 2025).

This trauma extends to the experience of adoptees and their families, as well (see also Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025). As Nelson et al. (2025) note, psychological safety is significantly linked to the degree of communicative openness adoptees experience. Those who felt seen, accepted, and loved reported greater trust and emotional security within their familial arrangements. Consider the life-altering impact of such safety and support—how youth in the child welfare system might actually have a fighting chance to survive and thrive in every aspect of life and civil society if they were given this kind of foundation.

Nonprofits as Lifelines and Bridges to Transformation

The role of nonprofits in our child welfare system extends far beyond their roles as NPFCSPs to their roles in civil society more broadly, where they may serve as lifelines and bridges to transformation (see Evans, 2026; Evans & Irizarry, 2022). For instance, I have told students and other audiences in various venues that the nonprofit sector

saved my life—literally and figuratively. I recognize that what helped me survive—and eventually thrive—was not the child welfare system itself, but the community organizations, mentors, and advocates who stepped in where the state had fallen short such as LFC's LGBTQ Rights Project, the Urban Justice Center, HMI, Living Beyond Belief, John Jay's SEEK program, and the Harvey Milk School founded by HMI (at the time a program of the Career Education Center, and since 2003 a public High School administered by the NYC Department of Education). I am intentionally not naming individuals here, because most certainly any list I construct now would be incomplete—but those people know who they are! That said, it is no surprise that the majority of these organizations were nonprofits, as it was in the nonprofit sector and through public educational institutions where I learned firsthand what was meant by public service motivation (Irizarry, 2024; Perry, 2020; Perry et al., 2010; Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015; Word & Carpenter, 2013). These institutions were not just safety nets; they were bridges to transformation.

Involvement with these nonprofits helped me challenge policy decisions that stripped me of basic support, pushed me to remain in school when dropping out seemed easier, and connected me to opportunities that allowed me to dream beyond mere subsistence. Their interventions turned me from a child welfare statistic into a scholar, educator, activist, and advocate who champions social equity for all in every aspect of life, especially in relation to democracy, civic engagement, and public and nonprofit pedagogy and praxis (Allen & Irizarry, 2025; ASPA DSJ, 2020; Evans & Irizarry, 2022; Evans et al., 2023; FIU Maurice A Ferré Institute for Civic Leadership, 2022; Irizarry, 2024, 2026e; Irizarry & Evans, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2023, 2026; Lopez-Littleton, 2022; Meyer et al., 2025; Rummell, 2004). For instance, as a youngster in a Catholic foster care agency, I distributed safer sex kits as an HIV/AIDS peer educator, advocate, and activist (Meenan, 2003). I later worked within the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) on developing the revised ASPA Code of Ethics (ASPA, 2013) and helped to establish the LGBT Advocacy Alliance as an ASPA section (Mostel, 2012, 2024), where I currently serve as a board member and was awarded a service to the section award in 2025.

As bridges to representation, self-discovery, and transformation, a variety of nonprofit organizations helped change the trajectory from the life imposed on me to one I could direct and more fully control. In many ways, their influence might even lead some to consider me a hood academic in the public service education arena. I wholeheartedly would accept the hood academic label as an identity of a person who "does not see [my] socioeconomic and marginalized background as a weakness" but rather as "lived experiences and 'street knowledge' that is applied in "reshaping pedagogy and instruction in the classroom" by contributing "resilience and experience that is not shared by [my] more privileged colleagues" (Philips, 2025, p. 176) in public administration and nonprofit education.

Confronting Complicity, Reimagining Care

In at least one way, my journey through foster care idiosyncratically. The majority of the youth I knew in care rarely graduated high school, let alone attended college or graduate school. They were rarely able to avoid being caught up in the carceral web of the foster-industrial complex (brilliantly elucidated by Roberts, 2022); and were

rarely able to avoid coping mechanisms, leading many to engage in high-risk behaviors and/or substance abuse. Accordingly, by comparison, my foster care experience ended uniquely as I avoided these perils and was able to age out just around the time when I submitted my last final exam for my Bachelor of Science in Legal Studies and with admission into the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Since then I have earned my MPA, Master of Arts in Criminal Justice, and PhD in Public Administration. Now with degrees in hand and students of my own, I remain troubled by the knowledge that my story is still far too rare. The systems that failed me continue to fail too many others. Nonprofit agencies—so often lauded as compassionate intermediaries—sometimes replicate the very harm they are meant to ameliorate. Too many youth age out of the child welfare system without permanent housing, without access to training or education, without safety, without family ties, and without hope. Too often, success is narrowly defined as completion of high school (or back in my day, completion of a GED) and a low-wage job, while holistic well-being, family preservation, or long-term empowerment remain afterthoughts.

This special themed issue of *JNEL* invites us to confront that complicity, gathering scholars, practitioners, and individuals with lived experience to interrogate the systems that claim to protect while often punishing and that claim to uplift while too often destabilizing. As public administration and nonprofit scholars and practitioners, we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to lead within a system that packages young people for discharge rather than prepares them for life? What would it take to truly center the needs and dignity of youth in our policy and programmatic responses? Together, the contributions in this issue urge us to reframe how we understand the child welfare system—not simply as a service, but as a structure of state power that intersects with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, and citizenship. In doing so, these contributions echo what many of us have long known: the system is not broken, it functions exactly as it was designed (see Roberts, 2022).

Radical Hope and the Work Ahead

There is an urgent need for the nonprofit sector, educators, social workers, and public administrators to reckon with the following truth: while the child welfare system claims to be a benevolent service, and while it can and may sometimes result in positive outcomes, the reality for many involved in the system, such as those of us in foster care is that the injuries inflicted by the system may outweigh such proclaimed benefits and have long lasting negative impacts. Such harms cannot be understood as merely sequential or discrete; rather, they are compounding, recursive, and structurally embedded with each experience of harm reinforcing and accelerating the next. Accordingly, confronting this reality includes interrogating how funding priorities, risk assessments, and service models reproduce cycles of dispossession, as well as recognizing the deep reservoirs of resilience and wisdom that exist among system-impacted youth. It also means making room for new leadership—by those who have lived these realities, not just those who studied them. Contemporary examples of such work include Alvarez-Hernandez, 2024; Berry-James et al., 2021; Chordiya & Protonentis, 2024; Chordiya et al., 2023; Colvin & Meyer, 2024; Foxworth, 2022; Gullums, 2024; Meyer et al., 2024a, 2024b; Page, 2023; Sweeting et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2022; Zavatarro et al., 2024).

Additional examples are contained within the edited volume, *Public Administration, Civic Engagement, and Spanish-Speaking Communities* (Irizarry, 2026f)—a volume that grew out of the National Academy of Public Administration's first ever bilingual (Spanish-English) panel on language and social equity (see Appendix D)—addressing multiple topics and arenas including health and human services (Alvarez-Hernandez et al., 2026), local government engagement (Camarena et al., 2026), immigration (Caraballo et al., 2026), social media (Evans, 2026), equitable access to crisis information (Haupt et al., 2026), homelessness (Moore & Knepper, 2026), news (Piscia, 2026), an equity model for inclusion in research (Rios et al., 2026), interactions with policing agencies in the United States (Topel & Colvin, 2026) and civic engagement and social equity (Vera, 2026).

Irrespective of the recent political shift in the United States calling for a blindness or outright eradication of difference, diversity, and identities other than white and English speaking (see Irizarry et al., 2026; Thomas, 2024), the literature in public and nonprofit administration is clear and demands retrospective and forward-looking reflexivity to address the scholarship of teaching and learning in public service education. Emphasis has been on what it is that we teach our students and how we train them (Azevedo & Shi, 2024; Evans et al., 2023; Irizarry, 2022; McCandless & Gooden, 2024; McDonald et al., 2024), whether or not public administration has failed (Guy 2025a), the future of nonprofit education (Stewart et al., 2025), and embracing and fostering a multi- and interdisciplinary practice for social change (Mason et al. 2020; Mirabella et al., 2025). What we do next must address and train public service leaders for the reality that there are ongoing and intensifying efforts to destroy rather than build public service—and for that matter democracy—and as Guy (2025b) notes, "a thriving democracy requires principled public servants whose concern is about performance and reliability" (p. 241). This requires us going beyond research and beyond the classroom (see Meyer et al., 2022; Ressler et al., 2023; Wright, 2023).

Accordingly, for me, contributing to this special themed issue as a co-editor was more than editorial work; it was a narrative act of resistance, a public scholarship of survival. It is a reminder that I am not just a foster kid or former foster youth. I am a public service scholar, an institutional insider, and a committed advocate for social equity and social justice. I carry within me the archives of my own struggle—emails, memos, scars, and memories—and I now offer them not as evidence of trauma alone, but as testimony to endurance, transformation, and radical hope. I know from experience that nonprofit programs can save lives and/or enable harm. My experience is that nonprofits weren't just institutions, they were lifelines or liabilities, depending on whose mission took precedence: contracts or care. When we reduce youth to case numbers, success metrics, or grant deliverables, we lose sight of their humanity—and of our own. The bureaucratic structure and personality that Merton (1957/2005) discussed is real, and we must avoid the traps of trained incapacity and occupational psychosis he mentioned, as that will not help us achieve major aspects of our code of ethics such as advancing the public interest, strengthening social equity, demonstrating personal integrity, and promoting ethical organizations (ASPA, n.d.). That's why I believe nonprofit education and leadership must be rooted in justice, not charity. In dignity, not compliance. In abolitionist imagination, not administrative ease. My words from long ago in the context of my work as an HIV/AIDS peer educator apply in this case and

still ring true: youth need to be educated, but that is not enough, because "If they don't believe they matter and don't protect themselves, we've failed" (Rummel, 2004).

My hope is that readers of this special issue hear the urgency that pulses through every article, autoethnography, and review (see also Irizarry et al., 2025b). That those involved and impacted by the system who read this special themed issue recognize that their voices and experiences have value and can be used in academic, scholarly, and professional works. This is consistent with the interpretive research tradition, where they would be "the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 43) and they get to determine what qualifies as data, information, and knowledge. The contributors of this special themed issue challenge us to move beyond reformist tinkering and into transformational action. They remind us that foster care is not a neutral good—it is a mechanism often weaponized against Black, Brown, Indigenous, disabled, and LGBTQ+ youth and their families. They show how nonprofit organizations—working as part of and external to existing child welfare systems—can either uphold or dismantle these systems of control, depending on the values we embed in our leadership, our funding models, our partnerships, and our pedagogies.

Our children deserve more than survival; they deserve justice, love, and a system that sees their brilliance—not just their needs.

To Those Still in the System: You Matter. You Always Did and Do

To the young people still in care, still waiting for a home, still being moved from placement to placement: you are not invisible, and you are more than a case to be processed and closed. You matter. Your voice matters. Your story matters. It bears repeating an adapted section of the acknowledgements of my dissertation:

> This [autoethnography—and for that matter my contributions to this special themed issue on foster care and adoption in the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*] is for those who need to be reminded that the future is YOURS to define and not determined by "the system" or anyone else. I did not let "obstacles" stop me from obtaining my higher education. I am a proud gay Puerto Rican former foster youth from NYC, first in my known family to graduate college, grad school and earn a PhD. I did this while managing my ADHD and working off campus to provide for myself. I believe that anyone who remains dedicated and resilient can do the same! (Irizarry, 2020, p. iv)

Know that we are more than what the system made of us. We are the future it didn't plan for—but desperately needs.

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Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13077
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 73–85

From the Frontlines

A Personal and Professional Reflexive Analysis of the U.S. Foster Care System

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Abstract

This autoethnography offers a personal and professional reflexive analysis of the U.S. foster care system from the perspective of a former foster youth, and current social worker and kinship guardian. Through narrative and critical analysis, it exposes how the system—though intended to protect—functions as a carceral regime that perpetuates racialized surveillance, intergenerational trauma, and systemic harm, particularly for Black, Latino, and Indigenous families. The piece argues that reform is insufficient, arguing instead for a radical reimagining of care grounded in community, dignity, and restorative. This analytical autoethnography critiques the complicity of nonprofits, educators, and policymakers in sustaining harm and urges a collective shift from paternalistic intervention to solidarity-driven support. It calls for the centering of lived experience, structural courage, and policies that prioritize family preservation, healing, and equity. This is not just a critique—it is an urgent call to action for a system of care that affirms rather than erases.

Keywords: *Generational trauma, foster care abolition, racialized child welfare*

Introduction

I write this autoethnography as someone who has experienced the United States foster care system from nearly every vantage point—as a former foster youth, a professional working with vulnerable populations, and now as a legal guardian navigating that same system on behalf of a child in care. This manuscript is a very critical reflection analyzing my experiences and perspectives about the U.S. foster care system primarily emphasizing self-awareness, growth, and how my perspective has evolved. This autoethnography is a deeply personal, ethical, and political reflection on a system that

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shaped my life and continues to shape the lives of millions—disproportionately Black, Latino, and Indigenous children and families (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022; Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2024).

The foster care system in the U.S., while often framed as a protective measure for children, operates as a carceral apparatus—one that surveils, regulates, and punishes marginalized families under the guise of care (Roberts, 2022). Rather than centering healing or support, it mirrors the punitive structures of the criminal legal system: investigations, removals, placements, and reviews take place within a bureaucratic infrastructure focused more on compliance and control than on compassion or repair, and as Dettlaff (2023) noted to separate the "bad" from the "good" (i.e., good parents or children vs bad/neglectful parents or children). It has functioned as a tool of family separation, racialized governance, and state-sponsored trauma. It has been argued that the U.S. child welfare system's foundational logic rests on surveillance and punishment, not necessarily on care, healing, and family reunification (see Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022).

This autoethnography is both testimony and analysis. It aims to amplify the voices of those most impacted and challenges nonprofits, educators, and policymakers to intentionally and proactively consider the harm this system causes, especially under the guise of child protection.

The Past: A Trauma Informed Reflective Experience

The U.S. foster care systems' past is rooted in attempts to care for vulnerable children, but it is also filled with stories of abuse, neglect, and systemic racism. My experience, while uniquely personal, is more common than most would want to believe. Foster care agencies perpetuate and focus more on risk management rather than on family preservation. My family was "broken" and needed assistance and support. The modern foster care system, though often cloaked in benevolence, continues to replicate historical patterns of poverty management, racial capitalism, family separation, and trauma-induced care under new names and mechanisms (Detlaff & Boyd, 2021; Fallon et al., 2013; Roberts, 2022).

From 1991 to 1993, I was a ward of the State of New York. Like many children from low-income and racialized communities, I did not enter care because my family was violent or negligent. We were poor. We were navigating housing instability. We lacked access to mental health resources. These are not moral failings—they are structural and systemic realities. Yet the system treated our family not as people facing hardship, but as problems to be managed—as contemptible, unbecoming, undeserving, and disposable. This did not feel like care or support; instead, it felt like the perpetuation of a lack of social equity and understanding of the principles of public service that reinforces the need of a public service ethics foundation in public service provisions (see Evans, 2022, Irizarry, 2023), especially in child welfare services.

What I remember most from entering care is not protection—it's disconnection. Not safety, but surveillance. One of my earliest memories is the intake process: being taken from my family by unfamiliar adults, brought to an unfamiliar place under the guise of care, and subjected to an invasive and dehumanizing examination—stripped naked, probed, prodded, and inspected for signs of abuse and neglect. This is traumatic for any child or person, and it didn't end with the intake process as it continued

throughout my initial placements. While thankfully I was one of the lucky few who did not get moved around every 6 months, I was cycled through at least two foster families. The initial placements were frightening and made me feel like an invader entering a new home, whose purpose was to provide some kind of monetary gain for the foster parents, rather than a child who needed compassionate care. I felt used and like my trauma wasn't even taken into consideration, as emphasis seemed to be placed on the monetary transactional nature of the placement arraignment.

It didn't feel like protection; it felt like punishment. I didn't understand what was happening, only that something about me—and about my family—must have been wrong. That experience planted a seed of shame that I carried for years: shame for being poor, shame for needing help, shame for not knowing better. It was a moment of profound powerlessness, not just physically, but existentially. We weren't seen as people in need of support, but as cases to be processed. In that moment, I wasn't a child—they made me feel like evidence. This treatment reflects the carceral logic embedded in the foster care system—where families are assessed, judged, and sanctioned through processes that resemble criminal proceedings more than acts of care (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022). Intake interviews mimic interrogations. Home inspections resemble compliance audits. Parents must complete mandated service plans to earn their children back, much like parolees must fulfill conditions to secure freedom. These are not neutral interventions; they are carceral procedures cloaked in child welfare. In effect, my family, already struggling, was cast as dangerous or defective, rather than in need of support and compassionate care. The system's gaze did not see our humanity; it imposed a narrative of unworthiness that took root before I could even speak up for myself.

While this was a deeply personal experience, it was not unique, it was systemic (Benson, 2022; Roberts, 2022; Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2024). This initiated the beginning of my distrust and battles with the systems that were set in place to protect me but instead began the cycle of trauma that would be passed down from one generation (me) to another (my brother). Generational foster care, a term used to describe the recurring involvement of families across generations, is a known phenomenon not limited to any particular country or region in the world. Children of former foster youth are at greater risk of entering care themselves (Fallon et al., 2013; Wulczyn et al., 2020). This is not a coincidence—it is a direct consequence of unresolved trauma, structural racism, and a system that prioritizes removal over investment.

The Present: Fragmentation and Powerlessness

From 1993 to 2013, I transitioned from being in the system to working within it. I became a professional working with foster youth and other vulnerable populations. This gave me a dual vantage point—both as someone who had once been processed by the system and later as a professional responsible for guiding others through it. This lived experienced allowed me to navigate the very systems that perpetuated an unsafe upbringing for me. I saw, firsthand, how overburdened caseworkers, undertrained foster parents, and inconsistent policies created a chaotic and disempowering experience for children and families alike.

My observations were of experiences that left vulnerable and traumatized youth without the necessary stability critical to nurturing their emotional and psychological growth. Unfortunately, these observations are also systemic, as evidenced in the literature (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021; Engler et al., 2022; Wade et al., 2022). For example, scholars have noted that "being placed in kinship care, longer stay in the same foster home, and fewer placement disruptions, all acted as protective factors limiting mental health problems of children in foster care" (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021, p. 1). Systemic reviews and metanalyses of the literature continue to demonstrate the importance of understanding the mental and emotional health impacts of care within the child welfare system on youth and the need for service providers and child care service administrators to appreciate and receive sufficient and appropriate training in trauma-informed care to significantly mitigate against and treat cognitive, socioemotional, and mental health impacts resulting from engagement with and care from the child welfare system (Engler et al., 2022; Wade et al., 2022). As a social worker in the nonprofit sector working with the state foster care system in the Bronx, I found myself trapped in walls of unfamiliar practices, policies that did not help the youth in care or their families, but rather perpetuated the continued separation and silencing of their voices. In my experience, it wasn't necessarily always about the best interest of the child, compassionate care, or about trauma-informed care, but rather prioritizing the system's and/or organization's interests over the interests of those they were to serve and protect. In many respects, it felt more like the prioritization of the bottom line (monetary benefit to the system and/or organization) over our service population in need.

Even now, from 2014 to the present, as a guardian for a youth in care, I find myself fighting against the very system I once relied on to provide me with the tools and environment that would promote growth, include compassionate care, and support foster or kinship care. Despite being part of "the system," I often feel like an outsider. The rules change. The communication breaks down. Decisions are made without including those most impacted—the youth themselves and/or their families or those caring for the youth. The cyclical and unchanged nature of the system and administrative burdens persist in parallel with my experience as a youth in care as well as now as a guardian of a youth in care (through the kinship care system). There are repeated instances when we go to court (approximately every six months) for permanency hearings and the lawyers never address me directly as a guardian or someone with lived experience in the system or as a professional social worker working within the system. Instead, they proceed without actually diagnosing or investigating the factual issues and challenges my family faces. Nor do they seem to attempt to learn about and understand the contextual and situational factors that impact us. What we experience is that the lawyers and court actors generally proceed by speaking amongst themselves as if they already "know" what's best for our family and the "solutions" to the problems to "help our broken family." It makes us feel invisible and almost as if everyone in that courtroom sees right through us or beyond us as if we were holograms not really in the room. The system saw us as nothing more than a docket number on the screen—or a case to be processed, and nothing more.

The foster care system does not center around the voices of children or their guardians—be they biological family, foster families, or other guardians. It manages them all. The system promotes and perpetuates the harmful assumption that families—

particularly those from marginalized backgrounds—are not competent or trustworthy narrators of their own experiences. It denies them the agency to articulate the ways in which their autonomy is stripped away and instead replaces their voices with bureaucratic interpretations of what is "best."

The power dynamics are harsh: biological parents are often vilified, foster parents feel unsupported, and caseworkers are expected to do the impossible with few resources. Children, meanwhile, move from placement to placement, school to school, adult to adult. It has been reported that the average foster child may have disruptions in placements as frequently as three times a year, with data indicating that this pattern impacts anywhere from a quarter to half of all foster children (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2024), and that more placements during time in care result in increased behavioral problems, emotional instability, and a host of other negative effects that are inconsistent with "the best interest of the child" philosophy (Dubois-Comtois, 2021). Rather than care and protection, for many, just entering the foster care system, as well as every move results in a new trauma.

These administrative movements are deeply traumatic. The child loses continuity, relationships, and trust every single time. The child's voice is suppressed precisely when it should be amplified. When it is permitted to surface, it is carefully curated—muted, reshaped, and only legitimized if it serves to showcase the system's effectiveness. In this way, children become props in a performance staged to protect institutional reputations rather than agents in their own stories. But the impacts of this system are not confined to one moment in time—they reverberate across generations, compounding harm through cycles of instability and survival.

Generational Trauma and the Foster Care Loop

The legacy of trauma in foster care is not just personal—it is generational and racialized. Disproportionality is not a statistical anomaly; it is the predictable outcome of a system rooted in racial capitalism (Benson, 2022; Roberts, 2022). Black and Brown children are underrepresented in the overall U.S. population but disproportionately represented in foster care (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). For instance, Black children make up about 14% of the U.S. child population, but nearly 22% of those in foster care, while 26% of all U.S. children are Latino or Hispanic they represent 22% of all children in foster care (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2023). These disparities are not accidental. They are built into the surveillance, reporting, and intervention practices of the child welfare system (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022).

Abolitionist scholars and practitioners argue that the system perpetuates intergenerational harm by policing poverty, criminalizing Black and Brown parenthood, and destabilizing family networks (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022). I agree. As someone who was raised by this system, worked within it, and now supports a child entangled in its web, I believe it is time to confront an uncomfortable truth: in many cases, the foster care system does more harm than good. What we've been doing isn't working. The system must be fundamentally reimagined—not just reformed—to integrate alternative models rooted in equity, care, and community self-determination. This means embracing ideas that challenge the deeply entrenched carceral logic of the foster care system, a logic built on surveillance, control, and the presumption of familial failure (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021), as well as the "colonial and racist ends of the US government"

(Benson, 2021, p. 111). In its place, we must adopt a restorative justice lens that centers healing, accountability, and the preservation of family networks as core tenets of care. Only then can we begin to reimagine what genuine support looks like—and how it's delivered.

We cannot "reform" our way out of systemic trauma. We must imagine something else. The cycle of trauma is at the root of the system. Families are forced to learn how to survive rather than overcoming the challenges that led to their system involvement so that they can thrive. This fosters a survivor mindset in families as a way to cope with oppression, violence, separation, and most of all, chronic instability. For these families, "success" would mean reunification not "solving" the rooted problems ascribed to them such as poverty, housing insecurity, current mental health challenges, or generational trauma. Such issues are systemic, not necessarily unique to specific families, and they are worsened by institutional neglect rather than failings attributed to the child and their families and caregivers. My family's survival mindset resulted in the transference of the same tactics, perpetuating the cycle of generational foster care where rather than "healing" the initial "problems" the impact was to reinforce a survival mindset, exacerbating the initial "problems."

Generational foster care represents the cyclical nature of trauma within marginalized communities. Children of foster youth are more likely to enter the system themselves, perpetuating patterns of instability, detachment, and unresolved trauma. This cycle often leads to mental health issues, difficulties in forming stable relationships, and socioeconomic challenges that persist across generations. The dual cycles of trauma and generational foster care become inextricably intertwined where both trauma informed experience and survival mindsets and continued system interaction become the new reality. We must not forget that trauma affects both parents and children in different capacities, and the road to "recovery" may look different for them. Perhaps approaches in health and human services to "create a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally attuned environment" through "engagement, continuous improvement, and accountability" (Alvarez-Hernandez et al., 2026, p. 166) should be considered more intentionally in child welfare services.

The Future: Reform is Not Enough—We Need An Abolitionist Reimagination

Without significant reform, the foster care system may continue to experience the same recurring issues of instability, power imbalance, and systemic neglect. Families will find ways to cope within a system that is designed to keep them in place and without progress. However, a future where foster families are provided consistent, trauma-informed care is possible. This requires a shift in the system to prioritize permanency and stability, such as the increase of resources for caseworkers, better training for foster parents, and legal reforms that reduce the time children spend in temporary care. Based on my experience in and with the foster care system, three immediate preventative measures come to mind that would significantly help keep children out of the foster care system to begin with:

- Direct economic support for families—ensures universal basic income and rental assistance thus mitigating against food insecurity and unstable housing, two primary "problems" generally interpreted as "neglect" for communities of color that result in the separation of families.
- Guaranteed housing for families—housing first model and potentially expanding family shelter options that promote safe, affirming and non-punitive alternatives, while emphasizing family unification and community resilience rather than family separation.
- Decriminalization of poverty—end mandatory reporting for poverty-related concerns, train workers to prioritize care referrals over CPS calls.

In cases where it is actually in the best interest of the child and family separation is necessary (i.e., where they are suffering direct harm that is worse than the harms inflicted through child welfare interventions), I believe radial changes to what happens are critical. For instance, chosen kinship and child centered advocacy can crucially result in a reimagined experience for those in the child welfare system:

- Chosen kinship or community-based care first care
  a) Prioritize chosen family, extended kin, and culturally matched community caregivers.
  b) Let families pre-identify "safe adults" before crisis arise – this can also be presented as a preventive measure or safe guarding the child.
- Child centered autonomy and advocacy
  a) Give children (especially teens) the platform to help decide where they could or should be placed if they have to be separated from their families.
  b) Provide child advocates that reflect their identities, providing more culturally competent representation and guidance in advocating to protect their rights and pursue their actual best interests.

I envision a foster care system that empowers children by giving them a greater say in their futures, providing them with a platform for self-advocacy and emotional expression, resulting in their support, guidance, and empowerment. An emphasis on permanency could also mean more support for kinship care, adoption, or reunification, depending on the unique needs of each child. As someone entangled in and navigating through the current foster care system, I am informed by my prior experience as a ward of state and my professional experience working with others in the system. As a guardian in the kinship care system, I know the importance of empowerment and autonomy to provide support, safety, structure, and ending the cycles of trauma and generational foster care. Programs that address trauma and emphasize long-term emotional health could greatly improve outcomes for foster children and their families.

These proposals reflect more than abstract ideals, they are actionable shifts grounded in lived experience, abolitionist scholarship, and community-based evidence (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022). They call for a fundamental reorientation of child welfare: away from surveillance and punishment, and toward dignity, solidarity, and com-

passionate care. To further clarify what this reimagined system could look like in practice, Table 1 contrasts key features of the current foster care system with transformative alternatives. It highlights how punitive responses to poverty, disconnected placements, and child disempowerment are not unavoidable—they are policy choices. A different set of choices is possible. One that treats housing and income as support, kinship and culture as assets, and children as experts in their own lives. Table 1 offers both a critique of systemic harm and a vision for a more just, compassionate, and community-rooted system of care.

Table 1

Reimagining the U.S. Foster Care System: From Control to Compassion

Vision Element	Current System	Reimagined System
Direct Economic Support	Means-tested benefits with limited rental assistance; poverty-related neglect leads to removal	Universal basic income, rental support, and direct cash assistance to prevent family separation
Guaranteed Housing	Unstable or punitive shelter options; homelessness penalized	Housing-first approach; safe, non-punitive shelter with a focus on stabilization and reunification
Decriminalization of Poverty	Mandatory reporting often treats poverty as neglect; CPS involvement triggered unnecessarily	Train workers to prioritize service referrals over surveillance and punitive action
Chosen Kinship / Community-Based Care	Placement often with strangers; limited recognition of kin or cultural matches	Pre-identified, trusted adults prioritized; culturally responsive community placements
Child-Centered Autonomy & Advocacy	Children have minimal input in placement or planning	Children (especially teens) help decide placements; advocates matched by cultural identity and lived experience

Note. Table summarizes proposed changes to foster care policy and practice based on abolitionist and restorative justice frameworks (see Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022).

I am sympathetic to—and increasingly aligned with—the abolitionist movement in child welfare (Dettlaff, 2023; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021; Roberts, 2022). The goal of abolition is not chaos or neglect; it is radical and compassionate care. Abolition means we invest in communities so that families are not separated and thrown into the chaos of the foster care system in the first place. It means we encourage easy accessibility to funding for housing, mental health services, food access, and income support—not surveillance, removals, and court hearings that perpetuate harmful practices and worsens mental health difficulties faces by children, families, and kinship care providers. It means we stop asking why a parent missed a case plan milestone and start asking why the system set them up to fail.

While I don't think we should throw out the tub with the bathwater just yet, I believe we need a reenvisioned system where kinship care, family preservation, and community-led supports are the norm. Where the guiding question is not "How fast can we place this child elsewhere?" but "How can we stabilize and support this family now and for the future?"—questions I wish would have been at the forefront when I began my journey as a guardian for my brother—and perhaps even when I entered care the first time. Such abolitionist reimagining is not a utopian dream—it is a practical necessity if we truly value children's well-being. It is important to acknowledge these challenges, it is also crucial to handle the topic with care, being mindful of the deep trauma associated with the foster care system. The stories of those who have survived the foster system deserve to be heard, but we must ensure that the retelling of these stories does not cause further harm to the individuals involved. We need to make sure that the stories are kept pure and genuine without involvement from others who may want to warp the process of storytelling. This reimagination requires nonprofits, caseworkers, educators, and policymakers to unlearn paternalistic models and embrace models of solidarity, healing, social welfare, social justice, empowerment, and community.

Call to Action: From Complicity to Courage

To those working in nonprofits, academia, and public administration: your work matters—but only if you're willing to take a step back and take another look through a restorative justice and reimagined lens. This is consistent with critical theories, such as CRT, feminist theory, social equity, and queer theory, that promote the scholar as activist (Irizarry, 2025; Irizarry et al., 2025; Ladson-Billins & Donnor, 2005; lisahunter et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2019; Mirabella et al. 2022; Meyer et al., 2024, 2025). It is not enough to manage systems. We must transform them. Start by listening to those who have lived the realities of foster care. Fund organizations that promote inclusivity of those who are former foster youth and host families who can provide insight, lived experienced, and the opportunities to tell their stories of navigating systems. This consistent with programs such as Kinship Foster Care and Guardianship Assistance Programs (KinGAP) emphasizing placing youth under the care of known adults, rather than total strangers (Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina, n.d.; Office of Children and Family Services, n.d.), thereby respecting and supporting their familial and tribal customs, norms, practices, beliefs, and autonomy. Finally, challenge the assumptions that equate removal with protection. Embrace abolitionist frameworks that ask us to build systems of compassionate care rather than control.

Children are not checkboxes on a case plan. Families are not contemptible, unbecoming, undeserving, and disposable. And service providers are not neutral actors. We must all choose a side: complicity or courage. Courage demands we listen, we invest, and we radically reimagine a system of care rooted in equity, solidarity, and healing.

Reimagining Care, Service, and Welfare

The harms of the foster care system are not incidental—they are structural, racialized, and deeply embedded in the very policies and institutions designed to help. To move beyond this, we must confront four interlocking failures: (1) the criminalization of poverty and trauma; (2) the complicity of nonprofits in upholding punitive logics;

(3) the exclusion of youth and families from decision-making; and (4) the continued erasure of community-based, culturally responsive practices. These failures reveal the urgent need for a care system rooted not in management or metrics, but in dignity, solidarity, and structural courage. In what follows, I outline how nonprofit leaders, educators, policymakers, and service providers must shift from paternalism to partnership—and from complicity to courageous reimagining, consistent recent calls about the future of public service education (Evans & Knepper, 2025; Evans et al., 2023; Guy, 2025; McDonald et al., 2024; Mirabella et al., 2025; Rios et al., 2026; Stewart et al., 2025). True care demands we challenge the carceral norms embedded in our institutions and build a system where equity and healing—not control—are the foundation, along with attempts to keeping families safely together.

Nonprofits are increasingly the primary service providers in the foster care system. Yet many operate within frameworks that, while well-intentioned, reproduce harm. Human service providers, particularly nonprofit leaders and frontline practitioners, must address how organizational goals, funding mechanisms, and compliance pressures often align more with bureaucratic control than with helping and serving families and community empowerment.

Those in positions of power or positions of leadership must question policies and practices that treat systemic hardship as personal failure. These leaders should provide guidance, necessary information, and meaningful support to direct care workers and policy makers to help them understand that poverty and need should not be criminalized, that facing hardships and being in need is not a moral failing but a structural reality that demands a compassionate, justice-centered response—one that invests in families, restores dignity, and seeks to transform systems rather than manage symptoms. They must recognize how neglect is often poverty misnamed, and how policies designed to monitor can easily become tools of exclusion. Change begins with shifting the narrative: from fixing "broken families" to addressing broken systems that criminalize those most in need of care.

Leadership in this space requires more than programmatic innovation—it demands moral imagination and structural courage. It challenges us to redefine what service truly means, and to whom it is accountable. It compels us to reimagine systems that perpetuate imbalances of power, knowledge, and authority. Too often, the system rewards complicity: child welfare workers struggle to distinguish between neglect rooted in poverty and situations of actual harm. As a result, surveillance and punishment are routinely directed at marginalized families. Institutional loyalty is upheld over ethical discernment; those who follow policy without questioning harmful practices are often—intentionally or not—turned into agents of state-sanctioned violence.

For policymakers and administrators, reimagining the system means rethinking legal frameworks, funding priorities, and accountability structures that favor removal over prevention, monitoring over mentoring, and punishment over possibility. A just child welfare system would invest in building capacity within families—not extracting children from them. This requires shifting funding away from reactive systems and toward programs that address root causes like poverty and structural racism. Laws and policies must be grounded in an understanding of how systemic oppression disproportionately harms families of color in marginalized communities. Preventive, restorative, and rehabilitative services can help break cycles of trauma and generational foster care.

Crucially, the policies that affect children and families must be informed by those with lived experience—youth, parents, kinship caregivers. When those most impacted are excluded from decision-making, the system silences innovation and reinforces top-down control.

For educators and scholars, this work requires amplifying lived experiences like mine—not as anecdotal, but as analytical. These stories carry both urgency and insight by centering lived experience in research and pedagogy, and helping to develope more accurate and equitable tools to assess child welfare concerns such as neglect and abuse. Educators are often mandated reporters, and without trauma-informed training, they may conflate poverty with neglect—leading to unnecessary system involvement. This inability to distinguish structural hardship from actual harm can lead to unnecessary removals and reinforces racial and socioeconomic biases within the system. When educators and scholars operate without a trauma-informed lens—or fail to interrogate the biases built into their assumptions—they risk perpetuating the very harms they are positioned to prevent.

Community members themselves must be empowered as co-creators of care, especially those directly impacted, because they should reclaim their voices, spaces, and power. Mutual aid networks, traditional kinship practices, and culturally grounded support systems offer sustainable, dignified alternatives to state intervention. Public education that challenges stigma and promotes community healing is vital in helping communities to build trust among each other and reintegrate transformative practices within communities.

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Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13348
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 86–99

No Place Like Home

An Autoethnographic Journey of Resilience and Foster Care

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Abstract

This manuscript delves into the lived experiences of a child who was kidnapped and taken across the border, ultimately being placed in foster care upon her return to the United States. Employing an autoethnographic approach, the author weaves personal reflections with broader societal themes, exploring the psychological, social, and emotional impacts of these traumatic experiences on youth and the administration of the child welfare system. The narrative underscores the pressing need to bolster the social safety net, ensuring that out-of-home placements in foster care are readily available when necessary. The author's journey is characterized by resilience as she navigates the complexities of entering and exiting foster care after the trauma of kidnapping. This manuscript serves not only as a testament to survival but also as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and communities, particularly considering the rising incidence of international child abductions.

Keywords: *Child trauma, family abduction, foster care, Hague Convention*

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." – Frederick Douglass

Introduction

Like the children who experience international parental child abductions, my journey has been shaped by trauma and resilience. By sharing my personal story of kidnapping, I aim to highlight the urgent need to strengthen the social safety net for children who enter, live in, and exit the foster care system. This manuscript reflects my deeply held personal connections to these issues and my unwavering professional commitment to promoting equitable and just approaches that improve the life chances

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of children in foster care. We must advocate for reforms that not only protect vulnerable children and ensure their well-being but also encourage the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families to rethink child welfare practices. It is essential to enhance child and family services, improve intake and assessment approaches to reduce response times for investigations, bolster family preservation services, and effectively address the diverse needs of children to enhance their overall well-being.

Historical and Contemporary Causes of Foster Care Placement: 1970 to Today

In 1970, approximately 500,000 children were in foster care in the United States. This number reflects the social and economic conditions of the time, as well as the functioning of the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1999). Several factors contributed to these placements, with abuse and neglect—including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse—being a major reason (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2000). Parental substance abuse also played a significant role, as addiction often hindered caregivers' ability to provide stable homes (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020).

Economic hardship was another critical issue; many families faced poverty and unemployment, making it difficult for parents to care for their children adequately (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Additionally, parental illness or disability—whether physical or mental—further complicated caregivers' abilities to meet their children's needs (Kirk & Griffith, 2009). Family disruptions, such as divorce, separation, or the death of a parent, often lead to children entering foster care (Murray & Hagan, 2010). Social and environmental factors contribute to out-of-home placements in the foster care system. Less than half of children exiting foster care were reunified with their families, raising concerns for those aging out without permanent homes. The foster care system has experienced a decline in the number of children in care, yet Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children disproportionately make up the foster care population (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). Furthermore, the persistent challenges posed by COVID-19 have intensified familial stressors, thereby increasing the risk of maltreatment and complicating access to essential support services (Rodriguez et al., 2021; U.S. Health and Human Services, 1997). Understanding this complex interplay of factors is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by families during that era and today. These reasons often intersected and intensified the challenges faced by families and children during the foster care placement. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing foster care placement over time, Table 1 presents a comparison of reasons identified in 1970 with those identified today.

Table 1

Factors Influencing Foster Care Placement Over Time

Reason	1970s	Today
Abuse and Neglect	Significant factor; physical and emotional abuse common	Continues to be a primary reason; includes a broader understanding of neglect
Substance Abuse	Less recognized but present; growing issue	Major factor, especially with the opioid crisis
Mental Health Issues	Less awareness and support for parental mental health	Increased recognition; mental health issues are a significant concern
Domestic Violence	Less frequently cited as a reason	A critical factor; more awareness and resources available
Economic Hardship	Present but less emphasized	Major contributor; economic instability impacts many families
Family Disruption	Common due to divorce and separation	Still prevalent; compounded by social changes and instability
Homelessness	Less documented; often underreported	Recognized as a significant factor affecting many families

In recent decades, awareness of critical issues like substance abuse and mental health has significantly increased, revealing the complex societal factors contributing to family crises today, such as economic instability, domestic violence, and systemic inequities (Daley, 2013; Kirkbride et al., 2024; Tzouvara et al., 2023). This understanding has led to a greater emphasis on developing support systems that assist families in crisis, recognizing that modern reasons for children entering foster care are often linked to broader societal challenges. By prioritizing the well-being of both children and families, we can rethink and reimagine compassionate child welfare policies. Effective foster care and family preservation services not only protect vulnerable children from abuse and neglect but also empower families, helping them heal and thrive together.

Cross-Border Abductions and the Struggle for Reunification

In the annual report on international child abduction, Marco Rubio, United States Secretary of State, emphasizes that the Department of State under the Office of Children's Issues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs serves as the U.S Central Authority for the Hague Convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of Internal Child Abduction and acts as a regulatory framework for resolving cases of international parental child abduction (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Between the United States and foreign governments, a treaty partnership exists to "restore the strength and safety of children and parents harmed by international parental child abductions, so that they may thrive" (U.S. Department of State, 2025, p. 4). An international parental child abduction is described as an event "when a child is removed from or retained outside their country of habitual residence, and the removal or retention violates another parent or guardian's custody rights" (U.S. Department of State, 2025, p. 4). The U.S. Department of State (2025) reports there were more than 1,000 children abducted from the United States. Of the 808 active abduction cases, 91.5% involved a custodial parent or guardian seeking the return of their children, and 8.5% represented a parent or guardian seeking access to the children. Specifically, in 2024, 1,118 children were "abducted or retained outside of the United States" (U.S. Department of State, 2025, p. 9).

Treaty partnerships between the United States and foreign nations show considerable variation in compliance and effectiveness when solving cases involving international parental child abduction. For instance, the Convention, a treaty partnership between the United States and Canada, has been in place since 1988. Despite this longstanding relationship, there were still 46 children possibly involved in international abductions with Canada last year, which represented 30 new cases in 2024 and active investigations on 16 cases, which were continuing from the previous year (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, n.d.), criminal and civil procedures that guide responses during international parental kidnapping cases are straightforward. Following a child abduction, field officers can assist families in two main ways:

1. A criminal arrest warrant can be issued for a parent or guardian who takes a juvenile under 16 outside of the United States without the other custodial parent's permission, as outlined in the International Parental Kidnapping Crime Act of 1993.
2. In countries that have signed the Hague Convention, a civil process exists that facilitates the return of abducted children under 16 to their home countries, as detailed in the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d., para. 10).

Family abductions represent the most common type of missing children cases. The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR] (n.d.) indicates that the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) regularly collects data to estimate the number of missing children, as mandated by the 1984 Missing Children's Assistance Act (Pub.L. 98-473). While capturing the full scope of missing children in a single study is challenging, NISMART provides valuable insights. For instance, NISMART-1 (1988) defined the

main types of missing child episodes, while NISMART-2 (1989) established standardized definitions and unified estimates of missing children in the U.S. NISMART-3 (2011) focused on three groups—general public, law enforcement, and juvenile detention centers—addressing issues related to missing children. NISMART-4 (2019) offered data on kidnapped and missing children, particularly those involved in stranger kidnappings.

Reports indicate a growing issue of missing children, underscoring the need for a global strategy (Ferrara et al., 2024). Family abductions have risen dramatically, increasing from 60,000 in the 1970s compared to an untold proportion of the 359,094 children reported missing in 2022 (National Child Identification Program, n.d.). When children are abducted by family members or strangers, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) aims to "identify, locate, and recover child victims" (U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). However, my own experience reveals the complexities involved in an overburdened foster care system. Upon returning to my home country, my rights as a child and my urgent need were disregarded, reflecting the psycholegal challenges faced by children abducted across international borders (Patel et al., 2021). I was placed in the foster care system while the judicial system deliberated on whether I could return to my grandmother and guardian, further delaying my reunion with my family.

No Place Like Home

I remember that day vividly—when the only family that I knew changed forever. My mother handed me her infant and said, "RaJade, take care of my baby." Moments later, she literally walked out the door and was never seen again for several years.

As the second oldest of five children under the age of 10, I, like my siblings, developed a resilience shaped by our shared experiences. Throughout our lives, we navigated trauma, consciously or unconsciously adopting various roles to cope with what we faced. We became heroes, rescuers, caretakers, and sous chefs, always looking out for one another. I can almost recall the dull gray sky that hung low over Bradley Beach, New Jersey, mirroring the heaviness in my heart and the whirlwind of excitement in my mind. At just seven years old, I stood in the doorway of one of the two homes I remember, feeling the weight of our circumstances, yet also a flicker of hope for what lay ahead.

After years of running away, only to be returned to the dwelling that was unfit for our small family of five and other visitors, I felt a glimmer of hope for a new beginning—a chance to forget the childhood trauma. Each of us took on roles typical of children coping with trauma. My older sister, at age 9, became the rescuer, always intervening or protecting during traumatic incidents. My brother, just 5, avoided social interactions, displaying heightened anxiety when engaging with adults. My youngest brother, only three, bore signs of physical abuse that went unspoken. As the protector, the baby cradled in my arms was forever shielded from harm.

My grandmother, who would soon become our legal guardian, stopped by the house that Friday evening on her way to her beach home to say hello and check on us kids. She will never forget the day she became the guardian of five children, all under the age of 10. The situation was straightforward—my mother no longer wanted to be a mother. She simply said goodbye, walked out of the house, and left the United States. For two years, we were told that she could not be found and was likely deceased. During

those early years, our grandmother, a public servant, struggled to keep our family together, eventually placing the youngest three in foster care. St. Peter Claver Catholic Church became the focal point in our lives; we gathered there each week for Mass, religious classes, baptisms, and confirmations. As we moved inland, we settled into temporary homes. Fortunately, my older sister and I were school-age and remained in the custody of my grandmother, while our younger siblings—three under five—were placed in the care of a loving couple who were seen as grandparents and became important caregivers (Berry, 2023).

In the summer of 1974, at the age of 9, I stood on the porch looking down the end of the long driveway leading to our small cottage, surprised to see a familiar figure confidently approaching the front door. Without hesitation, I dashed inside to inform my grandmother that our mother was still alive! The following weeks blurred together as family members visited and children were reunited with her. Like many children who endure the trauma of abandonment and the shock of reemergence, I felt a profound reluctance to leave her side. Instead of attending summer camp with my sister, I was permitted to stay home to keep my mother company. On this day, she asked me a simple question: "Have you ever been on a bus before?" When I replied no, we went to the bus station and she took me on the longest bus ride of my life—out of our small New Jersey beach town and across the border into Montreal, Canada.

For almost a year, I lived in a state of fear under my mother's care—scared yet clinging to the hope of reuniting with my family someday. In a cramped apartment complex in the borough of Lachine, we slept on the cold floor, surrounded by emptiness—no furniture, telephone, or television. I attended school, carrying the heavy burden of my secret, feeling isolated from my peers. Every day, I begged to call my grandmother, yearning to ease her worries about my sudden and mysterious disappearance. Each night, I cried out for my siblings, mourning the life that I had shared with my brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and church family. Every holiday that passed reinforced my sense of loss and longing. Ultimately, I managed to persuade my mother to take me back home across the border into the United States. It was the inquisitive border agents who, noticing my Canadian accent and questioning me about my school and birthplace, uncovered my truth. At that moment, the reality of my family abduction hit me hard: I had been kidnapped and missing for the entire school year. The stark contrast between my former life and my grim existence during that time underscored the horrors that I had endured.

Along with my mother, I was transferred across the border back to the United States. Upon our return to New Jersey, she was arrested, and I was abandoned once more. Despite my desperate pleas to go home to my grandmother, I was interned into the foster care system. In the middle of that night, I was processed, assigned a social worker, and scheduled for medical examinations. My unrelenting demands for immediate family reunification were denied, all under the guise of treatment for the shock and trauma I had endured during captivity. The caseworker focused on building a legal case against my mother, while I felt invisible and unheard. I spent isolated weeks in foster care, separated from the only place I knew as home. Once again, I was a captive, facing compounded isolation, and my cries to reconnect with my sibling and maternal grandmother were dismissed. My perspective as a child highlights the profound need for the foster care system to listen and prioritize the voices of children in their care,

ensuring that a child's emotional needs and family connections are not overlooked. Facilitating crucial conversations and creating space for voices to be heard is essential to leading by convening; this paradigm shift emphasizes social justice by integrating mindfulness practices to support the lived experiences of those who have faced trauma.

Leading by Convening: A Paradigm Shift

Reflecting on nearly four decades of teaching, research, praxis, and public service, I have prioritized social equity and social justice. As a champion for social equity, I am committed to opening doors and creating opportunities for the next generation, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. My unwavering commitment to public service leads me to assert that fostering social equity is a moral imperative, crucial for enhancing societal well-being. This requires developing inclusive policies that address systemic inequalities and ensure equitable outcomes for all communities (Simms et al., 2020). In higher education, I draw upon my own lived experiences to enhance discussions of fairness and justice, particularly at the intersection of ring theory and social equity. This article details a personal crisis and its profound effects, not only on me and my family but also on my teaching, research, and service. By reflecting on this experience, I aim to demonstrate how such challenges have shaped my understanding of my role and responsibilities within the academic community.

In the context of helping others, ring theory effectively illustrates how a child at the center of a trauma is surrounded by interconnected circles of support (Muntz, 2022). Armstrong (n.d.) explores the application of ring theory to understand grief and social justice. This framework highlights the significance of community and relationships in the healing process (Brindle, 2020; Silk & Goldman, 2013). The innermost rings typically include immediate family members and friends, while the outer circles encompass the broader community, including first responders, medical professionals, and bystanders (Brindle, 2020). Silk and Goldman (2013) emphasize how trauma survivors perceive their experiences, providing invaluable insights for those who assist them. Their principle of "comfort in, dump out" stresses the importance of offering emotional support to trauma survivors while encouraging others to process their feelings in a way that respects boundaries, fostering a healthier environment for all involved (Silk & Goldman, 2013, para. 11). In the fields of public policy, public affairs, and public administration, my scholarly contributions have engaged both local and global communities to describe, explore, and explain the complexities of ring theory. This theory examines the crises of lived experiences and the reactions of those closest to individuals experiencing grief or trauma, all framed within the broader context of support and boundaries in communities and systems.

As a child abducted by a non-custodial family member, I found myself at the center of a complex circle of support, with each ring playing a distinct role. My family, situated closest to me, exemplified the comfort in principle; I longed for reunification to receive the emotional support essential for my healing. In contrast, my interactions with the outer circles, particularly the foster care system, underscored the challenges of external support, where well-meaning responses often felt overwhelming—especially as I yearned to be returned to my family after the traumatic event. This experience not only illustrates the dynamics of ring theory but also emphasizes the crucial importance of respecting boundaries and understanding relationships in creating a fair and just safety net within public administration.

For those who have experienced childhood trauma, we grow into adults who reflect on our lived experiences by recognizing the importance of research and scholarly activity. From securing external grants to receiving early career awards, our contributions to high-profile journals and influential books showcase our commitment to advancing knowledge. Through community engagement, we connect with those around us, seeking to address societal challenges and foster positive change. In higher education, our personal commitment to fairness and justice shines through our scholarship on teaching and learning, innovative classroom practices, and experiential learning opportunities. As a distinguished scholar, my academic honors, professional fellowships, and membership in the National Academy of Public Administration empower me to advocate for fair and just approaches that prioritize the voices and needs of our most vulnerable populations in public administration. Building on this foundation, I have spent over a decade conducting evaluation research, assessing programs that support food-insecure children under the age of 5, women and children living in public housing, adolescents in early stages of addiction, and individuals living with HIV/AIDS who are struggling to maintain their sobriety.

Over the years, my scholarly activity began as a focus on implementing affirmative action in higher education and continues to support policies, programs, practices, and perspectives that advance social equity (Berry, 1999). As a scholar, I continue to examine how trauma profoundly affects the most vulnerable populations by highlighting urgent needs to promote the fair and just distribution of publicly funded programs and services (Gooden et al., 2023; Irizarry et al., 2025). In the public sector, research and community engagement underscore how systemic inequities exacerbate trauma, particularly among marginalized groups (Irizarry et al., 2025). Further analysis illuminates the pressing challenges faced by communities striving for fairness and justice (Wright et al., 2022). In this context, mentorship emerges as a critical mechanism to center voices and choices in the academy that foster resilience and empowerment (Ortega et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2013). To build a more equitable society, it is essential to address the persistent and consistent gaps identified in recent studies (Berry-James et al., 2021; Gooden et al., 2023). By examining the intersections of race and policy, we can better understand factors that enhance program efficacy and provide institutional support for those most affected by trauma (Berry-James et al., 2021). Ultimately, the collective insights from this body of work advocate for a transformative approach in public service education that prioritizes the needs and voices of the most vulnerable, ensuring that our efforts to address disparities lead to meaningful change and societal rebirth (McDonald et al., 2024).

A significant contribution to this area is *RAMS in Research: A Guided Journey through the McNair Scholars Summer Program*, co-authored with my student mentee, Cindy Vigil (2025). This article examines the impact of mentoring relationships on first-generation college students, emphasizing how effective mentorship fosters student success by enhancing trust, belonging, and self-efficacy, using the McNair Summer Research Program as a case study. Additionally, my co-authored article, Threats to Democracy: A Danger to Social Justice for All (Irizarry, et al., 2025), discusses how democratic backsliding undermines social justice efforts and proposes a multilevel response framework to promote democratic resilience. My contributions to understanding racial disparities and teaching about social justice are further reflected in several other publications, including the *Psychosocial Dimensions of Health, Homelessness, and*

Diverse Families (Nwakpuda et al., 2024), *Civil Rights, Social Equity and Census 2020* (Berry-James et al., 2020) and most prominently in *Stepping Up to the Plate: Making Social Equity a Priority in Public Administration's Troubled Times* (Berry-James et al., 2021).

As a university professor, I embrace the African proverb, "She who learns, teaches," as a guiding principle in my work. I focus on fostering innovation in the classroom and creating experiential learning opportunities for underrepresented students in a field dedicated to inclusivity, critical thinking, and civic engagement. I have developed award-winning courses that explore the intersectionality of race, gender, and public policy, emphasizing the importance of diversity in higher education. Additionally, my co-authored book, *Why Research Methods Matter: Essential Skills for Decision-Making,* with Susan T. Gooden (2018) underscores the importance of teaching research skills in public service education.

My professional service to the academic community includes roles such as senior associate dean at Virginia Commonwealth University and active participation in the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), Network for Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), and American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). As a co-founder of the *Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration*, I worked collaboratively to advance scholarship on social justice issues. Furthermore, I have contributed to various editorial boards and have served as a mentor to numerous graduate students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, helping to promote diversity within academia. My awards in the field are a reminder of the child in the circle and the hope that lives in the outer rings.

The recognition I have received throughout my career reflects not only individual achievement but also the collective hope of those we serve, particularly the children at the center of the trauma circle. My scholarly activities have gained acknowledgement from the outer rings of my traumatic childhood, illustrating how good work can resonate outward, impacting lives beyond immediate trauma. Being elected as a Fellow of the Congressionally chartered National Academy of Public Administration in 2019, receiving the ASPA Chester A. Newland Citation of Merit Award in 2024 and the Rutgers University—Newark Distinguished Alumni Award in 2023, along with other honors such as the NASPAA Social Justice Curriculum Award in 2017, the ASPA Presidential Merit Citation in 2017, Sylvester Murray Distinguished Mentor Award in 2017 from the Conference on Minority Public Administrators, and the NC State University Chancellor's Creating Community Award, Outstanding Faculty from North Carolina State University in 2013, affirms the national recognition of my efforts. Each accolade serves as a testament to the support and collaboration from those in the outer rings, who amplify our shared mission.

At the 2025 NASPAA global conference, I received the Nadia Rubaii Distinguished Service Award, which underscores my commitment to achieving social equity and highlights the critical role of mentorship in nurturing future leaders. As the immediate past-president of NASPAA, I organized the international conference, Leading by Convening: Shaping the Future of Public Policy, Public Affairs, and Public Administration, setting a foundation for advocating equity in the public sphere. The 2024 NASPAA conference emphasized the strength that emerges when diverse minds unite to address changes, share insights, and cultivate innovative solutions. For the

child that lives within my inner circle, each accolade is a reminder of the promise that our work holds, inspiring a new generation to pursue fairness and justice in their communities. As I continue to strive for excellence, I remain dedicated to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, ensuring that their voices are heard, and supporting them on their journeys. My awards and recognition in this field serve as a testament to the child in the center—the embodiment of dreams—and the hope that radiates outward, inspiring future generations.

Sharing my lived experience after my abduction serves not only as a narrative of resilience but also reflects my commitment to safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable children. Additionally, this manuscript acts as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and communities. By showcasing a successful reunification, I hope to inspire others in similar situations and continue to promote systemic improvements in public service. It is essential to emphasize the need for change within America's safety net for our most vulnerable populations.

Reflections

The phrase "there is no place like home" highlights the importance of investing in children's well-being from the very beginning. As Frederick Douglass wisely stated, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" (Goodreads, n.d.; Mapp & Gabel, 2019). This reinforces the critical importance of proactive support for children, demonstrating that investing in their development is far more effective than attempting to address the issues stemming from inadequate early intervention policies and programs. By strengthening the social safety net, we can create a foundation for resilient children who are less likely to face trauma and hardship. Protecting children is not only a more effective strategy but also a kinder approach than dealing with the consequences of inadequate support. Policymakers, practitioners, and communities must work together to create a strong foundation for our children, reducing their risk of trauma. Through collective effort and action, we can strive for a brighter future for all children. This autoethnography shares the personal journey of a child affected by kidnapping and foster care, serving as a powerful advocacy tool that promotes empathy and understanding among policymakers.

Reflecting on the process of writing this manuscript, I recognize the urgent need to move beyond traditional charity models in favor of solidarity-focused approaches to prioritize family preservation and community healing. Meaningful change arises from empowering those directly affected by these issues. As I advocate for policy reforms and examine alternatives to the current system, I also acknowledge my role in perpetuating harmful structures. The development of innovative educational strategies is crucial for equipping public servants and nonprofit leaders to effectively address the challenges within the child welfare system. This assertation is strongly supported by a range of research (Berry-James et al., 2021; Irizarry, 2022, 2026a, 2026b; Irizarry et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2022; Mirabella et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2025), highlighting the importance of informed practices and policies in this critical area. Ultimately, our goal must be to prioritize the best interests of our most vulnerable population—our children.

In the spirit of the Sankofa bird, I look back at my younger self to reassure her that everything will be okay. This autoethnographic exploration highlights the critical in-

tersection of personal experience and broader societal issues, particularly through ring theory. From my current perspective, I embrace the Ubuntu principle: I am because we are. Together, we share the responsibility to nurture our inner child, drawing on the wisdom of our lived experiences and protecting them in everything that we do, both locally and globally. Let us extend our compassion and commitment to help children everywhere, as they are our future, deserving of love, support, and the opportunity to thrive. Public and nonprofit organizations play a vital role in this mission, as they can provide the resources and advocacy needed to strengthen the safety net for children. Together, we can create a world where every child feels valued and safe, where their dreams can take flight. By strengthening the safety net for children, we uplift not only their lives but also the fabric of our society. Let us unite in this mission, recognizing that when we support our children, we elevate humanity itself.

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Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13351
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 100–106

Private Adoption and Nonprofit Studies

An Autoethnographic Perspective

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Abstract

Adoption is a complex process that includes multiple actors, including birth parents, adoptive parents, children, lawyers, and multiple nonprofit organizations. Using autoethnography, I explore the process of adoption from my experience. I then use this process to explore the ethics of adoption. To conclude, I explore the ways that nonprofit studies and public administration can contribute to adoption studies with our unique perspective. Through this study, we are able to see the complexities of adoption and discuss next steps for the field.

Keywords: *Adoption, nonprofit management, autoethnography*

Introduction

I come to this special issue as a researcher of nonprofit management, a social worker who has worked in foster care, a professor of nonprofit studies and ethics, and an adoptive parent of two. Specifically, I see adoption from two perspectives: as a parent who has benefited and a professional and researcher who understands the complex and cyclical nature which leads to people entering the world of adoption. Building on previous literature on adoption, this article uses autoethnography to explore the complexity of adoption and understand how nonprofit studies can better support the diverse interests within the field of adoption (Samuels, 2022; Wall, 2012). In this article, I will start by looking at adoptions and providing basic information about the structure of private adoption. I will then explore the ethical issues associated with adoption. To conclude this article, I will suggest areas of future research for public administration and nonprofit studies around the topic of private adoption.

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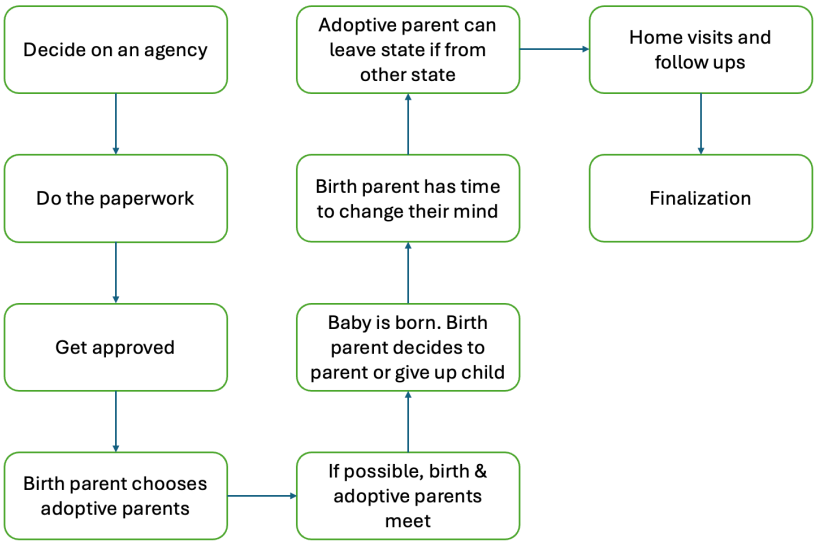
Private Adoption: An Introduction

In this article, I am looking specifically at private adoption. Private adoption is different from foster care; it is when a nonprofit organization coordinates an adoption between a birth parent and prospective adoption parents, either before the birth of the child or right after/shortly after the birth of the child.[1] These adoptions are approved by a judge in the state that the child is born in. These adoptions used to be closed, which means that the adopted child did not know information about their birth families and the birth families have no contact with the adopted child. Now, most adoptions are open, which is on a spectrum from the child being aware of the existence of birth parents to having continual contact with the birth parents.

The process of private adoption is not always understood. There are two different pathways: the adoptive parent and the birth parent path. To illustrate these pathways, I will be using my story as an autoethnography as well as an opportunity for education,[2] which means most of the focus will be on the adoptive parents' process. To start, I would like to explore the paths my husband and I took when adopting our children. Figure 1 provides a simplified version of the path of adoption in our case.

Figure 1

The Adoption Process



When my husband and I first decided to adopt, we interviewed with nonprofit organizations in the state where we resided at the time. When adopting, you usually start with an agency that is based in the state in which you live. Once we decided on

[1]This article will focus mainly on domestic adoptions within the United States. International adoptions, where the adoptive parents are from a different country than the birth parents, have a unique set of ethical issues (e.g., Stuy, 2013; Wall, 2012)

[2]Please note, while I will be talking about my story, some of the parts of the story may be edited, changed, or left out. This is to protect the privacy of my children as well as their birth parents. In this autoethnography, I aim to focus on my story while allowing my children and their birth parents the opportunity to have their story as their own.

an agency, we had a lot of paperwork to fill out. This paperwork was not only a background check, but we also discussed our lifestyles and what we thought parenthood would be like for us. Once the paperwork was done, social workers came to do home visits. During these visits, we went over our paperwork and discussed what we would be open to in terms of adoption. This can lead to difficult conversations about what you, as an adoptive parent, are willing to accept regarding race and ethnicity, attitudes toward a known or unknown birth father, your willingness for an open adoption, and thoughts on drug use during pregnancy. Lastly, you need to create an adoption book. This book is what is shown to the birth parents, which highlights the life that we have and helps the birth parent envision what the child's life will be like. The adoption book includes information on the adoptive parents individually, their parenting philosophy, and their friends and community. Once everything is done, the adoptive parents are put on a list. Sometimes, they will also work with other agencies as secondary agencies to expand the number of birth mothers who might see their book. To build our family, we went with an agency in a state other than ours for both of our adoptions.

When a birth parent(s) is interested in putting their child up for adoption, there are several ways they find an agency. This includes internet searches or recommendations from friends, families, or professionals, either before or after the child is born. Once the birth parent(s) contacts an agency, a social worker talks with the birth mother to learn about their background as well as what they are looking for in an adoptive parent(s). The social worker will, based on this conversation, show the birth parent several adoption books. The birth parent(s) will choose an adoptive parent based on the books provided (or they may ask for additional books if they do not connect with any of the parents provided). If possible, the birth and adoptive parents will meet either by phone or in person before the baby is born. This is not always possible, as sometimes the birth parents make the decision once the baby is born.

After the baby is born, it will go to the adoptive parent(s). That said, the birth parent may still decide to parent instead of giving the child to the adoptive parent(s). Before we had our first child, we were matched with a birth parent for three months. Following the birth of her child, she decided she wanted to parent instead of putting her child up for adoption. That was certainly her right, but for us, it was tragic. We, as potential adoptive parents preparing for three months, felt a loss. We spent time mourning the fact that we weren't going to be parents and the life we would not have with that baby. Two days later, our agency informed us of another baby who was just born and the mother thought we would be perfect parents for this child. We traveled across the state and, the next day, we met our son for the first time. In comparison, for our second child, the birth mother was very clear that adoption was the best choice for her, and once my daughter was born, the adoptive mother immediately called us saying, "Your daughter is born," and handed us our daughter as soon as she could.

Once the adoptive parent(s) has the child, there is still a revocation period where the birth parent(s) can change their mind. That period is different in each state and can last from four days to thirty days. For us, it was an incredibly tense time as we waited but continued to bond with our child. If the adoptive parent is adopting in a state different from where they live, once they have the baby, they can go home once paperwork between the state the baby is born and the state that the parents live in is completed,

also known as the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), which can take anywhere from a few days to a month. For our first child, it was only four days, while for our second, it took two weeks.

Lastly, there is finalization, which can be complicated. For my second child, finalization included two lawyers and three adoption agencies from two different states to complete. Before finalization, the adoptive parents are considered foster parents, and the adoption agency is the legal guardian of the child. The finalization is usually a mere formality. But for many families, mine included, it is both a huge relief and a day that is celebrated yearly. It means that the adoptive parent(s) finally become the legal parent(s) and they are now legally a family.

Adoption is a complicated and emotional process for both the birth and the adoptive parents. As this is a short autoethnography, it only scratches the surface of the process. There are many stories; stories of adoptive parents, birth parents, professionals within the adoption process, and most importantly, stories of children who have been adopted. To create an honest, useful, and representative discussion within the field of nonprofit studies, all of these perspectives need to be taken into account. By seeing private adoption through the multifaceted lenses, we can start to explore the complex ethics that nonprofit adoption agencies, as well as all nonprofit organizations, need to consider in their field.

Ethics and Issues in Private Adoption

As ethics is one of the main pillars of public administration and nonprofit studies (Meyer et al., 2022a; 2022b), it is important to explore how ethics plays a role in private adoption. While there is a growing literature around adoption, ethics is not always central (Koh & Reamer, 2021). To create an ethical adoption process, there should be a focus on the protection of the most vulnerable in the situation, nonjudgemental respect, good faith agreements between the adoptive and birth parents, and honesty (Reamer & Siegal, 2007). This means an acknowledgement of the power dynamics that exist between an agency, birth parent(s), and adoptive parent(s) and creating policies and procedures which support all parties in an ethical manner.

Transracial adoption, which is when one of the parents are of a different race than the child being adopted, represents over 50% of all adoptions in the United States (Pinderhuges et al., 2021). There have been many books (e.g., Hall & Steinberg, 2013; Roodra, 2015) and articles (Boiven & Hassan, 2015; Castner, & Foli, 2022; Luyt et al., 2021; Samuels, 2022) exploring transracial adoption, meaning there are fertile avenues for the field of nonprofit studies to better understand the impacts of transracial adoption. Considering the complex ethics involved in transracial adoptions, public administration should consider how to guide nonprofits through public programs and policy making. This includes making sure that transracial parents are prepared for supporting the needs of their family (Goldberg et al., 2016). Research on transracial adoption is limited and mostly focuses on the adoptive parents (Luyt et al, 2021). Though adoption is sometimes identified as a trauma (see also Brodinsky et al., 2022, and Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016, for views of trauma in adopted children), Samuels (2022) suggested that transracial adoptees may have unique traumas from the injustices which come at the intersection of "adoptee" and "mixed race."

There are also legal aspects to consider around transracial adoption, specifically concerning the adoption of Native American children due to the history of

Native American children being stolen from their homes and given to White families (Haskins & Jacobs, 2002; Jones et al., 2008). Due of the Indian Child Welfare Act, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Haaland v. Brackeen* (2022), when children with Native American birth parents are up for adoption, preference will be given to Native Americans from the child's tribe or Native Americans in general (National Indian Law Library, n.d.).

Understanding the ethics of adoption is an important route for nonprofit studies. Ethics is a central part of our field; when exploring the field of adoption, we should be no different. As mentioned in the introduction to this special issue (Irizarry et al., 2025), when talking about adoption within marginalized communities, there are unique ethical issues to consider. In this article, we explored specifically transracial adoptions, but the ethics of working with LGBTQIA+ adoptees or adoptive parents, individuals with disabilities, children with special needs, or single parents, among other communities, may lead to a more fully thought out and representative literature around adoption and nonprofit studies. Creating an ethical framework means that nonprofit studies should critically examine what adoption means and exploring best practices have been identified in fields like social work (e.g., Featherstone et al., 2018) and nursing (Castner & Foli, 2022). The unique experiences of adoptees should be central to the conversation of managing organizations which facilitate adoptions and work with adoptive parents, birth families, and adoptees.

Continuing the Discussion

This essay, and this special issue in general, is not meant to be an be-all, end-all around foster care and adoption. Instead, it is aiming to start a much-needed conversation, especially amongst those working in adoption (Featherstone et al., 2018; Featherstone & Gupta, 2020). Nonprofit studies can fill a niche in adoption studies by exploring the unique needs of the management of adoption agencies and service delivery to adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth families at various stages of the adoption process. Considering the focus on ethics within nonprofit studies with conflicting stakeholders (e.g., Chapman et al., 2025), the field has a lot of opportunities to shine light on the ways that adoption agencies are managed. Building a future research agenda can include many avenues including:

- **Ethics in adoption:** Nonprofit studies can explore the unique ways that adoption agencies manage the complex ethical issues which are inherent in the adoption system. Bringing a nonprofit management approach, nonprofit studies can support the models of adoption ethics.
- **Race in adoption:** Much has been explored about the complexities of transracial adoptions (Bolvin & Hassan, 2015; Pinderhughes et al, 2025). Nonprofit studies can continue to build on the understanding of the complexities of how race impacts adoptive families. Building on the guidance for transracial adoptive families (e.g. Hall & Steinberg, 2013; Roodra, 2015), nonprofit studies can help provide nonprofits with tools on supporting transracial families. Though not always at the forefront of nonprofit studies (davis & Chikoto-Shultz, 2025), having honest conversations about race within adoption can help create a stronger perspective from nonprofit studies into adoption management and lead to better outcomes for all of the parties being supported.

- **Support for adoptees:** Nonprofits can explore how to support adoptees, both adoptive nonprofits and all nonprofits which work with children in general. As most adoptions in the United States are open, understanding the way that openness impacts adoptees (e.g., Nelson et al., 2025) can help build supports and services that go beyond adoption agencies.

These are just a few avenues which are available for the future of the intersection of adoption and nonprofit studies. By building up a research agenda around adoption, nonprofit studies can merge our interdisciplinary perspective on nonprofit management and ethics to provide unique perspectives on supporting adoption organizations, professionals, and families.

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Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2026-13475
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 107–116

My Journey Through Child Welfare

From Sister to System Reformer

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Abstract

This autoethnographic manuscript traces the author's lifelong journey through the U.S. child welfare system—from growing up as a sister in a foster family to becoming a system reformer shaping state policy and practice. Drawing on decades of professional experience in county and state child welfare administration, the narrative foregrounds connections—to family, kin, place, culture, and story—as both a personal lifeline and an ethical cornerstone for child welfare and nonprofit practice. Through concrete initiatives such as "The Adoption Option," "Families for Kids," and statewide Family Finding, the manuscript illustrates how centering children's relational ties can transform foster care, adoption, and permanency planning away from practices that sever identity toward approaches that honor belonging, openness, and children's voice in their own journeys. Interweaving intimate stories of love and loss with reflections on policy debates, organizational culture, and collaboration between governments and nonprofits, the piece advances practice-oriented recommendations for expanding adoptive eligibility, elevating lived experience in leadership, and designing child welfare systems that treat connection—not removal, compliance, or data systems—as the guiding principle for decisions affecting children and families.

Keywords: *Foster care and adoption, nontraditional partners and providers, collaboration, connections*

Introduction

From growing up as a sister to more than 70 foster youth and throughout my long career in child welfare working with children and families to creating state programs, I have learned a lot about the ways in which we can better support those who are impacted by the system. Below is my story. Based on my personal and professional

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experiences, I make recommendations throughout this story about how nonprofits and governments can better support the child welfare community.

Beginnings

I was born in a small village of about one thousand people in New York State (NYS) in the 1940s. I lived with my mother, father, and grandmother in a small farmhouse on a dairy farm. I had two biological siblings, my brother, Howard, and my sister, Shirley. After World War II, child welfare experts advocated for family care over orphanages for children, as orphanages were known to be damaging to child development. Hence, when I was five years old, my mother and father became a foster family, bringing 70 foster children into our home through the early 1980s.

At first, we fostered primarily adolescents whose parents visited them at our farm. Later on, we cared for newborn infants who came to stay with us awaiting adoption. Of these 70 children, we adopted two: my brother, Robert, and my sister, Bobbi Jo. And so, I grew up with a kaleidoscope of siblings of all ages, intellectual capacity, and interests. I, myself, excelled in school, and prepared to go to college with the thought of becoming an archeologist, but . . . While I majored in English in college preparing to be an educator, one of a very few professions opened to women in the 20th mid-century, I quickly realized that teaching was not for me. After graduation, I got a job teaching English to 7th and 8th graders in Upstate New York. I did love the children in my classes but really disliked the work. Every day, I gave the students writing assignments, and every night I had to review and grade their papers! So, in the spring of 1969, I resigned from my teaching job and got a job at Livingston County Department of Social Services as a caseworker, drawing on my experience as a member of a foster family. My assignment was recruiting foster families in the Nunda-Portageville region. My career as a public service worker in child welfare began.

I continued to stay in touch with all of Mom and Dad's foster children. With one it was love at first sight: DEBBIE. Debbie was placed with my parents as a two-month-old foster child, I absolutely fell in love with her. I wanted to adopt her, but public policy at the time regarding ability of divorced individuals to adopt, and my divorce from my husband James made me unacceptable as an adoptive parent. It was not until the 21st century that the child welfare system accepted different types of family configurations, including single men and women, as adoptive parents. Debbie was placed for adoption in 1973. Immediately and coincidentally, I was promoted to Livingston County Director of Services. The work helped to distract me from my sadness.

Recommendation 1: Governments and nonprofits should work with families that are often considered non-traditional (those who are not in an opposite-sex, married dyad) to explore how these families can be included as foster and adoptive parents and the training needed to bring diverse families into the foster care system.

Before turning to the broader reforms and activities that helped me forge my career, there is one small boy whose presence still guides my choices. The following poem, "Crystal Blue Eyes," captures how his gaze became a guiding image for my life in child welfare and my resolve to keep children and families at the center of every decision.

CRYSTAL-BLUE EYES
BY LINDA KURTZ

His eyes stayed with me
For a very long time.

The little boy with crystal blue eyes first looked up at me with tears tracing down his cheeks.

"Kenny," I spoke to him softly. But he rolled over to avoid contact and instead wanted to cuddle with our half-collie/half German shepherd named Boy. Boy proved to be a magnet for our foster children when they first arrived in foster care and needed a sense of safety.

I stood and watched Kenny settle down,
then finally,
fall asleep on the big, gentle dog.

About three months later, when I was at school,

Kenny's Mama showed up to take him home.

I never saw him again.
But how I worried! Kenny had come to us because he had been maltreated at home. Had his mother been sufficiently helped? Would Kenny now be safe?
And grow up a healthy child?

When I became an adult and had the opportunity to make a difference on behalf of children like Kenny,
I often caught Kenny's eyes staring up at me,
Glaring when my strategy seemed to not be on a path that would really help,
Shining with approval when I got it right.

As I write this,
I am reminded
how frequently one child can touch your heart,
and demand that you follow a challenging path until
you achieve the goal.

Ah, Kenny's blue eyes are more than just a reminder;

They call to me to do my best,

my very best,

On behalf of children and their families.

Thank you, Kenny. And all the Kenny's I met along the way.

Based on my aptitude for delivery of services to children and families, I was quickly promoted to supervisor of Child Welfare, then to Training Director, and then to Director of Social Services, under Commissioner Robert T. Fox, in Livingston County.

During my time in Livingston County, I had substantial contact with New York State's Department of Social Services (NYSDSS or DSS). When the State of New York had an opening for a new Regional Director in Region 2 (Rochester overseeing nine counties), the state officials I had worked with reached out to me. I was just not convinced this was the right move for me. I drove to the cemetery in Owego, where I

"talked" to SaSaNa Loft, the Native American girl who had a gravesite there and was my longstanding muse who often helped me create an atmosphere of acceptance and confidence. I prayed, I wrote in my journal, and I still didn't know what to do. I packed up to go home, and as I drove over the bridge that crosses the Susquehanna River, I felt the answer. I decided, "Yes."

And a week, later, I became a state employee!

Recommendation 2: More research and discussions can help us understand the unique relationships that nonprofits and governments have in foster care.

Scope of My Work: System Reform from Enforcement to Collaboration

I supervised the counties of Region 2: Monroe, Chemung, Steuben, Livingston, Ontario, Seneca, Schuyler, Yates, and Wayne, and the staff who were state representatives to those counties. In addition to working with state staff, I worked closely with the voluntary agencies that contracted with counties to provide preventive, domestic violence, foster care, and adoption services, including Hillside, St. Joseph Villa, Glovehouse, and Snell Farms.

The county DSS provided casework to families and children where the child was neglected or abused and needed to be placed in foster care or had been in foster care and "freed for adoption;" they did the necessary work of adoption services. While the term "freed for adoption" is rightly bothersome to many given its linguistic ties to slavery and property, the term is a legal term that indicates the biological parent(s) have gone through a legal process that removes their permanent rights as legal guardian. My job was to set standards for good child welfare work, train staff in the necessary skills, monitor their practice, and help them improve where necessary.

While quite a bit of administrative work came with this new position, there was also an opportunity to set new standards for child welfare casework to better service children and parents. In addition, there was oversight of individual cases, particularly in crisis situations. For example, when a child living in an institution was abused, I supervised IAB (institutional abuse) staff who investigated the report. And when a child in Region 2 died, and the death was suspected of being at the hands of their parents, I supervised Fatality Review staff who investigated the county DSS who investigated the child's fatality.

The previous Regional Director had seen his role as one of *enforcement* of policies and procedures. But given my previous experience as a child welfare worker and my experiences growing up in a home with foster children, I saw the role of the state with the counties and voluntary agencies as one of *collaboration.* I strove to have my Regional Office work with the county DSS and voluntary agencies to assess their performance, create a plan to improve where necessary, monitor their implementation of the plan, and assess the results together, collaboratively. In addition, I helped the county DSS and voluntary agencies collaborate with each other through an effort I created, "Joint Planning," where I facilitated monthly meetings with Directors of Services and CEOs of voluntary agencies. During these meetings we communicated with each other about shared needs, shared problems, and children in the custody of DSS who needed immediate attention. This model became quite celebrated across the state. Looking back, I strongly believe my facilitation skills and commitment to collaboration were part of the reason for our success.

Recommendation 3: Future work in nonprofit studies can explore ways that collaboration between foster care agencies and families can improve supports and services for children.

Connections: Broadening the Impact of My Work

Several years on, I was asked by the OCFS Associate Commissioner of Child Welfare to move to Albany and become a Bureau Chief, supervising the five regional directors of the five regional offices! I needed to decide what to do. I went to the Glen Iris Inn in Letchworth State Park and spent the afternoon lying on the hill above the falls, pondering, as is my practice when contemplating a new move: "Linda, find a quiet space and meditate on the choice facing me. Suddenly a crow flew overhead." He said to me, "TIME TO GO." And I got up, packed up my journal, and drove home to type a note to the Associate Commissioner to tell her YES and ask when did I need to start.

Arriving in Albany to begin my new position, I quickly became acquainted with a variety of state actors in the child welfare system. Some were good and caring individuals, some lacked leadership skills, and most were very kind. Others were precise regarding the approaches we should take and were excellent administrators. One in particular impressed upon me, quite frankly demanded of us all, that we work together to better serve the minority populations in foster care.

Given my background and life experiences, I began speaking out about the direction of policy for families and children. Given that I was in an operational position, those in the policy office felt I was crowding in on their territory. However, my observation was that most in this office had zero experience in the field and had little understanding of the issues faced by families we served. Further, most county DSS administrators applauded my ideas and the new direction I was advocating for. I was seen as a person who had experienced the child welfare system firsthand as part of a foster family caring for these youth, a perspective that was and remains unique. And this was when I began drafting position papers, not only for state administrators, but for elected legislative leaders as well. And I began to meet with members of the NYS legislature advocating for the following:

1. Being able to use extended family and neighbors to provide care for children when they needed to be removed from their parents for reasons of neglect or abuse.
2. Keeping children in foster care within their own neighborhood, so that they would feel *connected* with their community.
3. Placing siblings together when they came into foster care to keep as much of the family together as possible.
4. Giving foster parents ten-day notice when a child was leaving their home to facilitate sufficient time and preparation for what follows next in ways that ease the continued transition.
5. Keeping an original birth certificate open for adult adoptees, so they could know who they are. Open meaning that the adoptive couple knew the birth mother and vice versa. For additional discussion on the ethics of adoption, open adoptions, and adoptee experiences, see Meyer (2025) and Nelson et al. (2025) in this special issue.

The universal need for *connections* became my underlying theme. Imagine my chagrin when New York State decided to implement an electronic case record named Connections. It became a hateful name of a hateful case record that took too much casework time away from children and families.

But to me, connections has always meant being connected to your family of origin, being connected to your neighborhood, to your school or place of employment, to your extended family—to your *Ohana* (Hawaiian concept) or your "kin," to your ancestors and their story. In order to have a complete sense of self and be able to accept new family and friends throughout a child's life, it was necessary to provide connections for those who came into the care of the state. My understanding of connections became my driving force in preventive services, child protective treatment, foster care services, after-care services, adoption services, and independent living services. And before too long, connections became a central theme of the foster care system— both family care and group care—as well as child protective services and after care.

The Adoption Option: Families for Kids

I was working closely with a state employee who had close connections to the Cuomos (Mario Cuomo was governor at the time). He became troubled by how many children were in foster care awaiting adoption. During this same time, I had begun meeting with prospective adoptive parents who complained about how difficult public agencies made the adoptive process. We began to strategize on the systemic changes that were needed to bring about much needed reform.

I brought to our "planning discussion" my growing concern about how our NYS adoptive process asked our children to sever their ties to their connections, and "be born" on the date of their adoptive placement (no matter how old they were and how long they had known and even lived with their family of origin and/or extended family or kin). Shortly thereafter, I appointed him supervisor of the adoption unit. One day we were relaxing in Letchworth State Park—I needed to find a space where I could contemplate steps that needed to be taken—and we talked about our shared experiences and concerns including his experience with adoptees coming to him to learn about their birth families, and about their birth siblings—most importantly, we discussed solutions! We wrote our Plan down and named it "The Adoption Option." One new step was to involve "freed for adoption" children to participate in their own search for an adoptive family.

We needed to "sell" our idea to our own OCFS administration and to the NYS legislature. We decided to ask Mrs. Matilda Cuomo, first lady of the State of New York, to be the point person for our Adoption Option album, featuring pictures of and statements by NYS "freed-for-adoption" children. Knowing the Cuomos personally, the head of my adoption unit arranged a meeting for us with Mrs. Cuomo. She took a shine to me and with my personal story about growing up as a biological child in a foster family that for two of the children became an adoptive family.

In a short while, the Kellogg Foundation approached NYS with an offer to give us a substantial amount of money if we improved our child welfare system. We asked Mrs. Cuomo to submit our Adoption Option. She re-named it "Families for Kids" and asked me to serve as Project Director. We met with adoption agencies, units, and staff, adoptive families and birth families, and adoptive youth and adult adoptees across NYS

to ask them to speak to what would improve our efforts to connect all "freed" children with a family of their own and support adoptive families once the children are placed.

Adult adoptees, adoptive families, birth parents, and adoption staff heard that we were creating a plan to improve adoptive services in NYS based on their input, and they began calling to request meetings with me and tell their story. Thus, we won the Kellogg Foundation approval for our "Families for Kids" plan.

Then the gubernatorial election was held, November 1994. Mario Cuomo ran, and … lost. The Kellogg Foundation withdrew their funds and support.

Governor Pataki withdrew the governor's support for our plan. And I was asked to wrap up my work as Project Director. We had begun the work of the Adoption Option/Families for Kids, and now we needed to discontinue our work.

A Surprise Awaits! But instead, our work had taken hold in the county DSS and voluntary agencies. We were asked by them to continue implementation in a collaborative style with adult adoptees, "freed for adoption" youth, adoptive families, birth parents, foster families, county DSS, and voluntary agencies that provided child welfare services. Our "assignment" had become a statewide "movement."

Family Finding

One day I was watching CNN, and Leslie Stahl interviewed Kevin Campbell. He had developed an approach to connections he called Family Finding. I was intrigued by what I heard and invited him to come to New York State and present on his initiative. He promised each child who had become estranged from their family or roots to reconnect them. As a result, NYSOCFS committed to develop a statewide plan, county by county, utilizing a Family Finding approach.

We decided we needed to work with a Voluntary Agency that would develop Family Finding expertise and then provide statewide training to county DSS and their voluntary agencies that they contracted with to provide child welfare services. OCFS chose Hillside to develop a training curriculum and develop the expertise needed so that training would lead to organizational change and, ultimately, to improved casework practice that successfully created family finding in the lives of the children they served.

I wanted to play a central role in the development of the training curriculum and implementation of organizational change to positively impact casework practice. Accordingly, I retired from NYSOCFS in May of 2010 and was hired by Hillside Family of Agencies. I began working with Hillside and their contract agency to develop a "Training to Practice" curriculum that translated staff training into concrete changes in day-to-day casework. I worked at Hillside as Senior Fellow of Family Finding from 2010–2013. Knowing that family connectedness is key to the healthy development of children, the program focused on making sure that youth in out-of-home placements did not lose their connections to family members and other supportive adults. We developed a pathway to permanency in six steps: Discovery, Engagement, Blended Perspective, Decision Making, Evaluation, and Follow-Up Supports (Family Finding, n.d.).

After this assignment, I began doing independent consulting, most notable being work with Hawaii on assessing and improving their child welfare system in 2014.

Recommendation 4: Nonprofit studies can explore policies on how to create a balance between adoption and keeping individual and familial identities for foster children who are free for adoption.

Recommendation 5: Nonprofit studies, as an interdisciplinary field, can use research from social work, public administration, and psychology to help those working in foster care to create environments that better support the families with which they are working.

Loss Expands in my Life (and hurts more)

But as life does to all of us, I found myself dealing with many losses in my own family. Mom died September 8, 2001, her husband having predeceased her 17 years earlier. Her calling hours were on September 11, 2001, and her funeral September 12, 2001. My older brother Howard died on October 8, 2003. In 2017, my brother Rob, who lived in Austin, developed heart congestion. His cardiologist recommended a heart transplant, and in the meantime, a Ventricular Assist Device (VAD). In August, Rob entered St. David's Hospital to have it installed. His daughter Monica and I waited there for word of his surgery. Twenty-five days later, Rob passed away. It was time to stop being employed and focus on family and myself. With no restrictions from work obligations, I began to reflect on where I "belonged." I moved to Connecticut to be near my adopted sister, Bobbie Jo, and her two adopted sons!

In my work with a Meditation Practitioner that I had found, he and I began to work on my sense of belonging. He planted the idea that, if I came full circle into an honest me, I can belong anywhere I am. And that the way to belong is through making and growing connections, with family, with friends, with neighborhoods, with places, with concepts, with being myself and being honest.

My mother and father had died, my brother Howard and my brother Rob had died, and my only remaining family were my sisters, Shirley and Bobbie Jo, and her two adopted sons. Yes! When my adopted sister grew up and became of child-bearing age, she and her husband decided they loved adoption. They adopted one newborn from Mexico and one African American. They embraced the concept of open adoption and became good friends with Juilan's "Mama Jen," and the power of connections bled throughout the family. Likewise, I continue to feel connectedness with my entire family—living and departed—in addition to often feeling Kenny's crystal blue eyes on my work—questioning, encouraging, insisting that I do better. Thus, the Linda who grew up on a dairy farm in southern New York State, graduated from a rural school with a class of only 30 children, mourned the loss of nearly 70 foster siblings and two brothers—one biological and one adoptive—and grieved her parents' deaths, became a true force for connections in New York State's child welfare system and, in the end, realized in her own life the power of those connections..

Although losing children was hard (my parents cared for 70 foster children who came to our home, and I had to grieve the loss of 68 of them), looking back I would not have lived my life any other way. My childhood created the Yellow Brick Road straight to my career in my adulthood, and my career was enriching and challenging and I was good at it. None of it was pre-planned, but rather happenstance.

My passionate belief in connections for all of us has come full circle, returning to my own life and asking me to do that which I believed in, taught to others, and advocated for throughout my entire career.

Recommendation 6: Nonprofit studies can use the life experiences of professionals and families (many of whom overlap) to create stronger supports for foster care agencies.

From Lived Experience to Leadership: A Call to Lead with Connections

My desire for this autoethnography is to convey the importance of deep, enduring connections—to family, kin, place, culture, and story—and its function as a personal lifeline and a necessary ethical foundation for child welfare policy and practice (see also Allen & Irizarry, 2025). My story highlights how growing up in a foster family, loving, and losing nearly 70 foster siblings, and grieving multiple family deaths transformed the Linda of today from "sister" to "system reformer." Involvement in the child welfare system can be rewarding in so many ways, including for those of us who get to grow our families and communities—and ultimately our holistic sense of self.

While everyone's path will be different, it is important to note that today's Linda is grounded in abstract child welfare policy debates AND in lived experience. A key lesson learned is that the child welfare systems must prioritize maintaining and rebuilding children's connections (to birth families, siblings, communities, and ancestry) rather than severing them in the name of safety or administrative efficiency. Concrete initiatives like "The Adoption Option," "Families for Kids," and statewide Family Finding are presented as examples of how centering connections can reshape adoption, permanency planning, and child welfare and human service casework practice.

Additionally, recall my experience with Debbie in 1973. While the work served as a helpful distraction from my sadness, from this experience, one practice proposal emerged: child welfare and adoption agencies should expand eligibility so that single adults and unmarried couples can be fully considered as adoptive parents when they can provide safe, loving, and stable homes for children. Unfortunately, not much change or progress in this area has been achieved in the U.S. child welfare system as of yet.

Finally, I share my story with readers to help them realize that rather than just critiquing practices that erase or hide children's origins (e.g., closed records, "born" at adoption) we can insist that identity, belonging, and psychological safety depend on honoring relational ties and giving children voice in their own permanency journeys (see Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry, 2025; Ruiz, 2025). My hope is that my story helps readers see the power of connections and encourages them to use their own lived experiences—their stories—to foster effective leadership in child welfare because that only grows from reflective attention to one's own attachments and losses. All readers should consider this story a call to design and lead child welfare systems that treat connection—not removal, compliance, or data systems—as the guiding principle for decisions affecting children and families.

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https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2026-13478
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 117–130

From System Budgets to Lived Bonds

Reimagining Nonprofit Education Through an Autoethnographic Journey in Three Acts of Care

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Abstract

This autoethnography examines the child welfare system, nonprofit leadership, and nonprofit education through a three-act narrative of foster care. Drawing on the author's roles as a public sector budget analyst, foster and adoptive parent, and scholar of nonprofit management, the manuscript explores how systems intended to protect children often reproduce harm through administrative burdens, fragmented accountability, and inequitable policy and service structures. Act One reflects on equity-oriented public budgeting and the central role of nonprofit organizations in preventive child welfare services. Act Two brings the system home, interrogating foster care, disability, and transracial adoption through an intersectional lens. Act Three situates these experiences within the evolution of nonprofit education, emphasizing critical pedagogy, reflexivity, and experiential knowledge. Together, the acts argue for reimagining nonprofit education and leadership as ethical praxis rooted in care, social equity, and lived experience, offering guidance for preparing future public and nonprofit leaders and educators to confront and transform systems of care.

Keywords: *Budgets, foster care and adoption, nonprofit education, ethics*

Introduction

I came to my co-editorship of this special issue as both an administrator in the child welfare system in New York and as a foster and adoptive mom. Many decades have passed since then, giving me time to reflect on my experiences and what I have

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learned. Understanding the foster care and adoption system requires an examination of the discordant goals of various stakeholders and its harmful impact on families and children. My perspective on the system is deeply informed by my lived experience. Hence the importance of this special issue focused on confronting systems of care and advancing nonprofit education, leadership, and praxis in child welfare systems (Irizarry et al., 2025) published as the journal completed its 15th year of circulation focused on meaningfully "bridg[ing] research and practice, elevat[ing] pedagogy, and strengthen[ing] leadership development across diverse organizational and cultural contexts" (Mirabella & Jeong, 2025, p. vii). In this autoethnography editorial, I use my story—presented as Acts of my lived experience—to self-reflect and explore the topic of foster care and adoption—with emphasis on the critical role of the nonprofit sector for this special issue of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership* (*JNEL*). My goal is to offer multiple and unique insider (and at times potentially outsider) perspectives, social critiques, and practical insights to help guide and inform the next generation of public service and nonprofit educators and leaders in the child welfare space.

Act 1: Budgets, Philosophy, and the Birth of a Public Service Career

After graduating from New York University with a master's degree in public administration, I applied and was hired for a position in the New York City's Office of Management and Budget as a Senior Budget Analyst in the Health and Welfare Task Force, responsible for the foster care and adoption budget, an issue area I knew virtually nothing about. Although the unit head who hired me was certain I would make significant contributions to the Task Force, she was concerned after a few months when all I was doing was reading and studying everything about the system I could get my hands on, while also gaining first-hand knowledge through meetings with various city, state, and nonprofit managers involved in the system. There was SO much to learn. (Later she told me she thought she had hired a dud!).

What my unit head came to understand is that the weeks I spent immersed in written material, reviewing previous foster care and adoption budgets, and perhaps most importantly, the long conversations I had with foster care administrators, nonprofit administrators—especially those affiliated with Council of Family and Child Care Agencies (COFCCA)—and advocates for families and children, formed the philosophical foundation for many budgets I would propose. Having become completely absorbed in the myriad policy issues related to foster care and adoption—including budgetary issues—I began crunching the numbers, which in those days meant creating hundreds of punch cards for all the foster care agencies under contract to determine current budget expenses and project future costs. At this time, New York City was still recovering from the financial crises that had almost sent it into bankruptcy. As a requirement of its bailout, the federal government mandated that NYC balance its budget through what we referred to as the PEG program, or the Program to Eliminate the Gap. Our task as budget analysts was to provide savings to Mayor Ed Koch that he could use to close the gap.

Having become quite familiar with the major issues around child protective services and the foster care system, and philosophically coming down squarely on the side

of those who felt that children were better served when they were able to live with their families rather than being place outside the home, I developed a program to provide preventive services to hundreds of families in the city as a way of preventing placement in foster care. While foster care was seen as a viable alternative to children remaining with their birth families in unhealthy environments (Dore & Kennedy, 1981), child welfare advocates during this time were beginning to question the potentially negative impact of removal from families on children (Bowlby, 1988; Geiser, 1973; Littner, 1956). It was becoming evident that the child welfare system, although seemingly established to serve the best interests of the child, was in fact working to the detriment of everyone, parents, children, and families. In their now classic work, Goldstein et al. (1984) recommended substituting "least detrimental alternative" moving "beyond the best interests of the child":

> The law ... is incapable of supervising the fragile, complex interpersonal bonds between child and parent. As parens patriae, the state is too crude an instrument to become an adequate substitute for flesh and blood parents. The legal system has neither the resources nor the sensitivity to respond to a growing child's ever-changing needs and demands. (p. 16)

Drawing on this philosophical approach, I successfully argued that by spending $10 million dollars in preventive services, the City would save over $40 million dollars over the next few years in foster care dollars while providing families with counseling and support services to create safe environments in the home for the growth and flourishment of children and their families. Mayor Koch endorsed the proposal, and my PEG was included in the 1984 budget. Most of the preventive service contracts offered in the community went to nonprofit organizations; in NYC, the vast majority of foster care and adoption services were provided by nonprofit organizations thus their also dominating service delivery in the foster care prevention space.

Also included in the 1985 budget was an increase of $7.5 million to hire 172 additional child-abuse social workers and additional instructional personnel for Special Services for Children (SSC), the division of the Human Resources Administration that oversaw the child welfare system. This proposal grew out of conversations I had with the administrators of SSC, who shared with me that the number of new cases being assigned to case workers was far more than the ideal number suggested by child welfare advocates. By listening, studying, and engagement, we were able to start creating programming and services for the children and families we serve that meet and focus on their wants, needs, and goals.

Interlude: Boarder Babies Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG)

During my initial months at the Office of Management and Budgeting (OMB), while struggling to understand the differences between Title IV-E and IV-A, and the distribution of foster care funding by the federal, state and city governments, my supervisor gave me a phone number and told me to call Mike P., the foster care analyst for New York State's Division of Family and Children's Services (NYSDFCS). Mike and I began to work together on our respective budgets, sharing information and figuring out expenditures in one area or another that would unexpectedly balloon. We noticed an increase in the foster care budget for payments to hospitals for "boarder babies,"

children living in hospitals for lack of foster home availability. Together we developed a PEG to move these children quickly out of hospitals and into homes, not only saving hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars, but more importantly providing those infants with safe loving homes as opposed to institutional care. Key to this PEG was increasing funds to nonprofit organizations to develop additional foster homes. The voluntary and charitable organizations in NYC and in many other states in the Northeast dominated the foster care, adoption, and preventive services spaces as they were providing these services BEFORE the creation of state central registries and child protective service programs (see Katz, 2023).

Intermission: Championing Preventive Services and Exiting OMB

In addition to my budget proposals, I used my budget position to advocate for preventive services for children in the judicial system. I was able to meet several judges to share the preventive service concept with them and explain the ways in which these services can be utilized to prevent out-of-home placement. After these conversations and upon our return to the courtroom, I was elated to hear the judges asking caseworkers, during hearings, if preventive services had been provided to the family!

While at OMB, I successfully convinced the organization to champion various budget proposals, several which resulted in being added to the Mayor's budget for the year. Upon leaving OMB after a two-year stint to take an academic position, the Deputy in charge of the unit commented on my unique ability to add staff and significant resources to the budget I oversaw, as it was in sharp contrast to the proposals of others in my unit all of whom had proposed cuts to their budgets.

While back then, such a strategy might have been unheard of or considered to be an idealistic academic exercise of idealism, in today's contemporary literature such budgeting strategies may be seen and studied in a growing body of work under the umbrella of social equity budgeting that emphasizes not just outcomes and quality, but also processes and access (see Afshan, 2026; Bartle & Rubin, 2024; Martínez Guzmán et al., 2025; McDonald et al., 2024; McDonald & McCandless, 2025; Rubin et al., 2024; Wei, 2025), including calls for cross-sector collaborations (Lee, 2024). A related advancement in the realm of public budgeting is growing interest in and use of participatory budgeting which is designed to foster fairness, access, quality, and just outcomes for marginalized communities through increased civic engagement where the voices of residents are sought, heard, and hopefully meaningfully considered and applied to budgetary and policy decision making (see Kuenneke & Scutelnicu, 2021; Taylor et al., 2025).

Act 2: Bringing the System Home: Mothering, Disability, and Transracial Adoption

As a dedicated public servant at OMB I, like many, worked tirelessly and met and got to work with so many amazing individuals. Notably, one friendship—with Mike at NYSDFCS—blossomed into a romance as we began dating after I left. We married shortly thereafter, and I moved to upstate New York with Mike and his two young children. At the time I dropped everything to focus on family, which led to a brief intermission from employment as I engaged in a journey of self-discovery with my family

and explored opportunities of interest consistent with my public service motivation to help others in meaningful ways. Shortly thereafter, while scanning the newspaper for a job, which is how we used to find employment in those days, I came across an article in the *Albany Times Union* titled, "Families Needed for 'Boarder Babies' Diocese to Help Neglected Infants" (Haddad, 1987). I immediately called Mike and told him that although my job search had not yet been successful, I had found a baby!

Shortly after reading the article in the *Albany Times Union*, Mike and I applied for approval as foster parents through a nonprofit organization, Community Maternity Services (CMS). Three months later, Lee joined our family after spending the first 14 months of her life as a boarder baby in a Brooklyn hospital. We adopted Lee shortly thereafter, though to be honest, the process was not really that short. Between all the required paperwork, psychiatric evaluations, and myriad obstacles presented by the system, she was six years old before the adoption was finalized. Such a short word count cannot completely convey the impact of such systems of care that impose administrative burdens on all involved from the child, to their biological parents and families, to those fostering and potentially adopting those children (but three manuscripts in this special issue expose and address some of the complexities and burdens involved, see DeMasters et al., 2025; Meyer, 2025; Nelson et al., 2025).

Upon receiving approval as foster parents, CMS presented us with a list of babies who were being brought to the Albany area for fostering. Long an advocate for placing foster children in their own communities to keep them in familiar environments (i.e., home, family, friends, schools, etc.), Mike and I struggled with the realization that we would be moving Lee far away from her relatives. However, two weeks before Lee was placed with us, she was sent to a foster group home. As a baby with Down syndrome, Lee was considered an "exceptional" or "special needs" foster care child who would be difficult to place in a foster home. This label reflected a broader reality in the child welfare system—that unfortunately persists today—where youth with disabilities are both overrepresented and at heightened risk for maltreatment, placement disruptions, and unmet needs compared to their nondisabled peers (Children's Rights, 2006; Lightfoot et al., 2011; Platt & Gephart, 2022). For better or worse, I believe Lee's placement with us offered more safety and stability—and loving environment—than a group facility would have provided when she was a toddler—especially given her unique needs. Research shows that children with intellectual and developmental disabilities often experience more severe maltreatment and longer stays in care when systems do not provide stable, well supported family placements (Dion et al., 2018; Shapiro, 2018).

Interlude: Intimate Acts of Care at Home Negotiating Race, Disability, and Motherhood

Through the years as Lee's mom, there have been quite a few rationalizations about bringing home and adopting a child with an intellectual disability. Obviously the first one was "of course she would be better off with us than living her life in a group facility," where she was headed before we became her foster parents. Other rationalizations pertained to bringing an African American child into a white family. As Lee grew, I became more aware that her race, disability, and status in foster care were not separate issues but intersecting identities that shaped how others saw and treated her.

Society can be unrelentingly cruel when it doesn't understand or lacks empathy rather than being supportive and attempting to understand. These ideas were not abstract to me; they showed up in our daily lives. Countless scowls, looks, stares, critiques, and much worse were directed at my child, at me, and at our family. Ultimately, Lee held multiple, intersecting identities. She was a newborn in foster care (a boarder baby—relinquished by her birth mother to the hospital) who had been voluntarily separated from her family of birth, a child with an intellectual disability (Down syndrome), and a Black girl being raised in an Italian/Irish/German white family. In those moments, I sensed the weight of her multiple identities and how others' reactions to her race, disability, and foster-care status converged, even if I did not yet have the words "intersectionality" or "multiple jeopardy" to name what we were living. I often felt that I was failing at being a good parent even as I was learning, growing, and loving as a parent to four children—one of whom was my wonderfully unique daughter with a disability. At the same time, I was trying to raise her in ways that were culturally sensitive and responsive so that she could know and embrace all her social and cultural identities as she desired. Over time, I came to understand that in the child welfare system—just like in society as a whole—these overlapping social identities and group memberships often stack the odds against children like Lee, creating "multiple jeopardy" in which negative outcomes are not merely additive but exponentially multiplied (Settles & Buchanan, 2014).

One particular struggle involved learning to care for someone with needs different from mine or their siblings, like maintaining and managing their hair. With little community support at the time for culturally diverse families, part of the struggle revolved around, perhaps a self-imposed critique of not feeling that I wasn't able to always be a good parent or not being able to get—what at the time I might have felt like an easy thing—hair care, maintenance, and styling—right. It felt like sometimes it didn't matter what else was going right, how happy and healthy my daughter was, how happy and healthy we all were as part of a loving family, or what we did as parents to support the growth and development of our children. Consequently, at some point, I rationalized that all the demanding work my family and I were doing to provide Lee with strong educational programs to help her thrive mattered more than conforming to others' expectations of how her hair or appearance 'should' look. I told myself that if she were loved, learning, included, and happy, then maybe it was acceptable if I could not always get her hair care, maintenance, and styling right.

When we moved to New Jersey in the early 1990s, I researched all the school districts in the state providing the best programs in inclusive education for children with disabilities. When we settled on and moved into the Somerset Hills School District in the suburbs of New Jersey, where only 1% of the population was African American, I rationalized that Lee's being included in a regular classroom was more important than her being in a racially diverse classroom. Looking back, I see how I framed these choices as either–or: academic inclusion versus racial and cultural belonging, hair care versus access to services. I did the best I knew how at the time, yet I now recognize that these rationalizations also reflected the limits of my own understanding and the pressures of parenting in systems that rarely made space for both disability-affirming supports and racial/cultural affirmation.

In making these choices, I was also navigating a child welfare landscape in which children from racially and ethnically minoritized communities are perpetually overrepresented in care and too often placed in homes that do not reflect their cultural or racial backgrounds—a pattern documented not only in the United States but in other countries such as Canada (Daniel, 2011; Francis et al., 2023). These broader histories of racism, colonialism, and ongoing debates over laws like the Indian Child Welfare Act—and recent rulings such as *Haaland v. Brackeen* affirming that Native children should not be unjustly separated from their families or communities—underscore how transcultural and transracial placements can both offer safety and introduce additional layers of trauma and identity complexity that require intentional, sustained ethical reflection (Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2023). And these rationalizations have continued as Lee has become an adult requiring different types of care. In short, in this season of our lives, the everyday decisions about hair, schools, and neighborhoods became sites where Lee's race, disability, and foster-care history—and our family's holistic identity and status—collided, forcing me to confront how often I was asked—implicitly and explicitly—to prioritize one part of Lee's identity (and by extension our family's identity) over another.

At the same time, Lee's story is only one example within a much larger system that still struggles to provide culturally grounded, disability-affirming support for transcultural, transracial, and blended families. Additional analytical-interpretive reflections addressing similar and related topics are provided in this special issue from the lived experience perspective of authors. For instance, informed by their involvement with the child welfare system, Allen and Irizarry (2025) present a book review of Robert's (2022) book, *Torn Apart*; Irizarry (2025d) elucidates how his identities as a Latino, neurodivergent, and LGBT+ community member significantly shaped his experiences in care; Ruiz (2025) details his experience as a Latino foster child, guardian of a sibling in care, and professional experience as a social worker shape his experience; while Berry-James' (2025) shares her experience as a youth kidnapped and taken out of her home country only to return and find that while there was no place like home, the system determines what "home" actually means in practice irrespective of the voices and perspectives of those impacted. Kurtz's (2025) manuscript highlights how privilege and status prevent those who are capable, knowledgeable, and willing to care for those in need are barred from doing so because of their status as being single or divorced, while Meyer (2026) highlights how the status of being married may be overshadowed and restricted by other identities such as heteronormative affirming standards and norms.

Nevertheless, some promising developments—including greater attention to ethics in adoption, more intentional preparation of foster and adoptive parents for multicultural family life, and emerging practices that center children's voices and identities—offer models for how agencies and nonprofit partners can better honor family diversity and promote belonging (see DeMasters et al., 2025; Meyer, 2025; Nelson et al., 2025). The manuscripts in this special issue, including Meyer's (2025) work on the ethics of adoption and Nelson and colleagues' (2025) analysis of adoption practices, further illuminate several remaining gaps and the possibilities for more just and culturally responsive systems of care.

Act 3: From Practitioner to Professor: Mapping Nonprofit Education

While raising Lee and the rest of our children together with my husband, I embarked on my second act as a professor of public administration and nonprofit management. I am currently an associate professor of Public Administration at Kean University, involved in research on philanthropy, nonprofit education, and critical perspectives on nonprofit organizing. I have edited and co-edited multiple volumes including the *Handbook of Critical Perspectives on Nonprofit Organizing and Voluntary Action* (Mirabella et al., 2024) serving as one of the first of its kind in the field to survey discipline specific critical scholarship and *Reframing Nonprofit Organizations: Democracy, Inclusion and Social Change* (Eikenberry et al., 2019, 2025), that substantively provided the discipline's first critical perspective on nonprofit administration.

In addition to working on edited volumes, some of my key scholarship in the field involved initiating efforts to map out the inception, growth, development, and impact of university-based educational programs of undergraduate and graduate nonprofit management and philanthropic studies (Brunt et al., 2020; Dolch et al., 2007; Mirabella, n.d.; Mirabella et al., 2019a, 2019b; Mirabella et al., 2021; Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella et al., 2007; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011; Mirabella & Eikenberry, 2017a, 2017b; Mirabella & Hoefer, 2023; Mirabella & Hoffman, 2023; Mirabella & McDonald, 2012; Mirabella & Nguyen, 2019; Mirabella & Wish, 1999, 2000, 2001; Mirabella & Young, 2012) and as many of our readers may be aware this scholarship subsequently led to the development of a companion nongovernmental organization database for global education programs.

With more than 1,700 citations to my works in Google Scholar (to date), my work has had a significant impact in multiple disciplines including nonprofits, social work, public administration, and public service. For example, my works (i.e., Mirabella et al., 2023; Sandberg et al., 2019) have recently been utilized in Appendix A: Implicit Bias and Implications for Social Equity: A Reflexive Written Activity (Irizarry, 2026a) and Appendix C: Reflexive, Mindfulness-Based, Social Equity Learning Activity: Multimedia Expression and Communication Connecting Historical, Political, and Societal Topics with Art, Music, and Public Service (Irizarry, 2026b) in the edited volume, *Public Administration, Civic Engagement, and Spanish-Speaking Communities* (Irizarry, 2026c), to supplement their engagement with implicit association tests and mindfully reflect on their results with an eye toward public service leadership development and public and nonprofit education.

Finally, it is impossible to articulate the roles, involvement, and impacts of my scholarship over time, nor to recognize all whom have cited my works directly or been indirectly influenced by it, but it is important to note that with this autoethnographic manuscript, and those contained in this special issue, readers should know that they can use their voice in all spaces and places—and that includes legitimately in research that is meaningful to them and may at times even use, rely on, and/or comment on their lived experiences. Accordingly, I see the works discussed in this act as reconnecting me to my "first act" as a public and nonprofit administrator, helping build the nonprofit field in the process. While not specifically focused on nonprofit foster care and adoption organizations, I believe my work in this regard helped to lead the way for nonprofit studies, including child welfare organizations, to flourish.

The Current Act: Looking Back, Acting Forward in Child Welfare and Nonprofit Education

When José and Seth approached me about this special themed issue, I was quite excited to re-engage in the policy issues concerning families and children, foster care, and adoption. Collaborating on this issue with them has clearly provided me with an opportunity to bring together the varied roles I have played in my life, particularly now as I have begun my third act at Kean University. My previous roles as nonprofit worker, child welfare budget and policy analyst, foster parent, adoptive parent, and professor, together with my scholarship in nonprofits, pedagogy, social equity and critical perspectives can now be employed to advocate for children and families negatively impacted by the child welfare system and work together with the scholarly, policy and advocacy community to create the system anew. In doing so, I join my co-editors in using our lived experience and positionality as a form of "street knowledge" that can inform the theory, practice, and teaching of child welfare and public service (Philips, 2025). By situating personal lived experience within nonprofit education and leadership development (Blessett, 2018; Evans et al., 2023; Gottlieb & Eikenberry, 2025; Irizarry, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2024; McDonald et al., 2024; Mirabella et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2025), my autoethnography aims to help prepare current and future practitioners to pursue more equitable and just approaches to foster care and adoption. I am grateful to José, Seth, and all other contributors to this issue for giving me this opportunity.

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Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13048
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 131–138

Book Review

Torn Apart

How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—And How Abolition Can Build a Safer World

Dorothy Roberts
Basic Books (2022)

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Introduction

Dorothy Roberts' (2002) *Torn Apart* offers a searing indictment of the U.S. child welfare system—reframing it as a carceral institution rooted in racialized control. This review situates *Torn Apart* within JNEL's Special Themed Issue on Foster Care. Through four parts—"Terror," "Design," "The Carceral Web," and "Abolition"—Roberts exposes how the system surveils and punishes families under the guise of care, while disproportionately targeting Black and Brown communities. She challenges the adequacy of reform and advances a compelling abolitionist framework grounded in mutual aid, kinship care, and community investment. For nonprofit practitioners, educators, and leaders, this book provides a critical mirror—demanding reflection on the moral and institutional foundations of service delivery. As debates around censorship and systemic inequities intensify, *Torn Apart* emerges as required reading for justice-centered public servants and this review provides readers with a springboard of references from which to embark. As two of the millions of individuals touched in different ways by the U.S. child welfare system—survivors in many ways, we find that *Torn Apart* is the real deal—a valid, reliable, illuminating exposé of the realities experienced by those touched by the system.

Torn Apart: Abolition, Social Equity, and the Nonprofit Sector's Reckoning with Family Policing

In this volume, child protective services (CPS) is not the implementer of benevolent interventions to save children, but rather the instrument of a family policing system designed as a tool for surveillance, separation, and social control—especially

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targeting Black families. Roberts—an advocate, researcher, activist, and abolitionist—adds another vital pillar to contemporary scholarship while building on her landmark *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (2001).

With *Torn Apart*, Roberts makes an impassioned, critical, well-informed and powerful case for abolition—not merely reform—of a system she understands and recognizes as irredeemably rooted in racist, classist, and carceral logics. Her well-articulated, sourced, relatable, and impactful argument significantly touched and impacted the authors of this book review, so much so, that while initially critical—and possibly even dismissive—of the abolitionist argument, the book review authors have been swayed enough to recognize the merit, basis, and overall strength of the abolitionist argument and now encourage readers to carefully consider it. As noted by Roberts (2022),

> the belief that Black children's problems are caused by their families and the solution is to tear them apart secures polices that criminalize Black children and their parents while impeding policies that would help them thrive. By relying on policing families as the way to protect children, the system blocks imagining a society that is safer for children. (p. 289)

We concur. For all public servants—for all in civil society—especially for nonprofit educators, practitioners, and leaders, *Torn Apart* offers a critical mirror, demanding a radical reconsideration of how our organizations engage with, replicate, or resist systems of oppression.

This review is part of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*'s special issue on foster care, adoption, social equity, and the nonprofit sector. Consistent with understanding social equity as pertaining to "public services being fair for everyone in regard to access, processes, quality, and outcomes" (Guy & McCandless, 2025, p. vii), this book review aims to uplift Roberts' abolitionist call as not just a theoretical critique, but a practical imperative for nonprofit leadership, ethical responsibility, and justice-centered public service. This is consistent with ideals recently expressed in the literature that contend that "if the world is to be more equitable throughout the 21st century and into the 22nd century, administrators in all sectors must be competent in how to promote fairness to all" (Johnson & Meyer, 2022, p. vii).

Additionally, this review was designed to also function as a key resource for readers in places and spaces where certain topics, books, and other content, discourses, and resources are under attack—or outright banned. Accordingly, readers will find an implications discussion that provides a number of additional go-to resources to help them further engage relevant literature.

Exposing the Machinery of Family Policing

Torn Apart is presented in four major parts—"Terror," "Design," "The Carceral Web," and "Abolition." Each part is crafted to build on the central argument: the child welfare system is not broken; it is functioning precisely as designed. Critically immersing the reader, Roberts expertly scaffolds her argument—crouched in understanding, care, compassion, equity, justice, and love. From the outset, the introduction, aptly titled "The Benevolent Terror," dismantles the myth that CPS protects children—detailing the real and horrific experience of family policing. Roberts illustrates how children are abruptly taken from their homes—from maternity wards, schools, even

playgrounds—often under the guise of care, but legitimized with the force of law enforcement and court-sanctioned trauma. The child welfare system is more of a destructive system often confused with being a helpful service provider that has policed Black families for far too long, so much so, that most Black children will encounter an experience with CPS at least once in their lifetime. In many situations caseworkers and police officers conduct investigations and inspections of environments "for what in their opinion constitutes a risk to children. Based on state child neglect laws, the investigators interpret conditions of poverty—lack of food, insecure housing, inadequate medical care—as evidence of parental unfitness" (Roberts, 2022, p. 21). This benevolent terror not only conflates conditions of poverty for parental unfitness, it demonstrates how the threat of removing one's children is legitimized by the law and how "this surveillance constitutes the stop-and-frisk of Black families that falls off the radar of public protest" (Roberts, 2022, p. 22).

In "Terror," Roberts draws on harrowing real-life stories to illuminate how families suffer devastation at the hands of CPS. The critical reality is that "Black and Indigenous families are the most likely to be disrupted by child welfare authorities. … Family policing is most intense in communities that exist at the intersection of structural racism and poverty" (Roberts, 2022, p. 36). The resulting CPS-induced trauma on Black children and their families is toxic and life-altering—especially significant as Black children "comprise a percentage of the foster care population that is nearly double their share of the overall population" (Roberts, 2022, p. 39). Consequently, the trauma inflicted by these encounters has long-term effects on mental health, brain development, and family stability that disproportionately impact Black and Brown children, families, and communities. Impacted children eventually display signs of fear and anxiety, loss of familial/ancestral cultural and ethnic identity, and loss of respect for biological parents as they increasingly become convinced that parents can't protect them—and no one cares. In many respects, impacted individuals can see CPS's benevolent terror as legally sanctioned and legitimized "professional kidnapping". Roberts critiques this reality by highlighting the stark contrast in how affluent white families are given privacy and grace—including opportunities to solve their issues privately—while poor Black families are scrutinized and penalized by CPS and their fellow law enforcement colleagues. The disparity, she notes, is not incidental; it is systemic.

Ultimately, all families should have the same chances and resources that affluent white families have. A key point made by Roberts (2022) is that "it isn't enough to argue that Black children are in greater need of help. We should be asking why the government addresses their needs in such a violent way" (p. 46). Such administrative violence is socially inequitable, unjust, and inhumane. It reflects how Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities are viewed, valued, and included—or excluded—within civil society and democratic institutions. It also reveals how those in power continue the legacy of dehumanization rooted in chattel slavery and re-entrenched through Jim Crow-era laws, policies, and prevailing social norms that upheld white supremacy and enforced racial and social stratification. This legacy remains embedded in many aspects of social life—including the child welfare system—by defining worthiness, vulnerability, and parental legitimacy—concerns Roberts further interrogates in the next section.

Design and Profit in the System

In "Design," Roberts explores how the system is structured to surveil and punish rather than support families. She connects CPS' methods to a long history of racial domination—from slavery to post-Civil War apprenticeships, to the forced removal of Native American children. While familial and community needs vary, "what ties together the families involved in the child welfare system is that they are disenfranchised by some aspect of political inequality—whether race, gender, class, disability, or immigration status—and typically embody an intersection of these subordinated positions" (Roberts, 2022, p. 87). In one especially damning example of hegemonic domination and oppression, Roberts discusses how pre-signed removal orders are kept on file to expedite child separation outside of court hours, revealing a system that prioritizes efficiency overdue process or empathy.

In many ways, the benevolent terror of CPS involvement in Black families is the new modern-day slavery. Marginalized groups are always on CPS radar, while affluent communities are not. This modern-day slavery allows control over Black families and diminishes the chances of generational identity, prosperity, and growth in Black communities. Roberts documents how the U.S. government has always found ways to police Black children and families—beginning with slavery and selling/separating children, then forced apprenticeships of Black children after the Civil War, and weaponizing Native American children. In this section of *Torn Apart,* readers will confront at least two key questions: 1) Why are Black Americans considered incapable of governing themselves? Are Black mothers viewed as dangerous reproducers? 2) Is the child welfare system really designed to keeping families intact, and is CPS doing enough to keep children in their homes and limiting removal, or is the child welfare system incentivized to tear families apart and place children in foster care?

Roberts also introduced the concept of the "Foster-Industrial Complex"—a network of state agencies, private contractors, and nonprofits that profit from the separation of families. Policing poor people allows state agencies to profit from the separation of families with billions of dollars funneled through federal, state, and local governments to care for children under the auspices of CPS. The industrial complex expertly creates an endless loop that funnels families back into the system with endless requirements—many unrelated to the stated reasons for child removal—while allowing CPS and its agents to continue securing federal funding and funding through fees imposed on families. This critique raises key questions for nonprofit agencies that receive contracts or grants tied to family separation and compliance.

The Carceral Web and Complicity

In "The Carceral Web," Roberts' shifts focus to surveillance and punishment showing how Black families are not just occasionally policed—they are embedded in systems of constant scrutiny. The incorporation of routine and systemic intense surveillance in Black communities introduces and essentially creates the Carceral Web—the prison-like web of incarceration, surveillance, and control through various social institutions and in almost all aspects of life—including the most private and intimate ones. Think about this: to catch a criminal, law enforcement usually studies their suspect. Knowing their plans, watching them discreetly, and knowing just when to intervene. In extreme measures, they even go undercover to build relationships with their suspect. Roberts

(2022) describes similar activities in child welfare services highlighting tactics, such as deputized neighbors, newborn drug screenings, and algorithmic surveillance that profile families before any harm has occurred. She illuminates the provocative nature of the relationship between child welfare services (through CPS) and law enforcement and how the lines between child welfare and criminal justice are routinely blurred—by design. While there may be legitimate reasons for law enforcement to be present in some child welfare checks/visits, readers will be compelled to question why police are routinely present—as law enforcement officers—for social service—child welfare—visits. Readers will also have to confront the blurring of the lines between being a social services worker (CPS worker) and functioning as a law enforcement officer.

The routine presence of law enforcement officers—and their "commanding presense" taking precedence over that of the social worker can turn deadly for Black families. Even reports of domestic violence can result in a child being removed from their mothers instead of removing an abuser from the home. So, rather than helping a mother in need, Roberts highlights how mothers are often blamed for domestic violence—labeled as neglectful for being victims. In this logic, the system doesn't remove abusers, it removes children. Roberts goes on to demonstrate how foster care becomes a pipeline to incarceration, with children aging out into homelessness, criminalization, and despair. While wards of states, children—especially Black and Brown children—in many cases are set up for failure, not rescuing. Their trajectories result in higher rates of suicidal ideation, breaks and delays in education, instability, and estrangement. The evidence presented shows that these children are seen as undeserving of compassion and more likely to end up in lockdown facilities, treatment centers, or prison. These children are punished for running away after being sexually assaulted in foster care and all too frequently, runaway children are arrested and are likely to be sent to jail. The result—runaways in the foster care are on a pipeline from foster care to prison.

Abolition as a Path Forward

In "Abolition," Roberts presents the visionary and radical idea of dismantling the child welfare system and replacing it with community-based care rooted in dignity, mutual aid, and kinship. "Abolition" may seem radical, but ask yourselves, as we did, "How can you be more radical than snatching children from their homes?" The system is designed so that preventive services are surveillance. System key stakeholders—the real ones—not the children and their families—don't seem to see a need for change as they earn profits—in the billions—from "caring" for children through the child welfare system—or as demonstrated through disempowering black communities under the guise of "care." Rather than policing families, Roberts envisions investment in mental health care, housing, food security, and especially kinship care—a long-standing tradition in Black communities where extended family members step in to support one another. She uplifts grassroots initiatives and informal care networks as models for what a caring, abolitionist future could look like. Abolition, as Roberts defines it, is not about destruction for its own sake; it is a blueprint for building a better world.

Implications for Nonprofit Education and Leadership

The foster care and adoption systems in the United States are broken and fractured, inundated with equity concerns including widespread concerns about racial dispro-

portionality, the over-surveillance of poor families, and systemic instability that leaves many children worse off (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022; Wellington, 2024). Nonprofit organizations are not only key providers of foster care services—often operating under government contracts—but they also shape the philosophy and implementation of child welfare itself (Wellington, 2024; The Policy Circle, n.d.). With foster care systems nearly privatized in many states, and many states contracting foster care and adoption services, nonprofit service providers become frontline managers of children's lives and welfare outcomes (The Policy Circle, n.d.). Functioning in dual roles—both as compassionate actors and institutional agents—demands that nonprofit leadership education center ethical complexity, historical awareness, mindfulness, systemic critique, social equity, and social justice (see Berila, 2016; Capper, 2019; Chordiya & Sabbharwal, 2024; Guy, 2025; Irizarry, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2023; Mason et al., 2020; McCandless & Gooden, 2024).

Torn Apart presents a critical moral challenge to public service broadly—and the nonprofit sector in particular. Many child welfare nonprofits participate in or are shaped by the same systems condemned in *Torn Apart*. Nonprofits that implement mandated reporting, partner with CPS, or receive government contracts may unwittingly reinforce the very harms they seek to mitigate. As nonprofit scholars and practitioners begin to further explore the "mechanisms that encourage or enable [nonprofit] unethical behaviors," it behooves us to recognize the impacts of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) or more broadly the nonprofit halo effect where moral goodness is insufficient to avoid unethical and immoral activities, particularly examining this halo effect and mechanisms such as moral justification, moral superiority, and moral naiveté (de Bruin Cardoso et al., 2023, p. 590). *Torn Apart* provides crucial insights beneficial to nonprofit and public service education and leadership professionals. At the same time, abolitionist nonprofits and mutual aid groups offer blueprints for alternative care models. Perhaps they can foster enhanced holistic approaches for organizational listening and diverse and inclusive stakeholder engagement instead of just stakeholder management (see Fu et al., 2023).

Future nonprofit leaders must be equipped not only to manage programs but to interrogate and reimagine the systems they inhabit, ensuring that their practices align with principles of democracy, justice, dignity, and community empowerment (see Callahan, 2025; Dettlaff, 2023; Evans et al., 2023; Guy & McCandless, 2025; Hogan & Sathy, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2025; Johnson & Meyer, 2022). As Mary Guy (2025) recently noted, "all levels of government, along with the nonprofits we rely on to deliver services, are brimming with specialized talent in every conceivable field" and "what is needed are graduates well-schooled in the constitutional premises, intersectoral dependencies, and administrative challenges that fit together like pieces in a puzzle" (pp. 1-2). *Torn Apart* is an informative and instructive read in this regard.

We believe *Torn Apart* should be required reading in nonprofit leadership programs and all programs where child welfare and human services are addressed. It's implications resonate across multiple domains: ethics, governance, stewardship, funding, and accountability. We must ensure that public service and nonprofit education programs train future leaders to resist complicity, center community voice, and champion social equity and social justice. As recently noted by ASPA's Section on Democracy and Social Justice, "it is beholden upon all in civil society to play an active, influential role

in guiding the direction and spurring momentum for real change to occur. … We must set a bold agenda for justice, civic trust, and public accountability" (Irizarry, 2025, p. 103).

Conclusion: A Call to Reimagine and Rebuild

Dorothy Roberts' *Torn Apart* is a landmark work that forces us to confront the painful realities of family separation not as an accidental byproduct of a flawed system, but as the very function of a system rooted in racialized control (See also Dettlaff, 2023). For public servants, nonprofit leaders, educators, and advocates, the question is not whether the system can be reformed, but whether we have the courage to imagine something different. We can start by shifting focus from growing the foster-industrial complex and enriching the stakeholders at the expense of our children and communities, and focus on abolishing family policing and building stronger, better, and resourceful families, communities, and public service systems. We can work to shrink the system until it no longer needs to exist. We can pivot funding from failed activities and reallocate those millions in investments to support communities needing resources—to support our children, and disadvantaged families. Strategic reallocation can remove our dependence on and need for family policing. We would no longer need to routinely see our children and families torn apart. As presented by Roberts (2022), this is abolition as care, as creation, as justice. In an era where families continue to be torn apart—in Black communities, at international borders, and across colonial histories—Roberts (2022) reminds us that justice requires more than reform. It demands transformation.

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Book Review

Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System

The Case for Abolition

Alan J. Dettlaff
Oxford University Press (2023)

Reviewed by Karen D. Sweeting
University of Rhode Island

Introduction

In *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition*, Dettlaff illuminates the historical roots, contemporary manifestations, and abolitionist alternatives to address social functioning and political power within the child welfare system. Dettlaff begins by providing a historical overview of the American child welfare system, tracing its origins to chattel slavery, and highlighting its roots in white hegemonic dominance. He points out how child separation was used as a diabolical tool to force compliance and terrorize Black families into subjugation. Dettlaff provides an in-depth exploration of the historical antecedents of the American child welfare system, illuminating its origins in colonialism, slavery, immigration, and white supremacy. He explores how policies and practices within the system have been designed to criminalize poverty based on a model of surveillance, regulation, and punishment that disproportionately targets and harms Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other marginalized communities.

The discussion transitions from slavery to the industrial revolution with emphasis on immigrants, as they became the mainstay of the industrialized workforce in the 19th century. Within this context of industrialization, immigrant parents often of European descent were frequently out of the home and children, which often meant that children had to care for and fend for themselves. Children of European descent left to their own devices were described and labeled by hegemonic groups children as "social ills," weaving a narrative that these children needed to be "saved" by removing them from their current circumstances. Dettlaff calls attention to the Orphan Train Movement that began in 1852, the "child-saving" movement, and the Children's Aid

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Society, which focused primarily on rehabilitating white European migrant children to "mold" them into "better" human beings and future American citizens.

Dettlaff explains how Black children were excluded from these movements as they were viewed as recalcitrant and unworthy of these efforts. He notes that "Black youths were rendered unsalvageable and undeserving of citizen-building ambition, while Black adults were disempowered in the deliberations of a white-dominated parental state" (p. 43). Through a systematic interrogation of data and literary insights, Dettlaff exposes the disproportionate surveillance, removal, and placement of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and marginalized children, laying bare the systemic injustices inherent in the child welfare system. Drawing upon critical race theory and intersectionality, he elucidates the structural underpinnings of racism entrenched in contemporary child welfare policies and practices.

Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition challenges the portrayal that the child welfare system protects vulnerable children from harm and helps vulnerable families in need. Dettlaff unveils the illusion of the child welfare system, exposing the pervasive biases that permeate the system from investigation and removal to placement and reunification. In his view, the child welfare system is unsalvageable and the only viable solution to address the enduring systemic injustices is abolition. At the foundation of his argument for abolition lies the reality that current policies, practices, and norms have caused irreparable harm and requires reimagining a society where resources are directed toward community-based support networks that prioritize empowerment and preservation and families' autonomy. Grounding in critical theory and social equity scholarship emphasis is placed on liberation and emancipation from oppressive systems that perpetuate cycles of oppression, subjugation, historical trauma, and harm.

Analysis and Significance

Dettlaff's analysis is incisive and comprehensive, backed by a wealth of empirical evidence, and informed by a deep understanding of social and human services in theory and practice. By centering the experiences of those most impacted by the system, he effectively illustrates the human cost of institutionalized racism and underscores the urgency of transformative change. Dettlaff delves into the lasting legacy of slavery—even after its abolishment. He argues that once slavery was abolished, southern industries had to reengineer slavery-like institutions and systems to replace the institution of slavery. Further, to control the movement and engagement of Black people in civil society after the abolition of slavery, Black Codes were codified and enacted into law restricting and denying access to specific public spaces. Black Codes essentially mandated segregation, prohibited interracial relationships, restricted where Black people lived and worked, and denied voting rights. Violation of Black Codes in southern states in 1865 and 1866 resulted in enslavement by incarceration as allowed by the 13th Amendment. The Thirteenth amendment allowed for criminal servitude—how else to get enslaved people then, if not to imprison those who "meet" the criteria for this—further criminalization based on race.

Dettlaff highlights continued efforts to sustain oppressive structures and systemic social control. This extended to the child welfare children, as enslavers sought legal pos-

session of Black children from recently freed slaves. By criminalizing unemployment and homelessness through Black Codes, enslavers justified their position by arguing that were better positioned to "care" for Black children, "if […] parents were deemed unfit or unable to care for their children" (p. 3). This resulted in the legitimization of state intervention for enslavers to take ownership of Black children under the guise of "apprenticeship." The book confronts uncomfortable truths about the American child welfare system and the exploitation of labor for capitalist accumulation.

From chattel slavery to convict leasing arrangements in the 19th century based on criminalization and incarceration of issues not formerly a crime (i.e., homelessness unemployment), the legal subjugation of formerly enslaved people was made possible through criminal law that significantly impacted Black families and fueled a new economy of the Black child labor. Through the nexus of criminal law, child welfare, and a new economy, the enslaved became an endless supply of replenishable products generated by the system—resulting in further dehumanization. Later when the child-saving movement became prominent, Dettlaff explains how this culminated in the formation of the juvenile legal system (juvenile justice or juvenile delinquency). Dettlaff noted that all but two states had established judicial systems to address issues of juvenile "delinquency" and "dependency" by 1928. The aim here was to further indentured servitude, another mechanism for the continued enslavement of Black children.

The Case for an Abolitionist Praxis

Central to Dettlaff's argument is the proposition of abolition as the imperative response to dismantling the racist and oppressive edifice of the child welfare system. He posits, and we have seen this, that reforms in irredeemable systems do not equate to social change. In the case of the child welfare system, we saw the organization of efforts to force labor through apprenticeship or incarceration—with the primary purpose of benefitting capitalism and maintaining subjugation. He explores the limitations of white imagination based on how white elites with institutionalized and systematized ways, used the law and the legal system to restore and sustain the status quo with Black Codes.

Embracing an abolitionist framework, he advocates for redirecting resources toward community-based alternatives rooted in empowerment and self-determination. Dettlaff cogently articulates the pitfalls of reformist approaches, arguing that incremental reforms either stall or fail because there is an intentional effort to avoid addressing the roots causes and legacies of entrenched racialized oppression and subjugation stemming from the institution of slavery in America. Through his impassioned plea for abolition, Dettlaff offers a vision of a more just and equitable future where every child can thrive within supportive and nurturing communities. As calls for abolition and dismantling of oppressive systems gain momentum within broader social justice movements, this book provides critical insight, deeper awareness, and elevated consciousness to enact transformative change within the child welfare system and beyond. A disillusionment in our public consciousness is that we perceive changes as addressing systemic issues, when often they fail to address the root of the problem that are often not transformative. The abolitionist perspective focuses on radical change requiring more than tweaks at the margins. To reimage what can be, divorced from the

shackles of what was, emphasis must be placed on eradicating the roots of colonialism and white supremacy envisioning a new way forward.

Conclusion

Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition is well organized, and the frameworks and concepts employed elucidate how social conditions, poverty, racism, and privilege deny autonomy and sustain sociological, economic, and political power, dominance, and privilege. This insightful and thought-provoking book will resonate with readers. Dettlaff's rigorous analysis challenges academics, practitioners, policymakers, and activists to reckon with the deeply entrenched structural racism endemic within the child welfare system to envision a radical reimagining of the system and alternative modes of care and support where humanity and human dignity are respected and prioritized.

This book is an essential read for anyone committed to operationalizing social equity within our systems, institutions, and government structures. One of the greatest strengths of this book lies in its direct approach and acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and other axis of oppression and subjugation. Dettlaff deftly navigates complex issues of power and privilege, highlighting how intersecting forms of discrimination compound the marginalization experienced by vulnerable populations and how the system upholds and protects itself and white power. By foregrounding the lived experiences of system-impacted individuals, he compellingly elucidates the human toll and historical trauma exacted by legal, institution, and systemic racism, oppression, and subjugation.

This text was enlightening, highlighting intergenerational trauma and harm. Dettlaff did not shy away from confronting the racist nature and historical roots of discrimination that is disguised as benevolence within the child welfare system. Dettlaff's impassioned plea for systemic transformation resonates as a clarion call for all who do work on social equity (practitioners, students, policymakers, academics, etc.). He calls upon those in critical positions to unify efforts and push forward in their battles to begin the process of destabilizing systems of oppression that will ultimately lead to their abolition and envisioning new ways outside of the colonial mindset and hegemonic dominance. Dettlaff appeals to practitioners not to be passive occupants within roles but rather to work with commitment and intentionality to confront institutional racism and stop criminalizing race and poverty. This book reminds me of the Jamaican poem of Paul Bogle and the Morant Bay Rebellion, where it states, "The roads are rocky and the hills are steep, the macca scratches and the gully's deep" speaking to the terrain we must traverse that is riddled with risks and requires bravery, perseverance, and commitment in the ongoing battle for abolition of systemic racism and discrimination, and liberation from colonial and capitalist power structures.

Editorial Guidelines for Authors

General Instructions on Writing

- Authors should know that the Webster's Unabridged Dictionary will be used for all issues of spelling and hyphenation.
- Authors should know that the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (abbreviated here as APA Manual, 6th ed.) will be used for all issues of style.

Specific Instructions on Writing

- Authors should remember that the APA Manual suggests, "Past tense or present perfect tense is appropriate for literature review and the description of the procedure is the discussion is of past events. Use past tense to describe the results. Use present tense to discuss implications of the results and present the conclusions" (2010, p. 65).

Sanchez (2000) presented the same results. Researchers have argued:

- Whenever including tables or figures, authors should remember that the APA Manual suggests they present those tables and figures in the following way:

Tables should be called Table 1, Table 2, etc. The label of the table (Table 1) should be placed flush left at the top of the table. The title of the table should be placed flush left under the label of the table and should be printed in italics with upper and lower cases words.

Figures should be labeled Figure 1., Figure 2., etc. The label of the figure (Figure 1.) should be placed flush left at the bottom of the figure, with the words Figure 1. in italics (notice the period after the number of the figure). The title of the figure should follow the label of the figure and should be printed in regular font in lower cases (except for the first letter of the first word), ending with a period.

Instructions on Writing Abstracts

- Manuscripts should be accompanied by abstracts.
- Abstracts should summarize each submission in 150 words or less.
- Abstracts (and keywords, should authors choose to include them) should be uploaded in the metadata set of windows mentioned in the General Instructions for Authors section listed above. Instructions on Writing References
- Authors should follow the APA Manual for creating proper in-text citations and proper entries on the reference page.
- Authors should remember that in-text citations require the inclusion of three elements: the surname of the author of the cited material, the year of publication of the cited material, and (when quoting) the page number (or paragraph placement) of the cited material.

Robinson and McLullen (2009) found that nonprofits can be profitable. Indeed, their research showed profitable results for most of the years studied (Robinson & McLullen, 2009). They argued 'for the use of a profitability index to compare nonprofits' (Robinson & McLullen, 2009, p. 345).

- Authors should list only the cited material in the reference section of the manuscript, in alphabetical order, according to the tenet of the APA Manual.
- References should be listed on a new page (with the exception of book reviews) in Times New Roman at 12 points, left justified with hanging indents. Instructions on Formatting Authors should prepare their manuscripts according to specific formatting guidelines. They should do the following:
- Type the manuscript using Microsoft Word
- Use only one space after end-of-sentence punctuation marks
- Use the font Times New Roman at 12 points -Format the manuscript to print on the standard U.S. 8.5 x 11-inch paper (not the standard A4 paper)
- Set the margins at one inch (2.54 cm) on all sides (top, bottom, right, and left)
- Indent all paragraphs
- Double-space the manuscript
- Left justify the manuscript
- Include tables, figures, illustrations, photographs, maps, etc. where they need to appear in the text of the manuscript (no Table 1 about here with the Table included on a separate page)
- Submit the manuscript as a .doc, a .docx, or an .rtf extension.
- Set the headings according to the four standard levels of headings described in section 3.03 (p. 62) of the APA Manual and exemplified on the next page. Introductions need no headings.

Instructions on Writing References

- Authors should follow the *APA Manual* for creating proper in-text citations and references.
- In-text citations require the inclusion of three elements: the surname of the author of the cited material, the year of publication of the cited material, and (when quoting) the page number (or paragraph placement) of the cited material.

    Robinson and McLullen (2009) found that nonprofits can be profitable. Indeed, their research showed profitable results for most of the years studied. They argued

    "for the use of a profitability index to compare nonprofits" (p. 345).
- Authors should list only the cited material in the reference section of the manuscript, in alphabetical order, according to the tenet of the *APA Manual*.
- References should be listed on a new page (with the exception of book reviews) in 12-point Times New Roman, left justified with hanging indents.

Instructions on Formatting

Authors should prepare their manuscripts according to the following guidelines:

- Type the manuscript using Microsoft Word.
- Use only one space after end-of-sentence punctuation marks.
- Use 12-point Times New Roman font.
- Format the manuscript to print on the standard U.S. 8.5 × 11-in. paper (not the
- standard A4 paper).
- Set the margins at 1 in. (2.54 cm) on all sides (top, bottom, right, and left).
- Indent all paragraphs.
- Double-space the manuscript.
- Left justify the manuscript.
- Include tables, figures, illustrations, photographs, maps, and so forth, where they
- need to appear in the text of the manuscript (note "Table 1 about here" with the table included on a separate page).
- Submit the manuscript as a .doc, .docx, or .rtf extension.
- Set the headings according to the four standard levels of headings described in
- Section 3.03 (p. 62) of the APA Manual. Introductions do not need headings.

Guidelines for Program Administration Manuscripts

JNEL publishes manuscripts on program administration and these may or may not be research based. These should be in the form of an essay rather than a research article. Of particular interest are essays on topics such as support by higher administrators, dealing with adjunct faculty, program directors as staff rather than faculty, etc. These manuscripts should share thoughts, experiences, and reflection and are designed as an opportunity to share insights and foster dialogue. In fact, it is hoped that readers will write commentary to be published in later issues of *JNEL* commenting on program administration articles. As with all manuscripts, program administration submissions will be subject to peer review and the criteria for acceptance will interest in the topic, expression of thought, and insight provided that may simply reinforce that experienced by others.

Guidelines for Case Studies

The *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership* (*JNEL*) is very interested in case studies that can be used for instructional purposes in academic programs and by consultants to present workshops and work directly with nonprofit professionals. Cases should be factual and based on historical information or participant observation including ethnographic research and the autobiographical research techniques of Norman Denizen and his associates.

Cases must be based on real occurrences but portions may use fictional material to protect persons, organizations, and fill in gaps to make the case read in a story like manner. They should be interesting and engaging to read and be written in such a way that they can be reproduced for instructional purposes. *JNEL* will give explicit permission for the reproduction of the case in hard or electronic copy with proper citation.

In addition to presenting the case itself, authors must provide these three sections in their submission: Implication for Theory or Policy, Suggestions for Classroom Instruction, and Suggestions for Consultants. Each section should have at least two or three paragraphs and suggestions for classroom use should include discussion questions, suggested readings and videos, and activities for students to examine the implications of the case or further their exploration of those implications. As with article submission, case study references should follow the latest APA guidelines.

Teaching Cases Editor

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Guidelines for Teaching Cases

Interested contributors are invited to submit teaching cases (real or fictionalized) based on the specific template provided. Authors that do not follow the required template will be asked to reformat and resubmit. These teaching cases should be directly relevant to the nonprofit/philanthropic sector.

The ideal final contribution would be between 5,000 to 7,000 words including citations and supplementary materials. Cases should focus on one or two issues, challenges, dilemmas facing organizations and the people in the philanthropic and nonprofit sector.

Contributions should reflect the broad diversity of research and teaching in our field. Scholars and students interested in a broad range of organizations, people, and critical issues are invited to contribute. Contributions can include but are not limited to the following areas in nonprofit education:

Advocacy and Policy Making
Board Governance
Change Management
Community Organizing
Financial management
Fundraising
Grant Writing
Governance Research
Human Resource Management
International NGOs
Leadership
Marketing and Public Relations
Nonprofit Law & Policies
Philanthropy and foundations
Program Evaluation
Social Entrepreneurship
Social Finance
Volunteering

For each area, authors are invited to identify one or two challenges they would like to address in their pieces. For example, an author interested in leadership could tackle the issue of founder's syndrome and succession planning. Another example could be a case developed around change management that would illustrate the effect of unexpected crises on the organization. Authors are invited to be creative in the themes they address and the cases they create.

FORMAT:

The six required components are:

1. Short abstract (~250 words)
2. Introduction (~2 pages)
3. Background (~5-7 pages)
4. Discussion questions (~1 page)
5. Key evidence (~3-5 pages)
6. Teaching Note (~4 pages)

NOTE: Decision moments will be used throughout the case to direct readers through key evidence, discussion questions, and critical analysis. Use footers to indicate the purpose of each decision moment.

How to Organize Your Teaching Case

Your case will consist of six main components (TOTAL 10–15 pages).

Abstract
- A short 150 words abstract of the case.

Introduction (1 page)
- Outline the issue and situation.
- Create a hook or dilemma of interest to the reader.
- The introduction should provide a summary of these five questions: what, where, who, when, and why?

Background (3-5 pages)
- Give insights into the broader context and drivers that what precipitated the situation.
- Include some chronology of events.
- Highlight several key decisions points throughout the case and remember to identify them clearly in the teaching note.

Discussion questions (1 page, approximately 5 relevant questions)
- General questions meant to guide the reading of the case.

Key evidence (3-5 pages)
This section contains documents, "interviews", letters, diagrams directly relevant to the situation and the issue to be discussed. These will be "fabricated" and creative: fake emails, videos, pictures… Have fun. Links should be clearly listed and explained (this video shows…) NOTE: any image must have permissions to use prior to submission.

Teaching Note (3-5 pages)

Instructions for Teaching Note

Adapted from The Case Centre http://www.thecasecentre.org/educators/submitcases/guidance/teachingnotes

What to include in your teaching note?

- Synopsis of the case

Provide a brief description of what the case is about, and the context in which it is set. You can reuse the abstract from part 1.

- Learning objectives and key issues

Set out the learning objectives and identify the key issues in the case that will help achieve them. You need to explain in detail the key concepts students will need to address. Clarify or alert the reader to important "clues" within the introduction and the background of the case (Part 2 and Part 3). Research what clear learning objectives should look like.

Teaching strategy

Describe how the case may be used. Try to be creative and provide clear explanations on how to use the case in the classroom. For example, suggest trigger questions to open the case discussion; offer ideas for group work or role playing; suggest how learning can be consolidated at the end of the case session, and so on. This section will generally reflect your own teaching/learning style. Remember, you have identified "decision moments" in your cases. Make sure that you map those for your teaching notes by identifying the possible course of actions a reader could take. You should refer to the assigned readings to demonstrate how the case illustrates these concepts.

- Questions for discussion

Include a list of questions designed to promote discussion of the key issues within the case (4-5). These questions should go beyond the general reading questions already provided and offer some additional prompts.

- Analysis of evidence

Why did you provide the evidence as you did? What are the clues readers should pick-up on and why? Explain how the evidence should be used.

- Background reading

Provide up to 5 references to relevant supplementary material on the case or related issues. Include 3-5 sentences for each reading explaining how it is directly relevant to the case.

Formatting Requirements and General Editing of Teaching Case Study

- 12 pts, New Times Roman Font, 1-inch margins, double-spaced.
- Citations: APA
- Title page should include:

  Title of case
  Names of author(s)
- You will submit three separate docx (please do not submit pdf) documents:

  Doc 1: Title Page
  Doc 2: Part 1, 2, 3,4, 5 (Case/Evidence)
  Doc 3: Part 6 (Teaching Note)
- Part 5, the "Key Evidence" should be presented as exhibits A, B, C… Each starting on a new page. Please use headings.
- "Evidence" should be formatted to make it look "real." For example, if it is based on an email conversation, have a "print out" of an email. If a letter, format it as a letter (the usual formatting does not apply). Don't be afraid to use fake logos to make it look "real." Be detail oriented, these are the best and most engaging cases.
- If your case is inspired by true events and not entirely fictional, please DO change names, places, and dates. It is important to respect the anonymity and privacy of what some would consider delicate situations.
- Please include a disclaimer that this case is fictional, based on real events, etc. following the Abstract (Part 1).

Guidelines for Book/Resource Reviews

Submissions

Submissions should be made http://js.sagamorepub.com/jnel using the journal management system. See SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS for details on using this system. During submission, in the first step, designate the journal section "Book/Resource Review." Abstracts are not required for this section.

Author Information

Name, title, institution, and background will be requested during the submission process and thus may be excluded from the manuscript document.

Book Citation

Author(s) last name, first/second initials, year of publication, title, location of publisher and publisher.

Critique

Reviewers may reflect on a variety of areas including the following:

- content (theories, frameworks, and concepts)
- organization of the book (design, methodology)
- audience (practitioners, undergraduate/graduate, field/subfields)
- pedagogical uses (frameworks, application, praxis)
- purpose and implications
- strengths or gap areas
- overall analysis and contribution to the field (new knowledge, substance, or redesign)

Length and Style

The preferred length for each book reviewed is between 1,000 and 2,000 words. The reviewer may submit a longer analysis in the case of comparative works (2 books or more). Length description is guideline only, and reviews may be longer or shorter depending on the importance, depth, and length of the book(s) reviewed. APA Style is appreciated when possible.

Deadlines for Review Submission

Unless otherwise stated, reviewers will have a minimum of 4 months to complete and submit reviews.

Editing of Review

The book review editor (and/or the journal editor) reserves the right to edit the manuscript. This may include formatting, content, or grammar. Substantive changes will be shared with the reviewer.

Questions may be directed to:

Dr. Theresa Ricke-Kiely, *JNEL* Book Review Editor
Executive Director
Center for the Common Good
tricke-kiely@stthomas.edu
office: 651-962-6340 l mobile: 574-303-2816

Online Submission Instructions

To submit a manuscript to the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, the author must (1) have an account on this site and (2) be enrolled as an Author with *JNEL*.

- If you, the author, have not registered an account with this site, please click 'Go to Registration' at the top of this page. Fill in the registration; check the box for 'Author: Able to submit items to the journal'. Then click 'Register'.
- If you have an account with this site, please click 'Go to Login' at the top of the page.
- Once you log in, if you are registered as an Author for *JNEL*, you should see the journal's title and off to the right, 'New Submission'. Click this to begin the five-step submission process.
- If you don't see 'New Submission' you will need to enroll as an Author. Enroll as an Author here: http://js.sagamorepub.com/jnel/user/profile
  - Under 'Country' is 'Roles'; to the right, click the box for 'Author'.
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- To return to view your manuscript submission status, make sure you are logged in and click on 'My Journals' in the upper right corner.

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- Manuscripts will be accepted for review with the understanding that the content is neither published nor simultaneously submitted for publication elsewhere.
- When an article is accepted for publication it is considered the property of JNEL. If the article is not accepted for publication, it will be returned to the author. No payment is made for articles published in JNEL.
- While an international audience is encouraged to submit manuscripts, only manuscripts written in English can be accepted for review and publication.
- Personal information about the authors should be absent from the manuscripts. The uploading process (when submitting a manuscript for review) allows authors to put this personal information in a metadata set of windows (Article Title, Short Title, Keywords, Abstract, and Cover Page Footnote, in addition to the Full Text of Submission window and the Cover Letter window) along with their contact information and their affiliation information. Authors should fill in all these windows since the information provided there will be used later if the manuscript is accepted.