

Understanding Perceptions in Foster Care: Changing the Narrative

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Abstract

Changing the Narrative is a youth-initiated effort examining implicit bias toward youth and alumni of foster care (YAFC) with the intention to redress it within the education and social services sectors. Results from a survey of 2,488 Los Angeles County residents found that the majority held inaccurately negative perceptions about YAFC regarding the likelihood of extremely negative life events such as abuse, neglect, prenatal drug exposure, gang involvement, sex trafficking, and poverty. This perception was held by those who did and did not have direct experiences with YAFC. The media portrayals selected most often by respondents included criminals, drug addicts, survivors, and victims. Statistical evidence found associations between these media portrayals and the negative biases that the respondents held about the youth themselves. Framing Theory proposes that media exposure frames narratives for the public, even for those who directly interact with YAFC, potentially leading to a distressing cycle in which YAFC are consistently exposed to those who see them as deficient and, as they cope with early trauma, these negative stereotypes are reinforced. Conclusions highlight the need for the development of a counter narrative curriculum.

Keywords: public perception, foster care, implicit bias, media stereotypes

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Introduction

“They think we’re criminals.” A group of youth in foster care shared a meal together and discussed the way they believe they are perceived by society. From that initial conversation, a research study was designed to examine the perceptions of the general public about youth in foster care. Youth and Alumni of Foster Care (YAFC) transition through every developmental stage of life interacting with foster parents, educators, and child welfare professionals who likely enter those relationships with preconceived ideas about the experiences of these children based largely on their current or prior status in the foster care system.

Children with a lived experience in foster care are placed in environments (new homes, new schools, new neighborhoods) that have the potential to help or hinder their developmental growth. Although there is variation in the size and processes of the foster care systems across the world, there is common ground on the reasons for placing children in foster care and the long-term consequences of those placements (George, Van Oudenhoven, & Wazir, 2003; McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996). In a review and assessment of foster care practices in both developed and developing countries, George and colleagues (2003) explain that “first order foster care refers to the day-to-day responsibility for children in need” and “second order foster care denotes a level at one removeand includes individuals and institutions that support and supervise foster care.” (p.245).

The premise of this study is that the media is a meaningful source of the foster care narrative and that individuals in first order foster care such as foster parents and teachers as well as those in second order foster care such as social workers, police, and lawyers are exposed to a lifetime of media that inaccurately frames the experiences of these children as extremely negative. Negative expectations for children have the power to generate corresponding negative behaviors (Allen, Chango, & Szvedo, 2014; Kools, 1997; Loeb, Hessel, & Allen, 2016). As children cope with early trauma (Unrau, Font, & Murphy, 2011), their coping strategies may be perceived as a confirmation of pre-conceived negative expectations by the important adults who are present in their lives to keep them safe from harm. This implicit bias can permeate every aspect of development and repeated doses from across these environments can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative outcomes.

Background

Little is known about the public perception of YAFC and, therefore, little is done to counter the narratives that are framed by all forms of media seeking to capitalize on sensational stories of abuse, neglect, sex trafficking, gang involvement, poverty, and prenatal drug exposure. In the developed world, these stories splash across news outlets, film, television, literature, web searches and social media (Alvarez, 2017; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Meese, 2012; Sims, 2018). YAFC are exposed to both the adults in their lives who hold these negative perceptions in mind and their own direct consumption of foster care media portrayals.

A review of existing literature establishes that YAFC are portrayed in movies as having behavioral problems or mental illness at significantly higher rates than real statistics indicate (Alvarez, 2017) and in newspapers as having significantly higher

numbers of negative outcomes as compared to positive outcomes (Busso, Down, Gibbons, & Volmert, 2019). Furthermore, these portrayals inaccurately reflect stereotypes of race, gender, culture, and socioeconomic status that do not match the foster care population (Fraidin, 2010). Alvarez (2017) analyzed 37 American movies from 1921 to 2012 and found that life in foster care was portrayed as consisting of multiple placements, exposure to violence, separation from family members, abuse, and running from care far more frequently than the actual statistics for these distressing events (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The FrameWorks Institute analyzed 215 American newspaper articles dated between 2016 – 2018 and found that individual stories reinforced specific foster care frames that include the hero caregiver, the bad apple, and the bootstraps story. These frames neglected to include references to the inequities within the system or the consequences of foster care for those it serves (Busso, Down, Gibbons, & Volmert, 2019).

As a parallel to the concerns about perceptions of YAFC that form the foundation of this study, Valentine and Freeman (2002) reported the impact of inaccurate media portrayals on perceptions of social workers, and suggested that “people who work in these positions are assigned the same stigma that society assigns to child welfare clients, simply through association” (p. 467). In other words, social workers face implicit biases simply because they work with the parents who have children placed in the foster care system. Valentine and Freeman (2002) described media portrayals that highlight a combination of 1) incidences of child fatalities while in care, ineffective leadership, overburdened caseworkers, limited resources, and incompetence, 2) biological parent substance abuse, incarceration, abandonment, and abuse of children, and 3) behavioral problems and mental illness in children. If professionals who work with child welfare clients face stigma, it seems likely that the children of these clients will also pay a similar consequence for their placement in foster care.

Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory suggests that any issue can be portrayed and perceived in a variety of ways based upon the interpretations of the media producers. The repetition of the same narrative reinforces beliefs that it is true and representative (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). Therefore, the people who enter into careers or volunteer service leading to direct contact with youth in foster care may believe a false narrative about the extent to which these youth have endured extremely negative experiences and have behavioral or mental health issues. Although, the hope would be that these negative perceptions are dispelled through pre-service training for careers such as social work and teaching, as well as in certification classes for foster parents, there is currently no evidence that such training exists.

Chong and Druckman (2007) called for transparency in the telling of foster care stories to create more accurate views of the foster care system because even small changes in the presentation can facilitate large changes of opinion. Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm theory similarly states that people are drawn to stories which then become the basis of our understanding, particularly if the story is consistent and relatable.

A variety of American social movements in the past few decades have sought to create a safer society for the LGBTQ community, for understanding gender fluidity,

and for racial inequities. These movements have not yet fully completed their goals but they have brought awareness, evolved our language, and changed some perceptions. Media has played a significant role in these movements through the inclusion of diverse voices in the production of media, the diversity reflected in storylines and character portrayals, and by reporting on inequities that continue to exist. Costanza-Chock and Schweidler (2017) refer to this as transformative media organizing. To move towards creating a safer society for YAFC in which they can grow and develop as individuals who are not defined by pre-conceived deficits, we examined the connection between the current media narrative about YAFC and public perception of YAFC.

Methods

Participants: The context in which this research took place is in Los Angeles, California, a recognized media hub for the world and a county in which approximately 30,000 children are in foster care at any given time. This study included survey data from 2,488 respondents in the greater Los Angeles area; 57.2% identified as female, 41.6% identified as male, 0.4% identified as gender non-conforming, and 0.9% preferred not to answer. The distribution of racial identification and age are below:

White/Caucasian	29.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	26.0%
Hispanic/Latino	18.3%
Black/African American	17.8%
Biracial	4.8%
Native American	1.3%
Other	2.2%

18-24 years	10.2%
25-34 years	22.4%
35-44 years	17.8%
45-54 years	16.6%
55-64 years	15.3%
65+ years	17.6%

Measures: After several rounds of pilot testing in consultation with foster care alumni, the final version of the survey contained 23 item level questions with embedded sub-questions for a total of 122 data points. The categories of questions included demographic information, perceptions of foster youth’s backgrounds, portrayals in media, and their own experience with the foster care system.

Sample Survey Questions

How do you think foster youth are most likely to be portrayed in the media? (Select one or more)		
• Criminal	• Sociopath	• Mentor/Guide
• Hero	• Survivor	• Sex worker/Pimp
• Victim	• Drug Addict	• Role Model
• Abuser	• Professional	• Loving Child or Parent

What percentage of foster youth do you think had the following experiences? (Scale of 1 – 100)
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• Sexual abuse	• Prenatal drug exposure
• Physical abuse	• Poverty
• Parental neglect	• Gang involvement
• Sex trafficking	

Results

An analysis of how familiar the respondents were with the foster care system revealed that only a minority of the sample had some prior personal and/or professional experience that may have contributed to their perception of YAFC. Of the 2,488 respondents, 14.7% identified as having personal experience with foster care and 20% identified as having worked or volunteered in a professional role with YAFC. Nearly half the sample rarely think about foster care (46.1%), 37.1% said they sometimes think about foster care, 4.5% said they think about foster care all the time and 12.3% chose not to answer. Less than 3% of respondents reported knowing 5 or more youth currently in foster care while less than 4% reported knowing at least 5 people who were once in foster care.

The most commonly identified media portrayal of YAFC was victim (72%), followed by survivor (41%), criminal (40%), and drug addict (30%). All other roles were identified by less than 20% of the respondents, thus subsequent analyses focused on these four portrayals. Respondents had the option of choosing multiple media portrayals. A co-occurrence analysis found that Victim and Survivor had the highest frequency of selection together (N=755), followed closely by Victim and Criminal (N=721). The other co-occurring sets of labels to note are Victim and Drug Addict (N=566) and Criminal and Survivor (N=407).

Using ANOVA with Bonferroni corrections (Tables 1a and 1b), the analyses revealed how respondents' demographics and experiences related to these four roles with main effects for gender, race, age, and direct experience with YAFC but no significant interactions. Specifically, post hoc analyses revealed that female respondents were more likely than males to select media portrayals of YAFC as survivors, criminals, and victims. Respondents who identified as Biracial were more likely than African American respondents to select victim for media portrayals of YAFC. African American and Biracial respondents were more likely than White and Asian Pacific/Islander respondents to select criminals. Biracial respondents were more likely than African American and White respondents to select that media portrays YAFC as drug addicts. Respondents who were 65+ years of age were more likely than those 25–34 years of age and 35-44 to report that media portrays YAFC as victims but they were less likely than those 18-24 years of age, 25-34, and 35-44 to report that media portrays YAFC as criminals.

<u>Demographic Variable</u>	<u>Portrayal</u>	<u>Groups</u>	<u>M (SD)</u>	<u>Model</u>
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Gender	Victim	Female	.69 (.46)	F(3,2470)=3.478**
		Male	.63 (.48)	
	Criminal	Female	.41 (.49)	F(3,2470)=5.954**
		Male	.33 (.47)	
	Survivor	Female	.41 (.49)	F(3,2470)=5.329**
		Male	.34 (.47)	
Race	Victim	Biracial	.79 (.41)	F(6,2475)=2.280*
		African American	.62 (.49)	
		White	.33 (.47)	
	Criminal	African American	.46 (.50)	F(6,2475)=7.617**
		Biracial	.55 (.50)	
		White	.33 (.47)	
		Asian/Pacific Islander	.32 (.47)	
		Islander	.32 (.47)	
	Drug addict	Biracial	.40 (.49)	F(6,2475)=2.916**
		African American	.26 (.44)	
		White	.24 (.43)	
	Age	Victim	65+	.73 (.44)
35-44			.59 (.49)	
25-34			.64 (.48)	
Criminal		65+	.28 (.45)	F(6, 2482)=7.153**
		35-44	.72 (.45)	
		25-34	.64 (.48)	
		18-24	.64 (.48)	
		18-24	.64 (.48)	
		18-24	.64 (.48)	

Table 1a: Media Portrayals as a function of demographic variables. *p<.05, **p<.01

Respondents who identified as having a personal experience in foster care were less likely to select that media portrays YAFC as victims and survivors compared to those without personal experience in foster care (Table 1b). Respondents with professional experience in foster care were less likely to select that media portrays them as victims and survivors and more likely to select that media portrays them as criminals compared to those without this experience.

Direct Experience	Victim	With Personal Exp	.56 (.50)	F(1,2435)=5.190**
		No Personal Exp	.69 (.46)	

	With Professional Exp	.60 (.49)	F(1, 2486)=11.738**
	No Professional Exp	.68 (.47)	
Survivor	With Personal Exp	.30 (.49)	F(1, 2435)=3.144**
	No Personal Exp	.40 (.46)	
	With Professional Exp	.33 (.47)	F(1, 2486)=7.525**
	No Professional Exp	.40 (.49)	
Criminal	With Professional Exp	.43 (.48)	F(1, 2486)=8.83**
	No Professional Exp	.36 (.48)	

Table 1b: Media Portrayals as a function of direct experience. *p<.05, **p<.01

Using similar statistical methods (ANOVA with Bonferroni corrections), the next set of analyses (Table 2) examined the relationship between respondent demographics and direct experience with YAFC on their perceptions of the probability that YAFC had endured one or more extremely negative experiences such as abuse, neglect, poverty, drugs, sex trafficking, prenatal drug exposure, and gang involvement. Overall, respondents were more likely to believe that YAFC had one or more extremely negative experiences (62.8%). Results revealed a significant effect of age in that respondents who were in the age range of 45-54 years were more likely than those in the age range of 18-24 years to respond that YAFC have a higher probability of extremely negative life experiences. Results also showed that respondents who identified as female were significantly more likely to respond that YAFC have a higher probability of an extremely negative life experience compared to the responses of respondents who identified as male. African American respondents were more likely than White and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents to believe that YAFC have a higher probability of one or more extremely negative life experiences. There was no difference between those who reported direct (personal or professional) experience in foster care and those who did not in their perceptions of the probability that YAFC have extremely negative life experiences.

Variable	Groups	M (SD)	Model
Age	45-54	3.96 (1.41)	F(5, 2195)=2.335*
	18-24	3.61 (1.39)	
Gender	Female	3.99 (1.32)	F(3,2186)=12.270**
	Male	3.64 (1.39)	
Race	African American	4.092 (1.4)	F(6,2191)=3.859**
	White	3.76 (1.29)	
	Asian/Pacific Islander	3.61 (1.43)	

Table 2: Likelihood of YAFC extremely negative life experiences as a function of demographic variables. *p<.05, **p<.01

The final set of analyses examined the relationship between media portrayals and perceptions of YAFC. The enter method of multivariate regressions found that media portrayals explain a small but significant amount of the variance for the perceptions that YAFC have been abused, neglected, prenatally drug exposed, poor, involved in

gangs, and subjected to sex trafficking (Table 3). The small size of the explanation underscores the need to examine other variables that mediate or moderate this relationship. For example, future research can examine patterns of the types of media that are most popular and influential for subgroups of the population. Yet, this result is meaningful because its statistical significance establishes that this research is on the correct path to understanding the relationship between media portrayals and public perception.

<u>IV</u>	<u>DV</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>Adjusted R²</u>
Media Portrayal	Sexual abuse	14.70	.01	.03	.02
	Physical abuse	16.88	.01	.03	.03
	Parental neglect	25.88	.01	.04	.04
	Prenatal drug exposure	6.02	.01	.01	.01
	Poverty	20.65	.04	.04	.03
	Gang involvement	11.53	.01	.02	.02
	Sex trafficking	9.430	.01	.02	.02

Table 3: Likelihood of YAFC extremely negative life experiences as a function of media portrayals

More specifically, Tables 4a and 4b displays how each media portrayal is associated with public perception of the likelihood of extremely negative experiences for YAFC. Respondents who reported that media portrays YAFC as criminals were significantly more likely to report higher percentages of YAFC as having experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, parental neglect, poverty, prenatal drug exposure, gang involvement, and sex trafficking. Perceptions of media portrayals of YAFC as victims significantly predicted the perception of higher percentages of YAFC who had experienced physical abuse, parental neglect, poverty, and lower percentages of sex trafficking. Perceptions of YAFC being portrayed in media as drug addicts significantly predicted the perception that higher percentages of YAFC are involved with gangs and media portrayals of YAFC as survivors significantly predicted the perception of lower percentages of YAFC involved in sex trafficking.

<u>IV</u>	<u>DV</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>IV</u>	<u>DV</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>Beta</u>	
Criminal	Sexual abuse	6.033	.142**	Victim	Physical abuse	3.11	.07*	
	Physical abuse	5.82	.14**		Parental neglect	6.17	.13*	
	Parental neglect	5.77	.13**		Poverty	5.20	.11*	
	Poverty	5.12	.12**		Sex trafficking	-	-	
	Prenatal drug exposure	3.65	.01**		Drug addict	Gang involvement	2.01	.05*
	Gang involvement	4.61	.11**		Survivor	Sex trafficking	-	-
	Sex trafficking	2.99	.07*				3.34	.07*

Tables 4a and 4b: Results predicting perceptions of YAFC extremely negative life experiences from perceptions of media portrayals (Scale of 1 – 100 with higher scores = higher percentage of YAFC who have had the experience). *p<.05, **p<.01

Conclusions

This representative sample of the general public in Los Angeles County not only documented their negative perceptions of how YAFC are portrayed in media, but our analyses also found strong links between those media portrayals and their negative perceptions of the experiences of YAFC. The majority of the sample had preconceived ideas that YAFC have been subjected to abuse, neglect, drug exposure, gangs, poverty, and sex trafficking. The respondents primarily felt concern (40%) and sadness (34.5%) when thinking about youth in foster care. In combination, these factors potentially contribute to a sense of hopelessness in the environments in which the children are developing a sense of identity. Children and youth who perceive that important/caregiving adults have low expectations for their outcomes, are more likely to fulfill that prophecy (Loeb et al., 2016). This alarming conclusion demands that we problematize how media frames the narrative about YAFC and take the necessary steps to prevent the public from further normalizing negative stereotypes of YAFC.

It is common for YAFC to hide their foster care status in their daily lives; perhaps, they do so because of these negative stereotypes. This raises the possibility that the participants have had a direct experience with YAFC more so than they realize. However, without that knowledge, those interactions cannot have had an impact on their perceptions of YAFC. This suggests that media is likely to be the primary tool by which most members of the public are exposed to the experiences of youth in foster care (Leber & LeCroy, 2012; Sims, 2018; Alvarez, 2017; Meese, 2012). We found no differences between respondents who reported personal/professional experience in foster care and respondents with no direct experience in their perceptions of the probability that YAFC have extremely negative life experiences. This result reinforces the idea that a lifetime of exposure to negative media portrayals of YAFC prior to career decisions is not dispelled (and may even be reinforced prophetically) by direct experience. We conclude that in order to counter preconceived negative perceptions of YAFC, specific content is needed to address this issue in the training programs for educators, social workers, foster parents, and so forth.

Implications for Practice: Meese (2012) proposed that in-service educators need specific training methods to promote inclusiveness in classrooms towards peers who have a foster care experience and that literature and films offer a tool by which to engage in those discussions and to counter negative stereotypes. Taymans and colleagues (2008) further argued that the dissemination of accurate information in preservice education programs for teachers will increase awareness and change the misperceptions that have developed through exposure to media. We conclude from our findings that programs to counter biases must impact all of the first order foster care environments and participants as well as second order institutions that support and supervise the development of children in foster care. Educators, social workers, and foster parents, as well as lawyers, mental health professionals, and physicians, and so forth all have the power to convey hopelessness or hopefulness when they interact with YAFC; without awareness of their implicit biases, they may be hindering rather than facilitating successful outcomes. Importantly, media producers must be informed of the power they have to inform rather than misinform the general public about the wider range of experiences and outcomes of YAFC.

The next step for this work is to produce appropriate content for an integrated curriculum intended to increase awareness, sensitivity, and the dissemination of accurate information for educators, social service professionals, and media producers. Our findings illuminated demographic differences in the perceptions of YAFC underscoring the need to consider demographics when planning professional development curriculum to counter biases. Taking these necessary steps will change the dominant narrative about children in foster care and alumni of the foster care system to provide a safer society for all people who grow up in a non-traditional family composition. With the creation of a movement to build awareness in the general public, we will move closer to a world in which all children are supported in their development of a positive identity based on their strengths and, therefore, build their capacity to achieve positive outcomes.

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