

The Role of Media on Public Perception: Impact on the Life Choices and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care

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Abstract

This paper shares the results of a pilot study designed to assess the feasibility of an online focus group as the methodological approach for Phase 4 of a longitudinal action research project examining the impact of media on perception of youth in foster care (YFC). Earlier phases of the study found that much of the public believes that media portrays YFC as victims, criminals, survivors, and drug addicts. Participants who endorsed these narratives were also more likely to assume that YFC face negative real-life outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration, teen pregnancy, and school drop-out. Phase 4 explores how these implicit biases may influence the life choices and current outcomes of young adults (formerly YFC). Although the online focus group script was carefully developed to prompt reflection and discussion, the pilot test was unsuccessful. An in-person, unstructured listening session was convened with young adults (formerly YFC) to generate new methodology ideas. Unexpectedly, the session produced rich conversations about the role of media in participants' lives and revealed four emerging themes to pursue when the study is scaled using this revised design: 1) Media had no influence or a positive influence, 2) The importance of media representation of foster care is debatable, 3) Identifying as YFC can create vulnerabilities, and 4) Success in life may be discounted or viewed as temporary because of one's foster care history.

Keywords: media portrayals, foster care, perception, outcomes, self-fulfilling prophecy

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Introduction

This paper documents a pilot study testing two methodologies for eliciting real-time retroactive reflections from a small group of young adults with a lived experience in foster care about the influence of media on their life choices and current outcomes. The hypothesis was that thoughtful planning and intentional prompts would guide the participants through a reflective process, helping them to recall events, stories, and experiences that connected their media exposure to the choices they made in adolescence, and, ultimately, to their current outcomes. However, to understand why the pilot test was necessary, it is essential to consider the historical context of this community-based action research project that began five years prior, in 2018.

A group of youth were enjoying a community dinner together as they always did once a month. There were a diverse group who had all spent time in their childhood and/or adolescence in the care of someone other than their biological parent(s). Some were living with relatives; others with foster parents, legal guardians or adopted parents. Collectively, this paper will refer to people with these lived experiences as youth in foster care (YFC) or as adults with a foster care-like experience (FCLE). Their experiences fit within a range of positive to negative, but in all situations, their FCLE status was due to the actions and decision-making of adults charged with their care and should not reflect on who they are or who they develop into as adults. Despite this, one youth raised the topic of being treated like a criminal when someone learns of their FCLE status. As heads around the dinner table nodded in recognition, a broader conversation emerged regarding why these presumptions exist, and how we might better understand these dynamics. From this discussion, the Changing the Narrative (CTN) project was born.

As the youth participated in the project's development, it became clear that a more structured inquiry was needed to understand the scope and impact of these assumptions. The three original hypotheses were that implicit biases towards youth with a FCLE exist and have harmful consequences; that these biases permeate the educational and social welfare systems where they may produce the most significant and lasting negative effects; and that research exploring the depth and origins of these implicit biases could provide a foundation for meaningful systems change. However, as each phase of the project revealed new information, new research questions and hypotheses emerged. The CTN project generated three phases of data over a five-year period, and the results indicated that the general public are likely to have negative implicit biases about youth with a FCLE and even those who are responsible for their care (foster caregivers, teachers, and social workers) may be wholly unaware of the impact these biases may have on their interactions with the youth (Ponciano, 2023). Succinct details of the results from the first three phases of this project are as follows:

Phase 1

A demographically representative large sample of Los Angeles County adult residents (N = 2488) completed an online survey (co-designed by YFC) and most reported (a mental model) that YFC are best represented as a youth of color living in poverty who has endured severe adversity, such as neglect and abuse. However, publicly available statistics indicate that a more accurate profile of YFC is a White youth who has experienced neglect. Respondents reported that YFC are negatively portrayed in the media and, holding this belief was associated with expectations that YFC would be likely to face negative life outcomes. The most frequently selected media portrayals were Victim, Survivor, Criminal, and Drug Addict. The selection of these media portrayals predicted the selection of the following life outcomes for YFC: Teen

Pregnancy, Incarceration, Unemployment, and School Dropout. Surprisingly, the responses from those who self-identified as having personal or professional experience with YFC were significantly more negative than those who had no known experience. The conclusion of this phase was that media plays an important role in the development of negative implicit biases about YFC. This phase raised new questions about the responses of those who had direct experience with YFC (phase 2) and about the types and genres of media that had the greatest impact (phase 3).

Phase 2

Online Zoom meetings served as an informal social experiment to dive deeper into the perceptions of YFC held by many dozens of professionals in the educational and child welfare systems. This exploratory study found that even those who have seen a wide range of positive and negative outcomes for YFC held implicit biases that predisposed them to believe that YFC would have negative outcomes. During the meetings, the researchers shared the origin stories of well-known fictional superheroes with a FCLE to intentionally prime the participants to recognize positive media portrayals before asking them how the media portrays YFC. Despite this priming, the most frequently selected media portrayals were still Victim, Survivor, Criminal, and Drug Addict. Less than 5% of participants selected Hero. Further, the most frequently selected life outcomes were still Teen Pregnancy, Incarceration, Unemployment, and School Dropout. We concluded that the lifetime of exposure to media must have a larger influence on their perceptions of YFC outcomes than their direct experience. New questions emerged about whether societal perceptions of foster care and adoptive care differed (phase 3) and how young adults with a FCLE perceived themselves (phases 3 & 4).

Phase 3

A national demographically representative sample (N = 2446) completed a survey (co-designed by YFC) that included some questions from the Phase 1 study about YFC media portrayals and outcomes and asked the same questions about youth in adoptive care (YAC). Further, more questions were asked to identify respondents with a FCLE and to identify the consumption of specific genres and types of media. The results indicated that media portrayals of YAC were significantly more positive than portrayals of YFC. Respondents with a FCLE perceived the outcomes of YFC more positively and the outcomes of YAC more negatively when compared to respondents with no FCLE; however, both subgroups reported overall perceptions of YFC that were mostly negative and YAC that were mostly positive. Higher consumption of news and dramas (genres) via news channels, newspapers network channels, or streaming channels (types) magnified the perceptual differences reported between YAC and YFC. Children who are adopted often spend time in foster care. The quality of care in adoptive placements range from positive to negative, similar to foster placements (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Adoptive placements can fail and result in removal; although, at a lesser rate than in foster care. Given this overlap in lived experiences, it is notable how these two groups are nonetheless perceived differently by the public.

We assumed from these results that negative media portrayals and the exposure to them may have influenced the way caregiving adults viewed the potential life outcomes of YFC. Perhaps they guided YFC towards particular pathways in high school based on implicit biases rather than on talents and inclinations. It was also important to examine if exposure to negative media portrayals had an impact on how those with a FCLE perceived themselves. We operationalized this as their life choices and current outcomes for Phase 4. However, a research design to collect

this data in a meaningful way was difficult to discern; therefore, we felt compelled to test our chosen methodology with a small group. This paper reports the results of an exploratory pilot study testing the 90-minute structured online focus group and an unstructured two-hour in-person listening session convened to interpret the focus group outcome.

Literature Review

There is substantial research documenting the construct of a self-fulfilling prophecy that results in negative outcomes for those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Rosenthal and Jacobsen provided evidence of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the school context with a controversial experiment in 1968. Three decades later, Pianta (1999) developed an important developmental model to explain the relational dynamics between child factors and teacher interactions. Although Pianta's research was focused on sociodemographic factors; others broadened it to include community relations or socially constructed stereotypes and perceptions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Sameroff, 2010). This model and other research has found that children who are disadvantaged (socio-demographics or stereotypes or community status) are more likely to be at risk academically (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

Jussim et al. (2009) proposed a three-step sequence: 1) teachers develop expectations for their students that may be based on biases, 2) these expectations lead teachers to treat students differently in accordance with whether they are expected to achieve high or low outcomes, and 3) students react to this differential treatment to confirm the teachers' expectations. In other words, the expectations that teachers have about student ability and academic performance can influence their interactions with these students (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Teacher evaluations include both current student achievement as well as expectations for future achievement (Funder, 1995; Jussim et al., 2009). More recently, there is consensus amongst researchers that teacher expectations affect the development of the child from their first days in school and throughout their educational career (Wang et al., 2018).

Youth who have ACEs may internalize the negative expectations that important adults in their lives have for their outcomes and behave accordingly to live down to those expectations. Research has found that when youth have negative expectations about their future, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Harris et al., 2002; Valadez-Meltzer et al., 2005). Other researchers found that they could connect youth expectations to career and educational outcomes (Harris et al., 2002; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Trauma and victimization have been associated with hopelessness about the future (Bolland et al., 2005; Brodhagen & Wise, 2008; Gibb et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2004).

A strengths-based approach to this topic was explored by Avant et al. (2021) through their interviews of college or university students with a lived experience in foster care. The participants credited their successful outcome of enrolling in college to the support of foster caregivers, social workers, high school counsellors, and child welfare staff who prepared them and encouraged them to apply. The qualitative data includes quotes from the participants about the influence of their interactions with these important adults in their decision-making about higher education. Another study by Kilgore and Miller-Ott (2019) reported both the positive messages as well as the discouraging messages that the participants received from foster caregivers and high school staff. They found that those who chose to pursue higher education were more likely to receive the positive messages and those that did not attend college were more likely to report receiving negative messages.

The respondents in Phase 3 of the CTN project who identified as having a FCLE skewed younger and used more digital or non-traditional forms of media. Generation Z (Gen-Z) refers to people who were born between 1997 and 2012 (Parker, 2023) and are often referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001) because they have had easy daily access to the internet throughout every developmental stage of their lives. This constant exposure to technology, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has raised concerns for their concentration and attention (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Aalde, 2018; Claveria, 2017; Shatto & Erwin, 2016) and their socio-emotional development (Bowler, 2020; Hasenbein et al., 2023; James et al., 2023;). Digital content from social media platforms and streaming services have become more ubiquitous with high levels of consumption amongst Gen-Z users. The average social media usage is over two hours a day (Kemp, 2024). Gen-Z seek information, entertainment, and social acceptance from online communities (Dhar & Bose, 2023; Dhar et al., 2024). Therefore, to understand the influence of media on life choices and outcomes, it became clear that we needed to include Gen-Z participants and a focus on digital media sources of foster care portrayals.

Methodology

The principal investigator of the CTN project worked closely with two research assistants with a FCLE who are studying psychology at the doctoral level to co-design a 90-minute script that was divided into three sections. The first 30 minutes included rapport building, identification of media consumption types and genres, and media consumption levels. The second 30-minute section included a short slide deck revealing the results from Phases 1–3 of the CTN project. The third 30-minute section included various YFC media clips. The various activities in each section were intended to stimulate discussions and shared experiences amongst the participants within each section, and to facilitate reflections about the impact of media on their life choices and current outcomes. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed.

The focus group script guided the participants to digest and process the results from earlier phases of the CTN project, and to relate those results to their own experiences with caregiving adults, life choices, and current outcomes. The rationale was that a small group context was needed for the participants to help each other through that process so that they could build on what they heard and learned from each other. A dynamic group interaction that encouraged social learning was expected to trigger more detailed recollections and deeper reflections in each other. The online focus group was expected to provide a safe space for the co-construction of meaning and a supportive environment for sharing. To protect confidentiality and facilitate psychological safety, participants chose pseudonyms and turned off their cameras.

After the online focus group, we organized a two-hour in-person listening session with a new group of young adults to interpret the focus group results. We did not plan any questions or prompts for the listening session. We simply brought the new group together, shared the focus group results, and provided them with the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussion in any way they chose. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Focus Group Participants

Inclusion criteria for participation were young adults (20–26 years) with a lived experience in foster care. Recruitment for the online focus group was managed by the staff at the Los Angeles Youth Collaborative, a non-profit community-based organization that provides leadership activities for YFC, from amongst their older members. After a few months of advertising the paid (\$50) opportunity, five people participated in the 90-minute online focus group on Zoom.

Although the participants presented as a mix of male and female, we did not ask them to share their gender identity, sexual orientation, age, race, educational/career attainment, or socioeconomic status.

Listening Session Participants

Inclusion criteria for participation were young adults (20–26 years) with a lived experience in foster care. Recruitment for the listening session was managed by the Director of Peace4Kids, a non-profit community-based organization that provides creative educational opportunities for YFC in Los Angeles. They posted the paid (\$50) opportunity in an online monthly newsletter that reaches alumni and volunteers of their programs and hosted the in-person listening session at their site in Los Angeles. Seven people participated and presented as a racially diverse mix of male and female young adults. They were not asked to identify demographics, educational/career attainment, or socioeconomic status.

Results

The three members of the research team independently analyzed the transcript; however, the collection of meaningful data from the online, scripted focus group was unsuccessful for what appeared to be a wide range of reasons. First, some of the participants arrived late and the informed consent process had to be repeated three times. This delayed the start of the planned and scripted events, interfered with the building of rapport, and likely caused boredom or frustration for the participants who arrived on time. Second, the instruction to keep their cameras off was intended to create a safe space but instead may have encouraged multi-tasking or other unknown distractions. There were long silences between our prompts and their responses. As their cameras were turned off, we were unable to discern if those silences were due to thinking and reflecting, unfocused attention, discomfort with the topic, or some other issue. These silences occurred even during simple prompts, such as “What are your favorite apps or streaming channels?” Third, we expected that the participants would unmute their microphones for discussions and that they would engage with others’ responses. However, the participants were reticent to unmute and, instead, typed short responses in the chat.

This created a challenge for transcription, so we read the typed messages out loud after unsuccessful requests for a verbal response. The participants did not engage in discussion, even via typed chat messages. We expected everyone to contribute a response to every prompt, but this did not occur. They responded intermittently and did not reply to others’ comments. The participants’ choice to type instead of responding verbally also created a challenge for the timing of the planned events. We could not see if they were still typing or had stopped, and we were unsure when to move on to the next planned prompt or activity. It is possible that some responses were not sent when we moved to the next planned activity.

Our pilot-test successfully determined that the planned focus group was the wrong research design for our intended purpose; although, the cause was unclear. We brought together a local group of young adults with a FCLE for an in-person listening session to seek suggestions for a new research design. After obtaining informed consent, we briefly described the purpose of the research, the failure of the original research design, and asked them to discuss possible ways to achieve our research goals. From that point forward, the researcher only spoke to follow-up or gain clarification on the discussion. A participant suggested we start with a short meditative collective breathing exercise and she guided this activity.

The listening session participants engaged in numerous discussions and debates; they also returned to earlier discussions again when they developed a new insight to share. Unexpectedly, instead of discussing only research design, they also discussed the research purpose by sharing their experiences with media, and its influence on their life choices. By the end of the audio-recorded two-hour session, they concluded that this in-person listening session design provided the opportunity to share their immediate responses and more reflective responses that emerged after hearing others' contributions. They suggested that we continue to meet in the same way to capture any additional reflections that may occur between sessions.

The transcript from the listening session was independently analyzed by the three people on the research team. Consensus was reached on four emerging themes that will serve as starting points for discussion at future listening sessions. The transcript and the themes were shared with the listening session participants.

Theme 1: Media's Influence

Several different discussions revealed that they either felt that media had no influence or a positive influence. Ironically, while some participants indicated that they have rarely seen foster care in the media during their lives, they all instantly recognized the specific examples that others shared. Their familiarity could only have come from media exposure.

- a. "And when I see them on YouTube, I'm like, skip. I think it's just because it's very sad. Nobody wants to get on the internet to be sad and know how much better they have it than other people."
- b. "Once we see them and we, you know, we see those, the people in my life, movies and stuff, and I think there are certain mediums that really do it well but are able to kind of translate or make it into more of like almost an artistic form."
- c. "I can't think of a person in foster care who I wanted to be like."
- d. "I really push back against that because I'm, like, all of that mattered - that the shows for me specifically *Switched at Birth*, *the Fosters*, and that spin-off, *Grown-ish*, like that has been my stuff of, like, she went out there and she became a lawyer. I could do that too. I just started a master's program ..."
- e. "And that's why I just don't feel like representation. Because even then, let's say representation is being saved. *The Blind Side*. Someone takes an interest in you. No one ever took an interest in me."
- f. "I thought that I could make something of myself because I saw that through the people from *the Fosters*. It was through those experiences that I got to see outside of Compton, outside of South LA that gave me the ability to dream big. And that's why I think representation is important and I want to be that representation of the next generations to come."
- g. "I mean, like, we all fangirl at some point in our lives over something...when I found out *Simone Biles* was in foster care, my support for her went up through the roof, you know, and every time I've seen her, I just want to her to win."
- h. "I can think of probably four times in my 28 years of living have I ever seen foster youth even represented in media."
- i. "I just don't see foster care social media enough to even feel like I have a proper sample size. Obviously, there's a stigma, but not really representation that I've seen personally."

Theme 2: Representation of the Foster Care Experience in Media

The representation of foster care in the media was debated by the group. Some felt that representation was not where foster care reform energy should be spent. After others shared the positive influence of specific famous people or fictional characters with a lived experience in foster care, the discussion evolved to the role that representation could play.

- a. "I'm not looking for representation and what I'm looking for, I think, if I'm watching TV, it's not to necessarily see somebody like me. I'm looking for a chuckle. That's not what I'm looking for on social media."
- b. "I don't even think there's a good or bad representation. I mean there's a bad representation for sure because in those few times that it has been represented, it wasn't necessarily in a positive light."
- c. "What I'm on social media for is not to, like, I'm not searching for these foster care stories. I'm not, that's not my intent. That's not what I want to see."
- d. "I guess stuff like that doesn't necessarily pop up. I feel like I've maybe seen a few, and mostly via *the Shade Room*, which is very popular in all of the media, but it just happens to be related to somebody who had lived experience."
- e. "I'm 22, and I've been on Instagram, Twitter, all of the social media apps for years, and have digested a lot of content, and it feels like having a foster care experience can be a part of that but when it comes to thinking about representation, it just doesn't feel like it's something that a lot of people in my generation are necessarily trying to profit off of or trying to make it a point."
- f. "I think representation helps break that stigma of people in foster care, they can heal, can make something of themselves."
- g. "You have to have a platform. You have to have a voice, right?"

Theme 3: Intersection of Vulnerability and Foster Care Identity

Several different discussions converged on how various aspects of identity may create vulnerabilities. Most of the group reported that their foster care identity carried a negative stigma and characterized it as a negative experience.

- a. "There's a point when you're younger, there's this perspective of 'I don't want that nomenclature or that naming or that [foster care] identity.' And, yet there are other parts of your identity that we lean into. I'm a woman, I am a straight man, I am a gay man, gay woman, like all those other identity parts of us, we have no problem leaning into."
- b. "I feel like society delivers a level of pity that we don't need."
- c. "I feel like very fortunate, and I'm just naturally really optimistic, and I feel like there's great things that have come into my life because of the people I've met being in foster care. But I think, even the best light I could paint it in, it's been very disadvantageous compared to the norm."
- d. "I think about going to college and the lack of support that you have compared to most kids as they're transitioning into college with the support of their parents and their family and stuff like that."
- e. "You can be black and have it [foster care] be expected, white and have it [foster care] be not expected."
- f. "There's a perception that's already there because we're folks of color. We'd have to break down one wall to get to the second wall."
- g. "There's this strange dichotomy that exists in this room where it's like, it doesn't matter, but I know it does. But it's just about me and how I show up. And so, I'm gonna

show up in my way and I can't worry about it, but I don't want people to know about my [foster care] identity.”

Theme 4: Intersection of Success and Foster Care Status

The group shared that they want to achieve success and represent that for others, but there is a pressure that their success won't be credited to them as individuals or that society is just waiting for them to eventually fail.

- a. “So, if you're successful and you're a foster kid, I don't want people like, oh so I wonder how many free this and this and that she was given, or how many times people hired her out of pity.”
- b. “Looking back on it, I would have done so many things different. I would have just not cared about x, y, and z.”
- c. “Is that necessarily what I want? Is that what I'm supposed to do in order to change everyone's mind about representation of youth in care?”
- d. “I don't put myself under pressure, so I won't slip. If I do something because I broke, and it's like, foster youth, that's the first thing they blame.”
- e. “I look at *Tiffany Haddish*, for example, who's very successful. She talks about it [foster care] all the time. How like she really is surprised that she didn't kill herself by the time she went out of foster care cuz being in foster care was the worst.”
- f. “Don't let anybody tell you that because you're in foster care that you can't become an attorney or that you won't have a successful marriage and won't be able to produce healthy children.”
- g. “I would love to share, by the way, I'm a foster kid. You can do this too because if you can see her, you can be her.”

Discussion

This pilot study resulted in two important outcomes. The first was the discovery of an in-person unstructured listening session research methodology that provided a safe space for young adults with a FCLE to reflect and discuss on the influence of media and implicit biases in their lives. The second outcome was to discover four themes that can be more fully explored when this research continues at a larger scale.

After an extensive literature search, the research team discovered several potential reasons for the failure of the online focus group methodology. Gen-Z students occupied classrooms at every educational level during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this experience may have contributed to a tendency to multi-task and cyberloaf in virtual environments (Ponciano et al., in press). The circumstances of the focus group such as cameras off during prompts and activities may have unintentionally increased the tendency to seek distractions.

The success of the listening session may be due to the sense of ownership and responsibility that the participants felt to keep the discussion moving forward. There were no prompts or activities, and they were facing each other in-person. Distractions did not exist in the same way as in a virtual environment. Silences appeared to be less tolerable amongst the participants. All but one participant engaged in the discussions regularly.

The hypothesis that negative media portrayals and implicit biases held by the public and by important caregiving adults would create a self-fulfilling prophecy of limited choices and negative outcomes was not supported during the focus group or the listening session. In fact,

the topic was never raised by either group of young adults. Instead, the listening session participants focused on the positive impact of media or the lack of impact on their perceptions of self. It is important to note that all participants were recruited from organizations with strong track records of supporting YFC towards successful outcomes. A different group of individuals with fewer resources for support or a higher likelihood of negative experiences may respond differently. Further, future listening sessions with the same participants may reveal that additional time to reflect allows for different memories to surface.

Conclusion

The next step for this research is to meet again with the same listening group participants to test if time to reflect individually between sessions adds new dimensions to the findings. From there, the listening sessions will be repeated with different groups of Gen-Z participants until a saturation point is reached across the existing and/or new themes that are generated.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Artificial intelligence was not used to write any portion of this paper. AI was integrated into the search engines on various internet sites.