

THE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE JOURNEYS OF STUDENTS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE



Authors

Dr. Evelyn Anderson

Affiliations

Community College of Philadelphia

Introduction

Undergraduate college students with lived experience in foster care are less likely to graduate from college than any other student group due to instability in placement, schooling, and mental health challenges as a result of time spent in the child welfare system. Only 3-10% of undergraduate students with a background in foster care successfully earn a college degree, with a large majority graduating with an associate degree (Avant et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2019). This study used a qualitative approach to learn about the college journeys of students entering college with a background in foster care.



Only **3-4%** of former foster youth obtain a 4-year degree.

Results

Findings revealed several significant challenges faced by students navigating college after foster care. Participants described difficulty forming meaningful connections with peers and campus communities, often influenced by feelings of stigma related to their foster care background. Many students experienced a challenging transition to college, compounded by ongoing mental health concerns, financial hardship, and housing insecurity. Participants also reported limited access to informal support systems, such as consistent family guidance or dependable social networks, which affected their sense of stability and belonging throughout their college experience.

Objective

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore and better understand the college experiences and educational journeys of undergraduate students with lived experience in foster care, including the barriers, supports, and factors that influence their persistence and degree attainment in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1
Theoretical Framework

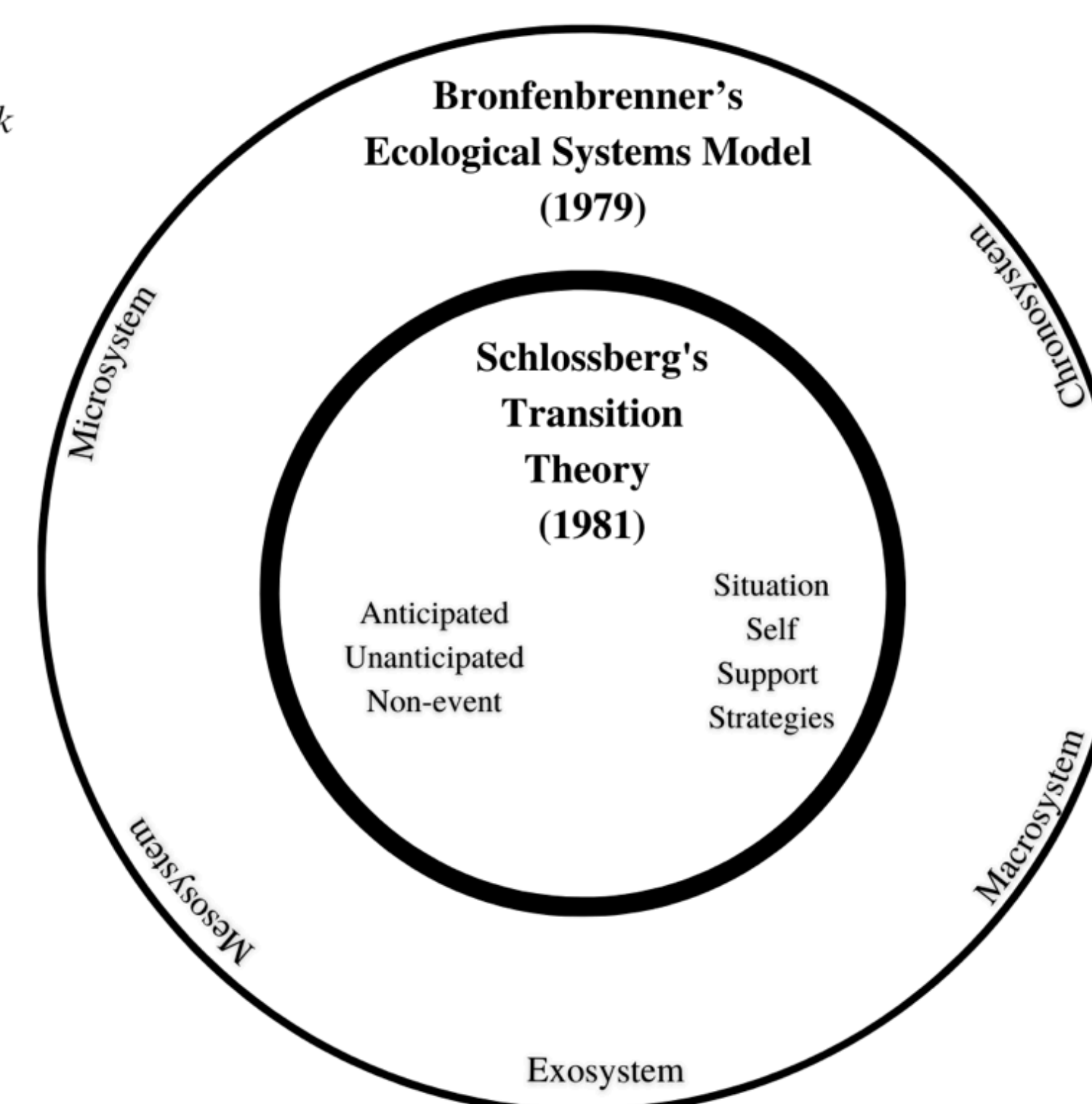


Figure 1 consists of two circles. The outermost circle, labeled the “Ecological Model,” represents the broader environmental context influencing students with experience in foster care (SEFC) before and during college. Within this circle are five interconnected systems that directly or indirectly shape the developing individual. The microsystem refers to the immediate environments in which the individual actively participates, while the mesosystem describes the interactions and relationships between those environments or systems.

Data Analysis

Based on the narratives of the participants in this study, it seems that postsecondary institutions can improve in the areas of the transition to college, providing timely and proactive information, resources, and support, and enlisting the help of trained professionals who are better suited to meet the needs of undergraduate students with experience in foster care. The majority of participants in this study were not prepared for the transition to college.

Conclusions and Future Research

While the results of the study were useful in understanding the lived experiences and needs of SEFC, the qualitative methodology does not furnish conclusive results that are indicative of what is happening for SEFC as they navigate college. Future researchers should consider conducting a quantitative inquiry that analyzes and evaluates the outcomes of all campus-based programs that exist on college campuses nationwide



Research Methods

- 1 This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of students who had background in foster care and transitioned into college.
- 2 Data was collected through 10 qualitative interviews to answer the following research questions:
 1. What are/were the characteristics of the undergraduate journey for individuals with experience in foster care?
 2. What barriers did students with experience face, and how did they manage these challenges?
 3. What additional supports would make a critical difference in their success?
- 3 The 10 individuals participated in this study and were recruited through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is defined as the recruitment of participants who are easily accessible to the researcher.
- 4 A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the participant interviews. I asked 11 questions and allowed participants to ask questions or offer insight into an experience, idea, or opinion that was not otherwise covered or discussed during the interview.
- 5 Interviews were transcribed and coded using inductive and deductive coding

