A Foster Care Alumna's Past and Present Technological Experience: A Feminist Case Study Approach

Cesia Roche[1], J. Mitchell Vaterlaus[2], and Jimmy A. Young[1]

Abstract

Research on technology use and access among youth raised in non-traditional family structures indicates that the youth's experiences are different from individuals raised in traditional family structures. Foster care represents a non-traditional family structure that warrants research attention in terms of technology. Using a multicultural feminist framework, the present study explores the past and present technological experience of a woman (30 years old) who was raised in the foster care system. The results are presented as a case study documenting her technological experience in foster care, as she transitioned out of the foster care system, and as she has taken on the roles of wife and mother. Results indicated that the participant had limited access to technology while in the foster care system, and this limited technology access related to her current use and perceptions of technology. Directions for future research are provided.

Keywords

Millennial generation, foster care, technology, women and technology, multicultural feminist theory, qualitative

The *Millennial generation* includes people born between 1980 and 2000, and the title denotes the first generation to come of age during the new millennium (Gurau, 2012). A distinguishing feature of the Millennial generation from previous generations is their "technological exceptionalism. . . It's not just their gadgets—it's the way they've fused their social lives into them" (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 6). These new technologies have created a reality where people can connect instantaneously across the globe (Courtois, Mechant, De Marez, & Verleye, 2009). Even Millennials who do not have personal access to new technologies share a culture that is heavily influenced by social technologies (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2010).

Because Millennials have aged concurrently with the evolution of new technologies, some have posited that they are also "digital natives" (e.g., proficient technology experts) and that the previous generations are immigrants who have difficulty adapting to new technology (Prensky, 2001). These terms, originally presented with only anecdotal evidence, have since been discredited as research has emerged that shows different levels of technological proficiency among Millennials (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Helsper & Eynon, 2010). Socioeconomic status (Robinson, 2009), education (Helsper & Eynon, 2010), gender, and family configuration (Notten, Peter, Kraaykamp, & Valkenburg, 2009) have all been identified as factors that make individual Millennials' technological experiences unique. Hence, caution must be given when making assumptions about technological experiences of a whole generation and it is important to be "mindful that there are as many differences in attitudes, values, behaviors and lifestyles within a generation as there are between generations" (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 5).

The present study was designed to give voice to the technological experiences of a subsection of the Millennial generation. Hundreds of thousands of children are placed in the foster care system within the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013), and children in foster care are likely to experience several transitions in placements (Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008). Many of the Millennials who were in the foster care system have now transitioned out of the system and into adulthood. To date, no research is available relating to the perceived influence of foster care on foster care alumni's technological experiences. As a starting point, this exploratory study sought to identify the current and past technological experiences of one Millennial foster care alumna using case study methodology.

[1]University of Nebraska Kearney, USA
[2]Montana State University, Bozeman, USA

Corresponding Author:
J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, Department of Health and Human Development, College of Education, Montana State University, P.O. Box 173540, Bozeman, MT 59717-3540, USA.
Email: j.vaterlaus@montana.edu

Foster Care

In 2012, 399,546 children were in the foster care system in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Caucasian children (29%) were the most prevalent racial group represented in the foster care system in 2012. When a child is placed in the foster care system long term, the child will likely experience transitions to more than one foster home (Strijker et al., 2008). Strijker and colleagues (2008) identified an association between multiple foster home placements and negative outcomes (e.g., externalizing problem behavior) for foster children. Research conducted with foster care alumni in the Midwest indicates that the transition from the foster care system to adult life poses additional challenges for those enrolled in foster care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). A study investigating foster care children's transition to adulthood found that among 19-year-old foster youth, only 18% were enrolled in a university or college (Courtney et al., 2005). Approximately 7 years later, only 6.9% had earned a 2- or 4-year degree (Courtney et al., 2011). More research is needed on how the traumatic events leading to foster placements, multiple transitions within foster care, and challenges aging out of the system relate to an individual's technology experience in terms of access and use in this digitally entrenched society.

Technological Differences

Family Formation

Research on family formation or configuration supports the proposition that there are diverse technological experiences among Millennials. Exploration of differences in technology use and family structure began with non-interactive technologies (e.g., TVs). For example, adolescents (12-14 years old) were found to spend more time with the radio and television when there was not a father in the home (Brown, Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990). Now some studies have emerged that investigate differences in interactive technology and family formation. Several studies have identified that single-parent families are marginalized in terms of computer ownership and Internet access when compared with two-parent families (Calvert, Rideout, Woolard, Barr, & Strouse, 2005; Clark, Demont-Heinrich, & Webber, 2004; Wartella & Jennings, 2001). For example, Wartella and Jennings (2001) reported that two-parent families (57%) were much more likely than single-father (31%) and single-mother (25%) families to have Internet access in the home. The differences in family formation have extended beyond technology acquisition into how adolescents use technology. Notten and colleagues (2009) reported that adolescents (15 years old) from single-parent families had higher odds of using technology for informational, communication, and gaming use than adolescents from two-parent families. In addition, adolescents in stepfamilies were less likely to look something up on the Internet for informational use when compared with adolescents from two-parent families.

It appears that the research is limited on family formation and technology differences, and that the majority of this research is focused on single-parent families. Research regarding technology and foster care has typically focused on issues of the proverbial digital divide or Internet safety issues such as privacy and has not given voice to those who have experienced foster care themselves (Finn & Kerman, 2004; Fitch, 2012). In our review, only one study gave voice to the technological experiences of children in foster care. Finn and Kerman (2004) reported that foster children are more likely to lack technology access due to domestic instability, educational discontinuity, and emotional and/or behavioral problems.

Youth transitioning out of foster care experience a variety of challenges in terms of educational deficits, economic vulnerability, mental health, and substance abuse (Jones, 2014). Young adults who have successfully adapted after transitioning out of foster care have reported that an important ingredient to their success was maintaining social connections and reconnecting with people in their social network (Hedenstrom, 2014). Mitchell, Jones, and Renema (2014) indicated that as youth prepared to transition out of foster care, 91% reported that they had an adult who could provide emotional support or advice. More than half of these youth also reported that they needed a cell phone to stay connected with people in their social networks. In addition, they mentioned the need for a computer, income, and transportation to maintain these relationships. Existing research hints at the potential importance of technology within the foster care system and during the transitional process out of the system. There is still much to be learned about technology and the foster care system.

Gender

Women have traditionally been socialized away from technological fields (Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013) and have been under-recognized for their technological accomplishments (van Zoonen, 1992). Research has indicated that women and men have different preferences and patterns of use of interactive technology (Kimbrough et al., 2013). Hargittai and Shafer (2006) reported that when actual online skills were investigated, adult women ($n = 51$) and men ($n = 49$) had similar abilities to use online technology. However, women's self-reported online technological skills were much lower when compared with their male counterparts' self-reported skills. It remains unclear why these gender differences are present, but they could provide further conceptual support for the notion that the technological experiences vary amongst Millennials.

Theoretical Perspective

To guide our study, we selected a theory that would address marginalized individuals' experiences with technology.

Multicultural feminism posits that "not all women are alike" and not "all women value the same things or aim for the same goals" (Tong, 2009, p. 200). This version of feminism pushes against a gender-focused feminism and includes women who are marginalized in terms of race, sexual orientation, poverty, and family structure (Skogrand, Mendez, & Higginbotham, 2013). The definition of multicultural feminism is further broadened to include women who share an uncommon history or tradition (Tong, 2009).

Research on the foster care system appears to create a group of women with an uncommon history and tradition with the experience of multiple transitions and the challenges of aging out of the system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Strijker et al., 2008). A multicultural feminist perspective advocates for giving voice to women with these unique common experiences and provides grounds for exploring differences within generational groupings (Tong, 2009). Pushing against the idea of "sameness" is at the very core of multicultural feminism, which would provide support for understanding the unique technological experiences among foster care alumnae.

Purpose of the Current Study

Little is known concerning the experience of technology among children in foster care (Finn & Kerman, 2004) or those who have transitioned out of foster care. In this study, we used a multicultural feminist perspective to give voice to the technological experiences through the transitions relating to foster care and life after transitioning out of the foster care system. Specifically, the study aimed at understanding access, perceptions, and beliefs about technology as a foster care alumna detailed her time (a) in the foster care system, (b) as she transitioned out of the system, and (c) as she transitioned into her roles of wife and mother. This approach provided the opportunity to identify how the foster care alumna perceived that her technological experiences in foster care influenced her life after she transitioned out of the foster care system.

Method

The participant in this case study was selected from a larger Institutional Review Board (IRB)–approved study concerning interactive technology (e.g., cell phones, social media), relationships, and health conducted in a Midwestern state. Participants for the larger study were recruited from university courses and received extra credit for their participation. Selection criteria for this case study required that the participant was (a) female, (b) within the age range to be considered a part of the Millennial generation (born between 1980 and 2000), and (c) raised in a minority family structure. The pseudonym Jane was given to the selected participant to protect her confidentiality. Jane met the criteria—She was 30 years old, Caucasian, and was raised in the foster care system.

As part of the study, Jane completed both a questionnaire and an in-depth interview. The questionnaire included open- and closed-ended questions about demographic information (e.g., sex, marital status) and detailed information about technology use (e.g., age of acquisition of cell phone, where she learned about technology). The semi-structured interview lasted approximately 60 min. The interview included questions about the Jane's technology history in general (e.g., age of acquisition, how she used technology), her perceptions of interactive technology (e.g., the purposes, concerns, and motivations for technology use), and technology and family relationships (e.g., parent–child relationships, marriage, and technology). The interview allowed Jane to detail her past and current experiences with technology. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

This case study was conceptualized using Stake's (1995) intrinsic case study approach. In this case study, we utilized both categorical aggregation (e.g., pattern identification) and direct interpretation (Stake, 1995). Both interpretive processes were used because there were important aspects of Jane's lived experience that only appeared once (i.e., direct interpretation) as well as topics that appeared several times that led to themes (i.e., categorical aggregation). To gain a sense of the totality of data, two independent researchers read the transcribed interview and results from the questionnaire several times (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During this process, both researchers highlighted common patterns that emerged from the data. The two independent researchers then met together and discussed the common themes and patterns. Two researchers were used as a method of triangulation to have "multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 1995, p. 454). Three general themes, consistent with Jane's transitions into and out of foster care, were agreed upon because they best represented Jane's lived experience and were inclusive of the direct interpretive information in the interview and questionnaire. After themes were identified, the data were coded independently by the two researchers, resulting in 96% agreement. When there were disagreements in the coding, consensus was gained by consulting the data and identifying the theme that most represented Jane's experience.

To increase the trustworthiness of the findings and to ensure that Jane's voice was presented, a variation of member checking was used (Vaterlaus & Higginbotham, 2011). The completed case study was emailed to Jane with structured questions to identify the accuracy of the report. Jane indicated that the case study accurately presented her lived experience, and only minor revisions were implemented.

Results

Jane detailed her transitional experiences in and out of the foster care system in terms of technology accessibility, acquisition, and use. Jane continuously detailed how her lack

of technological experiences in foster care placements influenced her technology perceptions and use in future life transitions. The themes that emerged were major transitions in Jane's life and are ordered in time sequence. Jane's technological experiences are presented in this case study in terms of her transition into the foster care system, her transition out of the foster care system, and her transition into her roles as a mother and wife.

Transition Into the Foster Care System

Jane was born in 1983 and was orphaned at the age of 7, which ultimately led her to being raised in the foster care system in a state in the western United States. Jane described her experience in the foster care system as time period of several transitions. The state in which she lived "didn't have the laws like permanency planning that they do now." Jane explained that because of the lack of permanency planning that the majority of her placements ranged from 30-day to 9-month foster care placements while she was in the system. However, Jane reported that she had two longer placements that lasted 2 years.

Technology use during Jane's 9 years in the foster care system was limited. Jane indicated that only one of her foster care placements provided access to a home computer, which was one of her 2-year placements. Jane explained that the foster parents and her younger foster brother did not regularly use the computer. Jane felt like her foster parents were socializing her away from computer use by directing her to spend time outside. In Jane's words, "Nobody was ever on [the computer], it was more kind of like an ornament in the corner." Her foster parents provided access to more active and outside activities that allowed her to spend time with "nature," "horses," and "playgrounds." She connected with her foster family and friends through these outdoor activities and shared that there was little need for technology for entertainment purposes. Jane elaborated on how this experience influenced her current interest in technology: "I guess since I grew up outside, I don't have a lot of interest in [technology] that is there to entertain me." On the rare occurrences that Jane or her foster brother did use the computer, she reported little supervision or foster parent participation in her computer use. Jane supposed that concerns over the Internet were not as large when she was a child. She stated, "[My foster parents] weren't worried about predators or what site we were about to get on. We didn't have fears of the worldwide web. So there wasn't any monitoring [of my computer use]."

Jane credited her lack of interest in technology to the lack of technology availability in her varied foster care placements. Jane mentioned that as she aged, she did follow some technological trends. She laughed as she reflected, "I got my first pager when I was 13! I was 13 years old." By permitting access to a pager, Jane's foster parents at the time created some technological connection between themselves and Jane, and between Jane and her peers. In retrospect, Jane largely dismissed her use of a pager as being "technological." Jane also mentioned no interest in communicating with peers via email, instant messaging, or the early social media outlets available at the time. In summary, while Jane was in the foster care system, she had limited access to technology, little peer or adult motivation to use technology, and limited experience with technology.

Transitioning Out of Foster Care

Jane concluded her time in the state foster care system through emancipation at the age of 16. She had to become self-sufficient and provide care for herself during this time period. Jane did not live alone, but shared a residence with an acquaintance in a Midwestern state. In terms of technology, Jane shared, "I wouldn't say there was more technology available after emancipation, but my access had opened to it." Jane felt like she was an outlier in her technology interest and use in comparison with her peers. Jane confessed, "Technology just wasn't my thing. I had very little interest in it." Jane completed her high school education in 2001, and at 18, she acquired her first cell phone. Up to this point, she had only had a pager and did not have personal ownership or access to a computer. Jane primarily viewed that the principal purpose of cell phone technology to be instrumental. Jane described that she used (and continues to use) her cell phone for scheduling purposes. Jane justified, "With me text messaging is always a reminder because nowadays that's how people prefer to communicate. So I can keep it my phone and put it on my calendar later." Jane also explained that she would likely not need a cell phone if she "wasn't fearful of being in an accident and not having something readily available to call for help." Jane reported only sending about five text messages per day, further emphasizing her perception of cell phones as instrumental rather than social. Jane recognized, as she described, that her technology evolution following her emancipation was based on "old fashioned" views and not consistent with contemporary technology trends of the time period—She was slower to gain access to personal technologies and in adopting the full features that technology permitted.

Transition Into Family Life: Marriage and Motherhood

New technology acquisition. After high school graduation, Jane began pursuing a bachelor's degree at a local university. She relied on technology made available by her university to complete required school work. During this time period, Jane met Brad, and they became parents to their first daughter when Jane was 20 years old. After becoming a mother and prior to completing her degree, Jane received an appealing job offer that she accepted in lieu of finishing her degree. Jane was required to use technology with her job, and Jane stated, "I got my first computer at 21 . . . and I didn't have

Internet access [in my home]." She further explained it was not until she was "23 when I had a computer with Internet access at home."

Jane gave birth to her second daughter at age 24, and she also married Brad during the same year. Brad and Jane continued to use limited technology in their home—relying on a personal computer and cell phones that lacked Internet capabilities. Jane reported that she upgraded to a smartphone when she was 27 years old, after 3 years of marriage and having 3- and 7-year-old daughters. Acquisition of a smartphone also led to Jane's first acceptance of social networking. Jane limited her social networking repertoire to Facebook and reported only spending 10 min a day on the application. Her adoption of Facebook was not easy. Jane explained, "[Facebook] was tough. I know it is user friendly, but there is this spot in the back of my head that's like 'there is so much more that my phone can do or that Facebook can do.'" Although the transition was tough, Jane appreciated the services afforded by Facebook.

Jane perceived Facebook as a medium that could reconnect past relationships and facilitate closeness. Having been disconnected with family in her transition into foster care, Jane especially valued the opportunity for reconnection with her biological family. Jane explained,

> I joined Facebook in 2010 so only 3 years that I've had it. But I think it's fascinating because it allows you to connect to people from your past that you haven't spoken to in almost 10 years and they find you on Facebook. It's like oh my gosh! You know. It's a way of reestablishing those ties and I've also been able to get in touch with my biological family from my grandma's side and what not. Yeah, I think it's amazing.

Jane also mentioned that she used Facebook to find and connect with foster siblings she had lived with when she was a child. In general, Jane valued the social features of social media but also valued the information sharing aspect of Facebook. Specifically, she valued the health and nutrition information shared by her friends. Jane shared,

> I'm also friends with a lot of families and they'll post recipes and stuff for a variety of different foods. It is one more note card I don't have to have in my recipe box. It expands my knowledge on available meals I can cook. I love that stuff!

Technology and relational concerns. As Jane reflected on her husband's social media use, she perceived that they had different expectations for how Facebook should be used. Brad acquired his smartphone after Jane had owned her first for a couple of years. Jane took the responsibility of teaching Brad not only how to use the phone but also how to use applications like Facebook. Jane indicated that Brad "uses his phone a lot for Facebook . . . He loves Facebook!" Jane inferred that her perspective was likely dated, but she still valued face-to-face connection more with her spouse and felt like technology got in the way of this desire. Jane disclosed,

Brad, I don't know, I suppose he might have an addictive personality. So he'll spend more time on his phone than me and that's irritating because it's like when you're home—we want you home. And even when you're sitting here you're not really here.

Jane acknowledged that her own lack of experience with technology in her foster care experience and later teenage life fueled her desire for less technology use and made her focus on the negative aspects of technology. Jane feared that social media and texting could lead to "miscommunication" and general distraction from human interaction. She used words like "irritating" and "backlash" when she talked about her concerns with technology. Jane cautioned,

> With Facebook, it's not something that you can always erase and usually in conversation you have dialect. You have voice inflection. So when someone is talking to you chances are you're going to understand their intended message; where you don't get that through Facebook. Someone can take it completely different than how it was meant. So I think with them having such an outlet it can also provide for a big backlash.

Similarly with text messaging, she stated, "I think with texting being the most common form of communication right now, with young adults and even children, I think it would contribute to miscommunication."

Jane recently began again working toward a bachelor's degree, and she indicated that her interaction with technology on campus and with younger students has helped her begin to acclimate to newer technologies like Facebook. Jane has not ventured into other social media outlets such as Instagram or Snapchat. Jane acknowledged that she does not find the same value in these new social technologies that college students and her other peers do. She explained that technology has an "immediacy factor" that she does not appreciate. Jane lamented, "The fact that you have it right there and you have an email, somebody's calling, or somebody's texting and you have to reply right now. I hate that you know, because you always feel in such a rush." Jane tried to limit her time spent using her cell phone and computer to when she had a specific "purpose" that was not entertainment.

Technology and motherhood. Jane indicated that her regular technology exposure in a college setting has allowed her to remain more advanced in her technology abilities than her 10-year-old daughter. Jane shared, "[My oldest daughter] hasn't had to teach me anything yet. She talks to me as if I don't know and she is super surprised that I do know. Like, 'Mom how do you know that?'" However, Jane readily acknowledged that she will eventually fall behind her children's knowledge of technology. Building on this point, Jane concluded, "I do accept that I will never have as much knowledge concerning technology as younger generations will."

Last, Jane discussed the tension between wanting her children to have access to technology and her own childhood

experiences being socialized away from technology. She described how technology, in her world, is for educational purposes and should only be used sparingly. Jane expressed concern that too much technology use could cause reliance on technology, ultimately leading to losing "the skills of the trade." Jane also explained that during her childhood, the risks of the Internet were not as high, but now they are "terrifying." Jane is still working to resolve the tension between contemporary trends in technology use and her own lack of technology use within her foster care experience. Her attempts to resolve this tension included "setting limits" for her children's technology use and monitoring content when they did use technology. Jane was quick to acknowledge her technology limitations and inadequacies; she strongly believed that she, and other parents, need to be educated about technology to monitor their children effectively.

Discussion

Jane's voice appears to be consistent with the traditional experience in foster care (Strijker et al., 2008). She reported several transitions in foster care placements after entering at the age of 7. She also had a commonality with the small subsection of foster care alumni who entered college after high school but had not completed their degree 7 years later (Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2005). Jane was also among the majority of female foster care alumnae who give birth to a child outside of a marital relationship within 4 years of transitioning out of the system (Reilly, 2003). The present study identified Jane's technological experiences while in the foster care system and after she transitioned out of the system. Results are discussed in terms of these transitional technological experiences and how these experiences are distinctive.

Technology Experiences in Foster Care

Jane's technology experiences while in foster care were limited but seemed to color her future use and perceptions of technology. Jane reported that she did have access to a home computer in one of her placements but rarely spent time using the computer. This lack of access and use of technology may be related to the domestic instability and/or educational discontinuity related to the several foster placements, which has been proposed in previous research with foster children (Finn & Kerman, 2004). Also, from Jane's perception, her foster parents who did have a home computer seemed to encourage her and her foster brother to spend time outside instead of online. The foster parents did not model computer use and did not co-participate in Jane's limited use of the computer. Similar to the majority of foster parents in one study (Finn & Kerman, 2004), Jane reported that her foster parents were not overly concerned about online predators or other Internet dangers.

Jane did indicate that her foster parents in one placement allowed her to have a pager when she was 13. Pagers were popular among adolescents during the mid-1990s and were considered an entrée for future mobile media gadgets among the adolescents and young adults (Ling, 2009; Matsuda, 2009). Jane did use her pager to connect with foster family and friends, but did not seem to convey the general enthusiasm regarding mobile technologies of youth during that time period (Ling, 2009). This lack of enthusiasm may be related to the retrospective nature of this case study—the emergence of newer technologies could possibly minimize the past novelty of pager technology. However, throughout the case study, Jane confessed a general lack of interest in technology. In the 1990s, adolescents were the early adopters of email and instant messaging (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006), but Jane did not report using these technologies. In general, it appears as though Jane had only limited access and interest in computer technology and other social technologies that gained popularity during her time in the foster care system.

Technology Experiences After Transitioning Out of Foster Care

Jane explained that after she transitioned out of foster care, she had more accessibility to technology. Jane acquired personal ownership of a cell phone in 2001 when approximately 50% of people in the United States owned cell phones (Pew Research Center, 2014c), which indicates that she gained access to cellular technology at a relatively normative time period. Jane was delayed in her ownership of a personal computer and having interent access in her home, compared with the majority of people in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2014c; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). This could possibly be explained by Jane not needing personal access because of the accessibility to computers and Internet made available on her university campus. Also, in the year 2000, a major reported reason for people below the age of 30 not having Internet access was that it was too expensive (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Jane did report owning a smartphone, which is common among Americans (74% of 30- to 49-year-olds own a smartphone) in her age group (Pew Research Center, 2014a).

Jane indicated that she joined her first social networking site when she was 27 years old. In 2006, 50% of 18- to 29-year-olds had joined social networking sites and when Jane joined in 2010 well more than 70% of young adults were already social networking site users (Pew Research Center, 2014b). Jane explained that she had a "tough" time learning how to use Facebook, offering a challenge to the notion that Millenials can naturally and easily adopt new technologies—using their previous knowledge of technology when adopting new technologies (Vaterlaus & Tulane, in press). Jane stated that she averaged 10 min a day on social

networking sites, which is approximately 4 hr less than averages reported by people below the age of 35 (Wiltfong, 2013). Jane informed that she has not adopted any social networking platforms beyond Facebook. Furthermore, Jane indicated on average that she sent five text messages per day, and Smith (2011) reported that on average, adults (25-34 years old) send 41.8 text messages per day. It appears that Jane has adopted the major technologies that are used among adults in the United States but uses them differently (and less) than the majority of adults.

A Unique Millennial Experience

Jane was born into the Millennial generation that has been described as a generation that has seamlessly embedded technology into their everyday living (Pew Research Center, 2010). Multicultural feminism focuses on challenging the "universalist voice" by "recognizing significant, power-structured differences among women" (Curry, 1998, p. 77). Previous research on women and technology has not considered the unique technological experiences of women who have been raised in the foster care system. Using a multicultural feminist framework gave voice to Jane's unique technological experiences as a foster care alumna.

In this case study, Jane described a tension between her experience with technology and what she perceived to be the accepted contemporary technological culture. She was almost apologetic as she described her technological views as dated or old fashioned. Jane was also aware that her limited childhood use of technology in the foster care system influenced her later adult experiences with technology. Robinson (2009) identified technological differences between youth who had Internet accessibility in their homes and those who did not have home access—but had some Internet access (e.g., at school). She concluded, "It has become ever clearer that users who enjoy unconstrained access [to technology] are in a qualitatively different position than their counterparts who must deal with constraints on their access to such technology" (Robinson, 2009, p. 505). To date, few studies have focused on the minority foster care family structure in terms of technology (Finn & Kerman, 2004), so it is challenging to determine if children in foster care have constrained or unconstrained access to technology. Jane described that through her multiple transitions into different foster placements, she had only limited access to technology, and when technology was available, she perceived that she was generally socialized away from using it—implying that transitions and foster parents placed constraints on her technology use.

Jane's case also challenged the "sameness" (Tong, 2009) in technological experience within the Millennial generation. Millenials are said to view the primary purpose of technology as being social (e.g., facilitating connection; Morrill, Jones, & Vaterlaus, 2013), but Jane perceived that the primary purposes of technology were instrumental (e.g., doing homework, scheduling, safety), for example describing the role she wants technology to play in her and her daughters' lives in pragmatic terms. Millennial women have been characterized as viewing tecnhology as a medium that strengthens relationships (Morrill et al., 2013), but Jane described technology as a source of disconnection in her relationship with her husband. Jane also worried about the miscommunication that could arise with technologically mediated communication and implied that technology could lead to being too socially connected (e.g., immediacy factor).

These differences in motivations and use of technology may be related to social challenges embedded in the foster care experience. Each transition to a new foster placement requires a foster child to say goodbye to old friends and then begin the challenging task of finding new friends (Ridge & Millar, 2000). Foster care is a unique developmental context that fostered youth acknowledge makes them different than children raised outside of the foster care system (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Being raised apart from a nuclear family, or more traditional family system, requires fostered youth to have "more personal strength and autonomy" (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1205). Some youth age out of foster care disavowing dependence on people/organizations and experience extreme challenges (e.g., becoming homeless). Disavowing people, even in part, would negate the need of using technology for social purposes. The social and developmental challenges related to foster care may shape how foster children and alumni use and perceive technology—more instrumental purposes.

Furthermore, one of the major challenges in experiencing multiple transitions related to foster care is maintaining contact with people from previous placements (Ridge & Millar, 2000). The process of maintaining contact and creating new contacts within social networks has been associated with successful transitions out of the foster care system (Hedenstrom, 2014). Jane reported that she did find the value in reconnecting with her biological family and her foster siblings on Facebook. Jane reported that she acquired access to social networking (i.e., Facebook) when she obtained a smartphone, which then allowed her to reconnect with people from her past. Jane's experience highlights the importance of technology in facilitating this reconnection and provides some support for the claim that youth need to have cell phones and computers to maintain supportive relationships through the transition out of foster care (Mitchell et al., 2014). Having access to technology and social media may be one way to maintain stability in relationships through the transitions associated with foster care.

In summary, Jane's technology experiences were quite different from others in her generation. Multicultural feminism postulates, "Those who share a common history of oppression or exclusion such as . . . nontraditional family structures, share a common bond" (Skogrand et al., 2013, p. 517). Our purpose in this case study was to illuminate the unique technological experience of one foster care alumna.

Now, future research should focus on giving voice to additional foster care children and alumni to identify the common bond (Skogrand et al., 2013) or similarities these individuals share within their understudied family structure. Further research on the commonalities among those raised in foster care could best inform policy and intervention related to technology in the foster care system.

Limitations and Conclusion

The qualitative case study approach provided a rich understanding of one woman's past and present experience in terms of technology. However, this method did limit the generalizability of the results beyond the participant's case. Future research should consider the use of larger sample sizes and multiple methods. Jane also was in the older subsection of the Millennial generation, and future research should recruit samples of younger Millennials and children from the next generation (after the year 2000) to investigate the current and evolving experience of technology among foster care children and alumni.

Using the multicultural feminist approach provided emerging evidence that a foster care alumna's experience with technology was different in terms of access, purpose, and use than the majority of Millennials. Future research should continue to explore not only the access to technology available through foster care transitions but also the constraints (e.g., foster parents' perceptions, access to media outside the home) associated with children's technology use within the system. Jane also perceived that she was an outsider in terms of her perceptions of the purposes and use of technology. This is a promising area of research that could investigate how foster children use social technologies differently than children raised in other contexts, if technology influences friendship formation after transition to a new foster placement, and the role technology plays in maintaining contact with past relationships after transition. This exploratory study serves as a beginning step to understanding the technological experiences in foster care and suggests that foster care is an important family experience to investigate in terms of technology.

References

Bennett, S., Maton, K., & Kervin, L. (2008). The "digital natives" debate: A critical review of the evidence. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *39*, 775-786. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2007.00793.x

Bogdan, R. C., & Bilken, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Brown, J. D., Childers, K. W., Bauman, K. E., & Koch, G. G. (1990). The influence of new media and family structure on young adolescents' television and radio use. *Communication Research*, *17*, 65-82. doi:10.1177/009365090017001004

Bryant, A. J., Sanders-Jackson, A., & Smallwood, A. M. (2006). IMing, text messaging, and adolescent social networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *11*, 577-592. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00028.x

Calvert, S. L., Rideout, V. J., Woolard, J. L., Barr, R. F., & Strouse, G. A. (2005). Age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic patterns in early computer use a national survey. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *48*, 590-607. doi:10.1177/0002764204271508

Clark, L. S., Demont-Heinrich, C., & Webber, S. A. (2004). Ethnographic interviews on the digital divide. *New Media & Society*, *6*, 529-547. doi:10.1177/146144804044333

Courtney, M. E., & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child & Family Social Work*, *11*, 209-219. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00433.x

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26.* Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest%20Evaluation_Report_4_10_12.pdf

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Bost, N. (2005). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=socwork_fac

Courtois, C., Mechant, P., De Marez, L., & Verleye, G. (2009). Gratifications and seeding behavior of online adolescents. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *15*, 109-137. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01496.x

Curry, B. R. (1998). Transforming feminist theory and practice: Beyond the politics of commonalities and differences to an inclusive multicultural feminist framework. In K. Conway-Turner, S. Cherrin, J. Schiffman, & K. D. Turkel (Eds.), *Women's studies in transition* (pp. 76-91). Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.

Finn, J., & Kerman, B. (2004). Internet risks for foster families online. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, *22*(4), 21-38. doi:10.1300/J017v22n04_02

Fitch, D. (2012). Youth in foster care and social media: A framework for developing privacy guidelines. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, *30*, 94-108. doi:10.1080/15228835.2012.700854

Gurau, C. (2012). A life-stage analysis of consumer loyalty profile: Comparing Generation X and Millennial consumers. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *29*, 103-113.

Hargittai, E., & Shafer, S. (2006). Differences in actual and perceived online skills: The role of gender*. *Social Science Quarterly*, *87*, 432-448. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2006.00389.x

Hedenstrom, M. A. (2014). *Aging out of foster care: The experiences of former foster youth who successfully navigated this*

transition (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Georgia State University, Atlanta.

Helsper, E. J., & Eynon, R. (2010). Digital natives: Where is the evidence? *British Educational Research Journal*, *36*, 503-520. doi:10.1080/01411920902989227

Horst, H. A., Herr-Stephenson, B., & Robinson, L. (2010). Media ecologies. In M. Ito et al. (Eds.), *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out* (pp. 29-78). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jones, L. P. (2014). The role of social support in the transition from foster care to emerging adulthood. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *17*, 81-96. doi:10.1080/10522158.2013.865287

Kimbrough, A. M., Guadagno, R. E., Muscanell, N. L., & Dill, J. (2013). Gender differences in mediated communication: Women connect more than do men. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *29*, 896-900. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2012.12.005

Ling, R. (2009). Mobile communication and teen emancipation. In G. Goggin & L. Hjorth (Eds.), *Mobile technologies* (pp. 50-61). New York, NY: Routledge.

Matsuda, M. (2009). Mobile media and the transformation of family. In G. Goggin & L. Hjorth (Eds.), *Mobile technologies* (pp. 62-72). New York, NY: Routledge.

Mitchell, M. B., Jones, T., & Renema, S. (2014). Will I make it on my own? Voices and visions of 17-year-old youth in transition. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1007/s10560-014-0364-2

Morrill, T. B., Jones, R. M., & Vaterlaus, J. M. (2013). Motivations for text messaging: Gender and age differences among young adults. *North American Journal of Psychology*, *15*, 1-16.

Notten, N., Peter, J., Kraaykamp, G., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2009). Research note: Digital divide across borders—A cross-national study of adolescents' use of digital technologies. *European Sociological Review*, *25*, 551-560. doi:10.1093/esr/jcn071

Pew Research Center. (2010). *Millennials: A portrait of generation next*. Retrieved from http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf

Pew Research Center. (2014a). *Cell phone and smartphone ownership demographics*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/mobile/cell-phone-and-smartphone-ownership-demographics/

Pew Research Center. (2014b). *Social networking fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/

Pew Research Center. (2014c). *Three technological revolutions*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/three-technology-revolutions/

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, Part II: Do they really think differently? *On the Horizon*, *9*, 1-6. Retrieved from http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part2.pdf

Reilly, T. (2003) Transition for care: Status and out of youth who age out of foster care. *Child Welfare*, *82*, 727-748.

Ridge, T., & Millar, J. (2000). Excluding children: Autonomy, friendship and the experience of the care system. *Social Policy & Administration*, *34*, 160-175. doi:10.1111/1467-9515.00183

Robinson, L. (2009). A taste for the necessary: A Bourdieuian approach to digital inequality. *Information, Communication & Society*, *12*, 488-507. doi:10.1080/13691180902857678

Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger": Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*, 1198-1210. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.03.005

Skogrand, L., Mendez, E., & Higginbotham, B. (2013). Stepfamily education: Case study of two lesbian couples. *Marriage & Family Review*, *49*, 504-519. doi:10.1080/01494929.2013.772932

Smith, A. (2011). How Americans use text messaging. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/09/19/how-americans-use-text-messaging/

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Strijker, J., Knorth, E. J., & Knot-Dickscheit, J. (2008). Placement history of foster children: A study of placement history and outcomes in long-term family foster care. *Child Welfare*, *87*, 107-124.

Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2013). *Recent demographic trends in foster care*. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/data_brief_foster_care_trends1.pdf

van Zoonen, L. (1992). Feminist theory and information technology. *Media, Culture & Society*, *14*, 9-29.

Vaterlaus, J. M., & Higginbotham, B. J. (2011). *Qualitative evaluation methods*. The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues. Retrieved from http://www.ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2011/v16-n1-2011-spring/vaterlaus-higginbotham.php

Vaterlaus, J. M., & Tulane, S. (in press). Digital generation gaps in parent-adolescent relationships. In C. J. Bruess (Ed.), *Family communication in the digital age*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Wartella, E., & Jennings, N. (2001). New members of the family: The digital revolution in the home. *Journal of Family Communication*, *1*, 59-69. doi:10.1207/S15327698JFC0101_07

Wiltfong, J. (2013, January 8). Socialogue: The most common butterfly on earth is the social butterfly. *Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange*. Retrieved from http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=5954

Zickuhr, K., & Smith, A. (2012). Digital differences. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/04/13/digital-differences/

Author Biographies

Cesia Roche is a graduate student studying counseling at the University of Nebraska–Kearney. Her research interests focus on social media use among young adults.

J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, PhD, LMFT is an assistant professor in the Department of Health and Human Development at Montana State University. His research interests include applied family science and new media and technology influences on family and human development.

Jimmy A. Young, PhD, MSW, MPA is an assistant professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of Nebraska-Kearney. His research interests include social media and technology in nonprofit organizations and social work education and practice.