Beyond Family: Patterns of Kin and Fictive Kin Caregivers Among Children and Youth in the Child Welfare System

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BEYOND FAMILY:

PATTERNS OF KIN AND FICTIVE KIN CAREGIVERS

AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2020
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Scott Leon for his patience, encouragement, and insight over the course of this project. Thank you for fielding countless panicked emails and questions about the research process. I could not have done this without you. I would also like to thank Dr. Maryse Richards for her thoughtful input. Additionally, thank you to my cohort and my labmates for their support over these past two years. Your willingness to listen to the challenges, celebrate the milestones, and send perfectly timed memes were essential to my writing process. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family. Kate and friends, thank you for your listening to every step of the process, for passing me water cups from across the room, and for your confidence in me. Mom and Dad and Chris, thank you for teaching me to be passionate about the work I do, for reminding me of my identity and worth, and happy hours of rest and communion. Grandparents, thank you for teaching me to savor the growing process, for modeling consistency and joy, and for sharing your lives with me.
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ABSTRACT

Children and youth in the child welfare system experience significant benefits from placement with custodial kin caregivers in psychological, social, relational, and educational domains (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018; Vasileva & Petermann, 2018). Additionally, the extant literature suggests that non-custodial kin and non-custodial fictive kin, or individuals unrelated by blood or marriage though afforded the same unofficial status as family (Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013), also contribute positive outcomes (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). However, little research has examined the ways in which custodial kin, non-custodial kin, and non-custodial fictive kin work together to provide social support to children and youth in the child welfare system. Thus, the current study seeks to add to existing literature by identifying distinct profiles of caregiving among these social support persons using the person-centered approach of latent profile analysis.

Results of the latent profile analysis indicated four optimal profiles: (1) Multigenerational Predominant Cousin \((n = 13, 4.09\%)\), (2) Bigenerational Lower Involvement \((n = 224, 70.44\%)\), (3) Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin \((n = 34, 10.69\%)\), and Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle \((n = 47, 14.78\%)\). Results suggest that amount and type of social support differs by profile, where children and youth in the Bigenerational Lower involvement profile experienced relatively lower levels of social support activities, those in the remaining three profiles experience higher levels of support that are spearheaded by specific caregivers. Additionally, while few demographic differences emerged across profiles, children and youth in
each profile experienced significantly different social support activities. This suggests that social support persons use specific forms of social support activities in order to care for children and youth in the child welfare system. Implications for child welfare practice and future research are discussed.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There are significant, well-documented consequences associated with the experience of maltreatment. Children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect are at risk for poorer psychosocial outcomes than youth who have not experienced maltreatment (see Pecora et al., 2009 and Vasileva & Peterman, 2018 for review). These negative outcomes include poorer social competence (e.g., Clausen et al., 1998), academic functioning (see Trout et al., 2008 for review), and maladaptive attachment styles (Vasileva & Petermann, 2018; Garcia Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2018; Fraley, 2002), as well as increased internalizing symptoms (Sheikh, 2018) and externalizing behaviors (Moylan et al., 2010). Given these negative outcomes, the child welfare system is designed to reduce both the likelihood that children and youth experience abuse and neglect and increase the resources and services available to care for those who have.

The child welfare system is a complex amalgamation of national, state, and local organizations and governing bodies that work in tandem to prevent the occurrence of and to mitigate the harm caused by child abuse and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). It spans across legal, social and political domains to field approximately 676,000 reports of child abuse and neglect annually, one-fifth of which are substantiated (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a).
In order to understand outcomes related to out-of-home care, it is essential to understand the experiences of children and youth before they experience child welfare involvement. Of those who experienced maltreatment, children under the age of one had the highest rate of victimization, with 24.8 per 1,000 experiencing abuse or neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). Additionally, girls comprised 51% of the victims of maltreatment. Furthermore, African-American (20.7%), Hispanic (22.0%), and White (44.9%) children comprised 87.6% of the total indicated victims (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). However, American Indian and Alaska Native children had the highest rates of victimization given their proportion of the population, with 14.2 per 1,000 children of this populations experience abuse or neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). Thus, if a random individual was drawn from a sample of abused or neglected children and youth in the United States, she would most likely be a white female under the age of one.

Neglect, or the failure to act that results in physical or emotional harm (United States, 2010), is the most common type of maltreatment: 74.8% of children who experience maltreatment are found to have been neglected (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). Alternately, physical abuse denotes the nonaccidental bodily injury of a child, which often includes activated stress reactions (Perry, 2006). Physical abuse is indicated in 18.2% of substantiated maltreatment cases each year (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). Neglect and physical abuse comprise the majority of child abuse and neglect cases. Less common cases involve sexual abuse (8.5%), psychological maltreatment (5.6%), medical neglect (2.1%), and other maltreatment (6.9%), including threatened abuse or parenting substance use (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a).
The experience of abuse and neglect often results in entrance into out-of-home care, which creates additional negative outcomes above and beyond the adverse psychosocial consequences caused by maltreatment. Nearly 443,000 children and youth were in out-of-home care as a result of substantiated abuse or neglect in 2017 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019b). These children and youth experience significant ecological disruption and loss as the result of their out-of-home care placement, including decreased contact with biological family and a decrease in the social capital provided by the community (e.g., schools, churches, extra-curricular activities (Ofsted, 2009; Schwartz, 2010). This disruption leads to fewer supportive relationships between children and adults (Perry, 2006). In addition to these initial disruptions, the majority of foster youth experience multiple placement changes that contribute to ongoing loss of social supports (Ofsted, 2009; Schwartz, 2010). These losses are troubling because of the importance of social support in buffering the negative effects of maltreatment and entry into foster care (Salazar et al., 2011). These ecological losses can be understood within the framework of social network theory.

A social network refers to specific relational linkages that exist between members of the network (Heaney & Israel, 2008). Resources are transferred through this network; thus, the quality of a social network relies on both the quality of dyadic relationships within the model and the interrelationships in the network as a whole (Lin & Peek, 1999). The quality of a social network hinges upon the several interconnected factors, including “the extent to which resources and support are both given and received in a relationship, the extent to which a relationship is characterized by emotional closeness, the extent to which a relationship is embedded in a formal organizational or institutional structure, and the extent to which a relationship services a variety of func-
tions” (Heaney & Israel, 2008, p. 190). Each of these domains may be influenced by entrance into out-of-home care, thereby significantly weakening the quality of children and youths’ social support networks and the psychosocial benefits they offer. Fortunately, the child welfare system has begun to recognize the importance of the broader, non-placement social support network and is making fledgling efforts to bolster the engagement of these networks. However, much work remains.

One critical gap in the literature involves the structure of families of children in foster care. Broadly speaking, African American and Latinx children are over-represented in the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). These populations are more likely to obtain social support from extended family members than from friend networks (Cantor et al., 1994). Nonetheless, little is known about the variability within these family structures and the structural typologies that may be present. For example, some families may be more matriarchal and provide support across generations (e.g., a combination of grandmothers, aunts and cousins) while others may provide support at a single generational level (e.g., only aunts and uncles or only grandparents). Further, we know even less about the role of non-blood related individuals who function as part as the extended family system, or fictive kin, in the lives of children and youth in foster care.

The current study seeks to fill a critical gap within the extant child welfare literature by examining distinct, structural typologies of social support among custodial kinship and foster caregivers, extended non-custodial kin, and non-custodial fictive kin members to assist both caseworkers and policy makers in providing support to these families. Thus, possible classes of children will be examined based on the unique patterns of social support extending across these
three domains. The following sections of the literature review detail what is currently known about the role of custodial kinship caregivers, non-custodial kin, and fictive kin members among both the general pediatric population and the child-welfare involved population.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Custodial Kinship Caregivers

Kinship care placements have only recently been prioritized within the child welfare system. Initially, child welfare policy was rooted in the evaluation of parents’ moral character, and thus their worthiness to raise their children. This approach applied to the extended family as well. Non-relative caregivers were initially prioritized above relative caregivers in an effort to remove children and youth from dysfunctional family environments (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2000). However, emerging research related to ecological systems and the benefit of maintaining connections reframed the benefit of extended family members, leading to a shift in child welfare policy towards incorporating kinship caregivers in the 1970s and 1980s (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2000). The prioritization of kinship caregivers was most recently codified in 2008 with the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which increased the federal funds available to kinship caregivers individually, while programs implemented nationally focused on increasing kinship engagement across the child welfare continuum (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019c). Now, custodial kinship care is a formal priority within the U.S. child welfare system. This emphasis on kinship caregivers mirrored their growing presence in the child welfare system. Between 2006 and 2016, the percentage of children and youth in kinship homes increased from 24% to 32% (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019b).
Despite mixed findings, there is evidence to suggest that youth with custodial kinship placements display better outcomes as compared to youth in non-family or group placements (Coleman & Wu, 2016; Winokur et al., 2018; Vasileva & Petermann, 2018). For example, kinship care provides equal or improved safety and stability for children and youth, as compared to children entering foster care (Coleman & Wu, 2016). This improved stability is in part facilitated because custodial kinship care is more likely to preserve family ties (Coakley et al., 2007), which in turn help children to reinforce their identity and self-esteem as it relates to their family history (Winokur et al., 2018). Through increased self-esteem, along with other supportive factors, kinship caregivers act as a significant mental health buffer as compared to non-kinship caregivers.

Children in custodial kinship care experience benefits directly related to their experiences with the child welfare system and in their mental health more broadly. For example, custodial kinship care decreases the likelihood of placement disruptions and institutional abuse compared to children in traditional, non-relative foster care (Winokur et al., 2018). In addition to these benefits, kinship care can foster attachment remediation among children entering the child welfare system. The relationships formed between caregivers and children are able to change previously established attachment patterns as supportive kin can act as a stable relationship through which children process their prior traumatic experiences (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2018). More broadly, children in custodial kinship care experience lower levels of internalizing symptoms, externalizing behaviors, and mental health problems than children in traditional foster care (Winokur et al., 2018). They also are less likely to experience cognitive and motor developmental delays than children in traditional foster care (Vasileva & Petermann, 2018). In summary, child welfare involved children and youth experience significant benefits from placement with
custodial kin caregivers in psychological, social, relationship, and educational domains. Given these benefits, it is important to assess the ways in which children and youth may receive these benefits more broadly, outside of the context of custodial kinship care.

**Non-custodial Kin Caregivers**

Unlike in kinship care, non-custodial kin do not have a legal responsibility to provide a safe and stable home for the children and youth for whom they care. However, extended family members often fulfill important functions within the family system. Non-custodial kin may provide key instrumental and emotional support to family, including to children and youth within their networks (Smetana et al., 2006).

Though non-custodial kin are present across races and age groups, racial and cultural differences may affect the presence of and support provided by extended family members. For example, African Americans report more frequent contact with their extended family. Additionally, African Americans are more likely to have smaller networks with a higher proportion of kin as compared to non-Hispanic whites (Ajrouch et al., 2001). However, there are no significant differences in the receipt of support, frequency of emotional support, perceived closeness, or number of involved family members across African Americans, Black Caribbeans, and non-Hispanic Whites (Taylor et al., 2014).

The presence of non-custodial kin has important indirect and direct effects in the psychosocial development of children and youth. Extended family members can provide socioemotional and financial support to parents, which in turn promotes well-being among their charges (Taylor & Roberts, 1995). Non-custodial kin also provide indirect instrumental support to children and youth in their kin networks by promoting their accumulation of human capital, thus improving
their future economic earning potential (LaFave & Duncan, 2014). Extended family members also support positive psychosocial development via direct contact and care. For example, the presence of extended kin is related to increased self-reliance among children (Williams-Butler et al., 2018). Non-custodial kin also influence religious commitment, which in turn decreases adolescent risk-taking (Mahoney et al., 2014). However, despite these promising findings, research on the role of extended family in the lives of children and youth is limited. Rather, the role of fictive kin has been prioritized in the extant literature to date.

**Non-custodial Fictive Kin**

Individuals in the general population are likely to interpret their family structure as existing beyond the confines of nuclear family when asked to evaluate their experience of family. This may occur through promoting unrelated individuals into the nuclear family structure, reclassifying family members into more immediate roles, or retaining kin regardless of the dissolution of family bonds (Allen et al., 2011). These fictive kin (also known as very important persons and non-parental adults) are afforded the same unofficial status as extended family members due to their continued and consistent presence, though unrelated by blood or marriage (Taylor et al., 2013). Extended fictive kin networks act as adaptive and flexible social support systems that serve important functions in the family system (Palloch & Lamborn, 2006). Their role is often legitimized by assigning them a family title or role (Braithwaite, 2010).

Fictive kinship occurs across diverse family networks, both in terms of race and age. The term is predominantly used in African American communities, and to a lesser extent LGBTQ community (Nelson, 2013); terms including extended family, friendship, and informal support networks denote the same role of fictive kinship in these two communities among other racial
and ethnic groups, as well as in child welfare settings (Taylor et al., 2013). Additionally, research on the topic has been largely limited to ethnographies among African American communities (Nelson, 2013). There is, however, evidence to suggest that fictive kin are more prominent in informal support networks for African Americans as compared to non-Hispanic Whites. This discrepancy is observable in amount of assistance, likelihood of daily contact, and frequency of interactions (Taylor et al., 2013). However, despite these discrepancies, fictive kin and community caregivers are present across diverse groups, as well as across diverse age groups. Though fictive kinship is present throughout the lifespan (Allen et al., 2011), its importance has primarily been studied within the context of adolescence.

Family and friendship support networks are important for coping with the ongoing stressors of daily life associated with normative youth development (Taylor et al., 2013). Key characteristics of fictive kin, including high perceived warmth and acceptance, are associated with more positive psychosocial adjustment among adolescents, above and beyond the influence of primary caregivers and peer-groups. This is particularly true in the lives of at-risk adolescents (Haddad et al., 1997; Rishel et al., 2005). The extant literature on the role these key attachment figures has largely focused on the type of individuals fulfilling this role, the frequency of contact, and the psychosocial ramifications of these relationships (Sterrett et al., 2015).

Fictive kin relationships can be formed through diverse initial roles, including school personnel, extended family, and friends. A substantial majority of adolescents are able to identify a non-parental adult who plays a very important role in their lives (Greenberger et al., 1998). These individuals meet unique needs in the lives of children and youth, including the provision of instrumental support, emotional support, information support, and esteem support (Sterrett et
Frequency of contact is directly related to the assignation of the fictive kin role. Specifically, Rishel and colleagues (2005) found that children experienced contact with teachers the most frequently, often several times a week, followed by athletic coaches, friend’s parents, and adult neighbors who they saw on average several times a week. Children were also likely to see club leaders, grandmothers, aunts, and religious leaders once to several times a month. This contrasted with less frequent contact between uncles, cousins, and counselors, who the children saw less than once a month (Rishel et al., 2005). Thus, frequency of contact is an integral component for children and youth to perceive adults as fictive kin.

The assignation of fictive kinship relies not only on frequency of contact, but also on the reported enjoyment of the relationships as well. Children and youth emphasize the perceptions of confidentiality and non-judgment when identifying defining features of their relationships with fictive kin, particularly in relationships that feel non-hierarchical in nature (Meltzer et al., 2018). American adolescents most commonly seek interpersonal support, general support, and fun from their relationships with non-parental adults (Chen et al., 2003). The interpersonal nature of these relationships, as well as encouragement and role modeling, are essential components in the relationships between adolescents and fictive kin (Meltzer et al., 2018).

When these relationships contain consistency, support, and warmth, fictive kin have been consistently found to promote positive psychosocial outcomes, including more positive academic outcomes, increased self-esteem and self-concept, and increased positive youth outcomes (Sterrett et al., 2015). They serve to moderate the effects of environmental stressors like poverty (Bost et al., 2004) and serve as protective factors against disorganized attachment and its associated consequences (Hall, 2007). These benefits are particularly salient for older females who experi-
ence strong social support via school personnel, though the positive effect of fictive kin extends to children and youth more broadly (Chu et al., 2010). Indeed, youth experience increased well-being as a function of their perceived social support compared to children. This may be because they are more able to develop collaborative and supportive relationships (Chu et al., 2010).

There has been a recognition in the value of extended networks in the broader literature, particularly within the context of perceived deficits in biological or legal family functioning (Braithwaite, 2010). However, this has not been matched by research in child welfare settings, despite youth in out-of-home care being both more vulnerable to negative psychosocial outcomes and likely lacking the relationships with key attachment figures that may promote positive functioning. Indeed, this has emerged only as a recent area of inquiry within the child welfare field.

**The Role of Non-custodial Kin and Fictive Kin in Child Welfare Settings**

The role of non-custodial kin and fictive kin is under-researched in child welfare specific contexts. An exception to this is a study demonstrating that frequent visits with non-custodial family members facilitates stronger attachment to biological family members among children and youth in long-term foster care (Poulin, 1992). Furthermore, for British youth in non-relative foster homes, contact with maternal grandparents predicted improvements in their relationship with their foster parents (Moyers et al., 2006). In addition to these studies, the benefits associated with the involvement of non-custodial kin and fictive kin among youth in child welfare has been more frequently researched in association with youth transitioning out of care without permanent connections. For example, it has been determined that fictive kin help to mitigate the social capital deficits that contribute to negative psychosocial outcomes among former-foster youth (Duke et al., 2017). The development and maintenance of these beneficial relationships is influenced by
transitioning foster youth’s participation in social institutions and their level of social-emotional competency (Zinn, 2017).

Among the broader child welfare population, children and youth in care value constancy in their relationships with both extended family members and fictive kin, as with non-child welfare involved children. Thus, paid professionals can become trusted adults due to their increased ability to be consistently present (Meltzer et al., 2018). Among the child welfare population, Collins et al. (2010) found that children and youth were equally likely to discuss child welfare professionals as community members and extended family members, thereby indicating their importance as fictive kin members. While describing the nature of these mentoring relationships with individuals brought into their lives via contact with the child welfare system, children and youth emphasized the “longstanding and consistent” nature of these ties. Other youth named community members, like coaches and teachers, as mentors. Though these relationships were less consistent and broader in nature as compared to child welfare professionals and non-custodial kin, the children and youth highlighted these mentors’ presence during key moments (Collins et al., 2010). Consequently, it appears that consistency and presence during important developmental milestones are important in the development of non-custodial kin and fictive kin relationships among child welfare populations, as in the general population.

Non-custodial kin and fictive kin support networks help to protect children and youth from the negative consequences related to the entrance into the child welfare system. They accomplish this, in part, by creating social safety nets and by helping individuals cope with stressors. For example, non-custodial kin and fictive kin contribute to the relational permanence experienced by child-welfare involved kin, thus improving their overall well-being (Williams-Butler
et al., 2018). Consistent with these findings, there are numerous benefits associated with increased contact between children and their extended families when in a non-relative foster placement, including greater likelihood of reunification with birth parents, decreased risk of placement disruption, and improved psychosocial development and functioning (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011), in addition to increased high school completion rates and fewer episodes of homelessness (Collins et al., 2010). As previously stated, custodial kinship care decreases the likelihood of externalizing behaviors and internalizing symptoms among children and youth in out-of-home care (Winokur et al., 2018). However, this extends beyond custodial relationships. Children with strong networks composed of non-custodial kin and fictive kin are also less likely to experience depression and anxiety (Collins et al., 2010).

Despite these promising findings, existing research indicates that only a minority of children in care have actively-involved, highly supportive networks (Leon & Dickson, 2018). Rather, limited contact appears to be the more common trend (Poulin, 1992). This suggests that the benefits of involved non-custodial kin and fictive kin are received by only a small proportion of children and youth in out-of-home care. Having a strong support network in one domain (e.g., biological family, foster care, or peer network) is not associated with improved outcomes over the experience of no support networks. Indeed, children and youth in out-of-home care need social support across no less than three domains to experience the psychosocial benefits of social support, including lower rates of depression and anxiety (Perry, 2006). The practical implications of the research on the benefits of non-custodial kin and fictive kin suggest that casework practice should seek to find and engage supports across the child’s ecology to promote positive outcomes.
Current Study

As the above review indicates, the presence of non-custodial kin and fictive kin likely contribute to a broader base of social support among children and youth in out-of-home care, suggesting that, in many cases, an “all hands on deck” approach to social support can provide significant benefits to children in foster care. However, there are several limitations to this body of literature. As previously noted, the majority of studies have focused on the role of kin as custodial foster parents as opposed to examining impact of non-custodial kin and fictive kin networks. Research has also frequently failed to assess the unique contributions made by members of the extended network towards levels of social support, instead dichotomizing support into ‘present’ or ‘not present’ categories or failing to distinguish between various types of non-custodial relative support.

Additionally, the extant literature has historically prioritized variable-centered approaches, which identify unique independent-, moderator-, and mediator-variables and the way that each of these variable affect child and youth outcomes. However, the complexity of social support networks cannot be adequately captured by variable-centered approaches alone. Most notably, variable-centered approaches examine sample variability in the independent variable and its association with dependent variable variation. However, this approach does not describe people and the way study variables pool in distinctive ways to characterize them. In the study of social network involvement and support, a person-centered approach allows for the description of families, and the ways in which family members and fictive kin come to represent a distinct family typology. For example, a person-centered approach may indicate a matriarchal family structure, in which grandma is predominantly responsible for caregiving and is supported by aunts within
the system. Or it may be that social support is more diffuse throughout the network, a patchwork of mentors, family members, and friends. These unique patterns of relationship, in conjunction with the ability of youth to distinguish between individual support providers (Collins et al., 2010), the importance of consistency in contact (Rishel et al., 2005), and the variability in outcome that occurs as the result of caregiver characteristics (Meltzer et al., 2018) demonstrate the need to implement a person-centered approach in addition to more traditional variable-centered approaches in order to examine specific typologies of contact occurring among the support systems for children and youth in child welfare.

The current study seeks to add to the understanding of children’s support systems in order to assist the child welfare system in better creating a comprehensive network to buffer against the negative effects of out-of-home care. Thus, the current study will identify distinct profiles of caregiving among custodial kinship and foster caregivers, extended non-custodial kin networks, and non-custodial fictive kin members. This will add to the current literature by improving our understanding of discrete caregiving clusters within the distinct setting of the child welfare system.

This study will examine patterns of involvement occurring among non-custodial kin and fictive kin across multiple domains of contact, including in-person visits, telephone calls, transportation, and birthday cards. Latent profile analysis (LPA) will examine the relational structure of extended networks by examining the interconnectedness of support figures and the unique contributions each member makes to the network as a whole. LPA, like cluster analysis, evaluates unobserved heterogeneity within this sample. However, where cluster analysis uses scree plots and deviations from the mean, LPA utilizes statistical indices to determine the ideal number
of profiles and response probabilities to assign membership therein (see Roesch et al., 2010 for review). Thus, the person-centered LPA is more appropriate than a variable-centered approach (i.e., focusing on the specific role of a variable in predicting specific outcomes) in analyzing the shared attributes that define non-custodial caregiving profiles.

Specifically, LPA will enable researchers to determine distinct profiles of kin and fictive kin support. Several relationship types will be included in the analysis, including familial relationships (e.g., cousins, grandparents, aunts/uncles), community figures (e.g., honorary “auntie,” a teacher, or a coach) and child welfare professionals (e.g., caseworker, therapist). Social network theory suggests that individual development is facilitated by the amount and quality of support that flows through their social support networks (Lin & Peek, 1999). Thus, understanding the typologies that exist among the social support networks of children and youth in out-of-home care will equip child welfare practitioners to more appropriately activate and engage extended, non-custodial care networks in supporting the 443,000 children involved with the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019b). Thus, the current study will investigate the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses

- Research Question 1: Will typologies differ by caregiver type, rather than by level of involvement?
- Hypothesis 1: If typologies differ by type, children and youth who do not experience kin involvement will experience fictive kin support.
- Hypothesis 2: Social support activities will not differ by profile.
• **Hypothesis 3:** Compared to other ethnic groups, African American participants will experience more social support from relatives, particularly within the grandparent domain.

• **Hypothesis 4:** Compared to children, older youth will experience more experience expansive social support networks.

• **Hypothesis 5:** Compared to boys, girls will experience more social support from fictive kin network members.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Participants

Participants included children and youth, aged 6 to 13, who entered into the temporary custody of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in Cook County and Will County Illinois between October 1\textsuperscript{st} 2011 and 2014. The data for this study were collected as part of a federal grant evaluation designed to improve children’s contact with kin and fictive kin upon entry into care. Only children and youth who received the grant intervention will be eligible for inclusion in the current study. There were no significant differences between the intervention and control groups, which were both representative of the Cook County and Will County foster care population during the grant period (Leon et al., 2016). However, children and youth in the intervention group had dedicated family finding services designed to increase the number of kin and fictive kin identified upon entrance into out-of-home care as compared to typical casework practice. In the intervention, dedicated family finders were tasked with identifying members of the children and youths’ support networks, of which all members had to be over the age of eighteen. After these kin and fictive kin were identified, family finding staff completed measures designed to assess the level and type of involvement specific to each identified support figure. Overall, children and youth who received the family finding intervention had 75\% more kin and fictive kin identified as compared to the control group (Leon et al., 2016), which may elucidate nuances in caregiving typologies more readily than children and youth in the control
group with fewer identified kin and fictive kin relationships.

Children and youth’s mean age at the time of involvement was 9.93 years (SD = 2.42). The present study included a total of 318 participants with a mean age of 9.85 years (SD = 2.44, range = 6 - 14) upon entry into child welfare. The sample included slightly more males (53%) than females. Most participants (58.5%) were African American, followed by 18.9% Multiracial, 13.4% Latinx, and 9.2% Caucasian or Asian American. These participants had, on average, 19.2 kin or fictive kin members in their extended network (SD = 7.4).

Procedure

The current study was part of a larger project seeking to identify and increase the involvement of kin and fictive kin into the lives of children and youth involved in the child welfare system, which was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Loyola University Chicago and Illinois DCFS. After identifying eligible participants in cooperation with Illinois DCFS, the research team gathered information about the participants’ demographic information and family relationships via the Illinois DCFS Statewide Automated Child Welfare System (SACWIS) database. This information was gathered primary through integrated assessment (IA) included in the SACWIS file, which Illinois requires to be completed within 45 days after a youth enters DCFS temporary custody. To complete the IA, a licensed mental health professional interviews parents and foster parents, and examines available records, in order to assess the medical, social, developmental, relational, and educational context of the child. Researchers reviewed the SACWIS file for each participant before confirming the collected information and collecting additional details through phone interviews with a child welfare worker.
Measures

Information regarding participants’ age, gender, race/ethnicity, family composition, and foster care placement history (including placement type and length) were assessed using the Kin Identification and Level of Engagement Form (KILE; Appendix A), a measure developed for the Recruitment and Kin connections Project (Bai et al., 2016). Members of the research team obtained information using the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services’ Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) and phone interviews with individual caseworkers in order to identify both social support figures for each participant and the type of involvement that characterized their support. To qualify as a social support figure, custodial kin, non-custodial kin, and fictive kin had to be at least eighteen years of age. Examples of involvement type included visitation, phone calls, homework help, mentoring, transportation assistance, coaching, sending birthday cards, invitations to family events, attendance at important events, providing respite, support to biological parents (via emotional support, visit supervision, or housing), and support to foster parents (via emotional support or helping with the child). The KILE has been found to have concurrent validity in multiple studies (Leon & Dickson, 2018; Jhe Bai et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

In the present study, total relative involvement with parents, foster parents, custodial kinship caregivers, non-custodial kin support figures, and fictive kin supports was determined for every participant at Time 1 based on the kinship involvement data recorded on the Kin Identification and Level of Engagement Form. Types of caregivers were categorized into either grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, or fictive kin in order to reflect distinctions between kin and
fictive kin. Support figures who were not designated as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin were placed within the fictive kin category. Additionally, as sibling groups often have similarly patterned social support, one child or youth was randomly selected from each family in order to prevent these patterns acting as confounds to examining inter-family patterns of caregiving.

A latent profile analysis (LPA) using Ward’s method (Ward Jr., 1963) was performed in order to identify clusters of children and youth with similar patterns of kin and fictive kin involvement. The LPA analysis relied on statistical indices, including Akaike Information Criterion (AIC; Akaike, 1987), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC; Schwartz, 1978), Adjusted Bayesian Information Criterion (ABIC; Sclove, 1987), Entropy (Ramaswamy et al., 1993), and the Bootstrapped Lo-Mendell-Rubin Likelihood Ratio Test (BLMR LR; McLachlan & Peel, 2000), which was then used in conjunction with the nonsignificant BLMR LR \( p \) values \( (p=.05) \) to determine the optimal number of profiles. Thus, the optimal number of profiles was determined using the lowest AIC, BIC, ABIC values, entropy values approaching 1.00, and nonsignificant BLMR LR values.

After identifying the ideal number of profiles, membership was assigned based on response probabilities. Following the assignment of participants to different profiles, two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) analyses were conducted to determine how social support person activities differed by profiles, as well as how specific types of social support differed by profile. Additionally, one independent samples t-test, one analysis of variance (ANOVA), and one chi-square test were then used to examine descriptive differences between identified clusters, including in terms of ethnicity, age, and gender.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Preliminary Categorization

To capture the broad range of social support experiences by children within the sample, data were coded to reflect the manifold types of caregivers who may be involved in the social network. Regarding kin relationships, the following support person categories were coded: maternal great grandparent, paternal great grandparent, maternal grandparent, paternal grandparent, maternal aunts and uncles, paternal aunts and uncles, maternal cousins, and paternal cousins. In terms of fictive kin, the following support person categories were coded: friends, godparents, caseworkers, mentors, adoptive family, siblings’ relatives (e.g. step-siblings, half-siblings’ family members, etc.), and parental paramours.

Despite the wide range of social support persons represented by these categories of caregivers, only a minority of children within the sample had support from most of these types of supportive figures. This may be due to the fact that the categories were highly specific. For example, the paternal side of the family was separated out from the maternal side, leading to distinctive categories such as paternal grandparent, maternal aunt/uncle, etc. (see Table 1). Similarly, the fictive kin categories were highly distinctive (e.g., friends, godparents), and as a result few children received support from many of these support person types (see Table 2).

For this reason, many of the support person types originally delineated, as seen in Table 1, were condensed. For the kin support person types, the paternal and maternal categories were
condensed. So, for example, paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents were condensed into one category, grandparents. Regarding fictive kin, all of the originally derived support person categories (e.g., teacher, godparent) were condensed into one category, fictive kin.

The total sample size in the parent project consisted of 493 children and youth. One sibling was randomly selected from families who had more than one participant in the study in order to avoid violation of the independence assumption, resulting in 318 participants in the current study. Outlier scores among these participants were excluded from the analysis.

Three independent samples t-test were conducted to determine whether participants included in the LPA differed from those not included (Tables 3 and 4). The results indicated that these groups did not differ in terms of ethnicity ($t(491) = 1.23, p = .22$), gender ($t(491) = -1.134, p = .26$), or age ($t(493) = .58, p = .56$).

### Table 1. Number of Support Activities Experienced by Kin Relationship Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kin</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>≥4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal great grandparent</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal great grandparent</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal grandparent</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal grandparent</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal aunts/uncles</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal aunts/uncles</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal cousins</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal cousins</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Number of Support Activities Experienced by Fictive Kin Relationship Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictive Kin</th>
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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>≥4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godparent</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive family</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings’ family</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ paramour</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Comparison of Categorical Demographic Information Across Those Included in the Latent Profile Analysis and Those Not Included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Included</th>
<th>Not included</th>
<th>% Included</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>64.30%</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>64.50%</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Comparison of Continuous Demographic Information Across Those Included in the Latent Profile Analysis and Those Not Included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Included</th>
<th>Not-included</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>9.98</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Latent Profile Analysis

Five LPA models were sequentially conducted using Mplus Version 7.1 using the previously described criteria for optimal profile selection (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). First, a one-cluster solution was conducted, followed by a two-cluster solution. The two-cluster solution was a significantly better fit than the one-cluster solution, as evidenced by low observed AIC and BIC values, an entropy value of 0.96, and a BLMR value of zero (see Table 5). Next, a three-cluster solution was conducted, which was a significantly better fit than the two-cluster solution, as the three-cluster solution had low AIC and BIC values, an entropy value of 0.98, and a BLMR value of zero. Next, a four-cluster solution was conducted, which resulted in low observed AIC and BIC values; this four-cluster solution most appropriately fit the data. The entropy value of 0.945 indicated clear separation between the classes and a significant BLMR value of zero. While the five-profile model also met criteria as an appropriate solution, as evidenced by its significant BLMR LR value, the fifth cluster in this solution only had nine participants. As such, the five-profile solution includes a cluster that is likely ungeneralizable and would have low power in any subsequent efforts to use the cluster to predict outcomes of interest. Additionally, the five-profile solution failed to replicate, indicating that it is not an optimal solution.
Table 5. Information Criteria. Entropy, and Likelihood Ratio Test Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Log likelihood</th>
<th>AIC</th>
<th>BIC</th>
<th>ABIC</th>
<th>Entropy</th>
<th>BLMR LR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 profile</td>
<td>-2925.95</td>
<td>5867.90</td>
<td>5897.99</td>
<td>5872.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 profile</td>
<td>-2816.59</td>
<td>5659.02</td>
<td>5707.92</td>
<td>5666.69</td>
<td>0.961</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 profile</td>
<td>-2724.74</td>
<td>5485.48</td>
<td>5553.20</td>
<td>5496.11</td>
<td>0.984</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 profile</td>
<td>-2661.85</td>
<td>5369.71</td>
<td>5456.24</td>
<td>5456.24</td>
<td>0.954</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 profile</td>
<td>-2620.46</td>
<td>5296.92</td>
<td>5402.26</td>
<td>5313.48</td>
<td>0.939</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ABIC = adjusted Bayesian information criterion; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; BLMR LR = Bootstrapped Lo–Mendell–Rubin likelihood ratio.

**Research Question 1 & Hypothesis 1: Typology Composition.** As discussed above, the optimal model was the four-profile solution, which included the following profiles: (1) Multigenerational Predominant Cousin \((n = 13, 4.09\%)\), (2) Bigenerational Lower Involvement \((n = 224, 70.44\%)\), (3) Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin \((n = 34, 10.69\%)\), and Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle \((n = 47, 14.78\%)\) (see Figure 1). A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine if the profiles differed based on the amount of support provided by specific social support persons. The results indicated that there was significant variation in support activities provided by grandparents \((F(3, 310) = 4.49, p <.01)\), aunts and uncles \((F(3, 314) = 9.54, p <.01)\), cousins \((F(3, 311) = 1,002.79, p <.01)\), and fictive kin \((F(3, 311) = 165.57, p <.01)\). Post-hoc Tukey HSD analyses were conducted to examine these differences more specifically.
The second profile, which represented the majority of children and youth sampled, was named Bigenerational Lower Involvement because it was typified by relatively lower social support, averaging approximately five support activities provided by grandparents ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 2.69$), aunts and uncles ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 2.92$), cousins ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.39$), and fictive kin ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 1.38$; table 6). Post-hoc Tukey HSD analyses indicated that children and youth in this profile experienced fewer grandparent social support activities than those in the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin profile ($p < .01$), fewer aunt and uncle social support activities than those in the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profile ($p < .01$), fewer cousin social support activities than those in the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profile ($p < .01$) and the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile ($p < .01$), and fewer fictive kin social support activities than those in the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin profile ($p < .01$).

In contrast, while the remaining three profiles had relatively commensurate numbers of support levels, ranging from approximately 12 to 16 caregiving activities per cluster, these
higher involvement clusters differed based on caregivers’ roles. For example, children and youth in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin cluster were more likely to have non-custodial kin across multiple generations provide support, particularly within the cousin domain. This included an average of 3.98 grandparent support activities (SD = 3.29), 4.73 aunt/uncle support activities (SD = 4.19), and 6.15 cousin support activities (SD = 0.99) included in their social support network. Post-hoc Tukey HSD analysis indicated that children and youth in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile were significantly more likely to experience social support activities provided by cousins compared all other profiles as compared to all other clusters (p < .01).

Similarly, children and youth included the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profile had the highest mean amount of aunt and uncle involvement, averaging 4.47 support activities provided by aunts and uncles (SD = 4.28) within their social support networks, which complemented lower but significant levels of grandparent involvement (M = 2.94, SD = 2.93). Post-hoc Tukey HSD analysis indicated that children and youth within this profile were significantly more likely to experience aunt and uncle social support activities than those in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement cluster.

Finally, children and youth in the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin cluster were more likely to experience social support through fictive kin (M=7.79, SD = 1.81), who may include community mentors, church members, teachers, foster parents, and coaches within their networks. Post-hoc Tukey HSD analysis indicated that children and youth in this profile were significantly more likely to experience social support activities provided by fictive kin than those in any other identified profile (p < .01). Children in the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin profile also had relatively lower levels of non-custodial kin involvement across grandparent (M =
4.16, \(SD = 3.46\), aunt and uncle \((M = 3.64, SD = 3.92)\), and cousin \((M = 0.07, SD = 0.24)\) categories. Specifically, they experienced fewer social support activities provided by cousins than those in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile \((p < .01)\) and the Multigenerational Aunt/Uncle profile \((p < .01)\). Thus, the four identified profiles significantly differed both in involvement level and caregiver typology.

**Hypothesis 2: Social Support Activity Differences Among Profiles.** A MANOVA was conducted to determine if there was significant variation in specific social support activity based on profile membership. The results indicated that there were significant differences in number of visitations \(F(3, 240) = 11.33, p < .01\) by profile. Specifically, post-hoc Tukey HSD analysis indicate that children and youth in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile were more likely to experience social support through visitation assistance than those in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile \((p = .001)\).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Multigenerational Predominant Cousin</th>
<th>Bigenerational Lower Involvement</th>
<th>Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin</th>
<th>Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>3.89 (SD = 3.29)</td>
<td>2.29 (SD = 2.69)</td>
<td>4.16 (SD = 3.46)</td>
<td>2.94 (SD = 2.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunts/uncles</td>
<td>4.73 (SD = 4.19)</td>
<td>2.05 (SD = 2.92)</td>
<td>3.64 (SD = 3.92)</td>
<td>4.47 (SD = 4.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>6.15 (SD = 0.99)</td>
<td>0.14 (SD = 0.39)</td>
<td>0.07 (SD = 0.24)</td>
<td>2.73 (SD = 0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fictive kin</td>
<td>2.10 (SD = 2.33)</td>
<td>1.14 (SD = 1.38)</td>
<td>7.79 (SD = 1.81)</td>
<td>1.69 (SD = 2.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total involvement</strong></td>
<td>16.87 (SD = 2.94)</td>
<td>5.62 (SD = 0.56)</td>
<td>15.66 (SD = 2.30)</td>
<td>12.68 (SD = 1.55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were also significant differences in social support offered via phone calls by clusters \(F(3, 149) = 34.36, p < .01\). Post-hoc Tukey HSD analysis indicated that children and youth in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile received more phone calls from social support figures than those in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement \(p < .01\), the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin \(p < .01\), and the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle \(p = .04\) profiles. Additionally, children and youth in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement Profile were more likely to receive phone calls from social support figures as compared to those in the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profile \(p < .01\).

Next, the MANOVA indicated significant differences in transportation support by profile \(F(3, 97) = 2.77, p = .02\). Tukey HSD post-hoc analysis indicated that children and youth in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile were more likely than those in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement \(p = .02\), the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin \(p = .034\), and the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle \(p = .02\) profiles to receive social support through transportation.

Finally, the MANOVA test indicated that there were significant differences in biological parent support activities \(F(3, 237) = 27.83, p < .01\) by profile. Children and youth in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile were less likely to have their biological parents receive social support by network members than those in the Multigenerational Aunt/Uncle profile \(p < .01\).

**Hypothesis 3: Racial and Ethnic Correlates of Profiles.** An independent samples t-test conducted to determine differences across profiles based on race and ethnicity (see Table 7). The test indicated that there were no differences in ethnicity among the profiles \(t(316) = 1.464, p\)
Thus, the likelihood of being placed in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin, Bigenerational Lower Involvement, Bigenerational Fictive Kin, and Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profiles does not differ based on ethnicity.

**Hypothesis 4: Age Correlates of Profiles.** Next, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted in order to assess differences in profiles based on age. There were significant differences between group mean ages ($F(3, 317) = 3.01, p = .03$). A post-hoc Tukey test indicated that children and youth in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile were older than those in the Bigenerational Fictive Kin profile ($p = .041$), thus driving the observed significant difference between profiles.

**Hypothesis 5: Gender Correlates of Profiles.** Finally, a chi-square test was conducted to assess gender differences across the four profiles. The test indicated that there were no gender differences among clusters ($\chi^2 (3, 317) = 0.89, p = .83$). Thus, the likelihood of being placed in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin, Bigenerational Lower Involvement, Bigenerational Fictive Kin, and Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profiles does not differ based on gender.
Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Four Profiles and the Overall Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Multi-generational Predominant Cousin</th>
<th>Bi-generational Low Involvement</th>
<th>Bi-generational Fictive Kin</th>
<th>Multi-generational Predominant Aunt/Uncle</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>( n )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>70.44</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-ethnic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>( M )</td>
<td>( SD )</td>
<td>( M )</td>
<td>( SD )</td>
<td>( M )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age *</td>
<td>10.25</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>9.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study extended prior literature by examining unique typologies of social support persons involved in the lives of children in the foster care system. Where prior literature primarily examined only custodial kin caregivers, this study examined the distinct contributions of multiple forms of caregivers, including custodial kin, non-custodial kin, and non-custodial fictive kin, via latent profile analysis. Therefore, this study provides information on the unique ways that children’s support structures are organized.

Four distinct profiles were identified detailing how grandparents, aunt, uncles, cousins, and fictive kin members may work in tandem to provide social support to children and youth in care. The four-profile solution included the (1) Multigenerational Predominant Cousin, (2) Bigenerational Lower Involvement, (3) Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin, and (4) Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle.

Research Question 1 queried whether profiles would differ based on the level of social support provided based person types. The LPA results suggest that social support levels differ. The largest cluster was the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile, encompassing 70.4% of the sample. The high rates of lower involvement across support persons is consistent with the literature. For example, Leon and Dickson (2019) identified that the majority of children and youth in the child welfare system had lower levels of kin-involvement within their social
network. Their study examined support types (e.g., variations across transportation, childcare etc.) while the current study examined variability across support persons (e.g., grandparents).

There are two possible explanations for the finding that the majority of children in the sample were classified as experiencing relatively lower support person involvement. First, it may be the case that entry into foster care is associated with social network disruption. Prior literature indicates that disruption is in fact common upon entry. Specifically, placement into out-of-home care disrupts established social support relationships and mitigates the development of these relationships (Rosenfeld et al., 1997). The greater the network disruption, the less likely it is that children and youth in out-of-home placements experience caring relationships with adults (Perry, 2006). Thus, the network disruption that typifies the child welfare experience contributes to the lower support person involvement experienced by this population.

The second possible explanation is that the family structures of children entering foster care are vulnerable to lower involvement even before entry. For example, children and youth who are involved the child welfare system are more likely to have experienced homelessness (Park et al., 2004) or substandard housing (Stokes & Schmidt, 2011), persistent poverty (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014), parental substance use (Seay, 2015), domestic violence, and parental mental illness (Hines et al., 2004) before entry into care. These factors have been associated with lower levels of social support among the broader population (Bohnke, 2008; Anderson & Rayans, 2004; Turner & Brown, 2010; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). Thus, it may be that the child welfare population is uniquely vulnerable to experiencing limited social support.
The three remaining profiles were typified by significantly higher levels of involvement that nonetheless differed according to the support persons providing the support. Additionally, in each these three remaining profiles, one support person type stood out as higher in terms of support provision than the remaining support persons in the profile. For example, children and youth in the Multigenerational Predominant Cousin profile experienced the highest levels of cousin-provided social support activities, while those in the Multigenerational Predominant Aunt/Uncle profile experience the highest levels of aunt and uncle support activities within their networks. Thus, it appears that while children and youth within these domains experience higher levels of support “across the board,” it is spearheaded by specific types of caregivers.

Hypothesis 1 queried whether children and youth with fewer kin-provided social support activities would experience increased fictive kin social support, which was supported by the present findings. In terms of fictive kin, within child welfare settings, children and youth are equally as likely to discuss child welfare professionals and other fictive kin figures as extended family members (Collins et al., 2010), suggesting that the presence of fictive kin support activities is essential in creating comprehensive networks for this population. The current study extends these findings by suggesting that non-custodial fictive kin members carry increased importance for a significant minority of youth by spearheading the provision of social support activities. Specifically, it may be that in cases where the custodial and non-custodial kin support was perceived to be lacking, fictive kin members within the network expanded their network responsibilities in order to meet the instrumental, emotional, information, and esteem support needs of the child or youth. Overall, this research suggests that there is significant heterogeneity in family systems among children and youth in the child welfare system, which mirrors existing literature suggest-
ing that extended kin networks are adaptive and flexible (Palloch & Lamborn, 2006), changing to serve the needs of individuals within the network. However, it is important to note that this study did not measure possible increases in fictive kin support in response to lower kinship support. Future work should explore this possibility.

These findings have significant implications for child welfare. Caseworkers should consider the diversity in family structure and avoid assumptions regarding the structure of social support networks for children and youth in care, as these assumptions may not accurately reflect the diversity of social support structures existing among this population. For example, child welfare caseworkers work with families to develop family team meetings, or meetings that include stakeholders who act in tandem as a case planning and decision-making body for children and their families throughout the course of their child welfare involvement. There are a number of approaches integrating custodial kin and foster parents, non-custodial kin, and non-custodial fictive kin with service providers and child welfare professionals (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). While families help to identify and incorporate team members into each family and team meeting model, the majority of this work is done by child welfare caseworkers (Singer, 2010). Though encouraged to include non-custodial fictive kin (Singer, 2010), very little research has been conducted to determine the how consistently this guidance is implemented (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). The results of this study indicate that a significant minority of children and youth in child welfare meet their social support needs through fictive kin. Emphasizing the inclusion of non-custodial fictive kin in family and team meetings can support caseworkers in creating a more comprehensive and consistent team (Wright et al., 2006). In sum, current understandings of “family” may not accurately represent the lived experiences of children and youth in the child
welfare system. Identifying and including more diverse family forms, like those spearheaded by cousins or fictive kin members, may contribute to the increased efficacy of family and team meetings and improved child welfare practice more broadly.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that the type of social support offered to children and youth would not differ by cluster, which was not confirmed by the present findings. Indeed, the social support activities of visitation, phone calls, transportation, and support to biological parents all differed by profile. Thus, social support persons appear to use specific forms of social support activities in order to care for children and youth in the child welfare system. Recognizing that different families are involved in different ways may increase engagement and collaboration in casework practice. Child welfare agencies would be well-served by not only recognizing the diverse forms of family structures, but also recognizing the unique social support activities provided by these kin and fictive kin structures in order to create more comprehensive social support networks.

Next, Hypothesis 3 proposed that African American participants would experience more social support from non-custodial kin as compared to other ethnic groups, particularly within the grandparent domain, which was not supported by the LPA results. This differs from prior findings detailing that African Americans are more likely to have a higher number of kin within their network (Ajrouch et al., 2001), are more likely to engage in reciprocal support relationships (Taylor et al., 2015), to live in closer proximity (Farber et al., 2005), and have grandparents acting as prominent caregivers within the family network (Fuller-Thompson et al., 1997) as compared to other ethnic groups. This discrepancy may be a result of differences in the ways in which social support was measured, as this study focused largely on the provision of instrumental sources of social support.
Hypothesis 4 proposed that older youth experience more expansive social support networks as compared to children, which was not supported by the current findings. Specifically, children and youth included in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile were significantly older than those included in the Bigenerational Fictive Kin profile. This diverges from prior findings suggesting that community members are promoted to fictive kinship by children and youth through their presence in key life events (Collins et al., 2010), thereby increasing the likelihood of fictive kin support among adolescents who have, by nature of their age, more experiences than younger children. These findings, however, suggest that younger children experience more social support activities. This discrepancy may be attributed to the unique population of study. The greater the length of time in out-of-home care, the greater the likelihood that children and youth in the child welfare system experience placement disruptions (Children’s Bureau, 2016), which in turn result in subsequent ecological losses (Stukes Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). It may be that children and youth within the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile have been in the child welfare system for longer than those in the Bigenerational Predominant Fictive Kin profile, thus experiencing more ecological losses that mitigate their experiences of social support activities. Additionally, children are more likely to experience social support from adults and parents while adolescents are more likely to experience social support from peers (Helsen et al., 2000). The current study excluded social network members below the age of eighteen. It may be that older children and youth were more likely to be included in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile because their social support needs are being met by peers, support persons who were not assessed in the present study.
Finally, Hypothesis 5 suggested that girls experience more social support from fictive kin networks than boys. This hypothesis was not supported by the current study as no significant gender differences emerged across the four profiles. Discrepancies exist within research examining gender differences in child and youth social support among the general population. For example, O’Bien et al. (2008) demonstrated that girls are more likely to experience psychosocial support in mentoring relationships, while Spencer et al. (2018) found that boys were more likely to experience stronger, more supportive mentoring relationships in adolescence. Other research demonstrates inconsistent but significant effects of gender on perceived intimacy in a broad range of relationships (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987). While inconclusive, prior research literature suggests that there are differences in the receipt of social support based on gender. However, the majority of the extant literature focuses on non-custodial fictive kin relationships. It may be that there are differing social support patterns based on gender among custodial and non-custodial fictive kin that are contributing the present homogeneity of gender across profiles.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This study was not without its limitations. First, the current study relies on the KILE measure, which was developed as part of the parent project. It therefore does not have as extensive a literature of support as other tools. However, this measure has been used in several prior studies. It has well-established predictive validity (Leon et al., 2016a; Hindt et al., 2018) and concurrent validity (Leon et al., 2016b). So, while evidence for the KILE’s psychometric properties is still being developed, its predictive and concurrent validity with social support related variables suggest that it is appropriate in gauging social support activities as assessed by caseworkers.
It is important to note that the KILE also relies on caseworker perception. Social support figures were identified via DCFS file review, meaning that these were figures recognized as important by the child’s caseworker. Accordingly, it may be that the children and youth involved in this study may have more expansive social support networks that were not identified by their caseworkers, but whose social support figures significantly contribute to the children and youth’s perception and experience of social support. Future studies should utilize multiple reporters in order to more accurately capture social support networks as they are experienced by children and youth.

Additionally, the KILE assesses only tangible social support activities, like transportation, phone calls, and childcare. While instrumental support is an essential component of social support (Smetana et al., 2006), it is not the only one. Emotional, informational, and esteem support are core components of the support provided by kin and fictive kin (Sterrett et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2011). It may be children and youth receive support beyond the activities assessed by the KILE and therefore experience more expansive support activities across domains. Future studies should assess multiple domains of social support beyond instrumental aid.

Third, given the broad range of support figures who may be identified as custodial kin, non-custodial kin, and non-custodial fictive kin, the sample size in the present study was limited. As the majority of children and youth within the sample did not have representation across the identified support figures, types of caregiver categories were collapsed into a broadly defined fictive kin category. Thus, nuance within this category was lost. Future studies should examine specific types of fictive kin support providers in order to examine how figures within this group may work together in order to fulfill the specific social support needs of children and youth in
the child welfare system. This is also true for custodial and non-custodial kin caregivers, whose social support was included into the broad categories of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. The extant literature suggests that kin support is provided by maternal and paternal relative groupings, which has important implications for the involvement of fathers’ side of the family. Future studies should designate kin along familial lines in order to observe any differences in profiles by both family line and type.

Finally, this study was conducted in an urban, Midwestern city. As a result, it may not be generalizable to all communities given the diversity in State and local child welfare policies. Future studies should examine patterns of caregiving support in rural and non-Midwestern samples in order to examine the impact of environment and child welfare policy on observed profiles.

Despite these limitations, the present study has a number of strengths. It utilized a person-centered analytical approach in order to more accurately capture the ways in which specific caregivers pool together in the provision of social support to children and youth in care. Additionally, the unique contributions of these caregivers across a wide range of instrumental support activities were assessed via the KILE, in contrast to prior approaches that dichotomized kinship and fictive kinship support into “present” and “not present” categories. Finally, this study assesses social support among the child welfare population. Apart from custodial caregivers, studies examining the presence and effect of social support among this population have historically been under-represented in the literature. As a result, this study fills a critical gap in the literature by identifying distinct profiles of social support as provided by custodial kinship and foster caregivers, extended non-custodial kin networks, and non-custodial fictive kin members to children and youth within the child welfare population.
Implications and Future Directions

The current study indicates systemic variations in patterns of social support among the networks of children and youth in the child welfare system. The four identified profiles within this study differed both in level of involvement and types of involved caregivers. Thus, children and youth in out-of-home care experience not only varying levels of social support, but there is also great heterogeneity in the sources by which that support is provided. This indicates that one-size fits all policy practices may not be effective in engaging and maintaining social support for children and youth in out-of-home care. Indeed, this research indicates that child welfare practitioners need to emphasize complexity when considering the social support persons available to children and youth by broadening working definitions of family structure.

Prior research suggests that children and youth in the child welfare system require social support across three distinct sources (i.e., biological family, foster family, peers, etc.) in order to experience the benefits of any social support at all (Perry, 2006). However, low social support appears to be the common trend, as indicated by high proportion of the current sample’s inclusion in the Bigenerational Lower Involvement profile. This was true even within the context of a project designed to increase kin involvement in the provision of social support to children and youth in out-of-home care (Leon et al., 2016c). Thus, recent concerns about the destabilizing and isolating effect of out-of-home care on children and youth’s ecological systems appear to be warranted. The present study indicates that child welfare systems need to ramp up efforts related to the identification, inclusion, and maintenance of supportive relationships in order to adequately provide for the socio-emotional and developmental needs of children and youth in care, particularly among youth as they were more likely to be included in the Bigenerational Lower Involve-
ment profile. Priority should be paid to placements and practices wherein children and youth are able to maintain relationships with established figures in order to support the long-term and consistent nature required for youth within this population to experience social support (Collins et al., 2010).

Additionally, these efforts should work on identifying a broad range of caregivers. Profiles typified by higher involvement were spearheaded by specific social support persons (i.e., cousins, aunt and uncles, fictive kin) who may not typically be viewed as essential social network members. However, there are a number of family structures available to youth that may not fit within standard narratives about who qualifies as family. While standard child welfare practice focuses on identifying and including kin into wraparound services (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013), it may be more effective to broaden these efforts to include less traditional caregiver types and family structures in order to better reflect the social support networks on children and youth in care. In sum, this study indicates that an “all hands-on deck” approach would be successful in a number of families because many families do in fact offer support across support person categories. Caseworkers should be open to seeing that in some families, fictive kin are actually the primary means by which children are supported.

By assessing social support activities across a variety of sources and utilizing a person-centered analytical approach, the obtained profiles more accurately represent the patterns of social support experienced by children and youth in the child welfare system than studies focusing on custodial kin caregivers using variable-centered approaches. Future studies should build upon these findings by expanding the type of social support figures across custodial kin, non-custodial kin, and non-custodial fictive kin domains in order to identify further nuances that exist in the
caregiving typologies of children and youth in care. Future studies should also examine identified profiles in relation to child welfare outcomes, including wellbeing, time to permanency, and safety, in addition to internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors. The extant literature suggests that social support mitigates the effect of out-of-home care on child internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors. It may be that distinct typologies of caregivers providing this social support differentially effect the development of maladaptive behaviors, as well as positive youth development. Finally, it would be useful to study changes in social support networks over time, particularly given the child welfare population’s dynamic needs and increased likelihood of placement changes. It may be that certain profiles have more consistent involvement levels, which would have implications for child and youth wellbeing and child welfare service fidelity.
APPENDIX A

KIN IDENTIFICATION AND LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT FORM
The RKCP Kin Identification and Level of Engagement (KILE) Form

PHASE I REVIEW
1. Initial Case History

Evaluator Initials: _____ Youth Name: ______________________ DCFS ID: ______________________

Youth DOB: ______ Gender: M F Ethnic/racial background: □ African/American □ Latino or ______
□ Caucasian □ Asian-American □ Multi-ethnic □ Other: ______________________ Date of DCP disposition and removal: __________________

Number of siblings: ______ Birth Order (e.g., 3/6) ______ Number of youth removed: ______

Date of Temporary Custody (TC) hearing: __________________ __________________ Date of case assignment: __________

Re_TC? Yes No: Dates of Re-TC hearing: __________ Date of case assignment: __________

Reason for removal: □ Physical Abuse □ Sexual Abuse □ Neglect for removal:

Agency:

Narrative (reason

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

SCRIPT AND PROTOCOL FOR SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION OF KIN:

"I am now going to discuss with you the kin, fictive kin, and any community supports (e.g., involved and concerned teacher, coach) that we found during our SACWIS file review of this case. I am going to list the names of the people and ask you to briefly describe their relationship with the child. What I am looking for is a description in your own words of the type of relationship the child has with this person. The basic categories include the following: Child’s placement, visitations, phone calls or cards to the child, whether they help out the child with homework, do babysitting or provide respite for the foster parent, whether or not they help the child learn important life skills (ex: teach the child to cook, practice sports with the child, etc.)
100 assistance with transportation (ex: drive the child to appointments or activities), or this person might be someone attends important events such as sporting events, or has been at court dates at Juvenile Court. Also, the person we’ve identified might be primarily a support to the biological parent (ex: help the parent get to AA meetings or doctor’s appointments, mentor them on parent skills, emotional support). For community supports, the person might be a coach who has taken a special interest in supporting the child through this difficult time in his/her life, or a teacher who has made visits to the child at home or the shelter. So please be thinking of these types of involvement they may be having with the child. For some of the relatives, I will also ask if you think the individual might have more involvement with the child at a future time. After I finish discussing these people with you, I will ask if you know of any other key people in the child's life who may not have been listed in SACWIS but who you have identified in working with this child.

There will probably be a wide range of involvement among the people I list to you. Some might be very involved, such as a placement, or regularly visit the child. Others might have no involvement with the child, such as a parent in prison or a relative who lives out of state and does not call or make any other contact. It's important that we know about these people as well. I would also like to know about any barriers that may exist in terms of getting the relative more involved in the child's life, such as a relative who has a known substance abuse problem, is in jail, or who wants to be a placement but has a criminal history. So let’s start. If you don’t remember all the things I just said, that’s OK, I will prompt you along the way if necessary. Do you have any questions?”

Then, list the first name and ask, “So how would you describe the relationship?”. You can add more detail if it's obvious such as if the person is the placement. If the worker does not describe any of the involvement categories you mentioned above, you can then prompt them by asking if they are doing anything with the child such as visits, respite, attendance at important events, life skills support/teaching etc. However, at this point do not ask them if the kin is a positive attachment figure. Instead, wait until after you have gone through the list and ask: “Thinking about all the people we discussed, who are the people you would say are truly positive attachment figures for this child? By positive attachment figure, we mean someone the child has a bond with, someone the child might go to if he/she is having a problem, or has a special and meaningful sort of tradition they do with the child, such as cut their hair.”

**First Relative Name:** _________________________ **Age:** ____ **Relationship to youth:** ________________

(e.g., “Maternal Aunt”)
☐ Biological parent support ○ Foster parent support ☐ Positive attachment figure? ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ No involvement ☐ Other Involvement. List:

☐ Barriers to involvement (e.g., substance use, perpetrator). List:

Notes:

Estimated Current Level of Engagement (circle one): Formal Natural Community Informal
Estimated Potential Level of Engagement (circle one): Formal Natural Community Informal

(# ___) Relative Name: ___________________________ Age: _____ Relationship to youth: _______________
(e.g., “Maternal Aunt”)

☐ Respite ☐ Visitations ☐ Home of Relative Foster Care Option ☐ Phone calls
☐ Tutoring/HW help ☐ Mentoring ☐ Childcare ☐ Transportation assistance
☐ Coaching ☐ Birthday cards ☐ Invitation to family or other events (e.g., picnics) ☐ Attendance at important events (e.g., sports, graduation)

☐ Biological parent support ☐ Foster parent support ☐ Positive attachment figure? ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ No involvement ☐ Other Involvement. List:

☐ Barriers to involvement (e.g., substance use, perpetrator). List:

Notes:

Estimated Current Level of Engagement (circle one): Formal Natural Community Informal
Estimated Potential Level of Engagement (circle one): Formal Natural Community Informal

Would you consider any of these kin or fictive kin alternative placements for the child if the current placement were to not work out for some reason? (Name of person)

Have discussed this possibility with this person? YES NO
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Jennifer Osborne was raised in Bay Village, Ohio. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended Elon University where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Strategic Communications, summa cum laude, in 2016.

While at Loyola, Ms. Osborne has worked as a research assistant in the Promoting Adjustment in Children through Evaluation (PACE) Lab with Dr. Scott Leon. She has also served as a teaching assistant for several professors throughout the psychology department. This year, she will be a pediatric neuropsychological assessment extern at NorthShore University Health System.