

Introduction

An interview was conducted by Danielle Key, whom I will refer to as Dani throughout this paper. I will examine my foster care experience using sociological questions to point out flaws in the foster care system that cause harm to youth in the foster care system. Using sociological questions of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, I describe systematic biases that run rampant through the foster care system. This interview is intended to show the trials and tribulations that youth in the foster care system must endure and persevere to become productive adults.

Dani: How would a critical theorist describe the population of children in foster care?

Ramon: A critical race theorist would explain that most kids placed in foster care live in poverty and are usually considered minorities in the United States. A majority of the children placed in foster care are of African American and Hispanic heritage. Many situations of removal are based on race or poverty, with socioeconomic situations leading to the removal of Black or Latinx children due to different situations, some based on facts, but not always.

Also, when I resided in a residential treatment center, the staff treated the Black kids poorly. Even the Black staff would mistreat the Black kids. The restraints after altercations would be rougher, and sometimes the staff would physically attack the Black kids unprovoked. The white kids did not have to endure such violence. One white boy I remember would use derogatory, racist language towards Black kids and then ran to staff when the Black boy would respond in a violent manner. The staff would chastise the Black kids because the white boy's family had money and placed him there voluntarily because of his behavior, without child protective services intervention. The residential treatment center is not meant to make you better; it's meant to keep you where you're at and break you. It's like jail.

Dani: How do gender ideologies such as heteronormativity explain the population of children placed in foster care?

Ramon: That is a really loaded question, because there is so much of a gender divide. Not even a divide, but it's just bad. Looking at it from a male perspective, it's like the only people getting placed in apartments are girls aging out who have children, while males and females without children are discharged into homelessness. Also, LGBTQ youth, it seems like most foster parents do not want them in their homes. It's just straight-up discrimination, and the agencies allow it.

There was a situation in a home I was in. The foster mother had two children of her own, her two nieces in kinship care, and me. The two nieces identified as lesbians. One night, I was going out to cash my independent-living stipend, and the younger niece ran away from home. My foster parents put the responsibility of finding her on me instead of calling the agency and making the care worker do their job. When I found my foster sister, she informed me that her cousin, the foster mother's biological daughter, and her friend were making sexual advances towards her, and nothing was being done about it by her aunt and uncle or the agency when she told them. Very little protection is given to LGBTQ youth in the foster care system.

When I was in a residential treatment center, there was this boy we all assumed was gay, and the staff would harass him along with other kids. They would call him a faggot and tell him nobody likes him. I remember one time a staff member dragged the poor guy into the pantry, and all we heard was fists hitting flesh and the kid crying, screaming, and begging the staff to stop, all this just because he was assumed to be gay. It was very traumatizing for me, and more so for the kid who was being abused just because of his perceived sexual orientation. It's sad that a young person cannot express themselves in a supposedly safe place.

Dani: How does age affect the population of children placed in foster care?

Ramon: I think it is deficient for teenagers. Families prefer newborns who can be adopted or toddlers who are impressionable and can be molded by the family, unlike teenagers who are usually set in their ways and resistant to change. Most foster families do not want to take teenagers because they have their own ways of thinking and will not change, especially if they were taken from their parents as preteens or teenagers. As in my case, I didn't arrive at a foster family until I was 15 years old. I knew what I expected from myself and would not change my perspective or sense of self-worth. I had short stays in four homes and two lengthy stays in homes until I aged out at 21. I went to four different high schools before I graduated. I bounced around a lot because I would not change my way of thinking or attitude. There was no getting me to conform with family norms. I was who I was, no changing me. I often would have conflicts with the male in the home because I never had a father, and no man was going to change me. When you're someone who can't be controlled or molded in their favor, the agency will do everything in their power to vilify you. They slap all kinds of labels on you and make you look undesirable in society's eyes. The agency wants to be in control of your future. If you don't play along, they try to set you up for failure.

I still hear stories of foster parents not wanting to take teenagers. The system has no choice but to place teenagers in group homes, which opens up a cycle of violence for the young person between abusive staff members and other teens who you do not mesh with. Being a teenager in a group home becomes very toxic.

Dani: How would Marx explain the population of children placed in foster care?

Ramon: Marx would say that the foster care system is a form of exploitation. The government is trying to turn the children into obedient workers, and if the child's parents cannot or will not make their children conform with norms, the government will. The government makes usually false allegations against parents who live in poverty and takes their children to exploit them and create good workers, without considering how the child or children might be brought up by their parents, no matter the income the family has. What the government needs to consider before removing a child is the child's well-being and happiness. If the child is well taken care of and happy, there is no need to remove them from there, even though they are growing up in poverty.

In my case, I was raised in a working-class, poor household. I lived with my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother in Jamaica, Queens, on the south side, a pretty poor neighborhood. I was taken away twice, once when I was a baby and once when I was 12 years old. When I was a baby, my mother told the hospital my great-grandmother's apartment had no heat, so I was taken by the state. They placed me with an ultra-religious family, the foster mother walking around with an "I Love Jesus" pin. They would try to embarrass me as a baby, dressing me in doll clothes because I was so small from being born premature. The state accused my mother of using drugs, but all she did was reach out for help, looking for a better living situation than living with no heat, and they took me. My mother got me back when I was one and a half. They put us in a Red Cross hotel until she found an apartment in Brooklyn.

When I was 12, I was having mental health issues between my mother losing her job and being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, my great-grandmother trying to kick me out, and being bullied at school. I tried to kill myself by taking a knife to my throat. My mother already had an open case because I hated school, so when I tried to kill myself, I was taken again. I was placed in a diagnostic center called Geller House in Staten Island, NY. I was there from April to October of 1999 and went through some trauma. On a July night, staff was showing a bootleg copy of the Fox show "The PJs" and I was listening to the New York Mets game on my Walkman. The Mets were involved in a bitter division race with the Atlanta Braves, who one of my friends there was a fan of. I got up to tell the Braves fan the Mets had won and the Braves had lost, when a 400-pound male staff member pushed me down, saying I was blocking the TV. I felt something snap in my ankle and immediately started screaming, "My leg, my fucking leg," as they laughed, thinking I was fooling around. I heard the female staff yell, "What the fuck you do that for?" across the day room at the male staff who assaulted me. No ambulance was called. Instead, the other male staff on duty drove me to the hospital. I had a fractured fibula. The next morning, all the kids who laughed at me

apologized and told me how fucked up it was what the staff did. I was in pain the whole six weeks of healing and went through years of physical therapy because of the injury. The staff member was fired the next day.

In early October, I was sent to Little Flower Children and Family Services Residential Treatment Center in Wading River, NY. I was there for 3 years. I had some good times and some bad. Seeing staff abuse my friends, like the time a friend of mine got slammed by a staff member just for asking me a question at the homework table, or seeing a staff member slam a boy so hard it broke his collarbone. Staff also cursed at us and played favorites, giving some kids extra food, snacks, or other rewards and denying others. I was one of the lucky ones who got to go to Washington, D.C. for the weekend, and one of the 5 boys picked to go on a trip to Coney Island, so it wasn't all bad for me.

The foster care system is a very abusive and violent system that causes harm to children and families through removal, all types of abuses, and even death. There needs to be a better system to attempt to keep families together, but how?