An Exploration of Clothing Selection Motivations and Meaning of Possessions
for Children in Foster Care Homes

Hyo Jung (Julie) Chang, Ph.D., Malinda Colwell, Ph.D., and Desiree Henderson,
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, U.S.A.

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Introduction: There is an increasing number of children experiencing life in foster care homes because of physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse and/or neglect (Leve et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand children's basic and psychological needs to provide them better life experiences, rather than the risk of vulnerability they experienced previously. As clothing is a tool to express oneself and considered as an extended self to show one's identity (Ahuvia, 2005), understanding the meaning of possessions related to clothing for children in the foster care homes can help us develop and provide necessary products or programs. Therefore, this study is designed to understand clothing selection motivations and the meaning of possessions for children in foster care homes.

Literature Review: Foster care is defined as a system in which a child has been placed into a group home with a state-certified foster parent (Leve et al., 2012). This placement of the child into a foster care home is usually arranged by the government or a social-service agency. Foster care can be long-term homes for many children and their needs are varied based on their age cohorts (Leve et al., 2012). Based on the Sheldon Stryker's (1980) Identity Theory, human behavior can be organized by symbolic linkages of psychological and social interactions to identify the self in the society. The clothing one chooses to purchase and wear is intricately linked to aspects of one's individual and social identity. Self-concept, reflected in identity, is one's self-perception related to attitudes, feelings, and knowledge about one's appearance or abilities (Byrne, 1984). In addition, individuals use the meanings associated with clothing to indicate roles within society to others (Kaiser et al., 1991).

Specifically, this study focuses on tweens as they are at the important stage of their lives to recognize and express their thoughts and beliefs (Brito, 2012). The word tween is a recent term defining the age gap between childhood and adolescence, ranging from ages 8 to 13 (Brito, 2012). Tweens are a large generation, with many opinions and ideas to share concerning what they think and how they feel and who are developmentally exploring issues of identity and self-esteem in unique ways. It is likely that clothing selection is one area that may reflect or be reflective of a tween's self-concept. Thus, this research aims to explore what clothing selection motivations are and what meaning their possessions have for children in foster care homes. Furthermore, children in the foster care homes have limited clothing resources or limited resources to purchase clothing with. Therefore, this study discovers clothing needs of children and to provide clothing-related programs and services.

Methodology and Results: This study employs qualitative focus group interviews to understand the phenomenological experiences of tweens in the foster care home. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data (Spiggle, 1994). All interviews were conducted in the room facilitated by the director in the foster care home in a Southwest area of the United States. The

total of 18 tweens, aged between 8 and 12, participated in the focus group interviews. There were 13 females and 5 males. Regarding the ethnicity, most of them are White (35.7%) or Hispanic/Latino (28.6%). The first two groups consisted of 7 tweens and the last group consisted of 4. Each focus group interview was audio recorded and lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. All data were collected and identified using the pseudonym, not a child's real name.

Six themes emerged from this study. These themes include *Self-awareness*, *Self-expression*, *Meaningfulness*, *Autonomy*, *Ownership*, and *Respect*. The *Self-awareness* theme emerged from their answers of choosing clothing based on proper appearance and self-consciousness of appearance. They also wanted to impress other people with their clothing. The *Self-expression* theme explained their various choices of clothing based on color, style, and design. They either want to match or not match based on their expression styles. Third, the *Meaningfulness* theme represents the special and unique importance of their clothing or possessions related to parents/family. Fourth, *Autonomy* emerged when they talked about whether they get to decide what to wear. They mentioned that it is an honor to choose their own outfits and talked about the freedom they have or want. Fifth, the *Ownership* theme represents how they feel about things that are their own. Alongside the ownership, participants showed mixed views regarding *Respect* about their possessions. They mentioned that some in the foster care setting respected other people's belongings, but not always. This theme was reflected in their discussions and seems to influence their satisfaction/dissatisfaction about the care.

Conclusion and Implications: The findings of this study provided an in-depth understanding of clothing selection motivations and meanings of possessions for the tweens in the foster care home by exploratory qualitative focus group interviews. The interesting finding was that participants expressed their character with clothing they chose. Also, this study explores the needs of children at foster care homes in terms of values and cares of their possessions. As this study found the importance of self-expression of tweens, future research about their actual clothing selection behavior is needed. Also, educational program about the clothing and style for children in foster care homes will provide experiential and psychological learning opportunities. Furthermore, the selection of clothing for children at the foster care homes is limited. Therefore, more choices of clothing selection by local and regional supports will be needed.

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