A Theory of Hoping For a Better Life Grounded In Youthful Offender Experiences

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Abstract

Twenty percent of children and adolescents in America experience a diagnosable mental health disorder before the age of 21 and 50% of all incidences of mental illness in youth occur by age 14. In the youthful offender population, the prevalence of mental health disorders increases to 70%. Common psychiatric disorders in the juvenile justice population include anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. While juvenile justice detention facilities slowly move to a more rehabilitative and treatment oriented approach, there is little known from the youthful offender voice about what happened in their lives that lead to being detained. In this grounded theory study, twelve youth gave voice to events in their lives through individual interviews. The resulting basic social psychological process, hoping for a better life, contained three stages: enduring the loss, persisting the dissension, and discovering a path. The stages result from the experiences expressed with the youthful offenders' own words.

Keywords: youthful offender, grounded theory

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Twenty percent of children and adolescents in America experience a diagnosable mental health disorder before the age of 21 (1) while one in ten children suffers from disease severe enough to impair daily life. But fewer than 20 % of youth who need mental health treatment receive services (2). While the incidence of diagnosable mental health disorders in a community adolescent population is 20%, the incidence soars to a range of 60 to 75% in a juvenile justice adolescent population (3, 4).

Common psychiatric diagnoses in a juvenile justice population include affective disorders such as depression; disruptive behavior disorders such as conduct disorder; and post-traumatic stress disorder (5, 6, 7). Psychiatric disorders are compounded with comorbid phenomena such as substance abuse disorders and learning disabilities. Lack of treatment facilities with professional staff educated in child and adolescent psychiatry result in parents relinquishing custody of their youth to juvenile justice as well as thousands of American youth being detained in detention centers without charges while they wait for mental health services in their communities (8).

Adolescent development is marked with physical, social, emotional, and cognitive changes. These normative changes can be adversely affected by changes in developmental issues. For example, a youth who appears physically mature may be at a disadvantage in a courtroom appearance because the mature appearance suggests decision making and competency abilities not yet possessed (6, 9). Socially and emotionally, youth interact with their families and peer groups to become independent. However, youth who live with inconsistent, coercive parenting and youth who engage in deviant peer group behaviors are at higher risk of delinquent behaviors and are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior (10, 11).

Finally, the cognitive and intellectual changes experienced by the adolescent demonstrate movement from egocentric and illogical thinking to a more abstract and hypothetical process. While neurobiological differences in brain structure and gender contribute to cognition changes in development, environmental stressors such as maltreatment and maladaptive responses to learning disorders contribute to the risk of youth becoming delinquent (12,13,14,15). Within the context of normative development, juvenile detention interrupts the developmental trajectory by changing normative functioning and quite possibly, causes irreparable damage to the youth (9). In addition, normative development may be interrupted when 50% of all mental illnesses in youth begin by age 14 (16).

The literature describes mental health issues, developmental trajectories and delinquent behaviors as risk factors that contribute to the juvenile delinquency trajectory (7, 10, 17, 18). However, little is known about what youth think of these issues and of what they think led to their detention. The purpose of this paper is to describe the substantive theory explicated from a study explaining the processes that contributed to juvenile detention as perceived by the adolescent.

1. Method

A grounded theory method was selected for this study because little is known about what youth think contributes to becoming detained (19). Grounded theory allows for relevance (20) while enabling

prediction and exploration of complex behavioral problems (21, 22). A naturalistic inquiry can make sense of narrative data that is represented by words as well as assist in understanding diverse stakeholder views (23, 24). Additionally, in explicating the participant's experience, social interactions can be transformative. This transformative experience in adolescents is important in terms of the effect an event has on the adolescent. Youth are deeply affected by events that occur during their adolescence and may base future behavior on those events (12, 25).

1.1. Participants

Following Institutional Review Board approval and obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality, theoretical sampling of youth residing in a 300 bed capacity juvenile detention center in the southwestern United States was used to ensure that contributing factors to juvenile detention could be explicated. Criteria for inclusion were 13 to16 years of age, able to understand and speak English, and volunteering to participate in one interview. Twelve youth (7 males and 5 females) with a mean age of 14.5 years old participated in the study. While most of the youth were in school, one youth had obtained a high school equivalency diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED) while in the detention center. Grade levels ranged from six to nine with a mean grade level of eight. Family constellations included four youth who lived with single mothers, three youth who lived with their fathers, and two youth who lived with a mother and stepfather. One youth lived with a biological mother and father who were unmarried, one youth lived with a paternal grandmother but thought that Child Protective Services (CPS) had custody of him, and one youth was in custody of CPS. Youth were asked to develop their own pseudonyms and self identified their ethnicity as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Age, gender, ethnicity, school grade and family constellation characteristics of study participants.

Participant *	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Grade in School	Youth Characteristics
Michael	14	M	Hispanic	8	Mother, brother Father unknown
Vince	15	M	White	9	Mother, stepfather, 2 siblings Father's location unknown
Junior	14	M	Hispanic	9 (suspended)	Mother, brother; Father incarcerated
Dominic	13	M	Pacific Islander	6	Father; Mother's location unknown
Sonny	14	M	Hispanic	8 (suspended)	Adoptive mother; Biological parents' location unknown

| Lucas	15	M	Native American	Special education	CPS Siblings on reservation; Biological parents' location unknown
Kiki	15	F	African American	9	Mother, father (unmarried), 3 siblings)
Anna	14	F	Native American	9 (truant)	Father (legal custody), aunt, grandmother, cousins; Mother has temporary custody
Tee	16	F	Pacific Islander	9 (Obtained GED in detention)	Mother, stepfather, sisters; Biological father's location unknown
Midget	16	F	White	9 (truant)	Mother, brother Father deceased
Andrea	13	F	Hispanic	8	Father; parents divorced; mother, siblings
Eastwood	16	M	White	8 (truant)	Paternal grandmother; father incarcerated, mother's location unknown, siblings Says CPS has custody of him
*					All names are pseudonyms.

1.2. Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a three month period (March through May, 2005). The study was explained to detained youth who then volunteered to be interviewed. After discerning that youth met the study criteria, both verbal and written parental consents and youth assents were obtained. Each interview was audio taped and ranged from 26 to 75 minutes occurring in a private but visibly accessible detention center classroom. The interview was guided by the data generating question: *What happened in your life that you are here in juvenile detention*? If probes were used they included questions such as *What is your biggest problem*? and *What needs to change?* Ten youth were interviewed when theoretical saturation occurred and when a theoretical model emerged, two more youth were recruited for interviews using the same earlier procedure. During the interview, detention approved snacks such as chocolate candies and box juices were offered and at the end of each interview youth were given a $10 gift card to a local retailer as a token of appreciation and available when discharged from the detention center. Following each interview, the investigator recorded field notes and personal impressions of the interview.

1.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim; the interviews were reviewed with the audiotapes for accuracy. Confidentiality was maintained with the use of pseudonyms as selected by the youth. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (21, 20, 26). Data were examined line by line through open coding. The resulting concepts, or substantive codes, were compared with other data until the categories became evident. Most of the categories were evident in the data analysis from the first six interviews. Questioning continued throughout theoretical sampling until saturation was achieved. Verification indicated a pattern of similar themes which were then examined for conceptual fit. Simultaneous coding and analysis resulted in a core category that best explained the process contributing to juvenile detention as *hoping for a better life*. Figure 1 shows an example of the analytic process that emerged from the narrative data. Using an iterative procedure and theoretical memoing, the narrative data as substantive codes emerged through selective coding to be conceptualized as detaching, one of the basic social structural processes in the emerging theory.
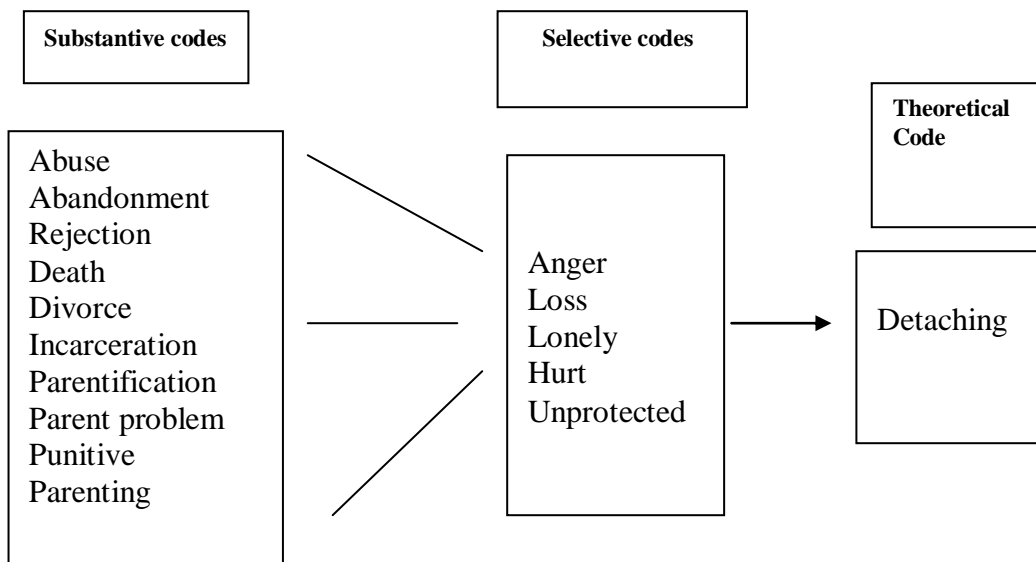
Figure 1. Selected code data from audit trail to demonstrate basic social structural process of detaching.

Methodological rigor (27) and trustworthiness (19) were addressed with the following activities: 1) presenting the study findings to two adolescent participants who recognized the interpretation as their own and subsequently furthered the findings with examples from their lives; 2) using three external experts in adolescent issues to provide external analysis of one interview; 3) using faculty expert in both the qualitative research method and psychiatric content to confirm contextual and analytic interpretation; 4) developing an audit inquiry trail of theoretical memoing and reading pertinent literature; and 5) having another faculty proficient in developmental saliency and the use of language to review the emerging conceptual analyses.

2. Findings

Loss was the basic psychological social problem for youth who were detained in juvenile detention and was related to losing a significant adult, usually a biological parent. Loss occurred through sentinel and irrevocable events such as divorce, incarceration, and death. However, being physically abandoned by parents, subjected to maltreatment, and being physically or emotionally rejected by parents were other ways youth described their losses. Losing a parent was not verbalized as a loss by youth, per se. Indeed, the issue was discussed in an offhand manner suggesting

the loss was integrated. No youth mentioned any assistance from family or other adults in coping with the loss.

The basic social psychological process of youth who were residing in juvenile detention was *hoping for a better life*, which explains how youth relate to their earlier losses over which they have no control. Three stages were discovered in the process of *hoping for a better life: enduring loss, persisting dissension, and discovering a path.* Each stage has a basic social structural process with themes. Youth moved through the stages in a distinct linear process (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Basic social psychological process themes of hoping
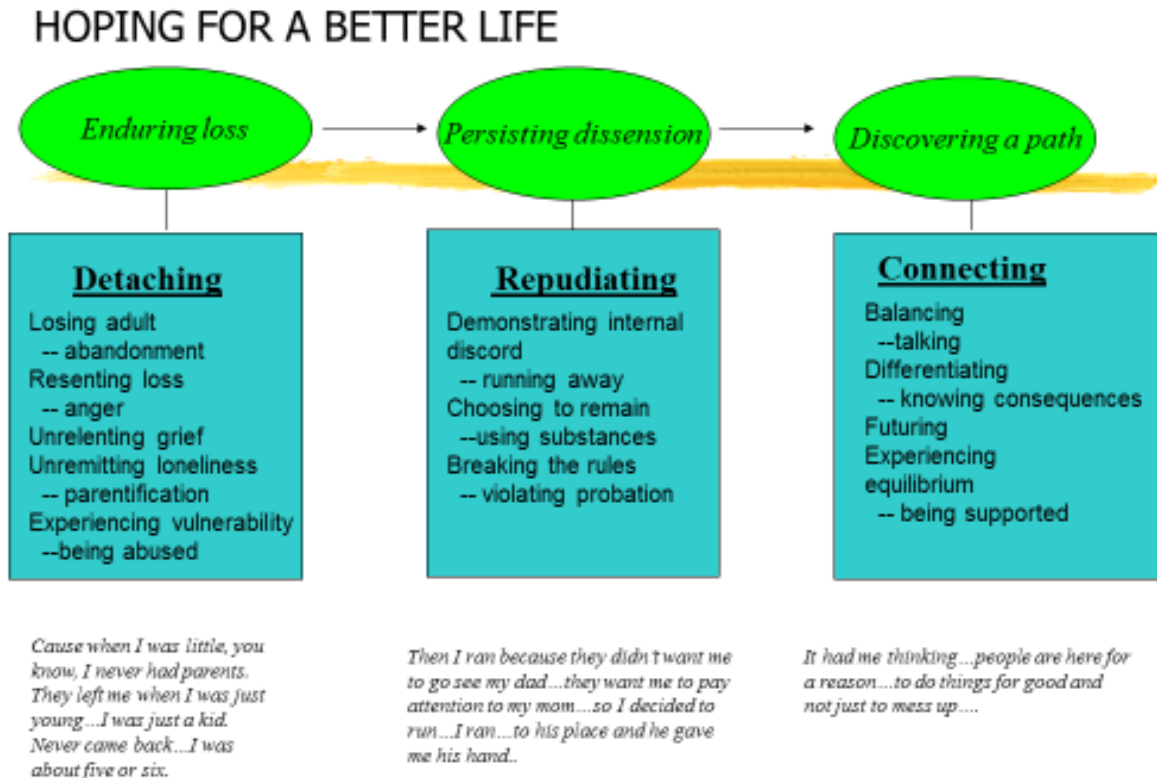
2.1. Enduring Loss

The stage of Enduring Loss represents the early and significant experience of loss of a parent and was responded to by detaching. The loss was not discussed as an unresolved issue but as something that had happened at another time. Eleven of the youth had lost a biological parent through some event or situation: abandonment, death, divorce, or incarceration. Five youth had been abandoned by parents: one female by her father, one female and one male by their mothers, and two youth by both parents. The biological fathers of three youth had disappeared when the youth were infants, leaving youth with no memory of them but still yearning. For example, Michael had never known his father; he had abandoned the family when Michael was born. Michael describes his need:

I feel like where is he and how come he wasn't here and which I do want to find out where is he and how come he wasn't there. But people ask me, where is your dad at? I just…well I don't know my dad... (Michael, 14)

Other youth talked of parental abandonment with such detachment that they didn't respond to the investigator's murmur of sympathy. Only one youth had lost a parent by death while two had experienced parental divorce. The impact of the loss was felt deeply by youth even while the event occurred at various developmental stages of the youth. An eleven year old was just as bereft with the loss of parents and family through a divorce as the four year old was when the youth recounted the time of the particular event. Thus, the basic psycho-logical structural process that youth responded to loss with was detaching. The strategies youth used to detach were resenting loss, unrelenting grief, unremitting loneliness, and experiencing vulnerability.

Resenting Loss. Anger and parent problems were commonly discussed as youth described resenting loss as the externalized behavior for the ongoing internal psychological process. Resenting the loss remained part of the youth's experience, emerging as a constant and continuing concept. The burden of the experience was internalized until the burden exploded as an external behavior which was usually anger. Youth indicated that while anger was their biggest problem, they were unable to say why they were angry and were puzzled by not knowing why they were angry. Anger, defined as the external demonstration of the internal distress, is usually a secondary emotion – a cover up for a deeper feeling – and a safe way to express the deeper feeling of loss.

The cops showed up and I ran and they got me for domestic violence…lot of anger…'cause of the past....my parents…I was on my own…I guess I just took it out on the victim's car…for no reason. (Lucas, 15)

I do have an anger problem… sometimes I can't control it. Sometimes I just cry about…like… not…I don't know it's like a good way to do it…really good way. But sometimes that's not enough for me. So, like sometimes I have to hit something. Like get it out like that. But I won't hit anybody 'cause that's just retarded…it'll get me into ten times more trouble so I hit my wall (Midget, 16)

Parent problem*s* were described as a disagreement or misunderstanding with a parent that resulted in punitive parenting. There was a sense of having no control or being acted upon with a cumulative feeling of a sense of helplessness or disem-powerment. Youth described situations where parental behaviors inadvertently compounded the issue.

Because I never like disobeyed my parents before…my parents have always

been strict…one day I came home from school and my mom was going through my things….cause she like went through my, she like emptied out my stuff. And she was taking things. And I got mad and she locked me out of my own room. Like she locked the door and then shut it with me and her out and said I was going to sleep in the hallway for that night. (Tee, 16)

Unrelenting Grief. Unrelenting grief was conceptualized from the youth descriptions of hurt feelings. The feelings were universal and transcended gender, ethnicity and age. It was not possible to resolve the feelings of being hurt when the parent was absent. Feelings were re-experienced when youth recounted the event causing abandonment or rejection. Grief is a normal process when loss occurs and growing through grief is facilitated with rituals, support, and traditions. Because youth did not have traditional supports useful to lessen grief, they fantasized how they would make life better.

My mom…. I'm not sure my mom….. I'm not sure about anything at all….but yeah, I suppose she'd still be living in Florida… I was going to get older and I was going to leave and go with my mom. I was going to run away… (Dominic, 13)

Unremitting Loneliness. Unremitting loneliness was the resigned and sad feeling resulting from an unrequited loss. Feelings of being lonely and alone persisted through normal developmental stages. When parents were inaccessible through events such as death, incarceration and absence, it was impossible for a youth to have a relationship with the parent. Youth used the process of parentification - thinking and behaving as youth thought adults would - to respond to the loneliness. For example, youth were often concerned about their younger siblings and said they were doing things "to bring him (or her) up right". Loneliness also resulted when a youth was rejected by a

parent. They felt dismissed and feelings of security were compromised by either the perception or the actual experience of rejection. There was a sense of displacement and not knowing where one belongs.

And like it hurt me, because the last time I was in here I asked my mom if she could come and visit me, and she's like, no, I don't' have time and then ah…ah…when I got out she…she had nothing but time. She watched movies all day….she'd go to her friend's house...she'd go to my grandma's house. She…she didn't even have time to come visit me when I was in here. That hurt me. I was in my room crying, too. (Vince, 15)

Experiencing Vulnerability. Youth who were unprotected by adults experienced vulnerability. Failure to be protected occurred in surprising places. Youth recounted organizations such as schools and child welfare services, systems traditionally designed to protect youth, did not protect or were perceived by youth as not listening to the youth. Parents of youth as well as other adults the youth knew in their communities were perceived as unsupportive. Conversely, adults who allowed activities such as harboring a runaway youth were perceived by youth as supportive. For example, when youth had no adult support and supervision, they were unaware that they were unprotected from negative contexts occurring in the neighborhoods and communities where they lived.

I mean, you see all these people, you know, walking up and down the road, you know, just thieving and doing anything. You know, selling their body and everything, these girls, you know. And then you see these men out, out thieving and stuff, you know, just to get a drug, you know. And, I guess you could say I was involved with that. (Eastwood, 16)

Eleven of the youth smoked marijuana in their friends' homes with their friend's parents and many had started using illegal drugs when they were 8 years old without anyone (parent) asking about substance use.

And so, I been trying it since I was eight, you know. My parents never, never thought I was high. They just thought I was sleepy or, you know, 'cause also, too, I was always in my room. I never came out of my room. I'd say I'd work on school work. And they always thought I was in my room doing school work and all that. (Andrea, 13)

Youth were harbored by adults they knew when they were runaways or having altercations with their parents. Systems that were designed to protect youth did not do so. Youth talked about adults who didn't notice their behavior or who didn't follow through with rules.

Some other kid brought marijuana to school, so we decided to go in the back… back of the school and started smoking marijuana. We all decided to go out and when the teacher turned back and then we had all said to ditch and then go around to the back. (Sonny, 14)

2.2. Persisting Dissension

There was a direct linear movement from the first stage of loss to the second stage of Persisting Dissension. The second stage was a transition of the burden of loss to externalized behaviors that youth demonstrated in the environments around them. In most cases, youth had displayed these external behaviors for some time before actually being placed in detention. Youth responded to the transition by repudiating, a refusal to conform to socializing agents of the community. The process of repudiating was characterized by visible protesting. Examples of visible protesting were stealing, lying, and vandalizing. The process encompassed more

than becoming delinquent. There was persistence or continuity in externalizing delinquent behavior even after the consequences of the delinquent behavior became known to the youth. Strategies used by youth to repudiate were demonstrating internal discord, choosing to remain and breaking rules.

Demonstrating Internal Discord. Demonstrating internal discord was defined as demonstrating socially inappropriate behaviors and persisting in those behaviors despite known consequences. The behaviors were usually longstanding and in the context of this study were framed as externalizing. External behaviors demonstrated by youth included using substances, running away, being physical and having psychiatric disorders diagnosed. Eleven youth (90%) reported they smoked marijuana. Four of those reported they had started smoking before the age of 10. When asked why they smoked marijuana, youth responded with many answers. Some smoked to escape from reality, some to calm themselves, some to focus and attend better, some to cope with feelings. Youth ran away from home for a variety of reasons, too. In most cases, there was disagreement about what the rules were. By being physical, youth were fighting, hitting and vandalizing in response to perceived threats and protecting family. The physicality in this stage was more intense than the anger that was discussed in Stage 1. These physical behaviors were intentional, rageful, and violent. The final externalizing behavior was psychiatric in nature. Six youth stated they had psychiatric disorders diagnosed by a mental health professional and were being treated psychopharmacologically. Disorders included bipolar disorder, depression, and attention deficit/ hyperactive disorder.

I was using the weed to like help me concentrate 'cause it made me concentrate and it helped me like…like I got more

interested into what the teacher was saying and everything. If I wasn't smoking I would be like all talking to everybody in class you know, starting to have a conversation with somebody else but when I was I would just sit there just really calm and like listen to what the teacher was saying and that would help me, I thought it would help me focus more and it did 'cause I was having good grades, I was having A's and B's until I started using coke. (Anna, 14)

Choosing To Remain. Choosing to remain was a process youth used for surviving. Youth were aware that the externalized behaviors they demonstrated were wrong or had harmful consequences. Yet, because of their circumstances, youth believed they were helpless and, as a matter of survival, they had to continue to participate in the behavior; thus, choosing to do so. For example, youth used substances as a way to relate to and interact with the environment. And, even though youth had used substances for some time, they could remember how they were before they started to use and could articulate that they would like to be that way again. Youth were innovative in creating survival methods. Some devised their own fundraisers while others joined local gangs. They were resourceful in finding ways to survive without a home, many running away and being "on the street" for months. While youth knew that some of the behaviors were dishonest, they also related to the mechanism of survival the behaviors afforded.

Breaking the Rules. Breaking the rules was intentionally choosing to participate in delinquent activities in spite of the known legal consequences. Most of the youth in the study had multiple detentions. Thus, youth intentionally participated in behaviors such as violating probation, stealing personal property, and being suspended from school.

And one day we were in the P.E. locker and then we were going through the backpacks and stuff and I found some marijuana and I was like …what is this? We ended up going…is this going to hurt me or are they going to be able to tell the difference because I don't want to get caught…so I ended up doing it anyways and we could not stop laughing so I liked it. We laughed at stupid stuff, we saw a bird flying we started laughing. (Kiki, 15)

This is my second time being here and the only reason why I'm here right now is for violating my probation…not doing what I'm suppose to, well I did a little bit what I am suppose to but my p.o. had told me…if I dropped dirty that he was going to lock me up and I guess that's what happened… dropped dirty is…like…a violation from messing up on probation. (Michael, 14)

2.3. Discovering a Path

In the third stage, youth in detention began to explore what opportunities there were for them once they were discharged from detention and what they would have to do in order to not return to the juvenile detention center. Youth described the process of connecting becoming physically transformed as they were energized by their plans for the future. The three conditions of Discovering a Path are balancing, futuring and experiencing equilibrium.

Balancing. When youth recognized their previous external behaviors were problematic, they began to discover new ones and were able to articulate appropriate behavior. They described learning how to talk about the issues and feelings rather than resorting to physicality.

Now I don't get in fights that much no more. But when I was twelve, I used to get in a lot of fights but from thirteen and fourteen…I …I don't get in fights. But people just be talking about, you don't know

my mom so I ain't going to get mad about what they're saying and then they will call me names, I'm like think what you think. (Junior, 14)

Learning to use words was a new skill youth demonstrated to express their inner feelings. Youth found relief in being able to discuss their situations as well as new ways of dealing with the situations after discharge. They described caring for other people, especially their siblings. And they were able to discuss mental health issues and how they could live with the diagnoses.

Ever since I came, like in here, and they told us we need to be more open with ourselves to …you know… to …you need to tell someone about it. (Anna,14)

My brother…he wrote me a note… and he says, need a hand pal, and he had a little hand right there. And that got my spirits high to where I don't want to do this no more because he's missing me and everything. (Vince, 15)

Futuring. As youth began to recount how they could have different futures, they became aware of appropriate behaviors and could differentiate right from wrong. In other words, they began to understand consequences or the effects of their choices. There was an awareness of choice, that they could choose alternative behaviors. In the process, they learned to behave differently and compared themselves to other youth. A sense of self worth emerged as youth learned to speak for themselves and not always take things personally.

See, now, also now that I'm sober, you know, I think back of all the people I stole from, you know, and it, it kind of hurts, you know. 'Cause thinking, thinking back, you know, I, I worked hard for all my stuff I had, you know, and that, like putting myself in their shoes, you know. They, they worked hard for what I took, you know. (Eastwood, 16)

I need to speak out more. I need to tell people how I'm feeling and you know and then try negotiate something with them to you know solve both of the problems, you know so they, like then when they would do that I would feel bad and all like sad because nobody ever listens to me, nobody will want to hear what I want to say but it's because I never tried to say it. (Anna, 14)

I'm going to go to, go back to my mom. Try to work everything out with her. I'm gonna try to get a job. And I'm going to go back to school in August. And I'm not gonna talk to those people who are giving me all the meth. (Midget, 16)

Experiencing Equilibrium. Youth described a sense of well being and that they belonged because they were supported and protected. Youth identified supportive people and how situations in the communities they knew they were going back to could support them. They remembered activities they had been involved with years before that they had been successful at and enjoyed. Personal strengths were identified as well as activities and people with which they could be involved. Normalizing assisted the sense of security and belonging that is important to continued growth and development.

I want to prove to everybody how…give…like…let my sisters be proud of me not "Oh, yeah, my sister's in jail right now," you know. So…I…I want everybody to…I want to show them what I'm capable of. (Tee, 16)

I have a lot of hope 'cause you know…I think now I understand more and I'm like happy I'm moving much better than I was before. (Lucas, 15)

3. Discussion

Six youth in the present study reported that they had been professionally diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and two other

youth were concerned that they might have a mental health disorder. This finding is congruent with current research that over 50% of the juvenile justice population has a mental health disorder (28, 3). Several youth had initial psychiatric evaluations in the juvenile detention center which is consistent with the notion that youth do not receive psychiatric care in their home communities. The psychiatric diagnoses of the youth in this study were classified into two subgroups, affective and disruptive behavior disorders. These subgroup classifications were congruent with the common diagnostic classifications in youthful offenders (5). This finding is also congruent with substantial evidence that lifetime cases of mental illness start by age 14 (29, 16).

The developmental trajectories of the youth in the present study were consistent with extant literature. While the males in this study demonstrated early incidences of externalizing behaviors, it was unclear if early maturing in females contributed to their involvement with delinquent behaviors. What was clear was that the females recounted months, and sometimes years, of delinquent behaviors before they were detained. This suggests that the juvenile justice system and society may sanction externalizing behaviors in girls for longer periods of time than with boys. It also suggests an explanation for the increased incidence of violent behaviors of detained girls. With literature supporting that the earlier delinquency and detention occur, the more likely the outcome of persistent lifelong delinquent behavior (30, 31, 32) and the median age of onset of delinquent behavior of youth in the current study was 13 years of age, concern is raised about the possibility of a lifelong criminality trajectory.

However, current literature does not discuss the implication of early and significant loss as a risk factor for the juvenile delinquency trajectory. The fact that loss of a parent was the basic psychological problem discovered in the current study needs further research and has implications for early intervention.

All youth in this study had substance use disorders and they clearly stated that they used illegal substances such as marijuana to deal with sad, depressed and angry feelings. These findings are consistent with the fact that detained youth have more than one substance disorder and that substance use is a prominent factor in recidivism (33, 34). What is more troubling is the potential for later mental illness in youth since current research suggests that early marijuana use increases the incidence of adult onset mental illness (35, 36).

Youth were deeply affected by their life experiences. Indeed, they developed their own ways of coping and interacting in environments where they did not have role models and socializing agents. Role modeling of appropriate adult behavior rarely was mentioned by the participants. Mixed messages, physical violence and unavailable adults made it difficult for youth to know to whom to turn and where they belonged. Youth described situations of coercive, inconsistent, and uninvolved parenting practices; parental substance abuse; and incarceration. Youth described punitive parenting practices that they responded to by running away. And yet, in spite of their experience with loss, with consistency and a positive environment, youth were able to visualize a different future for themselves by hoping for a better life. The sense of empowerment demonstrated by the participants while in a restrictive environment is intriguing and bears further research as does the effect of trauma.

4. Limitations

Several limitations of this study were identified. First, while theoretical saturation was reached with the ten interviews and two additional interviews provided member checks, the total sample of 12 is small. Qualitative studies by nature have small samples; the purpose of the study design is to explore complex behavioral problems. Second, the interview data was obtained through self-report, a method with known intrinsic bias. Finally, the detention center where the youth resided incorporated a rehabilitation and supportive system of care that may have influenced the study findings.

5. Implications for Practice

Early identification and intervention has long been espoused as an approach to mitigate the effects of trauma-related events and maltreatment endured by youth. Identifying youth at risk for eventual juvenile justice involvement could assist in delayed system entry with community-based interventions. Early identification of mental health disorders and learning disabilities could introduce interventions in early and middle childhood. Educating an inter-disciplinary workforce of teachers, nurses, social workers, and mental health counselors about identification, assessment, intervene-tion, and evaluation could support a wraparound approach for the youth, family, and community.

6. Conclusion

A loss of a parent is a significant event for detained youth who were asked what they thought were contributing factors to being in a juvenile detention center. The grounded theory of Hoping for a Better Life describes the behaviors youth use to live with the loss. In recounting the experience of loss, youth moved in a linear fashion by detaching in order to minimize the significance of the loss, persist in spite of the consequences of delinquent behavior, and, in discovering that there are alternative ways of behaving involving their own choices, voice hope that they can change and control their personal attitudes and external behaviors. Eventually, with evidence-based practices, the significant loss of a parent that a youth sustains will be appreciated for the trauma that it is. Eventually, with early identification, assessment, and intervention, the havoc the loss causes can be lessened.

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