



# Making Meaning of Risk: Exploring Resilient Adolescents' Interpretations of the Impact of Negative Life Experiences

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Making Meaning of Risk: Exploring Resilient Adolescents' Interpretations of the Impact of  
Negative Life Experiences

Nikhil D'Sa

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Robert L. Selman

Dr. Stephanie M. Jones

Dr. Sarah Dryden-Peterson

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard  
University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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For Kit, who believed in this work and, more importantly, in me from the day we met.

For my parents, who have been unwavering in their love and support.

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### Abstract

Our understanding of the relationship between risk factors and resilience has been framed primarily by probability. Resilience has been conceptualized as “beating the odds”: doing better than our statistical predictions would expect given the amount of risk the individual has faced. Undoubtedly, this research has offered a rich picture into trajectories of psychosocial development. However, it has limited our exploration of the mechanisms that explain *why* risk factors result in resilience. Context-driven work exploring these mechanisms has been limited by the subjective nature of risk factors. In order to extend our understanding of risk factors and resilience we have to understand the difference between actual and statistical risk; we have to understand how individuals make meaning of risk factors within the different ecological systems in their lives. In this study I explore how 38 inner-city charter school youth (ages 16-21) make meaning of self-identified negative life experiences. The school serves youth who have previously dropped out or have been expelled from high school. Additionally, the youth at this school reported a high level of risk factors by most objective standards. Using a mix of narrative writing and interviews, I explored (1) what events the youth self-reported as being detrimental, (2) what themes emerged in the youth’s discussion of the impact of these experiences, and (3) what discourses the youth used in discussing the impact of a particularly persistent experience: the loss of a biological parent. My analysis revealed that the youth framed their meaning around three questions: why have I been affected, how do I make sense of it, and what has changed in my life? In doing this they tried to create new meaning of negative life events, sometimes by internalizing or redefining life experiences. I discuss how meaning-making could be a constructivist mechanism that helps engender resilience; resilience could be explained by the ease with which the discrepancy between global meaning (i.e., schema that orients our

understanding of the world) and situational meaning (of a stressful event) is resolved. I

discuss the implications of this theory-generating work for future research and school-based practice.

### Introduction

Imagine our psychosocial functioning as a balance beam scale, each end stacked with different types of experiences, events, and occurrences that have been influential in our lives. The pivot on this scale can be moved. It represents our biological blueprint; it defines how easily the scale can tip in either direction. But the direction in which the scale tips depends not only on the position of the pivot but also the items placed at each end. Inevitably, our scales are not stationary; they are constantly in flux. At any point in time, adverse experiences that stress our psychosocial functioning increase the probability that the scale tips negative; these *risk factors* negatively affect our psychosocial functioning. On the other hand, protective experiences counter the effect of risk factors; they help bolster our psychosocial functioning in spite of the adversity that we may be experiencing, tipping our scales toward positive functioning.

This metaphor (Kendall-Taylor, 2012) helps us describe years of academic and empirical research on experiences that affect psychosocial functioning. It allows us to communicate what we expect to happen to the average individual given the relative weight of risk and protective factors in their life. The effect of a heavy load of risk factors (e.g., physical abuse, domestic violence, peer victimization) on psychosocial functioning is undeniable. We know that such risk factors can have a detrimental effect on children and adolescents' social, emotional, and cognitive development (e.g., Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). But some individuals do not follow this *average* story. Their scales still tip positive even though they have risk factors stacked on the opposite end. Our objective expectation, given years of empirical and anecdotal experience, is that the adversity they have experienced should weight their scale toward the negative. Yet, they demonstrate

resilient developmental trajectories, doing a lot better than what we would expect, given the risk factors in their lives.

Empirically, we have a strong understanding of the effect of risk and protective factors on individuals' well-being. We also have consistent evidence that some individuals do not follow the *average* trend (e.g., Masten et al., 1999; Werner, 1993); but we still do not fully understand *why* this happens; we do not completely understand the mechanisms that result in someone bucking the trend of poor psychosocial functioning. Even when we have managed to identify key mechanisms, like protective factors that counter the effect of specific risk factors, our understanding of their functioning has been limited. For example, strong and supportive relationships with parental figures has been identified as an important protective factor in defining resilient developmental trajectories (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1979). Yet, we still need to explore how these relationships work and why some individuals benefit from them, while others do not. This understanding is critical because it affects how we can respond to individuals experiencing risk factors and what services we can offer them. If we know how and why resilience emerges we are better placed to design programs that leverage that understanding for positive change.

There is little doubt that the *average* story is a powerful and helpful one. Grounded in an epidemiological model of health and sickness, this story has allowed us to design programs to predict and counter the effects of risk factors, and target individuals who may need additional services (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). However, overdependence on this *average* story has limited our ability to add nuance to our understanding of psychosocial functioning. In order to better understand the mechanisms that affect the varied manifestations of risk and protective factors we need to go from the population average story to understanding individual construction (Ungar, 2004). Indeed, risk and protective factors are both objective

and subjective in nature. The average story allows us to capture similarities across large samples of individuals; the story of individual construction allows us to contextualize why some individuals differ from the trend (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2009). In order to understand these subjective experiences we have to better understand how individuals make meaning of the experiences they define as having a negative impact on their life, and explore similarities within and across individuals.

In this thesis I add to the literature on risk factors and resilience in youth growing up in challenging social and economic circumstance. I extend our understanding of how individuals make meaning of self-defined risk factors: negative life experiences. Specifically, I offer a window into how 38 adolescents (16-21 years) from one urban charter school in the Northeast United States make meaning of experiences they believe to have had a negative impact on their life. I used narratives these youth wrote about their life experiences, and interviews with them as the primary data sources. I explored how these youth came to understand the meaning of negative life experiences<sup>1</sup> in the scope of their life. Delving deeper into a significant and markedly frequent risk factor, I also explored the social and cultural discourses that these youth drew on to explain why losing a biological parent had a negative impact on their life.

### **Overview and Roadmap**

In the next chapter—*Theoretical and Methodological Foundation*—I present an overview of the substantive and methodological literature that drives my work. While I have tried to offer a template for the separation of the substantive and methodological foci (below), the two strands are fundamentally linked; our substantive understanding of risk factors and

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “negative life experiences” to reference risk factors that are self-identified as detrimental by the youth in this study.

resilience is affected by the methodological approaches typically employed in developmental psychology. For example, resilience has come to represent a probabilistic construct: doing well when statistical models of the relationship between developmental outcomes and risk factors would predict otherwise. A substantive critique of risk factors and resilience has to reference the methods employed. Similarly, standard methodological approaches to studying the contextual nature of risk factors is affected by the substantive characterization of resilience within an epidemiological perspective. For example, *context* has been identified as a numerically quantifiable construct and so we have used statistical techniques to “control” for context. Thus it is important to discuss the substantive and methodological focus concurrently.

The *Theoretical and Methodological Foundation* chapter is divided into four sections. The substantive focus of the first section—*Risk and Protection: An Epidemiological Perspective*—is a description of the conceptualization of risk factors and protective factors in developmental psychology. In this discussion I highlight a severe risk factor—loss of a biological parent—and a cumulative risk index—the Adverse Childhood Experiences survey—as prototypes of the dominant conceptualization of risk factors in the psychological literature. The methodological focus of this section is on the effect of an epidemiology lens on the knowledge base of risk and protective factors. Notably, risk and protection have been defined as probability-based constructs because of the focus on prediction of normative and poor development at the population level.

The substantive focus of the second section—*Resilience to Severe Vulnerability: The Emergence of a Paradigm*—is on understanding resilience. I discuss how resilience is conceptualized in prevention science and the varying developmental trajectories identified in the empirical literature. I also describe the limitations in this conceptualization of resilience.

Methodologically, I focus on how the probability-based perspective of risk factors has affected how this conceptualization of resilience, and thereby limited what the developmental variation that can be explored.

In the third section—*Understanding the Contextual Nature of Risk*—I focus on the importance of context in the conceptualization of resilience. I discuss how context has been pegged as a critical construct that can unpack the mechanisms through which risk and protective factors actually manifest in resilience. I end this section with a discussion of two methods that have been used to study context. First I discuss the addition of context-based covariates in models used to analyze the relationship between risk factors and resilience. Second, I discuss the person-based approach: a directed approach that mixes quantitative and qualitative methodology. I end this section with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the approaches typically employed in the literature.

The final section—*Understanding the Subjective Meaning of Risk Factors*—focuses on the importance of meaning-making as one mechanism that has not been explored extensively in the risk and resilience literature. I present an argument for how meaning-making can address some of the limitations of the current conceptualization of risk factors and resilience. Methodologically, I focus on the meaning-making framework, a theoretically and empirically supported blueprint to understanding the process of creating meaning. I discuss the limitations of this framework and how hermeneutics can be used to address these limitations.

The objective of the *Study Design and Methodology* chapter is to present an in-depth view of the youth who participated in this study, their charter school, and the methods that I used. The aim is to put the design of this study and the data analytic strategy on center stage (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002), and thereby offer a transparent picture of the

limitations of this study and the rigor of the qualitative analysis. I start this chapter by providing details of the youth and the small charter school in which they study. I explain my decision for choosing this school and the specific sample. I follow this with a detailed description of how the pilot study led to a refinement of the research protocol and the methods I used. I then describe the process of collecting narratives from youth over two academic years, as well as the interactive interviews I conducted with nearly every youth. The latter half of this chapter covers the analytic methodology: grounded coding, thematic mapping, and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

In the chapter on *Rigor in Qualitative Research* I present a detailed description of the issues related to validity and reliability in qualitative research. I discuss the debates in the field with regard to what methods researchers should use and highlight the lack of consensus. In the latter half of this chapter I describe the four main strategies that I used to address the reliability and validity of my findings. First, I describe how I managed student reactions to my dual role at the charter school: as a teacher and as a researcher. Next, I describe self-checks, primarily through reflexive writing activities, that I used to monitor and account for my own bias as I collected the data and analyzed it. Third, I describe a process of triangulation where I ensured that all my codes and themes emerged in multiple data sources: life graphs, narratives, and interviews. I did this to reduce the possibility that a specific theme emerged because of the type of questions I asked in the interviews or the type of feedback I provided on the narratives. Last, I describe the post-hoc inter-rater reliability test I conducted to ensure that my codes could be applied by a third-party researcher.

In the *Findings* chapter I present evidence generated to address the three main research questions of this study. First, I discuss the frequency of self-reported negative life experiences and highlight the marked prevalence of the loss of a biological parent for nearly



all the participants. I follow this with a description of the six main meaning-making themes that emerged: identity, betterment, self-reliance, optimism, perseverance, and preparation. I also discuss how these themes differed along two thematic axes: internalization (the ability to incorporate the meaning of the negative life experience into their schema of their life) and redefinition (renegotiating the meaning of a negative life experience, and changing this meaning).

For the third research question I delve into the language and discursive constructions used by adolescents when talking about the loss of a biological parent. I describe how this analysis revealed three types of discourses. Some youth drew on a discourse of family unity to juxtapose their family before and after a divorce/separation to describe how their family “fell apart”. Other youth drew on a socially or culturally created norm about parental roles to describe how their biological parent(s) did not fulfill that role. Lastly, a handful of youth disowned their parents of the title of “parent”. They were let down time and again by their biological parent and so decided to ignore them or treat them as a friend, not a parent. The use of these discourses allowed the youth to reposition themselves, their biological parents, and other caregivers in a way that explained their behavior (often problem and delinquent behaviors) as being the reaction of a victim in an uncontrollable situation.

In the *Discussion* chapter I provide a broader discussion about the links between my findings and the extant literature. In the first section—*Links to the Meaning-Making Framework*—I discuss the connections between the findings from this study and the meaning-making framework. Three questions appear to drive the meaning-making that the youth in this study use: why have I been affected by the negative life experience, how can I make sense of the effects of this experience, and what has changed in my life because of the negative life experience. In the second section of the *Discussion* chapter I argue that this study

and its findings address four of the main limitations of the meaning-making framework. This study (a) extends the meaning-making framework beyond the medical and bereavement context, (b) addresses meaning-making through an indirect methodology, (c) moves beyond the “shocks to the system” approach of meaning-making research, and (d) focuses on the entire framework rather than a single component. In the last section I address four primary implications that emerge from my findings. I start by discussing how this work extends our current understanding of risk factors and resilience. I then discuss directions for future research and possible intervention strategies.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Foundation**

#### **Risk and Protection: An Epidemiological Perspective**

Developmental psychology has been closely influenced by the methodology of epidemiology: “the field of public health and medicine that studies the incidence, distribution, and etiology of disease in human populations. The purpose of epidemiology is to better understand disease causation and to prevent disease in groups of individuals” (Green, Freedman, & Gordis, 2008; p. 335). Most simply defined, epidemiology is the study of patterns of health and illness; it deals with identifying patterns and studying the predictors and determinants of these patterns. While the field has a varied, and expansive, approach to how these patterns are identified and understood, the predominant methodology has been to use a variables-based approach (Hardy, Magnello, & Hill, 2002). In this approach, researchers identify theoretically plausible factors of wellness and/or illness and use these factors in multivariate regression models to determine what best predicts a given outcome. More recently, researchers have started using more sophisticated prediction methods, including structural equation modeling, but the foundation remains the same (Hardy et al., 2002). One example of this variables-based approach in epidemiology comes from the study of adolescent obesity. Researchers have used the variables-based approach to identify key family-level predictors of adolescent obesity, like parental monitoring (Cislak, Safron, Pratt, Gaspar, & Luszczynska, 2012), parental education level (Lee, Harris, & Lee, 2013), and early maternal smoking & play-activity level (Chivers, Parker, Bulsara, Beilin, & Hands, 2012).

Embedded in this variables-based approach is the concept of probability; given a specific population (e.g.: adolescents), we try and understand which predictors (e.g.: parental monitoring) increase or decrease the chances that an individual will experience the illness (e.g.: obesity) (Hardy et al., 2002; Merrill, 2010). “Epidemiology assumes that disease is not

distributed randomly in a group of individuals and that identifiable subgroups, including those exposed to certain agents, are at increased risk of contracting particular diseases” (Green et al., 2008; p. 335). Because the aim of epidemiology is to identify patterns of wellness and sickness in populations, the variables-based approach has been used to define the probability that we can expect to observe a given sickness. While this model has been used widely in the study of public health, it has also influenced the study of risk factors and resilience (Luthar, 2006).

Prominent in the study of resilience are the terms risk factors and protective factors, terms defined by the construct of probability (Luthar, 1993). In the study of adaptive and poor psychosocial development, the epidemiological variables-based approach is used frequently to understand how individuals will react to particular situations or experiences. In other words, the focus has been on defining what would happen to the prototypical individual if they were to live through a particular experience, or set of experiences. If we go back to the analogy of thinking of human development as a balance beam scale, the study of resilience has been focused on how probable it is that the average individual’s balance beam would tip negative or positive when they are weighted with a particular set of “factors”.

*Vulnerability* defines a state of development where the individual is susceptible to poor developmental outcomes because of the presence of experiences and events that cause stress (Luthar, 2006). These *risk factors* increase the probability (or the risk) that an individual would be in a state of vulnerability, and thus increase the probability of poor developmental outcomes. On the other hand, *protective factors* increase the probability that an individual

would develop adaptively despite the presence of risk factors, precisely because protective factors counter the effect and impact of specific risk factors (Masten & Wright, 2009).

In using the variables-based approach, developmental psychologists have used two methods of determining the effect of risk factors on psychosocial development: (a) understand the impact of severe risk factors or (b) capture the effects of the accumulation of risk factors. The severe risks approach identifies pivotal risk factors, and the sequence in which risk factors present themselves, that result in poor developmental outcomes (Watson, Fischer, Andreas, & Smith, 2004). This approach has practical benefits; being able to identify specific events or the sequence of circumstances that increase individual's chances of poor outcomes makes it easier to consider preventive interventions. However, there has been considerable research demonstrating that risk factors rarely occur in isolation; they co-occur in constellations from different settings in the individual's life (Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). In trying to understand the effects of risk factors on development, such co-occurrence must be accounted for, requiring a method that considers the effect of risk factors from different settings in the child's life—family, school, neighborhood, etc.—rather than focusing on a single event, or sequence of events. Researchers have accomplished this by creating an index of the total (cumulative) number of risk factors. Such a cumulative index of risk factors has proved effective in predicting trajectories of developmental problems (example: Deater-Deckard, Dodge, & Bates, 1998; Morales & Guerra, 2006)

In the cumulative index strategy researchers determine a list of risk factors that are pertinent to the developmental outcome under consideration. Each participant is then given a risk score by determining a theoretically applicable cut point, dichotomizing each risk factor, and adding the dichotomized risk factors for each individual (Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). Alternatively, some researchers have standardized the scores for each risk factor and

added the standardized values (example: Atzaba-Poria, Pike, & Deater-Deckard, 2004; Masten et al., 1988). An important caveat regarding the cumulative risk approach is that there is little consensus as to what risk factors should be included because there is considerable heterogeneity in the manifestation and effect of different risk factors (Garnezy & Rutter, 1985; Thoits, 1983). While statistical methods like principal components analysis (Ackerman, Izard, Schoff, Youngstrom, & Kogos, 1999; Logan-Greene et al., 2011) can be used to decide which risk factors should be included, most researchers have relied on a theoretical framework to guide their choices (Deater-Deckard et al., 1998; Greenberg, Lengua, Coie, & Pinderhughes, 1999). In fact, some have argued that a well-founded theoretical framework is essential as it allows other researchers to place the current work within the extant literature (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

One of the most widely used and empirically validated cumulative risk approaches is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey (Felitti et al., 1998). The ACE survey was first used in a study at the Kaiser Permanente's San Diego Health Appraisal Clinic in the middle and late 1990s. Along with basic medical histories, visitors to the clinic were asked to voluntarily fill out a survey that included retrospective recollections about instances of childhood risk factors. Approximately 25,000 adults responded to the survey. This ACE survey asked the participants about childhood abuse—psychological, physical, and sexual—and childhood household dysfunction—substance abuse, mental illness, violence and criminality. The aim of this study was to understand how early abuse and neglect affected long-term health outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998). The study tried to bridge two silos of

knowledge: one on the impact of exposure to early childhood neglect & abuse, and the second on long-term health issues.

The data from the original ACE study and subsequent uses of the ACE survey, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), have demonstrated the strong and lasting impact of accumulated early risk factors—both abuse and neglect—on later health outcomes. Researchers have documented a strong relationship between the accumulation of ACEs and serious adult health conditions like ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease (Felitti et al., 1998). Overall, adults who reported accumulating more ACEs as children were also diagnosed with serious health conditions as adults. But the relationship between ACEs and later life outcomes were not limited to the health domain. Individuals who experienced more ACEs as children also reported more sleep disturbances, substance abuse issues, sexual promiscuity, stress, anger, and partner violence (Anda et al., 2011; Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003).

The severe and cumulative approach to understanding the effect of risk factors on development has led to the identification of anomalies: individuals who do a lot better than we would expect given what they have experienced. Many studies demonstrate that some individuals demonstrate resilience despite risk (Masten, 2001). In other words, the balance-beam scales for these individuals tip positive even though we would expect, given the weight of their risk factors, for it to tip toward poor developmental outcomes.

### **Resilience to Severe Vulnerability: The Emergence of a Paradigm**

During the 1960s and 1970s there was growing interest in understanding the effect of maternal psychopathology, such as schizophrenia, on the psychosocial development of infants and children (Garmezy, 1974; Rutter, 1979). This work revealed a subset of children who developed along normative psychosocial trajectories even though it was expected that

they would have problems with their psychosocial development because of their mother's psychopathology. This sparked the study of resilience. Since then developmental psychologists, social workers, and clinicians have continued the research on resilience; they have explored the different dimensions of this construct, looking at how other parental, familial, and neighborhood factors affect childhood development (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Rutter, 1981).

In developmental psychology, *resilience* refers to positive psychosocial development even though the individual may be experiencing severe stress, trauma, or adversity (Masten & Wright, 2009; Rutter, 1981). This definition assumes two key things about resilience. First, resilience can only be defined in terms of the vulnerability, or accumulation of risk factors, that an individual is facing or has experienced (Masten & Wright, 2009). A second assumption of resilience is that of positive adaptation. Albeit, the term "positive" is relative and depends on the amount of risk the person is facing, Luthar (2006) defines positive adaptation as "adaptation that is substantially better than what would be expected given exposure to the risk circumstance being studied" (p742). Hence, resilience refers to an individual "beating the odds," developing adaptively when the probability that they wouldn't is high, on average, in that population.

Most importantly, developmental psychologists view resilience as a process-based construct rather than as a trait. This means that resilience is not a "static trait or characteristic of an individual. Resilience arises from many processes and interactions that extend beyond the boundaries of the individual organism" (Masten & Wright, 2009; p. 215). In other words, there is no single cause or explanation for resilience; while resilience may be boosted because of certain dispositions within an individual, it is multiply determined and



occurs out of complex interactions of the individual and his/her settings and experiences (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 1999).

In defining a measure of vulnerability and a threshold for positive adjustment within and across domains, recent studies have offered insights into four broad trajectories of resilient development (Masten et al., 1999). The first is the trajectory of *resistance*. It refers to persistent positive development that does not deviate when the individual experiences severe stress or trauma (Bonanno, 2004; Masten & Wright, 2009). On the other hand, some individuals display patterns of *recovery*: individual development deteriorates in the face of severe vulnerability, before recovering to an adaptive level (Bonanno, 2005). Alternatively, some individuals who grow up in situations of severe stress demonstrate trajectories that are *maladaptive during the trauma, but that normalize* when they are moved to more adaptive settings. For example, children who grew up with severe social deprivation in Romanian orphanages demonstrated rapid and positive development when they were moved to foster homes that were characterized by nurturing caregiver-child relationships (Beckett et al., 2013). Lastly, some individuals demonstrate positive and adaptive development only after they experience severe stress even though their environment does not change. They display trajectories of *transformation*: experiencing risk results in positive adaptation (Linley & Joseph, 2004; C. Park, 2004).

But these varied patterns of resilience do not occur in isolation, they are affected by the context within which a risk factor, or collection of risk factors, occur. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that the same individual may experience different trajectories of resilience in different psychosocial domains (Luthar et al., 2000). There is heterogeneity in resilience across the psychological, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains. For example, in one study of children who reported severe early maltreatment, about 75%

demonstrated adaptive academic skills. However, only about 20% of these children demonstrated adaptive social skills (Kaufman, Cook, Arny, Jones, & Pittinsky, 1994). Some researchers argue that resilience should be defined as positive adaptation (given significant adversity) across multiple adjustment domains (Cowen, Wyman, Work, & Parker, 1990; Tolan, 1996) including emotion regulation, behavioral competence, academic achievement, etc. While inter-domain resilience is critical to life-long adjustment, there is little evidence that children with the most risk factors demonstrate resilience across domains (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). However, within adjustment domains children do demonstrate resilience to sets of risk factors (Luthar, 1993; Masten & Wright, 2009). This has led some researchers to argue that it is more important to understand resilience as positive adaptation within a specific domain of interest, assuming average adaptation in other adjustment domains (Radke-Yarrow & Sherman, 1990).

Clarifying definitions for trajectories of resilience and domain-specificity have highlighted the gaps in our knowledge about resilience. The work to identify the differences among individuals who follow these varied trajectories continues. The existing literature is not definitive with regard to why some individuals follow one trajectory over another. However, one of the strongest theories address this *why* question is that risk factors are inherently contextual (Masten, 2001). Individuals may be resilient to a certain set of risk factors but not to others (Park, 2004). They may also demonstrate resilience in certain environments and settings but not in others (Norris, Tracy, & Galea, 2009). In order to better understand resilience, and other phenomenon in developmental psychology, it is important to understand the context within which risk factors emerge and the settings within which they are experienced.

### **Understanding the Contextual Nature of Risk**

Most risk factors are contextual and depend on the situation within which they occur (Lochman, 2004). Adaptive development for children who grow up in inner-city communities, especially communities with high rates of crime and violence, may look different than for children growing up in a fairly safe, suburban, neighborhood. In communities that experience marked rates of violence, some research has suggested that nonrestrictive parenting acts as a risk factor for children since they are more likely to witness aggression in the neighborhood (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). However, strict parenting in a similar situation can be a protective factor, shielding the child from experiencing or witnessing aggression that could affect their psychosocial development (Sameroff, Gutman, & Peck, 2003). The opposite may be evident for children who grow up in safe neighborhoods. In this context, restrictive parenting has been linked to greater experimentation and risk-taking behavior as compared to nonrestrictive parenting (Sameroff et al., 2003). This is an important consideration since a similar event can be a risk factor in one context but a protective factor in a different context.

Inevitably, we have to understand the context within which risk factors function. This need has resulted in two different approaches of trying to understand the contextual nature of risk factors and their effect on resilience. First, researchers have expanded on the variables-based approach (described above) to incorporate “contextual” risk factors. Second, some researchers have adopted a person-centric approach to understanding the effect of risk factors. I describe both methods in greater detail below.

#### **“Contextual” risk factors in the variables-based approach**

The expansion of the variables-based approach to incorporate context has been driven by theoretical frameworks and heuristics that describe how context affects

development. There are three main frameworks that have been used successfully in developmental psychology. The first framework comes from a public health perspective on context. In this social-ecological model, risk and protective factors are theorized to function at three hierarchical levels: the community (e.g.: neighborhoods, social programs, schools, local administrative institutions), the family (e.g.: parenting style, attachment, household chaos) and the individual (e.g.: intelligence, self-control, self-efficacy) (Patton et al., 2012; Viner et al., 2012).

This framework has been used primarily when researchers are trying to explain which level—community, family, or individual—has the strongest effect on a certain developmental outcome. For example, there is an ongoing debate in the study of externalizing problem behaviors (example: aggression, delinquency, and conduct problems) about which level has the strongest impact on the development of these behaviors in children. In this research the social-ecological model is used to identify variables in each of the different levels and the variables-based approach is used to determine which set of factors (e.g.: factors from the individuals versus community level) is most predictive of childhood externalizing problem behaviors.

This research has led to some disagreement as to the contribution of risk factors from each domain to the development of externalizing problem behaviors. For example, Griffin and his colleagues (2003) argue that social and environmental influences such as neighborhood characteristics, are the strongest predictors of externalizing behaviors, followed by individual characteristics. However, Romano and her colleagues (2005) postulate that individual factors carry the most weight in predicting childhood externalizing problem behaviors with family factors close behind; for example, they found that only 4% of the variation in aggressive behavior could be explained by neighborhood factors. Conversely,

Morales and Guerra (2006) counter that school stress is more predictive of aggression over time when compared to family and neighborhood factors. While the methodology of these studies plays an important role in distinguishing their respective findings, it highlights the lack of consensus in the field as to which settings or risk factors are most salient.

Closely related to the social-ecological model is the bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This framework conceptualizes development as occurring within nested systems. At the center of this nested system is the biosystem: the individual. Individuals interact primarily within the microsystem: a system that houses the people and places that are part of the individual's everyday life. For a child, the microsystem could consist of their home and family setting, and even their school and peer groups as they grow. Most importantly, this framework describes the engine of development as within the microsystem. Described as proximal processes, these are the regular, every-day, interactions that propel the development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Surrounding the microsystem is the mesosystem (the interaction between two or more settings within the microsystem), the exosystem (interactions between two or more settings at least one of which do not include the individual), and the macrosystem (the larger norms and attitudes that dictate the interactions within and between the different systems) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Using this framework researchers have tried to understand how (1) risk may be manifested in the different nested systems, (2) how risk and protective factors may exacerbate or mitigate the effects of system-specific risk, (3) and how human agency plays a key role in development (Duncan, Magnuson, & Ludwig, 2009). The bio-ecological model has informed a more nuanced understanding of how risk factors within one system can be affected by vulnerability and protective factors in a different system. Using the example

described above, parenting style—nonrestrictive and restrictive—is characteristic of proximal processes that occur within the microsystem. The child is in direct interaction with the parent, an interaction that is defined by the parenting style. The safety of the community or neighborhood, on the other hand, consists of interactions that are within the meso or exosystem. The child could be in direct contact, or not, with neighbors or peers who are more aggressive. Similarly, if a parent is witness to aggression while attending an activity or meeting within the neighborhood, they may change or modify their parenting style directly affecting the nature of their interactions with the child. Thus, the interplay between factors in the meso and exosystem with parenting style act as either a risk or protective factor in the microsystem. The bio-ecological model has been the most widely used framework in efforts to contextualize risk factors using the variables-based approach (example: Atzaba-Poria, Pike, & Deater-Deckard, 2004b; Greenberg et al., 1999; Trentacosta et al., 2008).

The third framework is that of developmental cascades (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). There are two foundational ideas to this framework. First “competence begets competence” (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; p. 492). Developmental cascades unfold over time; risk factors that occur in the present can have indelible effects on development later in time. Second, developmental cascades assumes that events can have unintended effects in varying domains and ecological systems of a child’s life. Development across the social, emotional, and cognitive domains of a child’s life is interrelated (Masten & Wright, 2009; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). Additionally, risk and protective factors within one ecological system (e.g.: peer relationships) of a child’s life can affect development in other ecological systems (e.g.: family life) (Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010).

Unlike the first two frameworks, the idea of time and change is more integral to developmental cascades. This is why this framework has been more influential than the other

two when it comes to longitudinal rather than cross-sectional studies of risk factors and resilience. Indeed, there is a strong literature demonstrating the use of developmental cascades to contextualize risk factors using the variables-based approach (example: Kouros, Cummings, & Davies, 2010; Lansford et al., 2010; Moilanen, Shaw, & Maxwell, 2010; van Lier & Koot, 2010).

As is probably evident from their descriptions, these three frameworks are closely related and are often used simultaneously. However, in using one (or more) of these frameworks to identify contextual risk factors for a variables-based approach, there are three main limitations. The first limitation emerges because of the endogeneity problem (Duncan et al., 2009). On the most basic level this problem identifies the issue of missing covariates. In other words, in our effort to understand how certain risk factors lead to poor developmental outcomes, there are likely always factors about the child, the environment, and the interaction that we fail to take into consideration. The frameworks are used as a blueprint of which systems need to be covered; however, they do not offer insight into *what* risk factors should be included at different levels, or at different points in time. Researchers rely on previous research and theoretical justifications to identify the actual factors that are included at each level (Luthar et al., 2000). This can result in an evidentiary “blind-spot”, where we exclude factors that may be important, those that have not come up in previous studies.

Second, related to the endogeneity problem is the issue of unexplained variance. Part of the reason that “context” has been added to the traditional variables-based approach is because researchers realized that there was a considerable amount of variability in experience and outcomes that was not accounted for by previous models (Luthar, 1993). Some of this variability can be explained by adding covariates, like contextual factors, to a multivariate

regression model. However, few studies have actually been able to capture this variability in a significant manner (Duncan et al., 2009). Indeed, the addition of context-driven risk factors has added complexity to the models that estimate developmental outcomes, but has not provided a relative drop in the unexplained variance. In other words, the benefit to cost ratio of including these context-driven factors needs to be considered very carefully since there are often more “costs” (in terms of the fit of our models) than “benefits” (in terms of our understanding of what is truly happening in a population).

Third, in studying constructs like resilience we are studying phenomena that have a low base-rate in the population. The prototypical individual who experiences an accumulation of severe risk factors does not demonstrate resilience; it is the outlier who best represents this phenomenon. In other words, researchers are working at the tails of data: the upper tail of accumulated risk factors and the upper tail of positive adaptation (Luthar et al., 2000). If they are too severe with their cut-point for resilience then they have too small a sample to actually study the phenomenon. If too liberal, they risk diluting the effect that they see. This means that they have to make very concise choices about the threshold for resilience, a choice that is often determined by sample size. Adding context-driven covariates to such a model only reduces the statistical power and increases the possibility of erroneous conclusions (Bartlett, 1994).

These limitations have led to more frequent use of another method of understanding the importance of context in the definition of risk factors and resilience. Some researchers have moved from a variables-based approach to a person-based approach.

### **Adding context using the person-based approach**

In this approach researchers have used a predetermined categorization to identify individuals who fall into two different groups. They then use a mixed-methods approach of



qualitative and quantitative research to identify characteristics and experiences that differ among the two groups, attempting to determine if the identified characteristic/experience is the reason for the difference in categorization into the two different groups (Luthar, 2006). For example, researchers have used scales of exposure to risk factors (like the ACE survey) to identify individuals who fall into a “high” and “low” risk category. Some have added a scale of positive adaptation to identify “high” risk individuals who are doing well—resilient to some extent—and a second group of “high” risk individuals who are not doing as well (Werner, 2013). Descriptions of the differences between these two groups are expected to highlight the differences between resilient and non-resilient individuals, offering a peek into the mechanisms that may engender resilience.

Luthar and her colleagues (1999, 2003, 2005) have used this person-based approach with particularly powerful impact. These researchers focused their studies on inner-city youth who are often defined as “high-risk” and suburban youth, often categorized as “low risk”. The aim was to identify and understand the risk factors among these different groups of youth and how the risk factors affected the youth’s psychosocial functioning. The researchers were interested in whether these different groups of youth experienced markedly different risk factors and, if yes, how this experience manifested in their psychosocial development. Luthar and her colleagues found that both groups of youth experienced a similar number of risk factors. But, the suburban youth demonstrated higher levels of stress and anxiety related to the pressure of academic and extracurricular performance (Luthar, 2003). Because of the availability of more disposable income, these suburban youth also had higher rates of substance use and abuse (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Additionally, substance use had a strong and positive relationship with peer acceptance for suburban boys, but not for their inner-city counterparts (Luthar & D’Avanzo, 1999). Luthar and her

colleagues believe that this research highlights the fact that the use of “high” and “low” risk to describe inner-city and suburban youth, respectively, is problematic; both groups of youth demonstrated an accumulation of risk factors that had an impact on their psychosocial development. However, suburban youth did live in communities that were more affluent and so had more access to, and opportunities for, support.

Another example of this person-based approach comes from Werner and her colleagues’ (1993, 2013) longitudinal study of a cohort of children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. For 32 years these researchers followed all 698 children who were born on Kauai in 1955, conducting surveys prenatally, at birth, and at ages 1, 2, 10, 18, and 32 years. They categorized the children into groups of “high” and “low” risk based on their initial assessments of the amount of adversity each child had faced during their early years. Of the 201 children that were in the “high” risk category, 72 demonstrated resilience over time. The researchers noted that these youth tended to do better in the academic, social, and emotional domain (Werner, 1993). Because of their extensive work in collecting information about risk and protective factors at the level of the community, family, and child, Werner and her colleagues were able to define four clusters of protective factors that helped the resilient children: temperament, values, parental care giving, and community gatekeepers (Werner, 1993).

While Luthar’s and Werner’s work has offered invaluable insight into the contextual nature of risk factors, protective factors, and resilience, there are still some limitations to the person-based approach. First, while the person-based approach offers a more nuanced way of identifying context-driven factors, it is limited in its capacity to delve into the actual mechanisms that result in risk and protective factors having an effect on development. For example, it is still unclear why some suburban youth do not follow the same trajectories of

depression, anxiety, and substance use, even though they face similar academic pressure as their peers. Additionally, some urban youth demonstrate resilience as well. In other words, the person-based approach to understanding the contextual impact of risk factors expands our understanding of what contextual factors matter, but it does not always allow for a detailed inspection of *why* these factors matter.

Second, the person-based approach has been limited in its exploration of the subjective nature of risk factors (Luthar, 1993; Park, 2004); the way individuals understand the meaning of salient life events could differ from how they are understood by researchers in developmental psychology (Bartlett, 1994; Gordon & Song, 1994). For example, the impact of a specific factor, or set of factors, may be negative for a large portion of the population we are studying; but if a subset of individuals views this same impact as being neutral or positive then this points to an interesting area for further exploration (Luthar et al., 2000). Such gaps between research expectations and personal interpretation may help highlight the underlying processes by which risk and protective factors function.

Third, there is a distinct difference between statistical risk and actual risk. The variables-based and person-based approaches to understanding the influence of contextual risk factors use a statistical model to identify relationships. As explained above, they rely on the probabilistic nature of our predictions to determine what will happen to the average individual. Even the person-based approach that incorporates some qualitative methodology uses probability to determine the categories within which different individuals fall. In itself, this is not detrimental. However, knowing that the average individual's balance beam is expected to tip negative because of a given set of risk factors tells us little about what actually happens to a given individual. This affects the efficacy of targeted programming, programming that uses evidence from variables-based and person-based studies to decide

not only which individuals should receive the program but also what services they should receive.

### **Exploring the Subjective Meaning of Risk Factors**

To review, when trying to understand the role of “context” in the effect of risk factors on development, the variables-based approach has three main limitations. The first is the endogeneity problem, the problem of missing important contextual variables because of the limitations of prior research and theory. The second is that most studies have not shown a dramatic improvement in the prediction of unexplained variance, by adding “contextual” risk factors. The third is the fact that resilience is a low base-rate phenomenon and so statistical interactions and predictions in the tails of the data may lead to findings that are driven by numeric extremes rather than actual occurrences in the population. The person-based approach has had more success in identifying the role of “context” in the effect of risk factors on development. However, this method still relies on the probabilistic nature of risk and has a few limitations. First, it offers a picture of *what* contextual factors may matter but not *why*. Second, it is limited in its capacity to understand the subjective nature of risk factors. Last, it often confounds the idea of statistical and actual risk, especially when findings are translated into programmatic practices with limited oversight.

Because of these limitations, there has been a push to explore how we can better understand the other mechanisms that affect the relationship between risk factors and resilience (Masten et al., 1999). In three reviews of the literature that have spanned 13 years, Luthar and her colleagues (1993, 2000, 2006) identified this as a limitation of the current research on resilience and one that needs further exploration.

Research on resilience must accelerate its move from a focus on description to a focus on elucidating developmental process questions. With accumulated evidence that a particular variable does affect competence levels within a

specific at-risk group, investigators need to focus their inquiry on understanding the mechanisms by which such protection (or vulnerability) might be conferred. (Luthar et al., 2000; p. 555)

One way to add nuance to the issue of understanding the contextual nature of risk factors is by understanding the subjective meaning that individuals attribute to risk factors. In other words, we can attempt to understand how individuals understand an experience within the scope of their life and how this meaning-making process affects their psychosocial development. Meaning-making is a method of exploring the subjective interpretations of risk factors (Masten & Wright, 2009). In developmental psychology “meaning-making” is the internal process by which individuals work to accommodate the experience of risk factors into their schema, “changing the meaning of either their worldviews (global beliefs and goals), the stressful situation, or both” (Park, 2004; p.73).

However, the limited research on this topic in the risk and resilience literature has considered meaning-making to be a protective factor rather than an internal process of interpretation and accommodation (Masten & Wright, 2009; Park, 2004). Using a broad definition of “worldview”, researchers have tried to understand how having a positive outlook allows individuals who have faced significant adversity to maintain positive developmental outcomes. For example, individuals who have demonstrated resilience in the context of adverse life events often report a strong hope for the future and/or faith that things will get better (Masten & Wright, 2009; Park & Blumberg, 2002; Park & Folkman, 1997; Werner, 1993). In contrast, there is a dearth of studies in the risk and resilience literature that attempt to understand the process of meaning-making: the process that

accounts for how an individual comes to understand the significance of an event, either positive or negative, and accommodate this meaning into their interpretation of the world.

In related literature, meaning-making has been highlighted as a tool for reframing debates around statistical trends and as a critical component of theories of social development. I provide an example of each. First, Fine and her colleagues (1983, 1985, 1986) used a mixed methods approach to explore variation in the trend of high school dropout in New York, and in the process they reframed the conversation around this academic benchmark. While most variables-based approaches to predicting drop out had focused on low motivation and engagement, framing students who chose to dropout as losers (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983), Fine's research provided a more nuanced picture of how individual adolescents make meaning of the reasons for dropping out. She explored their interpretations of this decision, reframing many of them as being "highly motivated, intelligent, and critical of educational institutions and labor market opportunities" (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; p. 257).

Second, Selman's (2003) work on interpersonal understanding highlights the importance of personal meaning-making in how individuals make decisions in situations of interpersonal conflict and negotiation. His theoretical framework for understanding interpersonal negotiation strategies incorporated meaning-making as a critical component to understanding decision making:

...the personal meaning that an individual makes of the risks involved in a social interaction, incident, or relationship provides an important key to understanding whether there will be a gap between the individual's level of

interpersonal understanding and his or her level of actual social action.  
(Selman, 2003; p. 45)

As an illustration, children who grow up in some low-income communities do not always make meaning of interpersonal aggression as an act of violence; rather, some see it as a way in which to establish a safe place. By establishing a safe space through aggression they try to inoculate themselves from future aggression by making others afraid to attack. Even though they know the risks associated with fighting they interpret personal safety as being synonymous with preemptive physical aggression (Selman, 2003).

### **Components of a meaning-making framework**

Currently, there is an empirically and theoretically supported framework for understanding meaning-making in individuals (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park & George, 2013; Park, 2010). According to this meaning-making framework *meaning* refers to a “mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus, meaning connects things” (Baumeister, 1991; p. 15). Individuals have an iteratively constructed sense of global meaning. This global meaning is compared to the meaning that individuals construct during different situations referred to as situational meaning. When the meaning that individuals attribute to events in the situation does not align with the global meaning, the individual experiences distress. Meaning-making is the process through which individuals try to realign the situational meaning with global meaning by re-attributing meaning to events.

This meaning-making framework rests on five theoretical tenets (Kernan & Lepore, 2009; Lepore, Silver, Wortman, & Wayment, 1996). First, all individuals have a schema that orients their understanding of the world: global meaning. Second, when faced with stressful situations individuals attribute situational meaning to their experience. Third, the amount of

discrepancy between the global and situational meaning determines the actual level of stress that an experience has on the individual. Fourth, to alleviate this distress, individuals embark on a process of meaning-making, attempting to re-attribute meaning and reduce the discrepancy between the global and situational meaning. Fifth, this meaning-making process leads to *meaning*, and to better adjustment for individuals. Over the next few pages I offer a fuller description of this meaning-making framework.

In this meaning-making framework *global meaning* refers to the orienting system that individuals use to understand the world. This system is formed of three main components: beliefs, goals, and subjective meaning. *Global beliefs* encompass a person's overarching views about subjects like justice, goodness, equality, predictability, and coherence (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). On a more practical level, global beliefs deal with individuals understanding of the order of the world around them and how things can and should function. *Global goals* are an individual's motivating features; they describe the short- and long-term aspirations of the individual and the representations of how the individuals would like to accomplish these aspirations (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Lastly, *subjective meaning* defines a person's sense of "meaningfulness" in the world (Park, 2010). It defines how efficacious the individual feels in accomplishing his/her global goals. This global meaning is developed from early childhood and is developed iteratively throughout childhood and adolescence through life experiences (Catlin & Epstein, 1992). Developed along with the literature on identity formation, global



meaning follows a similar course as identity formation, becoming solidified as the individual moves from adolescence into adulthood.

In the meaning-making framework, *situational meaning* defines a conglomeration of processes that occur consciously and unconsciously every time an individual is faced with a novel situation or a situation that could cause stress.

Situational meaning thus begins with the occurrence of a potentially stressful event and describes an ongoing set of processes and outcomes, including assignment of meaning to the event (appraised meaning), determination of discrepancies between appraised and global meaning, meaning-making, meanings made, and adjustment to the event (Park, 2010; p. 258/9).

When an event first occurs, the individual goes through an initial appraisal process, attempting to understand why the event occurred, his/her agency in the situation, implications for the future, and the level of threat that the event poses. This process can be either conscious or unconscious, and may follow an iterative process where the individual reassesses the initial and immediate attribution (Sweeney, 2008; Thompson & Janigian, 1988).

Once an event has been appraised, the individual then tries to understand the discrepancy between this appraisal and their global meaning (Dalglish, 2004; Watkins, 2008). The assumption is that the level of *discrepancy* between these two accounts, the situational meaning and the global meaning, define the level of distress that a person undergoes in a given situation. There is little consensus on what domain of discrepancy has the largest effect on individuals. There is some postulation that discrepancies in global

beliefs have a bigger effect on people than global goals and subjective meaning. However, there is little evidence to support one theory over the other (Park, 2010).

Another assumption of the meaning-making framework is that once a discrepancy has been determined, the individual embarks on a process of realigning the global and situational meaning, a process of *meaning-making* (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004). There are multiple ways in which this meaning-making process can unfold. At the simplest level, individuals either try to change the meaning of the event they have experienced at the situational level, change the global meaning, or both. This meaning-making process results in some new meaning being constructed (Park & George, 2013; Park & Folkman, 1997). There is sufficient clinical evidence to suggest that individuals who are unable to resolve the discrepancy between the global and situational meaning end up in a process of *rumination*, resulting in several pathological outcomes, like depression (Park & Folkman, 1997).

### **Limitations of the meaning-making framework**

While the meaning-making framework does have face validity, as well as sufficient theoretical and empirical support, there are limitations to this approach. First, the empirical arm of the meaning-making framework lags behind the theoretical postulation. There are gaps in the empirical evidence on this framework. One of the biggest challenges is that studies that adopt this framework often focus on a subset of the entire framework and do not address for the entire process (Park, 2010). There is a need for studies that document the entire scope of the meaning-making framework in the individual experience.

Second, most previous work on the meaning-making framework has treated stressors to the individual system as shocks to the system rather than as continuous events that have an accumulated effect on individuals. In other words, studies often treat salient and stressful

experiences as occurring at a single point in time, with individual reactions occurring right after. However, meaning-making is an iterative process and changes over time (Baumeister, 1991). There is limited understanding of how this occurs.

Another important limitation is that most of the theoretical and empirical support for the meaning-making framework comes from research in the medical or bereavement context. A recent review (Park, 2010) of peer-reviewed publications that have used some aspect of the meaning-making framework uncovered a total of 78 studies. Of these, 51% were medically oriented, attempting to understand how individuals who had been diagnosed with terminal illnesses or life-altering disabilities made meaning of their diagnosis. Thirty one percent of the articles focused on the process of bereavement, parents losing children, college students losing parents, etc. Seven percent of the articles focused on serious sexual abuse, like rape. Only five articles actually focused on self-defined negative life experiences; and all of these were with students from elite colleges/universities or with adults. This bias in the literature could have unintended consequences for the theory and research that has defined the meaning-making framework. It is possible that the meaning-making framework is only applicable in a medical or bereavement context. Moreover, the outcome of the meaning-making process, the actual meaning, could differ from what has been suggested thus far. If meaning is contextual, it is safe to assume that meaning about medical and bereavement issues would be different from other negative life experiences. It is important to understand the similarities and differences in outcomes in different contexts.

Lastly, proponents of the meaning-making framework have moved rapidly to suggest surveys and measures for each part of the meaning-making framework (Park & George, 2013). However, a fundamental issue is that individuals are often not capable of defining the initial appraisal, discrepancy, meaning-making process, and meaning; they often lack the

language to do this, and this assumes that the process is completely conscious and measurable. Thus far, work on the meaning framework has been driven by studies in which individuals are asked questions such as “how did you make meaning of [insert event here]?” This assumes that individuals are capable of consciously describing the entire process. Additionally, this process assumes a level of reflection and commitment that often occurs in adulthood. During childhood and adolescence, global meaning is still being concretized and experiences may not be easily described in terms of their meaning. This suggests that we need to adopt a more nuanced approach to understanding meaning-making in children and adolescents.

One method of understanding how adolescents make meaning of life events is through hermeneutics, the study of textual and narrative interpretation. Hermeneutics offers a framework with which to understand the meaning individuals make of their lived experience. Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) have used hermeneutics in their work as counselors with youth, and offer a four-pronged definition of hermeneutics to frame meaning-making. The first element, interpretation, explores how individuals account for their experiences and the effect of these experiences. It deals with understanding the individual’s version of the “truth”, independent of its objective veracity. Connectedness, the second element, refers to the relationships in the individual’s life and how the context of those relationships shapes individual interpretations. Connectedness deals with the presence and absence of relationships and how each can impact the process of interpretation. The world, or the surrounding social and cultural processes, affects how individuals account for events in their lives. Interpretation is shaped by this third element because these socio-cultural processes permeate all the interactions the individual has. Time is the fourth element. The relationships and socio-cultural processes that affect individual interpretations change over time. “When

interpretations occur is as important as where and how they occur” (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; p. 18).

### **Study Design & Methodology**

In describing the *Study Design and Methodology* I aim to provide a detailed account of how the study evolved because of the limitations that emerged during the pilot study. I also provide a description of the methods I used to analyze the data. Rather than simply listing the methods, describing the steps in the process, I present a more nuanced description of how this study was developed and the methods that changed during the course of the three years. Smagorinsky (2008) described this elucidation of the study design and methods as a key part of robust and rigorous qualitative research and dissemination. It is important to describe the details of how the data were collected, not just what data were collected. Additionally, describing the limitations and modifications in the data collection allow others to judge the rigor of the study. Smagorinsky notes that it is important to explain what research theories one is drawing from and what additions or changes were made to this theory. This allows others to replicate the work, providing external validity to the study. In drawing on these kinds of descriptions in the *Study Design and Methodology* section I hope to be transparent about the approach I took to address the research questions that define my study, and the limitations I faced along the way.

### **Research Questions**

In this study I explored how 38 adolescents (16-21 years) from one urban charter school retrospectively made meaning of life experiences they designate as negative. I addressed this with three research questions:

*RQ1:* What life experiences do 38 adolescents self-report as having had a negative effect on their life?

*RQ2*: What does the talk<sup>2</sup> of adolescents from an urban charter school reveal about the way they have come to understand the impact of negative life experiences on their lives?

*RQ3*: What discourses do these adolescents use to describe the most frequent negative life experience: the loss of a biological parent?

- How do these discourses allow the adolescents to position themselves in relation to their biological parents?
- What opportunities do these discourses and subject positions allow the adolescents?

### **Site and Sample**

In conceptualizing this study, there were two requirements for constructing the sample. First, the focus of this study was on the meaning-making process that inner-city youth used when faced with severe risk factors. Hence, the sample needed to include inner-city youth who reported experiencing severe trauma or stress at some point in their life. Second, the study aimed to understand the meaning-making process within the context of resilience. Thus, it was important that some of the youth in the study demonstrated some form of resilience that could be justified within the extant literature. Essentially, the study required a sample of inner-city youth who were doing a lot better than would be expected, given the concentration of negative life events. In speaking to colleagues about this study, one researcher introduced me to a charter school in New England where he had worked. This school served ~120 adolescents who had previously dropped out of high school, been expelled, or left because of behavioral or social issues. Across the board, the adolescents at the charter school reported having experienced severe stress and trauma. When presented

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<sup>2</sup> I use this term to refer to the stories the participants told in their narrative and interviews

with a list of risk factors from the extant literature, students reported having experienced an average of 13 risk factors, a high rate by most standards (Deater-Deckard et al., 2010; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). Nearly every student at school reported having serious academic challenges before they joined the charter school and failing at least one class. Despite these events, all the adolescents at the school had returned to complete their high school diploma.

Students entered the charter school with different academic backgrounds and were then placed into the proper academic level based on grades from their previous school and an extensive evaluation. All students who were within two semesters of graduating with a high school diploma were considered seniors; the rest of the students categorized themselves by the number of months or years they had been at the school. The teacher to student ratio was approximately 1:10 and the school had one full-time and two part-time guidance and adjustment counselors.

The sample for this study comprised 38 adolescents (21 female) for whom there were either written narratives, interviews, or both. Of the 38 adolescents, 26 consented to share their narratives with me and participate in the interview process. The students were between 16-21 years of age with an average age of 18 years. Nineteen self-reported as being White, 4 as Black, 8 as Hispanic, 2 as Asian, and 5 as Mixed Race.

## **Data Collected**

### **Pilot survey and interviews**

In the fall of 2010, I visited the charter school with two purposes. First, I conducted an electronic survey with all consenting students at the charter school. The aim of this survey was to get a picture of the negative and positive experiences that students (n=112) at the school had experienced and how often. Additionally, on the survey students were asked to



rate the effect and impact of experiences in relation to each other. This survey offered a baseline for the negative life experiences that students at the school had experienced and allowed me to frame the study within the extant literature.

Second, I interviewed eight students about their negative life experiences and how they had been affected by these experiences. The pilot interviews followed a similar protocol to what is outlined in the “Interviews” sub-section below<sup>3</sup>. However, the pilot raised several issues with my research strategy. First, some of the events that youth described were unavoidably traumatic. For example, for all participants in the pilot, the loss of their father to the US prison system or divorce was hard to talk about. I think it is important to point out at this time that I made certain that the students understood, at the start of the interview (and through consent forms to parents and students), that they could refuse to talk about any event or stop the interview at any time. I reiterated this at several points during the interview to ensure that they did not feel compelled to delve into uncomfortable issues. But the pilot interviews made me realize that I needed to provide the students with more support if I was asking them to be vulnerable. For future interviews I made sure that the school counselor was in the building and open to seeing students during the time slots when I conducted the interviews. Over the three-year period only one student asked to stop the interview. She demonstrated significant discomfort describing her relationship with her mother. I ended the interview immediately and ensured that she sat down with the school counselor to debrief.

A second issue that emerged was one of expression. During the pilot interviews I realized that some of the students had not had opportunities to reflect on the individual and accumulated effect of different events. They did not have the space or time to develop the language with which to express their thoughts about some risk factors. While debriefing the

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for complete interview protocol

pilot interviews the students mentioned that they “did not have an issue” talking about negative life events, but they had a hard time expressing how the events had impacted their lives. This was a conundrum; I did not want to give students the language with which to talk about events. I realized I needed a more concrete strategy to give them the space and time to think through these events and develop language for themselves.

The third issue underscored the importance of building relationships with participants. It was impossible to build rapport with the youth in an hour-long interview. I could sense that some students were cautious about engaging in the meaning-making processes. Some characterized the impact of events as good or bad, with little detail. During the debrief at the end of the interview, several students mentioned that they were more likely to open up to someone who they saw on a regular basis, someone with whom they had a relationship.

Interviewing the eight students shaped the direction of data collection through student narratives and interviews over the next two academic years (D’Sa, 2013). In *Table 1* I provide a brief overview of the data sources employed in this study. I do not include the information about the pilot survey in *Table 1*.

*Table 1.* Overview of data sources by participant and academic year<sup>4</sup> (a “✓” suggests that I collected that datum for a particular participant)

Academic Year	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Interview	Life-graph	Event-list	Narrative
2010	Chris	Male	18	Mixed	✓	✓	✓	
	Jeremy	Male	18	White	✓	✓	✓	
	Tanisha	Female	17	Black	✓	✓	✓	
	Becca	Female	17	White	✓	✓	✓	
	David	Male	19	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	
	Rachel	Female	16	White	✓	✓	✓	
	Beth	Female	16	White	✓	✓	✓	
	Erica	Female	17	Mixed	✓	✓	✓	
2011	Zach	Male	19	Asian	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Greg	Male	20	White	✓	✓	✓	
	Sarah	Female	17	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Tevon	Male	19	Black	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Marco	Male	19	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Sam	Male	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Amy	Female	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Nate	Male	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Brenda	Female	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Diana	Female	17	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Allie	Female	18	Mixed	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Izzy	Female	18	Mixed	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Silvia	Female	19	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	James	Male	19	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Holly	Female	17	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Eve	Female	20	Black	✓	✓	✓	✓
2012	Kenyon	Male	20	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Maria	Female	18	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Kenisha	Female	20	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Devon	Male	19	Black	✓			✓
	Brad	Male	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Karen	Female	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Isaac	Male	18	Asian	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Lashonda	Female	19	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	
	Ingrid	Female	19	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Jonah	Male	18	Mixed	✓	✓	✓	

<sup>4</sup> I used pseudonyms for all participants to maintain their privacy and confidentiality

	Bella	Female	18	White	✓	✓	✓	
	Felipe	Male	19	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Addie	Female	18	White	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Justin	Male	18	White				✓
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>				<b>37</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>26</b>

### Narratives

To address the limitations of my research strategy that emerged during the pilot interviews, I returned to the school in academic year 2011-2012 as a volunteer teacher and a researcher.<sup>5</sup> In conversations with some of the teachers at the school I was connected with the teacher that facilitated the *Senior Seminar* class for all the seniors at the school. The aim of *Senior Seminar* was to give students a chance to chart their next five years; they were expected to reflect on, research, and write a viable plan for the five years after they graduated from the charter school. The administration believed that this course gave students the opportunity to articulate a plan, something that they did not have space to do regularly. During the fall semester (September to December) I co-taught the *Senior Seminar* with the faculty member; he was being trained as an adjustment counselor. I worked with this teacher to redesign *Senior Seminar*. We expanded components of the course in which students were asked to reflect on past experiences and make connections between salient life experiences and their current situation. We also embedded strategies from the literature on counseling and developmental psychology as writing and reflection exercises. For example, we incorporated research on possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & Markus, 1990) into the course. Based on the findings from this research we gave students in *Senior Seminar* an opportunity to reflect on what they most hoped for, expected, and feared for the next five years. More importantly, our exercises asked them to reflect on how these

<sup>5</sup> Please see D'Sa's (2013) article for further information on this process.

hopes, expectations, and fears were based in prior experiences. In other words, we were trying to give students the opportunity to reflect on the link between past experiences and their present life trajectories.

*Senior Seminar* met 4-times a week for 50 minutes. I was present for one class each week and led that class session. We planned the course so that I was present whenever there was a discussion about the main assignment in *Senior Seminar*. For this assignment students were asked to reflect on their lives. They were then asked to write narratives about the events they had experienced, how these events had affected them, and their goals/plans for the next five years. Students were given three writing prompts over the four-month course. In the first writing prompt<sup>6</sup>, students were asked to write about salient experiences and events. A key excerpt from this prompt read as follows: “Part I will be your statement about where you’ve been, how you grew up, how the people and places of your childhood and adolescence brought you to where you are today. It is your narrative of your life.” The second and third prompts were “a statement about education and career plans, from now through graduation (Part II) and from graduation [into the next 5 years] (Part III). Think of it as a timeline of the future.” In this study I used the narrative they wrote for the first writing prompt: what they experienced and how those experiences affected their life.

At a minimum each student received at least two rounds of feedback from the faculty member and me; a few students received four or five rounds of feedback. At the end of fall semester I approached students and their parents for consent to use the narratives in my study. In each of the two years, approximately 85% of the students in *Senior Seminar* agreed to let me use their narratives as data for this study.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix for complete description of all three writing prompts.

### Interviews

During the spring semester of each year (January to May) I returned to the school and interviewed consented students about their written narratives. I also interviewed some students who did not consent to sharing their narratives but did consent to the interview (see *Table 1*). There were three parts to the interviews<sup>7</sup>. I commenced the 75-minute<sup>8</sup> interviews by presenting students with a list of salient adverse life experiences drawn from the literature (example: Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, & Bates, 1998; Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Felitti et al., 1998; Flouri, Tzavidis, & Kallis, 2010; Morales & Guerra, 2006) and asked them to put a check mark next to those they had experienced<sup>9</sup>. I then asked participants to add events they thought were influential but that were missing from the list.

Second, I provided participants with a piece of paper that was blank except for an age-line in the center (from birth to current age). I asked them, to draw salient events from the event-list and their narratives onto this paper using a line to represent when the event occurred and how long its impact lasted. I asked them to only include events they thought had had a negative or positive effect on their life. In *Figure 1*, I present de-identified copies of two of these “life-graphs.” Students drew events that they believed had a positive impact on their lives above the line and those that had a negative impact below the line. While all events started and ended on the age line, the peaks and troughs display the students’ subjective experience of the effect of an event at that point in their life and its impact over time, relative to other events.

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for complete interview protocol

<sup>8</sup> On average interviews took 75-minutes (range 25-90 minutes)

<sup>9</sup> Heretofore referred to as the event-list

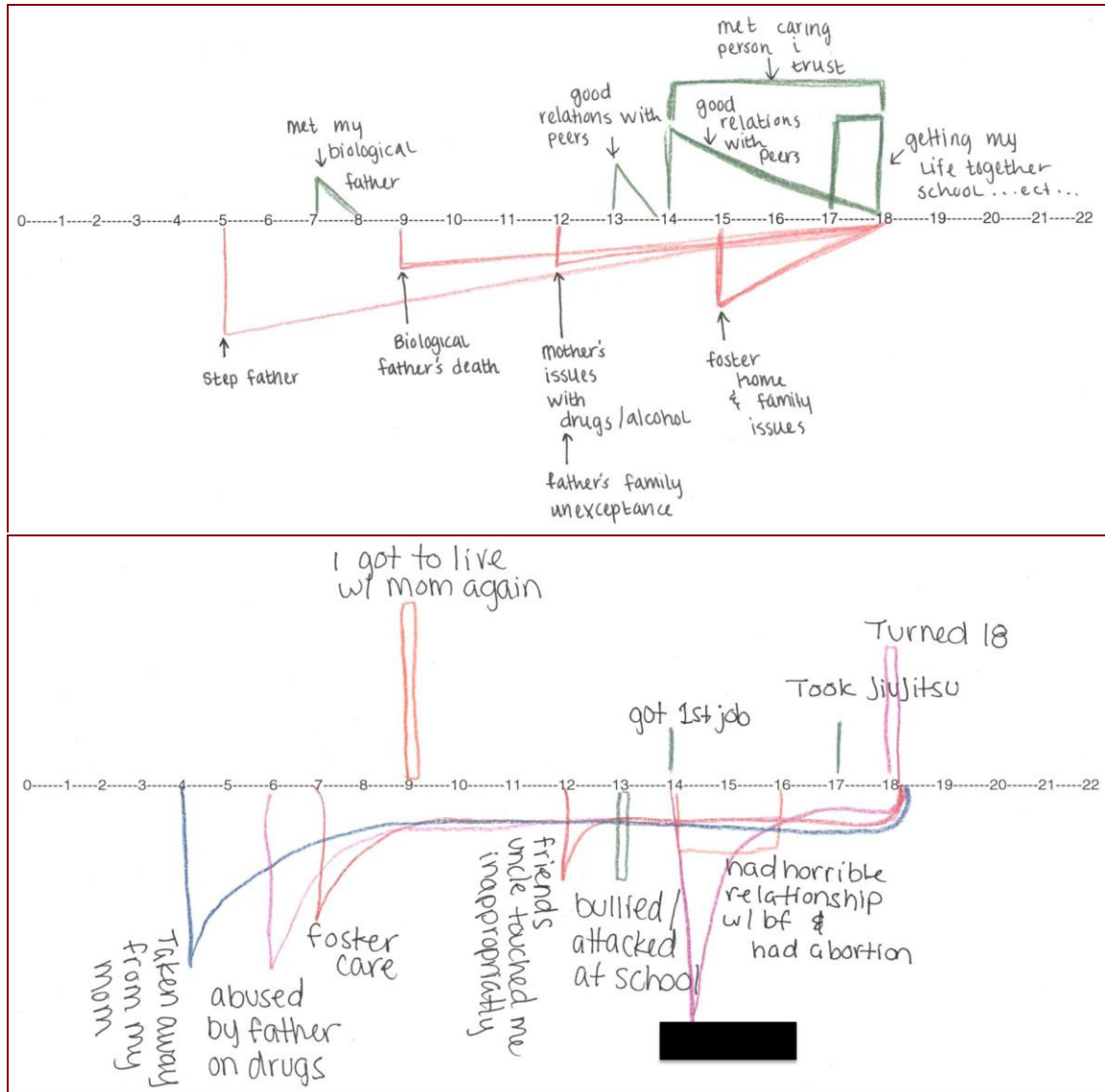


Figure 1. De-identified life-graphs for two students illustrating their recollection of the effect of events. Participants determined whether an event had a positive or negative effect by choosing to draw it above or below the line, respectively. Peaks and troughs represent the relative effect of an event compared to other events.

I gave these instructions to students by walking them through a life-graph I had drawn for myself. I pointed out how events can have different effects at different points in one's life and how the effect was relative to other events. I also pointed out how an event could have a positive effect at one point in life (drawn above the line), and then dip below the line to signify a negative effect (not illustrated in *Figure 1*). I also pointed out how I

labeled each of the event-lines. While contentious in some academic circles, presenting my own life graph served two purposes. First, it gave students a pictorial example of a life-graph that they could use as reference. Second, it gave me a chance to capitalize on the rapport I had created with the students in the class, demonstrating a level of vulnerability that allowed them to open up about their own lives.

Finally, the major part of the interview was devoted to asking students questions about their life-graph and narrative. I walked the student through each event on the life-graph, asking them to describe (a) the event, (b) when it occurred, (c) how often it occurred, (d) the effect on their life when it happened, and (e) the overall impact on their lives.

Nearly every participant in the study ( $n=38$ ) made an effort in the narrative and/or interview to explain how negative life experiences had affected their life. While the level of detail and reflection they offered varied, 36 of the 38 adolescents gave me some insight into their construction of how negative experiences fit into their story of their life. This is why my sample for *RQ2* and *RQ3* is 36 participants and not 38.

### **Analytic Strategy**

#### **RQ1: Compiling self-defined negative life experiences**

For this research, negative life experiences (risk factors) were self-defined by the participants. They are events, occurrences, or relationships that a participant defined as having a negative effect on his/her life at a specific point in time or over time. There were two instances in which adolescents categorized events as being negative. First, at the start of the interview adolescents were asked to draw salient events on the life-graph. Negative events were drawn below the line and positive events above the line. I used this definition of events to categorize a specific event as being negative. Second, adolescents often described



an event as being negative, or having a negative impact, in their narrative and/or interviews. I added these events to those already defined by the adolescents in their life-graphs.

In compiling a database of experiences that participants defined as having a negative effect, I classified negative life experiences into two categories. I completed the 10-item Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) survey (Felitti et al., 1998) for each participant, given my knowledge of his/her self-defined negative life experiences. This allowed me to classify negative life experiences as (a) ACEs or (b) other negative experiences. I created this database of negative life experiences for two purposes. First, the data on the number of negative life experiences is important in placing this study in the context of the extant literature. There is a robust literature on the accumulation of ACEs and other negative life experiences, and the effect of accumulated risk on future development (example: Anda et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998). Having a participant-defined measure of the accumulation of negative life experiences allows me to place this study in context with other similar studies that have used ACEs. Second, I used the compilation of negative life experiences to understand if my findings for *RQ2* and *RQ3* could be disaggregated by the amount of self-identified risk participants had experienced. This allowed me to understand if trends in my findings differed by the accumulation of negative life experiences.

### **RQ2: Grounded coding**

To be cognizant of what the adolescents were saying so as to comprehend how they understood the effect and impact of salient life experiences, I used grounded coding as my primary analytic strategy. Grounded coding is a cumulative process designed to reveal classifications of actions and meaning that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Below I describe the three steps that I took in the grounded coding of the narratives and interviews.

For more detail about this process, see *Table 6* for a description of the actions, thematic codes, and thematic families that were formed.

**Coding for actions.** Combining each participant's narratives and interviews, I first coded each sentence with gerunds—actions—that capture what the participant was attempting to convey (Charmaz, 2006). The aim of this initial coding was to categorize the data into pieces of information that summarize what the participant was doing, allowing me to stay close to the text rather than ascribing potentially biased meaning to the events being described. I wrote memos during the initial coding to keep track of the formation of emergent codes and my reflections on how my experience with the students was affecting the formation of these codes (Luttrell, 2010).

**Forming thematic codes.** Next, I used the memos to begin forming thematic codes that grouped together conceptually similar actions being used by the participants. The aim of this step was to summarize the most common themes that emerged and to start to make connections between the different thematic-groups. Writing memos during this process was essential to establishing thematic codes because this process was conceptually driven (Charmaz, 2006); taking notes about my preconceptions during the formation of key thematic codes allowed me to revisit the formation process later to test the validity of my code construction.

**Thematic mapping.** As a third step I used thematic mapping to understand the relationship between the different thematic codes. As described by Attride-Stirling (2001), thematic mapping or thematic networks are webs of interrelated codes, with hierarchy, that are displayed in a pictorial form. While the webs are not regularly used while writing about the thematic networks, they help in the analysis of thematic codes. Similar to axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), thematic mapping relies on the researchers deductive and

inductive reasoning to create “families” of codes that fit together conceptually, specifying a hierarchy of codes where necessary. Through this process I tried to identify the prominent themes that emerged through the initial and focused coding at different levels. This coding process allowed me to address the second research question: What does the talk of adolescents from an urban charter school reveal about the way they have come to understand the impact of negative life experiences on their lives?

### **RQ3: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)**

In the school-wide electronic survey given in academic year 2010, approximately 90% of the 112 students who responded to the survey reported losing their biological parent through divorce/separation, parental abandonment, incarceration, legal issues, or other reasons. It was the most frequent negative life experience that adolescents reported on the electronic survey. Similarly, in compiling the self-defined negative life experiences for the 38 youth who contributed narratives and/or participated in interviews, losing a biological parent was the most frequent experience. During the initial coding I noted that adolescents predominantly talked about the relationship—or lack thereof—with their biological mother and father and the effect of the same on their life. Several of the adolescents connected their positive and negative life experiences to their relationship with their parents, circling around to the context and effect of these relationships when discussing life experiences. Often, when they tried to contextualize the short-term effect and long-term impact of negative life experiences they anchored their descriptions in their reflections of their relationships with their parents. This prompted me to explore what discourses the adolescents used to describe the loss of a biological parent.

There is also substantial evidence from the developmental psychology literature that strong parent-child relationships can be protective factors for some children, while the lack

of these relationships can act as a risk factor for poor developmental outcomes. For example, in consolidating what we learned from the early research on protective factors, Rutter (1979) described four main protective mechanisms that moderate the impact of risk factors and could engender resilience. One of these protective mechanisms was the presence of relationships with biological parents or early caregivers that fostered a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Based on the early research on this protective mechanism, Rutter (1981) concluded that children who grow up with strong attachment relationships with their parents are likely to be protected from the detrimental impacts of some risk factors. This conclusion is supported by the boarder research on the nature and impact of strong parent-child relationships (example: Beardslee, Versage, & Gladstone, 1998; Cislak et al., 2012; O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2010).

Conversely, the lack of these parent-child relationships can be detrimental for long-term development. In other words, the lack of this relationship could act as a risk factor for some youth. For example, interruptions in the relationship of children and parents has been linked to wide range of psychosocial issues among children and youth, including aggression, violence, depression, and later mental health issues (example: Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Brook, Duan, & Brook, 2007; Sameroff & Seifer, 1983; Schneider & Cavell, 2003). The different types of loss of a biological parent that were identified in this study have also been linked to poor developmental outcomes. Because the loss of a biological parent can interrupt an attachment relationship, the different types of loss may have a long-term detrimental outcome on the development of the individual. Divorce/separation (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Hines, 1997; Kelly & Johnston, 2001) emotional & physical abandonment (Balcom, 1998; Mishne, 1979; Schneider & Cavell, 2003), parental incarceration (Murray & Farrington, 2005), and other types of loss (Tennant, 1988) have

been shown to have a detrimental impact on the psychosocial development of children and youth. However, there is limited understanding as to why these different types of loss affect children and youth detrimentally (Luthar, 2006).

To address this third research question I turned to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Discourse analysis, also referred to as discursive psychology, is concerned with how an individual's interpersonal negotiations are affected by his/her use of language (Hall, 2001). In other words, discursive psychology is concerned with "*how* people *use* discursive resources in order to achieve interpersonal objectives in social interaction" (Willig, 2008; p. 95/6). FDA builds off of this tradition but is informed by a post-structuralist ideology. This form of analyzing text, speech, objects, and/or actions "focuses upon what kind of objects and subjects are constructed through discourse and what kinds of ways-of-being these objects and subjects make available to people" (Willig, 2008; p. 96). FDA is concerned with the positions that specific discourses allow individuals (Hall, 2001). Specifically, it focuses on the power relationships present in the talk being used by participants and how the discourses being used allow participants to position themselves in relation to the other individuals in their story (Willig, 2008).

I used a five-step process of discourse analysis to guide my work on *RQ3*. This five-step process was modified from the description of FDA offered by Willig (2008). I provide a brief overview of the steps in *Table 2* below. First, I identified the *discursive construction* of interest. Since, *RQ3* is focused on the loss of the biological parent—the discursive object—I picked out excerpts about these relationships in the narratives and interviews. I did this so that I could capture the explicit references to the parent-child relationship as well as the implicit, contextual, references that emerged when the adolescents referenced the loss of their biological parent. Second, I explored how the language used to construct this discursive

object fed off broader *discourses*. To do this I went through each of the excerpts identified in step one and coded them for the emerging discourses being used. I tried to understand the different discourses utilized and how they differed from each other.

*Table 2.* Description of the steps taken in the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis used in this study

#	Step	Description
1	Discursive construction	Identify the direct and indirect references to the “object” of interest based off of the research question and how it is talked about
2	Discourses	Identify how the discursive constructions fit within the wider social and/or cultural discourses
3	Positioning	Determine the subject positions that are afforded to the participant, and other stakeholders, based on the use of certain discourses
4	Practice	Determine what actions are opened or closed for the participant based off of the discourses and positioning they use
5	Subjectivity	Identify what subjective experiences the construction allows for the participant

Third, I identified how adolescents *positioned* themselves, their biological parents, and other stakeholders (e.g.: foster parents) in the discourses they used. I identified what the adolescents believed their rights and duties were and how they chose to position themselves in the relationship with their biological parents, which in turn allowed them to navigate these right and duties (Davies & Harre, 2009). Fourth, I explored “the ways in which discursive constructions and subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action” (Willig, 2008; p. 116/7). In other words, I tried to understand how the adolescents benefited from constructing this discourse. To limit my subjective bias in understanding this *practice* I stayed close to the participant’s words, relying on their narration

of specific actions that they conducted. The last step—*subjectivity*—allowed me to understand the “links between the discursive constructions used by participants and their implications for [their] subjective experience” (Willig, 2008; p. 122). In other words, it allowed me to understand how the discourses and positions used by the adolescents allowed them to make meaning of the negative life experience within the context of their life.

### **Rigor in Qualitative Research**

Trying to understand the meaning-making process that individual's use requires a move from a population-level to an individual-level of analysis, a move from a quantitative model of statistical averages to a qualitative exploration of individual variation due to context and experience. However, among academics there is discussion and disagreement about how to address and judge the rigor of findings derived from studies that primarily use qualitative methodology. Some have suggested the use of checklists: a collection of strategies and methods that all qualitative research should be judged against. These checklists often include mention to purposive sampling, multiple coding, triangulation, and respondent validation, methods that address issues like researcher bias, reliability, internal validity, and external validity (Barbour, 2001). Even in the realm of checklists, there is diversity. Some researchers have a list of ~5 main items that cover the key areas of rigor (Barbour, 2001), while others have put together long lists of 32 items that address all the things a qualitative researcher should address in terms of research team composition, reflexivity, study design, analysis, and reporting findings (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). But others have disagreed with this move toward standardization in the quest for rigor and consistency in qualitative research. They counter that in the quest to mark every box on a checklist researchers often lose sight of the actual research and the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings that guide the work (Power, 2001).

Even when it comes to terms like "reliability" and "validity" there is disagreement. In their seminal work, Guba and Lincoln (1981, 1982) pointed out that the focus on "reliability" and "validity", especially as they were traditionally conceptualized, did not fit the naturalistic and phenomenological work being done by most qualitative researchers. They argued that terms like "reliability" and "validity" lead qualitative researchers to think about



rigor in terms of quantitative research, rather than in terms of strategies and methods that are actually appropriate for qualitative work. Guba and Lincoln put forth the idea of “trustworthiness” in qualitative research. A qualitative researcher could think of rigor in terms of the “trustworthiness” of his/her work. In so doing, they suggested a paradigm that focused on four components—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. However, recently some researchers have pushed back against this well-accepted paradigm. They suggest that the four items in the paradigm mirror ideas of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, respectively, noting that straying away from accepted and understandable terminology only hurts the acceptance and understanding of the rigor of qualitative research (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).

As is clear from this brief review, there is little agreement on the criteria that should guide conducting and reporting qualitative research. However, there is a push for researchers to transparently consider the rigor of their findings, being explicit about the criteria they use, how they met these criteria, and the limitations they encountered (Mays & Pope, 1995, 2000). Over the next few pages I describe strategies that allowed me to address the validity and reliability of their findings.

### **Validity**

*Validity* refers to the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 2010; p. 280). Indeed, in qualitative research there is no objective truth or threshold to which observations and findings can be compared. However, validity at its core refers to instituting strategies that increase the match between the findings and the phenomenological experience of the participants in the study. There are two components of validity that are often referenced in the literature: reactivity and bias.

*Reactivity* is a component of validity that represents the influence of the researcher on participants in the study, the settings, or both (Maxwell, 2010). In qualitative research, especially research that includes interviews, it is almost impossible to completely remove all influence of the researcher on participants. We expect that participants will be affected by the interactions they have with the researcher, what is important is being conscious of the ways in which a researcher could affect respondents and either minimizing or accounting for it when interpreting the data (Maxwell, 2010).

The validity threat of *bias* represents how the researchers own interests, perspectives, and world-view affect the choice of sample and/or how the data are analyzed. Bias often emerges in “the selection of data that fit the researcher’s existing theory or preconceptions and the selection of data that “stand out” to the researcher” (Maxwell, 2010; p. 282). It is not possible to completely remove one’s own perspective from qualitative research. But by acknowledging and accounting for it, we can effectively highlight its influence.

In qualitative research reactivity and bias have been addressed through the use of reflexive writing. These writing exercises help the researcher capture their thinking through the process of collecting and analyzing the data (Luttrell, 2010). The aim of reflexive writing is to give the researcher a space within which to chart the development of their thoughts and ideas. It also could serve as a space for researchers to note any attitudes, notions, or perceptions that he/she believes to be affecting how the data are selected or how they are analyzed. The written “memos” can then be used in multiples ways. First, the researcher can return to the memos during the course of the data analysis and in writing-up the findings. This allows the researcher to understand how his/her thoughts changed and developed over the course of the study, adding nuance to findings and allowing the researcher to go back and amend any obvious bias. Second, the researcher could share these memos with

colleagues, asking for directed feedback on a topic. This would allow the researcher to test his/her ideas against colleagues in the field to determine the validity of what he/she is finding.

Another method with which to handle issues of validity in qualitative research is to be transparent about the methods used in data analysis. Anfara and his colleagues (2002) refer to this as putting qualitative research on stage. They note: “the problem is that qualitative researchers do not always provide their readers with detailed explanations of how research questions are related to data sources, how themes or categories are developed, and how triangulation is accomplished” (p. 30). By providing others with a transparent review of how the data were analyzed, the researcher can account for his/her own bias in creating codes and findings certain themes. For example, the research could offer readers a code mapping table (Anfara et al., 2002); this table provides an overview of the different levels of codes that were used and how the families of codes were formed.

### **Reliability**

*Reliability* defines the stability, reproducibility, and accuracy of findings (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007); it “refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (Long & Johnson, 2000; p. 30). In qualitative research reliability captures the possibility that another researcher would come to a similar conclusion if he/she analyzed the same data.

Triangulation of data sources is one method that has been used extensively in qualitative research to address the issue of reliability. The concept of triangulation is one that comes from the field of land management. Surveyors would use multiple angles to measure the same plot of land so that they could *triangulate* their findings and offer a more accurate

measurement (Malterud, 2001). In qualitative research “*Triangulation* refers to an approach to data collection in which evidence is deliberately sought from a wide range of different, independent sources and often by different means” (Mays & Pope, 1995; p. 110). The aim is to determine the reliability of findings through different sources rather than relying on a single type or source of data.

Triangulation is helpful in two ways. First, using different sources to determine the reliability of the findings assures the researcher that the findings are not an artifact of a particular data source. Additionally, triangulation helps the researcher check that the participants’ report is not overly influenced by a single data collection and analytic method. For example, there is a well-documented amount of reactivity that occurs during interviews; participants are influenced by the researcher’s presence and vice versa (Maxwell, 2010). Triangulating findings from an interview with at least one other source helps the researcher confirm that the findings from the interviews were not only a manifestation of this reactivity (Mays & Pope, 2000).

But triangulation does not simply include other types of data; it can also include the incorporation of other theories or perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In other words, triangulation can also include a researcher checking his/her interpretation of emergent codes, discourses, or observations with participants, colleagues, or experts in the field. Additionally, working with multiple researchers to form and test the same codes in the data is also viewed as a form of triangulation (Tong et al., 2007). *Inter-rater reliability* is one form of triangulation (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). It refers to the process whereby two or more researchers code the same data using the same set of codes (that they designed together or were assigned), and then test the amount of agreement or disagreement in their coding. Inter-rater reliability has become a key component of measuring the rigor of qualitative

research findings, featuring in several checklists (example: Barbour, 2001; Malterud, 2001; Tong et al., 2007).

However, there has also been significant pushback against the overuse of inter-rater reliability as a measure of rigor in qualitative research. In a short critique, Morse (1997) argues that inter-rater reliability is only a valid measure of rigor in structured and standardized studies. She notes that structured interviews, where every participant is asked the same question in the same order, are an appropriate case for inter-rater reliability because the researcher's perception of the codes and themes do not change because of the context or flow of the interview, or where it was placed in the sequence of all interviews. Additionally, there is less room for context-driven follow-up questions and so it is more straightforward to assess inter-rater reliability. On the other hand, when interviews use a less structured format, inter-rater reliability does not add much to the rigor of the study. We expect that researcher's thoughts and ideas grow as a result of the context and sequence of interviews; this is hard to capture in a reliability measure. Additionally, there is a concerted effort among qualitative researchers to test inter-rater reliability during the process of forming codes and themes rather than once these have been formalized. Collaborating with other researchers during the coding process allows qualitative researchers to test their level of agreement during the process and brainstorm the reasons for possible discrepancies in agreement (Smagorinsky, 2008).

Even when a decision to use inter-rater reliability has been made, there is limited guidance on what metric should be used to measure the amount of agreement between raters. By some estimates, in the early 1990s there were already 40+ proposed metrics for measuring rater agreement with nominal data (Popping, 1988). With the advances in statistical analysis and software, this number has increased. Ideally, a metric should be able to

measure the amount of agreement between two or more assessors who are independent of each other. It should also be numerically grounded in a scale that is interpretable and comparable across projects. This means that the metric should have some sampling distribution that is known or can be modeled. Lastly, the metric should function with different forms of data, categorical, nominal, ordinal, etc. One of the few metrics to meet all of these criteria is Krippendorff's Alpha: "It generalizes across scales of measurement; can be used with any number of observers, with or without missing data; and it satisfies all of the important criteria for a good measure of reliability" (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; p. 78). It also provides a scale that is easy to interpret and understand. Users are given a rating between 0 and 1, with 0 representing no reliable agreement between raters and 1 representing complete overlap on all the coding occurrences for the different raters.

Of course, triangulation is not the silver bullet to attain reliability in qualitative research. Some academics argue that triangulation is often misrepresented as a fundamental test of rigor because of its use of multiple forms of data. However, the interpretation of these forms of data and whether they converge still depend on the researcher's lens (Long & Johnson, 2000). Thus, most researchers argue for the use of triangulation as one component of a larger approach toward rigor in qualitative research (Barbour, 2001).

### **Addressing the Rigor of the Findings**

#### **Reducing my reactivity as a teacher**

In the current study, the reactivity threat to the validity of my findings primarily emerged because of my presence in the charter school as a researcher *and* a teacher. My primary concern was that some students would feel pressured to be part of the study because I was their teacher. If the students thought that their final grade in *Senior Seminar* or their graduation trajectory depended on their participation in the study, then I would be

affecting not only who participated in the study but also what personal information they decided to disclose.

I avoided unknowingly pressuring students to participate in the study by being transparent about my roles and thoughtfully scheduling the process by which students and their parents consented for the study. During the first class my co-teacher introduced me to the students. I was unequivocal in explaining my role as a researcher who would be seeking their permission to use their narratives and interview them. However, I highlighted the fact that while in the classroom, I was their teacher and none of our conversations during the class would be part of my research. I also made sure they understood that participation in the study was independent of their progress at the school. After this introduction, I did not mention the study until the last day of class. By this time, students had finished writing their narratives and handed them to my colleague. Only then did I approach participants and their parents for permission to collect student narratives and conduct interviews. This allowed me to separate my time at the school as a teacher and a researcher. When I taught the class in the fall, they considered me a teacher, and when I collected narratives and interviewed them in the spring, I was a researcher.

But while I was their teacher, I had to avoid allowing my research interest to influence the way I commented on student narratives. To safeguard from this, I kept a journal of memos I wrote to myself at the start and end of every class (Luttrell, 2010). This was a self-check to ensure that I was not letting my study's interests contaminate what I was saying to students in the classroom. I also wrote memos while commenting on students' written work. While this method did not allow for total sequestration of my research interests from student work, it did provide a place for constant reflection and assessment that allowed me to limit spillover. The process of being reflective about the message I was

sending students through lectures and feedback allowed me to tease apart, and separate, my research interests from the aim of the class. It is worth noting that I did not follow the same process of personal checks and balances when designing the course with my co-teacher. I was more comfortable with using methodology in the content and pedagogy of the course that allowed students the space to reflect on their experiences and write about them. I believed that this would help their narratives for the course while adding to my research.

### **Using self-checks to monitor bias**

To manage the bias that I brought to the data analysis, I used two strategies. First, I used several reflexive writing exercises to sort my own biases as I analyzed the data (Luttrell, 2010). I described most of these memos in the *Study Design and Methodology* chapter above. When working on the thematic networks for *RQ2* and the discourses for *RQ3*, I continuously referred back to these memos that I had written before and during the coding process. These memos helped me keep track over time of how my thoughts and ideas were developing; they allowed me to understand how my thoughts on the emergent codes had changed over the span of data analysis. This process allowed me to monitor my own perspective and keep track of how it was affecting my findings.

Second, I tried to be transparent about the coding and development process so the reader can judge the veracity of my findings. I did this by providing quasi-statistics (*Table 5*), quantitative descriptions to support claims for the density and presence of the themes (e.g.: rare, prevalent, etc.) to qualify the conclusions I made (Maxwell, 2010). Additionally, I provided a map of my coding process (*Table 6*) so that the reader can judge the formation of the thematic umbrellas and how these emerged from the thematic codes and the actions that I initially coded in the grounded analysis (Anfara et al., 2002). I also provide descriptive examples of all my findings in the words of the participants. Rather than simplifying my



findings, I display them with the participants' biographies and their use of the different meaning-making themes and discursive constructions. I expect this contextual presentation to help readers determine the veracity of my findings for themselves.

One limitation is that my strategies only account for my bias in the selection and analysis of data; they do not account for my bias in sample selection. Since I was interested in understanding how adolescents made meaning of severe adversity in their life, I approached this study knowing that I needed a sample that had an objectively high level of risk factors. Additionally, I was interested in youth who demonstrated resilience. The charter school was an appropriate site because of the students who attended the school, and the accumulation of risk factors that they all seemed to have experienced. Additionally, all the students at the school demonstrated academic resilience since they had managed to return to the school in spite of the accumulation of risk factors in their lives. Inevitably, the sample is a sample of convenience. I could have chosen additional samples (e.g.: youth at a juvenile detention center) to test the themes and discourses but did not have the resources to manage additional data collection and analysis. The restricted sample is a limitation of the findings in this study.

### **Triangulation: Using multiple sources of data**

In this study I tried to have at least two sources of information for all of the findings. The participants' self-report of negative life experiences came from three different sources. The life-graphs they drew before the interview, during the interview, and from the narratives. This allowed me to triangulate the data and ensure that participants' recollection of negative life experiences emerged from at least two sources, if not three. This was especially important for when participants identified the loss of a biological parent as a negative life experience, a risk factor. Since this risk factor was pivotal to *RQ3* I ensured that each

participant identified this experience as negative in at least two sources. This allowed me to ensure that the identification of this experience as being negative was not an artifact of the types of questions I asked in the interviews or the comments I provided in the narratives. Additionally, the meaning-making themes from *RQ2* and the discourses identified in *RQ3* came from interviews and narratives. I ensured that these findings could be equally identified in the narratives and interviews of all the participants. This ensured that the formation of specific themes or discourses was not overly influenced by the kinds of questions I asked in the interviews or the comments I provided in the narratives.

Besides the multiple data sources I also tried to triangulate my findings by getting feedback from my colleague at the charter school with whom I taught *Senior Seminar*. During the initial analysis of this data, while I was coding the actions the participants were using and developing thematic codes, I had phone conversations with this teacher about my preliminary findings. Because this teacher did not have student consent to listen to the interviews, I only used data from the narratives when talking to this teacher. Since we both taught *Senior Seminar* together, this teacher had already read all of the students' narratives. He was also a mentor and advisor to several of the participants in the study. I presented him with some of my preliminary findings, asking his opinion on whether my findings made sense given what he knew about the students at the charter school. This process kept me from over-interpreting what the youth were saying in their narratives and allowed me to make thoughtful and referenced changes in the ways I understood their talk about their experiences.

#### **Inter-rater reliability: Testing the application of codes**

Unlike Smagorinsky's (2008) suggestion, I did not have collaborating partners who could help in the formation of the codes and in the checking of the reliability of the codes as

they were being formed. Additionally, the interviews in this study were not structured; they followed a formative interview protocol that changed based on what the youth wrote about in the narratives and how they discussed different events. Thus, the inter-rater reliability statistics I present for this study are simply an indication of the reliability of the application of the formed codes in a controlled setting; they do not provide an estimate of the reliability of these codes if applied independent of this research setting.

The six main meaning-making themes in this study were tested for the reliability of use by two raters: the principal investigator (myself) and a hired graduate student. The inter-rater reliability test took place after the first round of coding all the narratives and interviews of the participants, and forming the six main meaning-making themes. I went through the coded narratives and interviews of the 30 youth who were part of the main sample (not the pilot study). In these narratives and interviews I picked out every excerpt where I coded for one of the 6 meaning-making themes. Next, I put all these excerpts into a new document and resorted them (so that not all excerpts for a single theme were together), selecting the first 30% of these. To this sample I added a few excerpts where I never coded any of the 6 meaning-making themes. This document of excerpts formed the data for the inter-rater reliability test.

The graduate student who helped with this test received limited training: an orientation to the study and an overview of the codebook with the six main meaning-making themes. After coding 10% of the data that I provided, I spoke to the graduate student again to clarify any concerns or issues.

*Table 3.* Reliability statistics for inter-rater reliability test of the 6 meaning-making themes from 30% of all coded excerpts

	<b>Percent Agreement</b>	<b>Scott's Pi</b>	<b>Cohen's Kappa</b>	<b>Krippendorff's Alpha</b>
Identity	91	0.81	0.81	0.81
Betterment	90	0.79	0.79	0.79
Self-Reliance	92	0.83	0.83	0.83
Optimism	95	0.90	0.90	0.90
Perseverance	95	0.90	0.90	0.90
Preparation	92	0.79	0.79	0.80
<b>Overall</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>0.84</b>	<b>0.84</b>

In *Table 3* I present the reliability statistics from the inter-rater reliability test. Though I present several statistics in this table for the reader's perusal (and comparison to other studies that use other metrics), I relied on the Krippendorff's Alpha statistic for interpretation (final column of *Table 3*). While there is no definitive threshold for what value of Krippendorff's Alpha a researcher should be looking for, a rule of thumb in content analysis is to look for a value of at least 0.80, with values between 0.65 and 0.80 allowing for some conversation of trends in reliability (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). A value of 0.80 would suggest that two or more independent raters reliably used the code at least 80% of the time. Overall, across all six meaning-making themes, the graduate student and I reliably used the six different codes 84% of the time. The inter-rater reliability within each of the six themes ranged from 0.79 for *BETTERMENT* to 0.90 for *OPTIMISM* and *PERSEVERANCE*. In all, the inter-rater reliability study would suggest that, in a controlled setting, the six meaning-making themes could be applied to data excerpts from this study reliably by multiple researchers.

## Findings

In this chapter I describe the main findings. I frame these findings using the three research questions presented above. I start by describing the ACEs and other negative life experiences that the youth identified as having a negative impact on their life. I describe the frequency of each event across this 38-youth sample. Under *RQ2* I present the six meaning-making themes that emerged when participants tried to describe the short-term effect and long-term impact of negative life experiences. I also describe how these six themes fall under two broad thematic umbrellas: *INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION*. Under *RQ3* I describe three discourses that these adolescents used to describe the most frequent negative life experience: the loss of a biological parent. The three discourses—family unity, parental roles, and disownment—are expressions of how these adolescents use language to navigate their changing relationships with their biological parents because of the negative impact of the loss that they experienced.

### **RQ1: Participant's Self-Reported Negative Life Experiences**

In *Table 4* I present the frequency (number and percent) with which participants ( $n=38$ ) reported experiencing each type of negative life experience. In the first half of *Table 4* I present the findings for the 10 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), sorted in descending order by reported frequency. 84% of adolescents reported that losing a biological parent through divorce, abandonment, or other reason had a negative impact on their life. Thirty-seven of the 38 participants reported some form of household chaos or confusion—living in a home where adults argued, where at least one adult had a problem with alcohol or street drugs, where they had experienced verbal abuse, or where they felt like there was a lack of care. Ten adolescents noted that experiencing physical abuse was a negative event for them while three adolescents reported sexual abuse as having a negative impact on their life.

*Table 4.* Number and percent of participants (n=38) who reported having experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and other negative life experiences

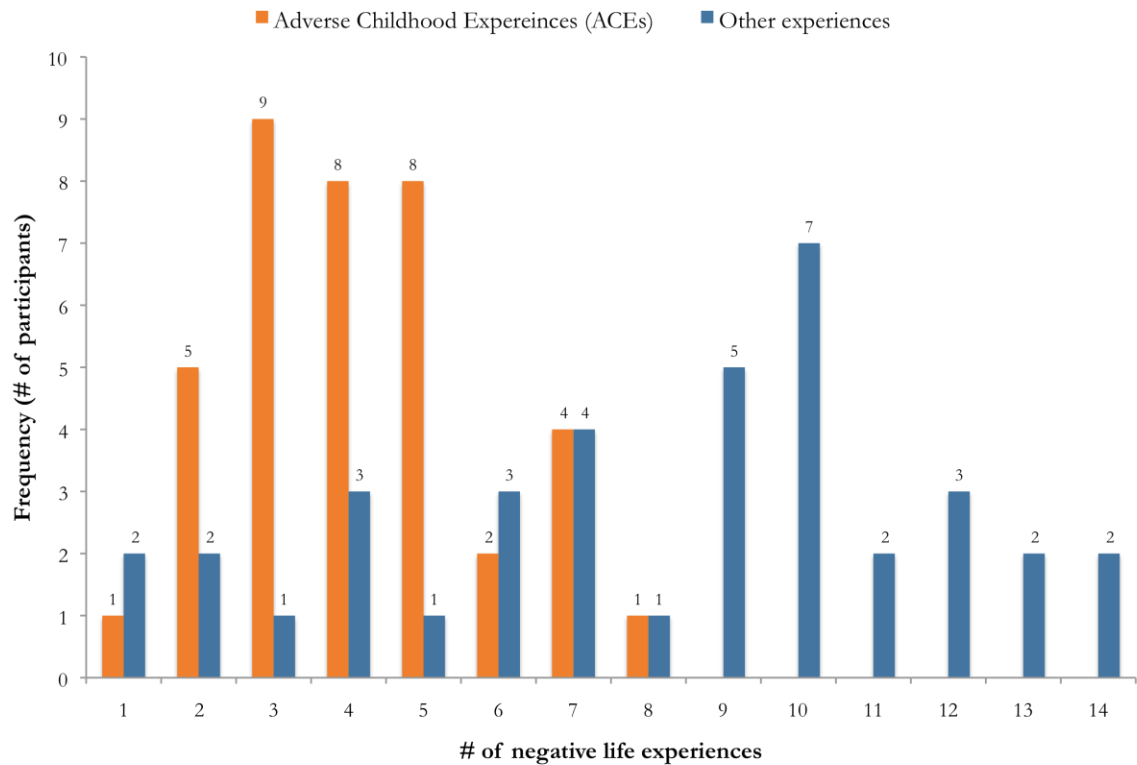
	<b>Experiences</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
ACEs	Lost a biological parent through divorce, abandonment, or other reason	32	84
	Lived in a home where adults argue and fight (physical as well as verbal)	28	74
	Lived with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs	23	61
	Sworn at, insulted, put down, or humiliated by parent or other adult in household	18	47
	Often felt like there was no one to offer care in the home	20	53
	Had a household member go to prison	12	32
	Pushed, grabbed, slapped, or hit (injured) by parent or other adult in household	10	26
	Often felt like family didn't look out for each other, feel close, or support each other	7	18
	Lived with a household member who was depressed or mentally ill	5	13
	Touched, fondled, or forced to have intercourse by person at least 5 years older	3	8
Other negative experiences	Failed a class	31	82
	Trouble with teachers at school	26	68
	Sent to school office for problem behaviors	26	68
	Seen another person being beaten or stabbed	25	66
	Had close friends who were/are part of a violent gang	22	58
	Lived in a neighborhood that outsiders consider "violent" or "unsafe"	22	58
	Verbally bullied or teased by other adolescents	21	55
	Asked to repeat a grade	21	55
	Dropped out of school	20	53
	Consumed drugs on a regular basis	18	47
	Lived in a neighborhood that outsiders consider "poor"	18	47
	Moved around a lot as a child	18	47
	Consumed alcohol on a regular basis	16	42
	Beaten-up by other adolescents	16	42
	Been arrested	14	37
	Spent time in jail or detention center	8	21
	Became a parent	6	16
	Been involved in gang activity	6	16

Seven participants were adversely affected by the fact that their family did not look out for each other while five participants reported that living with a household member who was mentally ill had a negative impact on their life. Nearly every youth in the sample experienced some form of abuse or neglect during their childhood.

In the bottom half of *Table 4* I present the non-ACE experiences that the adolescents identified as having had a negative effect on them. Not surprisingly, every single adolescent in the sample reported having some trouble in school—failing a class, having trouble with teachers, being sent to the school office for problem behaviors—and that these school experiences had a negative impact on their life. Additionally, though 34 of the 38 participants reported having dropped out of school, only 53% noted that this experience was negative for them. Thirty-four of the 38 participants reported experiencing some form of violence in their life. Approximately half of the adolescents reported that living in a neighborhood that outsiders considered violent and being bullied by peers had a negative impact on their life. Sixteen participants reported the adverse impact of being beaten-up by other adolescents while 25 adolescents witnessed someone else being beaten or stabbed. A third of the participants reported the adverse impact of being arrested or spending time in a detention center.

On average, participants in this study reported having experienced at least 4 ACEs and 9 other negative life experiences. In *Figure 2* I present a bar chart that illustrates the number of participants who reported accumulating different numbers of ACEs (orange bars) and other negative life experiences (blue bars). Participants reported experiencing 1-8 ACEs and 1-14 other negative life experiences. One adolescent reported experiencing 8 ACEs, while 2 adolescents reported experiencing 14 other negative life experiences. Nine adolescents reported experiencing at least 3 ACEs, the tallest orange bar in *Figure 2*, while 7

adolescents reported experiencing 10 other negative experiences, the tallest blue bar in *Figure 2*.

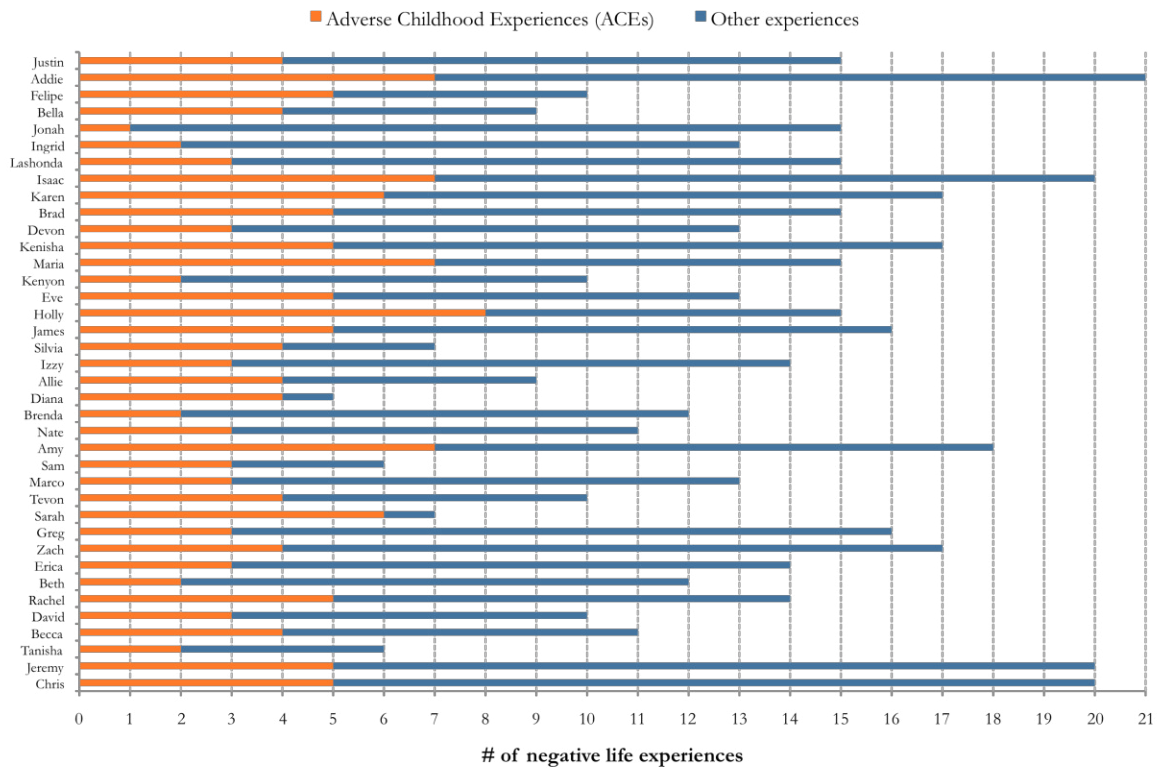


*Figure 2.* Bar graph of the accumulation of negative life experiences—ACEs (orange bars) and other experiences (blue bars)—versus the frequency of each numeric accumulation in the sample ( $n=38$ )

The correlation between ACEs and the other negative experiences was small (Cohen, 1988), 0.03: participants who experienced a high number of ACEs did not also report experiencing a high number of other negative life experiences. In *Figure 3* I present a detailed illustration of the number of ACEs and other negative experiences that were reported by each of the 38 participants in the sample. Addie, second from the top, reported the most experiences, 21—7 ACEs and 14 other negative experiences. Jeremy and Chris (bottom two bars in *Figure 3*) reported 20 experiences—5 ACEs and 15 other negative experiences. Jonah



reported experiencing a single ACE, having lived in a home where adults argue and fight, but had a high number of other negative experiences, 14. On the other hand, Sarah reported six ACEs but only one other negative experience, having lived in a neighborhood that outsiders consider “violent” or “unsafe”.



*Figure 3.* Bar graph of the number of negative life experiences (ACEs and other negative experiences) for each adolescent in the sample (n=38)

## RQ2: Meaning-Making Themes

In using the grounded coding method to analyze the narratives and/or interviews of 36 participants, six themes emerged in the adolescents’ talk about the impact of negative life experiences on their lives. In *Table 5* I present the prevalence of these themes, and respective sub-themes.

*Table 5.* Prevalence of themes and sub-themes from grounded coding for RQ2 (n=36)

Theme	# of participants	% of sample
<b>IDENTITY</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>44</b>
General	11	31
Specific	7	19
<b>BETTERMENT</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>36</b>
Passive	10	28
Active	6	17
<b>SELF-RELIANCE</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>OPTIMISM</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>PERSEVERANCE</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>25</b>
Internally motivated	7	19
Externally motivated	4	11
<b>PREPARATION</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>17</b>
General	4	11
Specific	2	6

It is important to point out the co-occurrence of many of these themes and sub-themes. Most of the adolescents used more than one of the themes when explaining how they understood the effect of negative life experiences in the scope of their life. The average participant in this study used at least two different themes in their narratives and/or interviews when describing the effect of negative life experiences. Additionally, the prevalence of sub-themes under most of the main themes is greater than the prevalence of the respective theme. For example, the top row of *Table 5* indicates that 16 adolescents used the *IDENTITY* theme in their descriptions, 11 using a general construction and 7 using a

specific construction (I describe these constructions in more detail below). This suggests that two adolescents used both a specific and general construction at some point during their narrative or interview.

The three-step process I defined in the last chapter drove the formation of these meaning-making themes. *Table 6* maps the three steps and the different codes that were formed along the way. Using grounded coding I started by defining the action that the student was taking in each sentence. For example, in *Table 6* the first five rows present five different types of actions that the student's used. In explaining the short term effect and long term impact of negative life experiences the students often defined their sense of self, tried to integrate the event and their sense of self, explained how the event became part of the self, compared the self before the event to the self after the event, and/or described how they matured because of the experience. These "actions" did not happen in any specific order; nor did all youth use all these actions. However, all these actions explained how the negative life experience had become part of their *IDENTITY*. This was the second step of the process: using the action codes to form thematic codes. Last, I used the memos that I wrote during the coding process to define thematic families—*INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION*—that described the main "buckets" that categorized the thematic codes.

Table 6. Mapping the actions, thematic codes, and thematic family “buckets” that were used to address RQ2

Data	Coding for Actions	Thematic Codes	Thematic Mapping	
			Internalization	Redefinition
	<i>Actions</i>	<i>Meaning-Making-Themes</i>	<i>Meaning-Making Processes</i>	
Narratives and Interviews	Defining sense of self	Identity	✓	✗
	Integrating event and self			
	Explaining how event became part of self			
	Comparing self from before event to after			
	Maturing because of experience			
	Explaining how things got better	Betterment	✗	✓
	Comparing life before and after			
	Describing changes after experience			
	Explaining negative impact			
	Reflecting on life if experience had occurred			
	Feeling let down	Self-Reliance	✗	✗
	Depending on others			
	Explaining a change of dependence			
	Comparing relationships			
	Describing expectations			
	Expressing sense of independence	Optimism	✓	✓
	Expressing missingness			
	Describing changes after experience			
	Describing positivism as part of self			
	Learning to be optimistic			
	Describing changes after experience			
	Explaining negative impact			
	Living through/surviving an experience	Perseverance	✗	✗
	Explaining negative impact			
	Finding strength from experience			
	Learning to persevere			
	Describing expectations			
	Describing inevitability of negative experiences	Preparation	✗	✗
	Carrying on after experience			
	Comparing life before and after			
	Preparing self for future			
	Describing state of preparation			
	Learning about self			
	Describing lack of self-agency			

I was unable to find any marked trends in the use of the themes and sub-themes by gender or level of negative life experiences. Males and females used the different themes and sub-themes equally. In my analysis, none of the themes resonated as being used more often by the males or the females in my sample. Additionally, I could not identify any persistent trends in how students with high ACE scores or high levels of other negative life experiences used the themes, as compared to their peers who had fewer experiences. The themes seemed to appear independent of the total accumulation of negative life experiences.

### **Identity**

One of the most common ways in which participants made meaning of negative life experiences in the context of their lives was to describe how the experiences were part of their identity, part of who they were. Their talk was defined by references such as “it is a part of me”, “part of who I have become”, “made me who I am”, and “helped me become who I am”. I coded this theme in the narratives and interviews of approximately 44% of the sample (see *Table 5*). The *IDENTITY* theme was especially prominent in (but not exclusive to) the interviews when I asked adolescents a hypothetical question: “If you had the opportunity to go back and change one thing in your life what would it be, and why?” Several of the adolescents noted that they would not change anything in their life because what they had experienced, even though it had had a negative effect on them, was part of who they had become. Participants noted that past events had helped shape their life and was now part of how they saw themselves. Removing these experiences would fundamentally alter the person they had come to see themselves as.

Allie, an 18-year old female who self-identified as Mixed Race, was an example of a participant who believed that a specific prior adversity was part of who she had become. From when she was 5 to when she turned 11 her older sister’s friend, who was 7 years older

than Allie, repeatedly sexually assaulted Allie. Beside the trauma of six year of sexual assault, Allie also had to go through the process of reliving the assault when her parents finally found out what was going on. She had to face her “aggressor” in court and narrate everything that had happened between them. To Allie, the worst experience was having her sister not believe that this assault had happened. In fact, her sister was a character witness for the boy in the trial. Because of the lack of concrete evidence, Allie explained that the boy was found not guilty and she still had to see him because he was still her sister’s friend. But when she reflects on this negative life experience during the interview, Allie explained that the experience was part of who she had become. When asked if she would change this experience if she had a chance to go back in time, Allie noted that she never wanted it to happen but that it made her stronger and it was part of who she was as a person.

[The experience of the sexual assault] made me who I am today. It made me a stronger person where as other people would be. Some people after 6 years of being molested, it brought nothing. Most people think about it every day. They can’t have real relationships or anything but I think it made me stronger. I mean I got up in front of a courtroom and I talked about what happened and even though he was found not guilty, I mean I did still have the strength to show other people that they could do it. I mean it made me who I am today.

Allie’s story is one example of the 7 cases (see *Table 5*) where participants believed that *specific* negative experiences were part of their identity. I coded the *IDENTITY* theme when they described the effect of a discrete event or experience. However, in 11 cases (see *Table 5*), participants viewed the collection of adversity they had experienced as part of who they had become. In these cases participants did not specify that a single experience was part of their identity; rather they argued that everything they had experienced was part of who

they had become. Brad, an 18-year old male who self-identified as White, was one example of this *general* construction.

Growing up, Brad was exposed to his father's temper on multiple occasions, in the form of physical and verbal abuse. He described a volatile relationship with his biological father where he could never predict how his dad was going to react to different incidents. He went on to put his father's temper in the context of his extended family. He described how most of the men in his family had "anger issues", anger that they often tried to cope with by using alcohol and illicit drugs. Brad also described how most of them were part of violent gangs and were arrested or held in jail over-night for fights in the neighborhood.

Brad felt like his own behavior was influenced by these experiences; he was suspended from school on three occasions for conduct problems, before being expelled. Nonetheless, when asked what he would change if he had the hypothetical opportunity to go back in time, Brad argued that he would not change a single thing in his past because those negative life experiences—the violence, anger, and delinquency of the males in his extended family, as well as his own behavioral and academic issues—made him the person he was. "Every step I took to this day has led me to who I am, where I have gotten so far, and where I will go in life." I coded the *IDENTITY* theme in parts of Brad's narrative and interview because he viewed the accumulated negative life experiences as part of himself.

### **Betterment**

One of the other prominent themes from the participant's narratives and interviews was that of *BETTERMENT*; thirty-six percent of the sample (see *Table 5*) argued that their lives were better off because of the adversity they had experienced. In describing negative life experiences they acknowledged that their lives had been adversely impacted because of the experience(s). However, these 13 participants went a step further: they explained that

experiencing the negative life experience(s) had resulted in a better outcome or trajectory for their life. In using this theme, the participant's talk was filled with references to the comparative or superlative form of the adjective *good*. They compared their current situation to what their life used to be like when they were living through the negative life experience in question; their conclusion was often framed around how their current situation was "better" than what it used to be like or "better" than what it could have been.

Participants constructed this *BETTERMENT* in two ways. Ten participants used a passive construction, referencing how experiencing an event had bettered their life. These participants did not discuss their own agency or involvement in the process of their life becoming better. Rather, the very act of having lived through a negative life experience had somehow transformed their life in a positive manner. On the other hand, 6 participants used a more active construction, describing how they had bettered their life because of the influence of negative life experiences. These participants described their own agency and action in bettering their life. While they were not always clear about *what* they had done to better their life, they did note that they had actively changed things so that their life could be better.

Devon, a 19 year-old male who self-identified as Black, provided one example of this meaning-making theme, especially the passive construction. In his narrative and interview Devon narrated a complex story that was highlighted by peer violence & victimization, his frustrations with growing up in poverty, and his struggle with depression & suicidal ideation. But one of the most poignant negative experiences that Devon described was growing up without his biological father. In his narrative Devon noted that growing up he felt like his dad was a stranger and that he wished that he had had more time to spend with his father. He described how he felt he missed a part of his childhood because he did not have a chance



to get to know his dad. However, when asked to describe the kind of effect that the absence of his father had had on his life, Devon said the following:

I wouldn't be the man I am today if I'd had my dad around. I probably would have been a worse man. From what I heard my dad wasn't the best man growing up. He was a very angry person [while I was] growing up. He dealt with a lot of stuff. Maybe I would've got that directly, that same bag of treats. It's good that I didn't have him growing up.

He compared his current life to what he imagined it would have been like if his dad had been present during his childhood and teenage years. Devon drew on what he had heard about his father—the anger, the involvement in gang activity, the use of street drugs—and believed that he was better off because his father was not present. Though, as a child, he viewed the lack of his father as a negative event, he was able to, over time, renegotiate the meaning of this negative event; he was able to put his life in perspective and understand what it may have been like if his father was physically and emotionally present while he was growing up.

Devon's example provides an illustration of the passive construction of *BETTERMENT* that was used in 10 cases (see *Table 5*). Eve, a 20-year old female who self-identified as Black, was one example of the active construction of *BETTERMENT*. Eve's story was dominated by a self-defined sense of abandonment. She described being abandoned by both her biological parents, physically and emotionally. She also described being in several abusive romantic relationships, the last of which resulted in her pregnancy when she was 16. She explained how getting pregnant and having a baby had a negative effect on her life early on: her mother kicked her out of the house, she dropped out of high school, and she had no money to feed herself. However, Eve also clarified that this chain of negative life experiences ended with a personal realization when her son was born:

I knew I wanted [my son] to have a better life than I did. I officially moved in with my sister. On my own in the world with a child and paying bills. Every night I would watch my son sleep. I know I could be a good mother but I didn't know how to do it. I had to cut off every negative person in my life. I needed to be focused and motivated. I needed to better my life and my son's life. Here I am, Senior Year, working on getting my diploma and walking across the stage. Ready for my future.

She described actively changing the course of her life because she had a baby. She described changing her peer group and paying more attention to her academic work because she wanted to better her life and the life of her young son. Eve also explained how she chose to stop searching for the right partner so that she could end the cycle of abuse and abandonment she had felt throughout her life.

### **Self-Reliance**

Thirty-six percent of the sample (see *Table 5*) demonstrated a sense of *SELF-RELIANCE* in their talk about the effect of negative life experiences. Participants discussed how they used to rely on individuals in their ecosystem—their families, friends, mentors, neighbors, etc.—and how they had given up on those relationships because they had been “let down” or “disappointed”. They compared the relationship they had with individuals in their ecosystem to either a socio-cultural norm or to the experiences of others (friends, peers, etc.) to explain what was missing in their relationship. In constructing this *missingness* they explained how they had learned that they could not always “count on” or “depend on” others to offer help and support when it was needed. Having lived through negative life experiences, they had learned that it was more important for them to rely on themselves, their own skills and resources, if they ever faced tough situations.

Zach, a 19-year old male who self-identified as Asian American, was an example of a participant whose talk reflected the theme of *SELF-RELLIANCE*. Zach's story was dominated by a sense of chaos and instability in his family life. His parents moved him across four states and five schools during his elementary and middle school years because of job opportunities for them. Besides the stress of being the outsider at school, the moves put a strain on his family as well. He witnessed several physical and verbal arguments in the home before his parents separated. The instability in his home made him look for a family outside the home, one he found in neighborhood gangs. The gangs introduced him to illicit drug use and the use of violence to attain goals. This had an influence on his schooling; the time he spent with his peers in the gang detracted from his school activities, to the point that he dropped out of school. He noted that he lost all motivation for school and studies. The turning point for Zach came when his long-term girlfriend ended their relationship. Zach explained that all these experiences led to him realizing the importance of relying primarily on himself.

Everything and everybody seemed to be slowly walking away from me. So one day I'm sitting in my room coming back from laundry, folding my clothes and started to think shit was different when I had a girl living with me. I then said, "Eff everything and everybody. I'm going to do me! Eff the bullshit and move the Eff on!" I stopped feeling sorry for myself and stepped up.

Zach noted that he came to a realization that all the people on whom he had relied—his family, his gang friends, and his girlfriend—left him. He felt like they were the cause of his negative life experiences and should have supported him through the tough moments in his life. But their abandonment made him realize that he had to be self-reliant in order to succeed. Experiencing negative life experiences, and the reactions of his closest confidantes,

taught him the importance of being self-reliant. For example, Zach compared the relationship he has had with his girlfriend to the relationships his friends had with their significant others. In leaving him she did not live up to the expectations that he has constructed for this relationship, an expectation that came from his friends' steady relationships. This is why he believed he could not rely on his romantic partners to offer the support he expected. Zach realized that he needed to be more self-reliant.

While Zach gave up on most of the people in his broader ecosystem when he drew on the concept of *SELF-RELLANCE*, Sarah's construction was more closely related to her parents. Sarah, a 17-year old female who self-identified as White, narrated a story that was dominated by the dynamics within her immediate family, especially her parents. She described a childhood that was shaped by her relationship with her father. He was constantly "in and out" of jail and lied to the family about his street drug use and extra-marital affairs. Because of the gaps in her relationship with her biological father, Sarah felt like she did not have the care and love of a father. She talked about the role of the father as being someone with whom she could "talk to about problems." Sarah believed that not having the kind of relationship with her father that she expected, affected all her relationships with men later on because she could not trust any of them. Additionally, Sarah's close relationship with her mother deteriorated during her early teens. Sarah's mother became romantically involved with a drug dealer and she started to do street drugs herself. This resulted in a change in the household; it moved from a situation of care and concern to one where Sarah felt like there was no one in the home who could care for her.

In reflecting on these familial relationships Sarah came to the conclusion that she could not rely on her mother or father anymore. She compared the level of support and care she got from her mother to what she was used to during her childhood. Sarah realized that

she could no longer rely on her mother for love and support the way she used to. Because of this she decided to let go of the expectations she had for her mother, and her father, and to rely on herself.

I made a choice to finally let go, because I can't stand the pain; I said it's time for my last tear to fall and smile again. I'm starting to live my life for now on; I do what makes me happy...I just don't care anymore. I'm ready to finally live my life and let go [of] all the pain.

She explained that she had tried to reconstruct her relationship with her mother. But the failure of these attempts led to a realization that she needed to be self-reliant. Because of the negative life experiences she had lived through, Sarah learned that she needed to take more agency in her own life instead of relying on her parents to help.

### **Optimism**

Of the 36 participants whose data were analyzed for this research question, 11 (see *Table 5*) explained that negative life experiences had helped them learn to be more positive and optimistic about their lives. These participants admitted that negative life experiences had had an adverse effect on their life, especially when they first occurred. However, when thinking about the long-term impact of these experiences, these students explained that they had learned to see the “bright side” of experiences, to “be more positive” about their life, because they had “already survived” severe stress and adversity. Indeed, they explained that the fact that they had “come through” the experiences that had had a negative effect on their lives made them realize that there was a positive side to all experiences. Moreover, in talking about this *OPTIMISM*, they described it as a personality characteristic. They did not discuss *OPTIMISM* outside themselves; rather, their talk reflected an internalization of the lessons they had learned from previous negative life experiences such that their viewpoint on

negative experiences had changed as a whole. They positioned themselves as being optimistic rather than using optimism when it best suited their situation.

Maria, an 18-year old female who self-identified as Hispanic, described how her previous experiences had taught her to think about the “bright side” of negative events. As a child she felt abandoned and ignored by her biological father, who did not believe she was his child. This was followed by physical, verbal, and emotional abuse at the hands of her older sister and mother after her biological father passed away. This had an impact on Maria’s schooling and her future romantic relationships. She explained how she was never able to have a steady and healthy romantic relationship because of the relationships she had as a child. She believed that if she had a more loving and trusting relationship with her family she would be able to love and trust her boyfriends as well. However, when asked what she would like to change in her life, Maria argued that she would not change anything she has experienced.

Because I already have a positive outlook. Things might affect me negatively, but when I think of something that affected me negatively, I think about the positive solution. Like I can look at the bright side even if I am standing in the dark. And I learned how to do that through everything I've been through. So there's no reason to change it. It's just a fact of life.

She described how her negative life experiences actually taught her to look at life events with more *OPTIMISM*. She was able to see the “silver lining” in any negative event and dwell on that rather than the negative aspects. In this construction Maria is self-focused; her construction of *OPTIMISM* is focused on her personal characteristics. She described her *OPTIMISM* as being a personality characteristic, an outlook that has been developed because of her experiences.

Another example of this *OPTIMISM* theme is Diana, a 17-year old female who self-identified as Hispanic. Diana described a cascade of negative life events:

My grandfather [passing away], then my parents getting separated, we lost our house. I have lived in there since I was one. All the feelings from my grandparents passing away to my parents splitting up, I just gave up on school in 7th grade.

She described low motivation to succeed at school and also disengaging from her friends and peers, something that she attributed to the depression and loneliness she felt after her parents split up. She also noted that she felt a divide between her home and social life because of the façade of normalness that her parents portrayed outside the home. She was witness to the constant bickering and verbal disputes that took place between her parents throughout her childhood. But outside the home her parents acted like a loving couple, a dichotomy that did not blend with Diana's perception of reality. She explained that while most of her extended family viewed her parents as an exemplar for a marital relationship, they did not know about the fights and arguments that took place behind closed doors.

Yet, when reflecting on the long-term impact of her experiences, Diana discussed how her prior experiences had taught her to focus on the positive.

I've recently got another job so I'm currently a full time student and working two jobs. It's a lot to have on my plate especially my senior year of school but I'm determined to succeed and save money. I've learned that life is too short to dwell on emotional feelings, so I've learned to put it aside and just live my life with a positive attitude.

She explained how the negative life experiences taught her to take the long view, to focus on the future rather than the adverse impacts of some experiences in the present. Similar to Maria, Diana also described her *OPTIMISM* as a personality characteristic, an "attitude" that

she learned because of the experiences she had. Rather than the *OPTIMISM* being focused on a single event or experience, it permeated their outlook on the world.

### **Perseverance**

Nine participants (see *Table 5*) noted that dealing with prior adversity had taught them about *PERSEVERANCE*. They acknowledged that these events had an adverse effect on their life. However, their talk reflected the fact that they had learned to persevere through negative life experiences. They talked about “persevering through” events or “finding the strength” to deal with negative life events. They did not redefine events as being positive but made meaning of negative life events in the scope of their life by describing how they had learned to “carry on” through them. In so doing, they defined themselves by this *PERSEVERANCE* and not by the adversity they experienced. However, these participants did not discuss *what* it took to persevere; instead, they viewed perseverance as a state of being. Their talk did not delve into what skills an individual needs in order to persevere through negative life experiences or the mechanisms by which *PERSEVERANCE* occurs. Rather, the nine students whose talk reflected *PERSEVERANCE* viewed it as a skill that they had learned because of the negative life experiences. They viewed negative life events as being inevitable in their life. Given this inevitability, *PERSEVERANCE* helped these youth ignore the byproducts of negative life experiences and continue with their life instead of “getting dragged down”.

The talk of these participants also illustrated two different types of *PERSEVERANCE*. In 7 cases (see *Table 5*) participants defined their *PERSEVERANCE* based on their own, internal motivation. They defined a self-focused motivation to persevere through negative life events. On the other hand, in 4 other cases (see *Table 5*) participants defined an external motivation as the source of their *PERSEVERANCE*. These adolescents



discussed how they persevered through negative life events so that they could prove something to their family, friends, romantic partners, or schoolteachers.

Amy, an 18-year old female who self-identified as White, provided an illustration of the internally motivated *PERSEVERANCE*. This is an excerpt from her narrative:

Still, I persevere to stay strong. I use my strength to get me by each day, based off what could've happened, I could've stayed home, and been miserable and probably turned into a drug addict. I could've not come back to school and not be as successful as I am. I've come so far, and I will continue to go farther. I will live to be happily ever after, just got to keep my head up and strive to be the person I know I can be.

In her narrative and interview Amy described a childhood that was dominated by household chaos. She was witness to regular physical and verbal disputes between her parents. She was often drawn into these disputes and, while she tried to keep herself out of them by hiding in her room, she was often the lightning rod for both parents' anger and frustration after they finished arguing with each other. In order to escape this she ran away from home on six different occasions, living with friends or on the street each time. While dealing with this household chaos, Amy also had to deal with several psychological and emotional issues. She self-diagnosed herself as depressive and tried to deal with this in different ways: she self-medicated with alcohol or harder street drugs, like cocaine. When that did not work, she began to cut herself, noting that she just wanted to "numb the pain on the inside".

However, when reflecting on the long-term impact of her unsettled childhood and adolescent years, Amy noted that she has learned to persevere through adverse experiences. She explained that her tumultuous childhood and adolescent years taught her the importance of finding the "strength to get by each day", and, more importantly, to believe that there is something better in her future if she pushes through the negative life experiences.

Additionally, Amy's construction of *PERSEVERANCE* provided an example of a construction that is internally motivated. Her realization that she needed to find the strength to get by each day was one that was driven by a personal motivation to keep her "head up" and look toward the future.

While Amy's *PERSEVERANCE* came from an internal motivation, Addie's *PERSEVERANCE* was driven by a more overt motivation to prove herself to her family and peers. Addie, an 18-year old female who self-identified as White, was born several months premature into an abusive family. Her father tried to kill her mother during the delivery because he believed that he was not Addie's biological father. He tried to suffocate her mother using the oxygen cord. Addie claimed that she was born premature because of the stress that her mother went through during one of the beatings her mother received from her husband. Because of her underdeveloped heart and lungs Addie had to live through several medical emergencies, including two heart attacks and periods where she had to use an oxygen tank for several months at a time. After her parent's separation, Addie's mother ended up going to jail for two and a half years for welfare fraud. During her mother's jail time Addie and her younger brother were sent to live with their biological father. During that year and a half they were repeatedly exposed to physical and verbal abuse from their father. They also witnessed their father threaten to kill their stepmother. When Addie finally took control and told her school about the abuse, she was sent to foster care and cycled through several foster homes until her mother was released from prison.

Through these experiences Addie expressed the frustration of being held down by her family. She felt like her life was shaped by the decisions—good or bad—of her parents, and she had very little control in determining her past. Yet, she explained that she chose to

persevere through this adversity because she wanted to prove to her family that she could achieve something in her life, despite what they put her through.

...as of right now I work and go to school. On the track I'm headed to be successful starting with graduating this June and continuing onto college. I struggle with school just like everyone else but I understand what I have to do if I want to finish and be successful and I plan to do whatever it takes to show everyone that I can do it. I can make it through everything and still land on top of my game.

Addie explained that her schooling suffered because of the experiences she had had with her family. Moreover, her family members, especially her father, derided her for not being successful in school and dropping out. These negative life experiences taught her to persevere through adversity so that she could succeed in school. Her construction of *PERSEVERANCE* was externally motivated; she wanted to make it through her schooling so that she could prove to her family that she could be successful, in spite of the fact that they believed she was a failure and dropout.

### **Preparation**

One of the less common, yet prominent, ways in which adolescents made meaning of negative life experiences was to understand how previous negative events had prepared them for future adversity. Six participants (see *Table 5*) described how prior negative life experiences had prepared them to face future adversity, either already experienced or yet to come. The talk of these adolescents was filled with some expression of frustration at not having any control or say in the negative life experiences they had originally experienced. They actively expressed the lack of self-agency in those situations and their expectation that individuals should be able to control what happens to them. When reflecting on the effect of the events they had experienced, these 6 participants came to the conclusion that past

experiences had given them the opportunity to learn how to deal with negative life experiences, preparing them for future adversity.

Additionally, the six participants talk reflected two different aspects of the *PREPARATION* theme. Two participants explained how negative life events had prepared them for *specific* future experiences; they described how previous negative experiences had helped steel them to the effect of a specific event that had occurred in the recent past. Four other participants referred to the more *general* sense of *PREPARATION*. They explained how the accumulation of negative life experiences had prepared them for whatever adversity they had to face in the future. They did not identify a single event or occurrence for which they were more prepared but rather a general sense of preparedness. Below, I present one example of each construction of this theme of *PREPARATION*.

Holly, a 17-year old female who self-identified as White, described severe trauma and adversity throughout her life. She was separated from her mother when she was a child because her father claimed that her mother was a drug addict, incapable of caring for a child. This was followed by several years of foster care and legal troubles when her mother tried to take Holly away from a foster home where her foster siblings bullied her. However, this was only part of the negative life experiences that Holly narrated. As a freshman in high school she was on an overnight trip with her boyfriend's family. During this trip her boyfriend's uncle touched her inappropriately. She never told anyone about this incident (until recently) and had to live with the trauma of seeing him intermittently. However, Holly explained that the traumatic experience of being sexually abused, and having to see her boyfriend's uncle intermittently after the experience, prepared her for future adversity. A few years later a friend raped her. Her previous experience with sexual abuse prepared her to stand up for herself in this instance. She reported him to the police and pressed charges.

If that [first incident with boyfriend's uncle] never happened I would have never been able to stand up for myself [after being raped] because when I was touched I never did anything because I was scared. I should have because [my boyfriend's uncle] was released from jail and I actually saw him the other day and I freaked out and...I don't know...it made me stand up for myself and actually call the cops and tell them [about the rape] instead of holding it in.

Holly provided an example of how a past event prepared her to deal with a *specific* future one. Other participants described how previous adversity prepared them for the *general* adversity that was yet to come. Ingrid, a 19-year old girl who self-identified as White, described a life that was dominated by her medical condition and the drugs that she took for this. She explained that she was born with severe asthma and allergies. She was given steroids to treat this and for most of her childhood this drug use was monitored and regulated. However, during high school she experienced a level of independence that allowed her to experiment with her drugs. She overdosed on her steroids, became very angry with the world around her, and started picking fights with peers. This led to rehabilitation where she was introduced to new drugs for her diagnosed bipolar disorder and ADHD. She ended up abusing these drugs as well, taking a month's ration in 3 days. When she could not get more prescription drugs she moved to self-medication, using alcohol and cocaine. However, when asked about the impact of her health condition on her life she mentioned the following:

...it started off being a negative impact on me, because it took away a lot of my childhood. I mean, I couldn't even go trick-or-treating, like my siblings could. My dad, or my mom would usually take me home and then the other parent would bring my siblings around the neighborhood. I would get two houses up the street, and I would have to go home, because I couldn't breathe. My siblings supported me. They really tried taking care of me, but I

think that me being sick was a negative impact on my childhood, but as I started getting older, I realized how much stronger of a person I was for it. I am now ready for whatever happens.

She described how her reasoning changed over time. Through most of her life she viewed her illnesses as a burden, as something that was holding her back. But her experiences with the resulting drug abuse and rehabilitation left her feeling like she was a stronger person. She went on to describe how her experiences with her illness made her feel ready for any future complications that she would experience.

### **Confluence of two processes: Internalization and redefinition**

In trying to understand the relationship between *how* and *why* the adolescents were using the six different meaning-making themes described above, I noticed trends in their talk that suggested two different processes (see *Table 5*). The most common way of understanding the meaning of negative life experiences was to first explain the experience. Participants often followed this with an explanation of why the experience had had an adverse effect on their life when it occurred and/or an adverse impact over time. Next, participants attempted to place the experience within the scope of their life. They focused on what had changed in their life because of a negative life experience and their talk reflected an attempt to explain how they had chosen to deal with those changes. Two types of meaning-making processes could categorize these explanations: *INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION*. In *Figure 4* I present an illustration of the two different meaning-making processes, their individual components, and the overlap between processes.

		REDEFINITION	
		YES	NO
INTERNALIZATION	YES	Optimism	Identification
	NO	Betterment	Self-Reliance Perseverance Preparation

Figure 4. Grid of *INTERNALIZATION* versus *REDEFINITION* meaning-making processes used by the students (n=36) in this study

The *INTERNALIZATION* process illustrated in *Figure 4* is a representation of how well youth were able to internalize each of the six different meaning-making themes into their schema, into their understanding of themselves and their ecological systems. The process of *INTERNALIZATION* was not identified because youth described a specific meaning-making theme as being internalized or understood in the scope of their schema. Rather the way the youth used the meaning-making theme in explaining the effect of an experience on their lives demonstrated a sense of *INTERNALIZATION*. In other words, the meaning-making themes that were internalized by youth were ones where they described an experience as being part of themselves or part of their personality. These themes were not described, as external processes, like *BETTERMENT*, or skills, like *SELF-RELLANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION*. Rather, the talk of youth who used the *IDENTITY* meaning-making theme demonstrated their perspective that negative life

experiences were part of who they were; they described these experiences as an integral part of their *IDENTITY* and their sense of self. Similarly, the talk of adolescents for whom I coded the *OPTIMISM* theme reflected their belief that optimism was not a skill or tool that they could use when they needed to interpret a negative life experience. Rather, they described how they had learned to become optimistic because of past negative experiences and the fact that they had learned to see the silver lining in different experiences. *OPTIMISM* was described as more of a personality characteristic that had been internalized rather than a strategy that the youth could use.

The *REDEFINITION* process illustrated in *Figure 4* follows a similar structure as the *INTERNALIZATION* process. *REDEFINITION* indicates whether or not the participant redefined, changed, the meaning of a negative life experience(s) in the process of constructing a particular meaning-making theme. For example, in the talk of the youth for whom I coded the *OPTIMISM* and *BETTERMENT* themes, participants distinctly described how they had come to see past negative life experiences as being positive for them. They actively redefined negative life experiences as being beneficial. This did not occur for all six meaning-making themes. However, in the talk of the youth for whom I coded the themes of *IDENTITY*, *SELF-RELIANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION*, the participants did not actively describe how they had changed the meaning of past experiences, or how the meaning of past experiences had changed for them. In some cases, for example in the case of the *IDENTITY* theme, the youth did attribute more positive outcomes to their past negative experiences. However, they did not actively change the meaning of those past experiences from being negative to being positive. This *REDEFINITION* from negative to positive seemed critical to how youth constructed the *OPTIMISM* and *BETTERMENT* themes. In the process of explaining the effect of negative



life experiences using these two themes, participants explained why the past experience was negative for them before describing how the same experience was now positive, having a beneficial impact on their life.

These two meaning-making processes—*INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION*—can be thought of as working simultaneously during the construction of each of the six meaning-making themes. As illustrated in *Figure 4*, this allows us to think of these processes as overlapping on a 2x2 grid that describes whether or not each of the processes was used by the youth in this study in the construction of each of the 6 meaning-making themes. In the talk of the youth for whom I coded the theme of *OPTIMISM*, participants displayed the fact that they had internalized the meaning of past negative life experiences and were able to redefine the effect of these events from being negative to being positive. Similarly, for the theme of *IDENTITY*, participants displayed the process of *INTERNALIZATION*, but not *REDEFINITION*. *BETTERMENT* was defined by a *REDEFINITION* of the meaning of negative life events but not an *INTERNALIZATION* of the experiences into their sense of self. Lastly, neither the process of *REDEFINITION* nor *INTERNALIZATION* was used when constructing the meaning-making themes of *SELF-RELLANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION*. They were described primarily as skills that the youth had learned to use when necessary to deal with inevitable negative life experiences.

### **RQ3: Discourses on the Loss of a Biological Parent**

As described in the *Study Design & Methodology* chapter, *RQ3* focused on the parent-child relationship, especially in cases where the participants explained that losing a biological parent had a negative impact on their life. Indeed, one of the most frequently reported negative life experiences was that of losing a biological parent through divorce,

abandonment, or other reason (see the first row of *Table 4*). Eighty-four percent of the participants in the study—32 of 38 participants—reported that losing a biological parent had an adverse impact on their life. I present the frequency of the different types of loss in *Table 7*. Twenty-four of the 38 participants reported that their biological parents separated or got a divorce. Five felt that their mothers abandoned them while 10 felt abandoned by their fathers. Eleven students reported other reasons for losing their biological parent, like death, parental incarceration, or being sent to foster care because of parental drug use. Of course, some of the participants reported multiple forms of loss of their biological parents. And some adolescents reported the return of their parents. For example, two of the adolescents who were separated from their parents by child services due to parental illicit drug use were eventually reunited with their biological parents.

*Table 7.* Number and percent of participants (n=38) who reported the different forms of loss of a biological parent

<b>Reason for loss of biological parent</b>	<b># of participants</b>	<b>% of participants</b>
Separation or divorce	24	63
Abandoned by biological mother	5	13
Abandoned by biological father	10	26
Other (e.g.: sent to foster care, death, incarceration)	11	29

In isolating direct and indirect references of the loss of a biological parent as a discursive object, the FDA analysis revealed that participants constructed this relationship, or the lack thereof, using three types of discourses—family unity, parental roles, and disownment. I was unable to find any marked trends in the use of these discourses by gender. In the analysis, none of the discourses resonated as being used more often by the males or the females in the sample.

Over the next few pages I detail the content and use of these discourses. I present examples from participants to better describe the use of the different discourses and how it varied among the students. In *Table 8* I offer a brief overview of the exemplars I use to explain each of the three discourses. I describe these exemplars along the five-step process for an FDA that I described in the *Study Design & Methodology* chapter.

Table 8. Description of FDA steps for five example participants

#	Step		Zach	Diana	Nate	Amy	Jeremy
1	Discursive construction	Object	Lost biological father to parental divorce	Lost biological father to parental divorce	Separated from biological mother by child protective services	Biological father incarcerated and abandoned by biological mother	Abandoned by biological father
		Construction	Contrasts family's togetherness, despite constant moving, before the divorce to the separation and chaos after the divorce	Parents divorced and father left after several years of domestic arguments	Sexually abused by biological mother and while separated from her, still had to see her once a week	Parents argued and fought when they were together, resulting in Amy running away and being sent to foster care	Biological father left and returned, but always had alcohol-abuse issues
2	Discourse		Family unity	Family unity	Parental roles	Parental roles	Disownment
3	Positioning		Positions himself as being abandoned and his parents as being responsible for his future delinquency	Positions herself as a victim in an uncontrollable situation	Positions his mother as leaving a hole in her expected role, and his father as being both "father and mother"	Positions herself as a victim and her foster mother as filling a gap of parental nurturing	Positions father as "bum" and self as "man of the house"
4	Practice		Absolve self of responsibility for behavioral issues and look for a "family" outside his home	Absolves self of responsibility for dropping out of school	Explains why he feels guilty for letting down his father through his delinquency and problem behavior	Absolves self of responsibility for delinquent behavior, but also defines when self had to re-adopt ownership for behavior	Explains why he broke the law to earn a living for his family
5	Subjectivity		Self-reliance: dependence on himself for all future decisions and actions	Optimism: learned to look at negative life experiences from a positive perspective and become a positive person	Perseverance: get through negative life experiences so he can live up to father's expectations	Perseverance: success will come if she succeeds in staying away from drugs, alcohol, and cutting	Steeling: prepared him for other negative life experiences

**Family unity: The cases of Zach and Diana**

The loss of a biological parent was often constructed in terms of what it meant for family unity and togetherness. This was especially common among participants who had lost a biological parent to divorce/separation (see first row of *Table 7*). While this discourse was not exclusive to the 24 youth who described losing their biological parent to divorce/separation, this type of loss was most frequently explained using this type of discourse. These participants relied on the time that they had with their biological parent as a contrast to what their life was like once they lost that parent to divorce or separation. Since most of these youth had several “good years” with their parents, the loss of a biological parent to divorce/separation was constructed as a disruption of the family system. They contrasted the togetherness and unity that existed before the divorce/separation to what their situation was like after to describe how they were affected by this experience. Zach was one participant who used this construction to describe the loss of his biological father to divorce. We were first introduced to Zach in the *SELF-RELLANCE* section above.

**Discursive construction.** Zach drew on the comparison of his family before and after his parents’ divorce. Zach’s biological parents moved through several cities in an attempt to establish a successful donut shop. While Zach expressed frustration at the constant moves and financial troubles that his family faced, he argued that he lived in a caring home. He felt like his parents tried their best to keep the family’s financial troubles under control and he was happy that his family stayed together through all their moves. This is why his biological parent’s separation and ultimate divorce was jarring for Zach. The divorce, which came after his mother’s extra-marital affair, entailed an end to his perception of “the perfect family”. He explained that though his childhood was far from perfect he was always happy to have his family together. His biological parents’ divorce meant his family

now had to split up. When his mother moved back to the Northeast, Zach joined her, while his brothers ended up living with their biological father in the Southwest. Zach explained that this split in the family had a deep and long-lasting effect.

One day I was looking through my brother's pictures of our family. I looked at a group family picture with everybody smiling and wicked happy. I broke down in tears, hardcore, crying to myself in a hallway closet where my brother kept his belongings. I felt like I didn't exist or what I did didn't matter no more.

Zach contrasted the "smiling and wicked happy" state of his family when they were together to the upheaval that took place when his parents divorced. Indeed, Zach defined himself by the fact that his family was "together." His parent's divorce not only affected him physically by splitting up the family unit but also had an emotional impact on him. Zach explained that he did not know who he was without his family being together; he felt like he "didn't exist."

**Discourse.** Zach drew on a discourse of family unity to explain why his parent's divorce had a negative effect on him. He believed that "normal" families are families that stay together, a belief that he created off of the pre-divorce experience he had with his family.

My family was normal: mom and dad and no step-dad, no step-mom. I had real brothers and real sisters. We were all a happy family, just all together. When that broke up, it made me look at things different like, "Oh, all right." What I thought was supposed to be my family was not there anymore, so who am I?...I just kept sobbing and thought shit wasn't real. My family is supposed to be together forever. How the fuck did all this come about? My family is for sure broken up and the good and perfect family we were once is now GONE.

He drew on a construction of family unity that he perceived to be “normal”. For Zach, his family was “perfect” because they were together. He believed that the biological family unit should have a specific structure; even if the family had to move and change locations, they should always do this together and the parents should “stay together.” For Zach, a family is made up of biologically related individuals, “no step-dad, no step-mom” who are “happy” because they “always remain together.” He was troubled and challenged when his family did not fit this mold. He compared his family, and the unity before the divorce, to the separation after the divorce to express why he believed his parents’ divorce had a negative effect on him. As Zach expressed: “My family is supposed to be together forever”.

**Positioning.** In construing this discourse Zach was able to set a threshold of expectation for family unity. When his family failed to meet this threshold he positioned himself as someone who was abandoned by his family; because his family was not together anymore, he viewed himself as family-less. This allowed him to look for a family outside of his biological parents and siblings, and partake in activities that would prove to this outside family that he was a worthwhile family member that should not be abandoned.

Everything from there [after the divorce] completely changed; I didn’t care about what I did, who I was or who I was around. I did things sometimes to show my friend’s that I was down and made sure I did things so they wouldn’t have left me like my family did and to prove to them that I was useful. It was an everyday thing for about 2 years, doing ecstasy pills and doing what people on street called DIRT. Basically I was always up to no good. Stayed up all day and all night to smoke, drink, and whatever crimes I could commit I would’ve. I did all that to prove to them and myself I guess at the time that they needed me around.

Zach explained that the two year’s after his parent’s divorce was shaped by experimentation and delinquency, all with the aim of finding a different family and making sure this family

did not see him as “useless.” He drew on his position as someone who has been abandoned by his family to explain that his delinquent behavior after the divorce served the purpose of him finding a new family. It allowed him to position his parents as being the ones to blame for his delinquent behavior after the divorce.

**Practice.** The use of the family unity discourse, and the positioning that Zach navigated, allowed him certain avenues and opportunities to negotiate the effect of this negative life experience. For Zach, this construction process opened up opportunities to blame his family’s lack of togetherness for his behavioral issues. He was able to absolve himself of blame for the delinquency, drug use, alcohol use, and academic failure that followed in the two years after his biological parents’ divorce. Moreover, this construction allowed Zach to blame his parents for these behavioral, social, and academic issues. He traced all the issues he had after the divorce to the fact that his family was no longer together. By positioning himself as being not only abandoned but also in search for a new family, he was able to explain his post-divorce issues as a process of finding and belonging to a new family.

**Subjectivity.** Subsequently, this discourse and positioning allowed Zach to draw on the meaning-making theme of *SELF-RELIANCE* to explain his understanding of how the loss of his biological father affected him. Because he positioned himself as someone who was abandoned and positioned his family (especially his parents) as responsible for his delinquency, Zach realized that he could no longer depend on his biological parents for care and support, he needed to rely more on himself. In shutting down opportunities to rely on his family for positive outcomes, he had to be more self-reliant.

Then I started to realize that nobody’s going to always be there for you; not your girl, your brothers, sisters, and parents. NOBODY but yourself is going



be there for you. I took and looked at life from a different perspective from there on.

This *SELF-RELLANCE* defined Zach's subjective experience. In describing this *SELF-RELLANCE* he discussed how he moved out of his home and started living with an older cousin who gave him a job as a mechanic. He also discussed how he decided to come back and finish his high school diploma because he realized he could not rely on his family; he had to fend for himself.

Zach was not the only case that used this construction; eight other participants used a similar construction when talking about the loss of their biological parents to divorce or separation. These participants drew on the discourse of family unity to describe *why* they had been negatively affected by their biological parents' divorce and/or separation. Their talk of the loss of their biological parent was held together by expectations like "always having that love and support [of parents]" (Amy) and the fact that "families are supposed to be close" (Allie). These expectations and past experiences were contrasted with the situation of their family after the divorce or separation. Like Zach, these participants also felt that the juxtaposition of togetherness to the post-divorce/separation disunity of their family had a substantial negative effect on their life. They talked about how they felt "like other people are so close to their siblings and family" (Allie) and that they "miss[ed] the connection that [they] used to have when [their families] were together. It was just like so close, like, very close" (Silvia). While the discourse these participants drew on were very similar, the actions and positions this discourse offered them, differed. Diana provided an example of a different use of a very similar discourse of family unity.

**Discursive construction.** As I detailed above (in the section on *OPTIMISM*) Diana described growing up in a family that had two very different personas. Outside the home,

her biological parents were seen as the ideal couple. However, their home life was peppered with domestic arguments.

There was never really a part of growing up where I can't remember my mom and dad fighting. This was basically the cause of my parent's breakup. Even though most of my family saw my mom and dad as "the perfect relationship" because we had everything materialistically, they never saw what happened behind closed doors.

The juxtaposition of the two situations was hard on Diana. She mentioned having a hard time trying to resolve this internal and external persona of her parents' marriage. However, she did mention that she liked that her parents were together because she had both her parents around when she needed them and she was able to talk to both of them and look for care and advice from both of them when she had an issue. When Diana was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade her parents finally split up. While Diana did note that this split was probably good for her parents, she explained that it still had a "drastic" effect on her.

I grew up from being a baby to about 13 having [dad] and my mom both around consistently and then it was a drastic change. I ended up moving with my mom and my brothers and sister ended up staying with my dad.

Diana insisted that though there were some problems in her parents' marriage, she wanted them to stay together.

**Discourse.** Diana explained that being separated from her dad and her siblings was hard because she was used to "always [growing] up with [her parents and siblings] being together." Her parent's divorce threatened the unity of her family and the togetherness that she saw as an integral part of family life. Diana compared the situation of her family before the divorce to the disunity after the divorce and came to the conclusion that her family was meant to stay together. She did not explain why she believed that they should stay together,

aside from the fact that that was the status quo and what she was comfortable with.

Nonetheless, she drew on a discourse of family unity to express why she believed she was affected by her parents' divorce. She was used to her family always being together and their divorce disrupted this unity.

**Positioning.** This construction of family unity, or the lack thereof after her parent's divorce, allowed Diana to position herself as a victim in the situation. She described how she was overwhelmed with the divorce, and her reaction to these emotions.

All the feelings from my...parents splitting up, I just gave up on school in 7th grade. I didn't care about anything anymore. I started sleeping out a lot and even not coming home. I regret a lot of it now, but I was depressed about so many things that I just didn't want to be around anyone but my friends.

She described how she was so "overwhelmed" by the feelings she had after her parent's divorce that she did not want to deal with school or home. Positioning herself as a victim of an uncontrollable situation, especially one who had been overwhelmed by her feelings, allowed her to explain her sleeping at a friends' home and dropping out of school. However, Diana's talk did not present a convincing position for her parents. While she did describe her own position after the divorce, she did not describe how she viewed her parents. However, we can deduce that in positioning herself as a victim, she positioned her parents, or the act of the divorce, as the source of her victimization.

**Practice.** Similar to Zach, this construction allowed Diana to let go of some of the responsibility for her low academic performance and problem behaviors after her parent's divorce. Using this discourse and the subsequent positioning allowed Diana to absolve herself of the responsibility for failing classes at school and eventually dropping out. It opened up the possibility for Diana to represent the incidents after her parents' divorce as

the fall-out of a divorce rather than as actions for which she was responsible. Because she was “depressed” and “overwhelmed” with her parents’ divorce, Diana could explain her actions after the divorce as the actions of a victim.

**Subjectivity.** This construction allowed Diana to learn something from her experiences of dropping out of school and running away from home. Because she was a victim in this situation she gave up responsibility for her subsequent behavior. This also meant that she did not need to feel threatened by the fact that she had to take responsibility for her actions. She was able to see these experiences as events from which to learn.

All the negative things that were bringing me down, like sleeping out and not going to school made me feel like I wasn’t going to make it anywhere. I had my mom constantly breathing down my neck and I didn’t like the feeling. I knew I had to change my ways and become a strong and positive person.

Indeed, she described the *OPTIMISM* she learned through these experiences. Framing herself as a victim who was overwhelmed by her situation allowed Diana the room to learn to be a “strong and positive person”. She described how she started to become more “positive about [her] life and studies” once she realized that her parent’s divorce had been “bringing [her] down.”

### **Parental Roles: The cases of Nate and Amy**

Another common way in which to construct the loss of a biological parent was to reference specific roles and expectations of the biological mother and biological father. Thirteen participants made use of this type of construction, especially students who reported being abandoned by their biological parent or being separated from them because of legal reasons. These students compared their relationship with their parents, or lack thereof, to a norm of what they expected from biological parents. They drew on a norm of what roles parents should fulfill and the responsibilities of those roles. Because they were abandoned by

their parents or separated from them because of legal reasons, they felt that their biological parents were not present to fulfill these expectations and satisfy the responsibilities of their role. This is how these adolescents explained *why* they were negatively affected by the loss of their biological parent. Over the next few pages I provide two examples of this construction: one from a student who was legally separated from his mother and another from a young woman who was abandoned by her father.

**Discursive construction.** Nate, an 18-year old male who self-identified as White, was separated from his biological mother by child protective services. His mother sexually abused him and his sister for the first six years of his life. Nate did not remember any of the experiences from these first six years and though he was in therapy from age 6 to age 17, he was unable to recall what his mother actually did to him. Nate was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and he got extremely sad and depressed every time he has to try and recall what his mother did. However, his sister did have a recollection of those events and she was the one who finally told their biological father about what was happening. Nate's father separated from Nate's mother (they divorced a year later) and filed for sole custody of both children. However, child protective services allowed Nate's biological mom to retain visitation rights with the children. Until he turned 18, Nate was forced to meet with his biological mother for 8 hours every week. Though these visits were supervised, by Nate's grandfather and/or a child protective services representative, Nate felt uncomfortable and uneasy. He was most disappointed by the fact that his mother always denied the sexual abuse charges and would not admit to the trauma that she put him and his sister through.

**Discourse.** In spending most of his school-going years without his biological mother, Nate missed having his biological mother in his life. He explained his belief that

both parents have specific roles that they should fill. Fathers are supposed to be strict and mothers are supposed to be nurturing.

I feel like my life would have been a whole bunch different if I had both my mom and dad around because the dads are the ones that are supposed to be the strict ones. They're supposed to set you in line because they're dads. They're supposed to be protective and the moms are supposed to be the nurturing and caring ones, you know what I'm saying? Not to single out and make it like dad's are bad, dads are mean, but dads are supposed to be the stern ones. Not saying that moms can't be stern, but it will be kind of weird to have a stern mom.

Nate's talk reflected his belief that fathers are supposed to be "strict" and "protective" while mothers are meant to be "nurturing." He was not clear about how his beliefs about these roles emerged; however, he was clear that the two biological parents have very different roles in the lives of children. He drew on a norm of parental roles to describe why he was affected by the loss of his biological mother.

**Positioning.** In relying on this discourse, Nate was able to contrast his expectation of his biological mother with the monitored and legally mandated relationship he had with her. He juxtaposed the "nurturing" role he expected of her with the abuse he experienced from her. In so doing, Nate described a hole in the role that his mother was supposed to fill. Constructing this position for his biological mother, as someone who was not able to fill her role, allowed Nate to position his biological father as "father and the mother." He positioned his biological father as someone who had the strict and protective role qualifiers expected of a father but also the nurturance expected of a mother.

He's been the father and the mother basically. It's hard to explain though, you know what I'm saying. He's been the strict parent that needs to be in charge, but he's also that fun parent that you love to be around. He's stern

when he needs to be, fun when he needs to be. He cares about his kids and he's always been just that one person to go to.

He described how his father was able to fill the role left by his mother. His father took care of the family, but was also a confidante and a friend.

**Practice.** By positioning his father as filling the gap left by his biological mother, Nate was able to explain why he felt guilty that he was not able to meet his father's expectations.

Lately he's been pretty disappointed with me because of the choices I made, flunking in high school, the vandalism and the counterfeit money and repeating grades. It clearly upset him, getting sent to the principal's office for skipping most of the time.

Nate had several behavior and social issues during high school. He was caught vandalizing the school bathroom while in the public high school and ended up failing several classes because he started to skip school. Even when he dropped out of school and moved to the charter school he still demonstrated a few problem behaviors. On one occasion he was turned into school staff for knowingly trying to use counterfeit money to buy merchandise at a local store. Through these experiences he felt like he had let down his biological father. Because he had positioned his father as not just the authoritarian paternal figure but also the nurturing maternal figure, he was able to explain why he felt the guilt of letting him down. Nate explained that his father went above and beyond his fatherly role. Because of this, Nate felt especially guilty for not living up to his father's standards.

**Subjectivity.** This construction of the loss of his biological mother, and the role his father filled, allowed Nate to make meaning of this negative life experience in the scope of his life. Nate explained that he learned that he has to *PERSEVERE* through the issues he

had—vandalism, using counterfeit money, failing classes, dropping out of school—so that he could live up to his father’s expectations.

He’s [father] showed me a lot actually. He’s never given up on me even after the vandalism and the counterfeit as I mentioned. He’s always seen the good in me. You think a father would give up, “Oh, he’s just going to end up in jail.” No, he just wants me to do good and he’s supported most of my decisions so far. He’s impacted me by just letting me know he’s there for me... Since I came [to this charter school] though, our relationship has gotten better because I finally pulled myself together and started doing my work again and I’m finally graduating.

Nate came to realize that he needed to persevere through his own issues and problems so that he could live up to his father’s expectations and maintain the relationship he still had with his father. He was afraid of losing this relationship if he got into any more trouble and so realized that he needed to *PERSEVERE* through any temptations to slack off in school or break the law.

Nate provided one illustrations of how some adolescents used their construction of parental roles to position themselves and their parents, leveraging specific expectations and responsibilities. The other participants who used this construction also drew on the discourse of parental roles to describe *why* they had been negatively affected by the loss of their biological parent. These participants’ talk was held together by references that described the roles and expectations they had of biological fathers and mothers. For example: “I didn’t have a father, you know, a father’s supposed to be the one to throw the ball around with” (Chris), or “...moms are supposed to be your friend” (David). Like Nate, these participants juxtaposed what they expected from their parents, the roles they believed their parents should fill, with the loss of their biological parent. However, participants drew on different types of roles and expectations in constructing this comparison. This affected what positions



they could accommodate and how they could navigate what they learned from these experiences. Amy provided a different example of a similar discourse to Nate's.

**Discursive construction.** Amy described two forms of loss: her biological father was incarcerated on drug charges and her biological mother abandoned her emotionally and started to use illicit drugs. Amy described a very tentative relationship with her biological father as a child. Her father was in and out of jail through most of her early childhood for small acts of robbery and theft. When Amy was in elementary school, her father was incarcerated with charges of intending to distribute cocaine. He returned when Amy was in high school. However, Amy explained that she did not have a very close relationship with her father. In fact, the periods that he was at home were characterized by verbal and physical abuse. She was witness to regular physical and verbal disputes between her parents, and was often drawn into these domestic disputes. Additionally, Amy believed that she lost her biological mother as well. Her mother dealt with mental health issues for most of her adult life. She was on prescription medications, used street drugs intermittently, and often refused to take care of her children. When Amy was in middle school her biological mother's street drug use became more severe and regular; she began to completely neglect Amy and her siblings.

Amy explained that this loss and abandonment by her biological parents and the ensuing chaos in her home meant that she tried to distance herself from her home life as much as possible. She ended up running away from home on six occasions. She was either arrested or returned every time because she had no money for food & basic necessities. Eventually, Amy was able to convince a judge that her family situation was not appropriate for her. He allowed her to live with a foster mother of her choosing. Amy chose to live with the family of one of her closest friends. This was a turning point in her life because, as Amy

described, she grew very close to her foster mother. Her foster mother had had a very similar childhood to Amy and so was able to not only empathize but also offer appropriate support and care.

**Discourse.** In explaining *why* the loss of both biological parents had a negative impact on her life, Amy used the discourse of parental roles and expectations. Unlike Nate, Amy did not describe distinctly different roles for each biological parent, however she described a common set of expected roles: “You know, just dinner every single night at the table; parents, my sister, my dad, my mother bringing you to Six Flags or something. Always having that love and support when you get home, not screaming and arguing.” Amy had a preconception of the kinds of activities in which a family should partake—going to a theme park and having regular dinners together—and the kinds of roles family members should fulfill. She believed that parents should love and support family members, with a minimum of fights and disagreements. However, her family did not fit this norm. The incarceration and abandonment of her parents meant that they did not meet the roles she expected biological parents to fill. They were not able to give her the love or support that she believed families should provide.

**Positioning.** Relying on this construction of family roles and expectations allowed Amy to juxtapose her actual family chaos to her expectation about families, and the relationship she had with her foster mother. This allowed her to position herself as a victim of her family situation. During her middle and high school years Amy dealt with several instances of alcohol and drug abuse. She also started cutting herself. As Amy explained:

I was just sick [of my home situation]. Every single time I got that feeling I was telling you about. That’s just what I [started cutting]. When I felt like I was all bottled up and I was going to explode, that’s what I [cut myself].

She blamed her home situation for her experimenting with cutting, illicit drugs, and alcohol. Additionally, the use of this discourse allowed Amy to position her foster mother as filling the gap that was left by her biological parents. When Amy finally moved in with her foster mother, she began to get the kind of love and support she believed she deserved from her biological parents.

I guess, I just moved in with my foster mom and that gave me the leniency, and gave me the freedom, and gave me the right to make my own decisions, and was there for me and she gave me what I needed to be able to mature, and grow, and prosper and all that. Eventually she taught me right from wrong. She told me what I should and what I shouldn't be doing, and she found me a good school and just little by little.

This allowed her to position her foster mother as filling the gap, the gap in her expectations of her biological parents, which is filled by this pseudo-mother.

**Practice.** Like several of the other youth who positioned themselves as victims, this construction allowed Amy to move the responsibility for her delinquency, substance abuse, and self-harm behavior to her biological parents. Because she relied on a norm of a loving and supportive family and juxtaposed her situation to this norm, she was able to transfer some of the blame for her behavior onto her family situation. Moreover, in positioning her foster mother as filling the gap left by her biological parents, Amy was able to define a discrete time point after which she was responsible for her actions. Before her foster mother fulfilled the role of a biological parent, Amy was able to transfer blame to her family situation. But in defining her foster mother in the role of a pseudo-parent, Amy now had the nurturance and care that she expected from her biological parents. This meant that she could no longer absolve herself of the blame over her actions.

**Subjectivity.** This discourse and positioning allowed Amy to make meaning of the loss of both her biological parents in the context of her life. Because they were not present to fulfill the kind of role that she believed they should have fulfilled, Amy realized that she could not rely on them. However, her positioning of her foster mother opened Amy up to the possibility of learning from her foster mother's experience.

That girl's been through so much in her life. It's not even...it's ridiculous. Her family's been through so much...it just makes me realize, "Wow, if I'm going to get anywhere!" She is a good example. I honestly don't know how I can do it. I haven't put together in my own head yet. I would never go back to that. Like don't get me wrong, I still party. But I'm not a drug addict. I'm not going to be an alcoholic. I'm not going to be abusive [like my parents]. I'm not going to cut. I'm not going to do any of that shit.

Amy described how the experiences that her foster mother had, and the fact that she had gotten "somewhere" in life, made her foster mother a "good example" for how Amy could shape her life. This learning would not be possible if Amy had not positioned her foster mother as fulfilling the role of a biological parent, a role that is characterized by love and support according to Amy. And in learning from her foster mother's experiences Amy constructed the idea of *PERSEVERANCE*. She realized that in order to succeed she had to stay away from drugs, alcohol, and cutting. She also had to stay away from becoming abusive like her parents.

### **Disownment: The case of Jeremy**

While not as common as the two other discourses described above, there was a third construction that was prominent in the talk of 5 of the participants in this study. These students constructed a discourse of disownment. All 5 participants were abandoned by their biological parents. In talking about this kind of loss, they noted that they did not think of

their biological parent/s as their actual parent any longer. They disowned their parents for having abandoned them. These youth referred to their relationship with their biological parent as a relationship on which they had “given up” (Brenda). They also talked about how they “no longer want[ed] to see” (Sarah) their biological parent/s. These youth felt that the biological parent who had abandoned them had “let [them] down” (Brenda) because he/she was “never around” (Sarah). In using this construction, these adolescents managed to negotiate a new meaning for their relationship with their biological parent by navigating the power dynamics between themselves and their biological parent. Jeremy, an 18-year old male who self-identified as White, provided one example of the use of this discourse and how his navigation of this discourse changed the power dynamics in his relationship with his father.

**Discursive construction.** Jeremy grew up with his biological mother and older sisters. His biological father left when Jeremy was four-years old. His father had severe alcohol abuse issues. Jeremy’s mother asked his father to sober up so that he could take care of the children. However, his father was not willing to give up alcohol; Jeremy believes he chose alcohol over his family, and left. Jeremy ended up spending most of his childhood without his biological father. However, he had a close relationship with his mother. He talked about his relationship with his mother as being one of “good friends,” who grew close when it was “just [him] and [him] mom.” However, Jeremy also acknowledged that there were things that “she doesn’t know,” things that he had to do to support the family because his mother was a “working...single mom.” Jeremy noted that because his father abandoned the family, all the financial responsibility fell on his mother. His family ended up facing several financial hurdles because they did not always have enough money to buy necessities and food.

**Discourse.** Jeremy's father came back into his life when Jeremy entered high school. However, Jeremy explained that his father still had severe issues with alcohol abuse and was arrested on several occasions. Moreover, his father was still not able to support the family financially. Instead, Jeremy's father would call Jeremy to come bail him out of jail or when he needed financial support. When asked to describe his relationship with his father at this moment in time, Jeremy provided the following description.

This is when my dad became not my dad anymore, just you know, a buddy of mine that came in and out. Because I've had friends all my life that would be like "Hey I'm out-a here man." And I'd be like "Where you going?" And they'd be like "I don't know, but you won't see me for a while." And they'd go and they'd travel and that's what my dad does except my dad's a bum and that's when I realized my dad wasn't my dad, where I just realized that he was always just going to be a friend of mine...like realizing I didn't have a father anymore, you know, I realized he was never going to be there.

In his talk, Jeremy used the discourse of disownment; he explained that his father acted like one of Jeremy's friends. He was not around when he was needed and it was impossible to say when he would be back. This is why Jeremy disowned his father and decided that his father was "not [his] dad anymore."

**Positioning.** Jeremy ended up disowning his father of the position of "dad" and reassigning him to the position of a "buddy" and a "bum." In positioning his father as a friend/bum Jeremy opened up the possibility to re-position his mother as well in their relationship. He explained that because his father was not there to help with the household finances, his mother had to bear the entire burden. Jeremy positioned her as the "single mom" who had trouble making ends meet for her family.

I was young and I didn't have a father. And then from then on, from 8 on I realized how my father was. He was never around when we needed. I mean if

he was a blue collar guy, working, doing something, I would definitely be in a different situation... You know, my mom, she's just been this single mom. It's not like we ever went broke or went poor. It makes me angry that she goes out and works every day and does not get anywhere. Things still get shut off you know. So, that's a [negative event] in my life.

Since his father was not around, the financial pressure of supporting the family fell on Jeremy's mother. However, she was not able to always provide for her children. This allowed Jeremy to position himself as "the man of the house." He believed that because his family had financial trouble he needed to help out and earn some money as well.

**Practice.** However, Jeremy turned to illegal means to earn a living: "when you got no money you got to make money and you do it any way you can. And that's the only trouble I've had. We were doing anything to get money in those days." In using this discourse and positioning, Jeremy was able to justify his behavior; he was able to justify breaking the law in order to make a living for his family. While he did not describe exactly how he broke the law, he did note that he did take up illegal means to support his family. However, he described this illegal behavior as a direct effect of his father being an absent "bum": "[our situation would be] Very, very different [if he was around]! I wouldn't have gotten into some of the stuff I gotten into before, getting into trouble and stuff." So the positioning allowed Jeremy to argue that he had little choice as the "man of the house" but to break the law and earn a living. Jeremy was also able to use this positioning to blame his absent biological father for his delinquency.

**Subjectivity.** The result of this discourse and positioning is that Jeremy is able to make meaning of the negative impact of being abandoned by his biological father by explaining how that experience prepared him for future negative experiences. He drew on the theme of *PREPARATION*. When asked about the effect of his father abandoning him

and having to break the law to earn some money for his family, Jeremy mentioned the following: "I grew up quick, you know, I was never immature about anything, tried to be responsible. I know when to do something and when not to do something." The experience helped him mature quickly and prepared him for future experiences. For example, he explained that he recently had to deal with having a child with his girlfriend. His mother was very disappointed and angry with him because she believed he was too young to be a father. However, because of how his father abandoned him, Jeremy felt like he was much better prepared to be a father himself.

The three discourses discussed above offer an illustration of how the participants in this study, who noted being adversely affected by the loss of a biological parent, made meaning of this experience. These discourses are related. For example, the use of the disownment discourse does entail some understanding of what parental roles should look like. This allowed the participant to argue that the biological parent did not meet those role expectations. However, compared to the meaning-making themes presented under *RQ2*, the discourse had little overlap between participants; there were only a handful of participants who made use of multiple discourses in explaining why the loss of a biological parent negatively affected them. It is also important to note that these discourses, and the descriptions, are a representation of the participants' use of language to explain their interpersonal interactions in relation to their biological parents. The discourses do not explain the *actual* behavior of the students. In other words, simply because Jeremy noted that he broke the law to earn a living for his family does not mean that this is the objective truth of why he broke the law. The discourses only give us a picture into how Jeremy has come to understand this event, and how he uses language to make meaning of it.



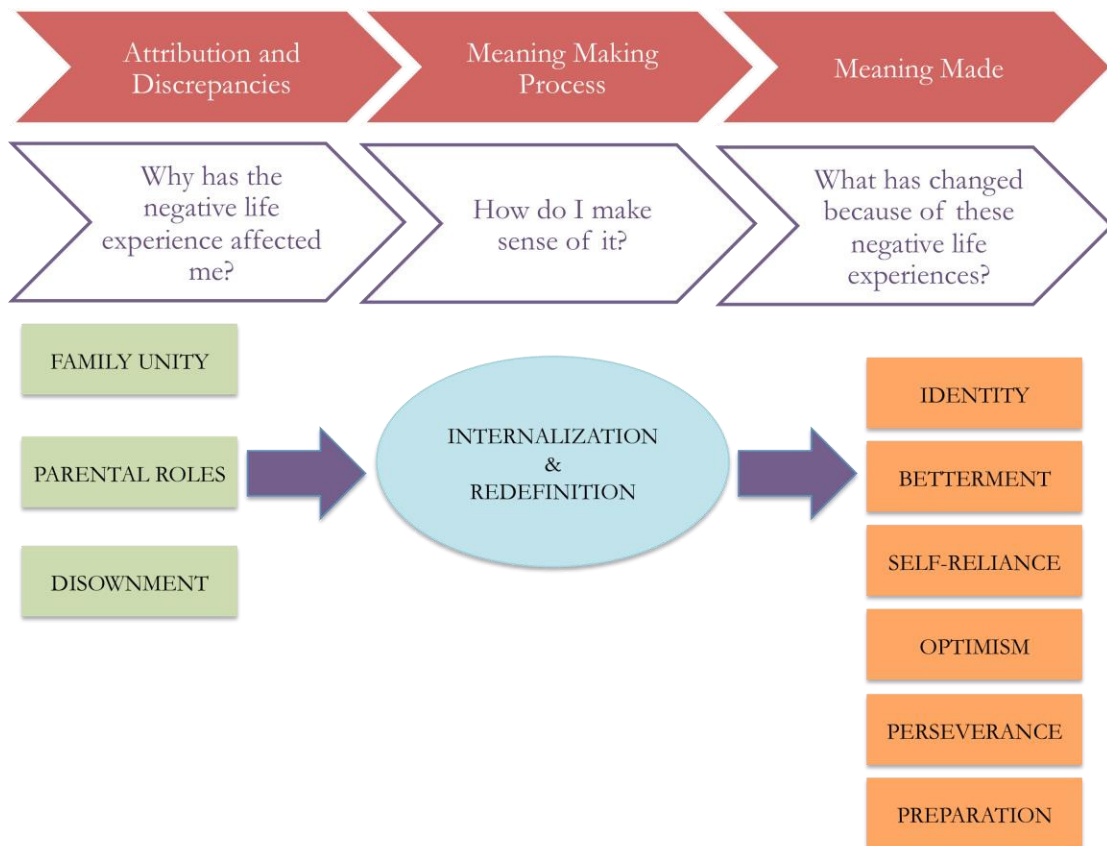
## Discussion

### Links to the Meaning-Making Framework

The first research question in this study was purely descriptive. It dealt with identifying what life experiences the 38 adolescents self-reported as having had a negative effect on their life. However the second and third research questions had an analytic lens. *RQ2* dealt with the way in which participants had come to understand the impact of self-reported negative life experiences in the trajectory of their lives. *RQ3* focused on the most frequent of these negative life experiences, losing a biological parent, exploring the discourses used by the adolescents. More critically, the findings from *RQ2* and *RQ3* were closely linked to the meaning-making framework I described in the latter half of the *Theoretical Foundation* chapter of this thesis. *Figure 5* illustrates the links between the findings from this study and the meaning-making framework.

In review, the meaning-making framework (Park & George, 2013; Park, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997) is a theoretically supported paradigm that explains the conscious and/or unconscious thought process that individuals go through after experiencing stress or adversity. According to this framework, from birth to early adulthood, we all develop a global meaning that covers our beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaning in the world. This global meaning is formed iteratively through experiences and challenges, primarily in childhood and adolescence. When faced with an experience that may challenge this global meaning, individuals embark on a process of attributing situational meaning to the event. If there is a discrepancy between the global and situational meaning, the individual experiences distress. Indeed, the larger the discrepancy the more distress we would expect in the individual. Based on this attribution and assessment of discrepancy, the individual consciously or unconsciously tries to make meaning of the discrepancy; this is the meaning-

making process. In this process the individual attempts to either change their understanding of the global meaning, the situational attribution of the event, or both. This meaning-making process results in the individual attaining a new meaning. If the individual is unable to resolve the discrepancy and establish new meaning, the individual continues to ruminate in the meaning-making process. This could result in pathological outcomes like depression.



*Figure 5.* Visual representation of meaning-making paradigm used by participants (n=36) in this study.

### **Why have I been affected?**

When asked to reflect on the impact of negative life experiences and how they fit into the trajectory of their lives, the majority of participants started by attempting to understand or explain why the negative life experience had affected them. As demonstrated

in the findings from *RQ3*, participants started to reflect on the impact of negative life events by trying to understand *why* they were adversely affected by the life experiences. In *Figure 5* this is reflected in the text-arrows and boxes that form the left third of the illustration.

In the case of losing a biological parent, the youth used one of three main discourses when trying to understand the *why*. Adolescents who had lost a biological parent to divorce or separation tried to understand why they were affected by this loss by using a discourse of family unity. They often had experience living in a home with both biological parents before the loss. Once they lost their biological parent to divorce or separation they juxtaposed their pre-divorce/separation family to the post-divorce/separation family, highlighting the destabilization of their family unity. They answered the *why* question by explaining that the togetherness and stability of their family had been disrupted by the divorce/separation.

Participants who lost a biological parent because of abandonment or for other reasons (like being separated by child protective services) used one of two other constructions. First, a majority of these participants drew on a socio-cultural norm of what roles are expected from biological parents. These adolescents compared their perception of the role that biological parents are expected to play to the role that their parents actually fulfilled, or failed to fulfill. They answered the *why* question by justifying that their biological parents had failed them, and the expected role, and so they had been negatively affected by the experience. Second, five of the participants in this study disowned their parents in order to answer the *why* question. Through multiple experiences of being let down by their biological parent, these adolescents decided to sever the parent-child relationship with their biological parent. They either changed this relationship to a peer/friend or completely cut off ties with their biological parent. In disowning their biological parent they answered the

*why* question by arguing that the intermittent communication with their parent, or lack thereof, was traumatic.

The *why* question that came through in the findings of this study mirror the (a) attribution of situational meaning and (b) assessment of discrepancy between global and situational meaning that are part of the meaning-making framework. This is reflected in the top-left red text-arrow in *Figure 5*. Participants in this study directly referred to a global meaning when assessing why they had been affected by the loss of a biological parent. Youth who used the family unity discourse had a global belief about the need for family unity and consistency that was built iteratively through the pre divorce/separation experiences they had had with their families. Their global meaning dictated that families needed to stay together, even if there were issues and disputes. When they lost their biological father or mother to divorce/separation, these youth assessed the situation; the meaning that they now found in their family life was one of disunity and disorganization. This highlighted a discrepancy between their global meaning about family unity and their situational meaning about family disunity. They described this discrepancy as being the reason for why they were affected by the loss of their biological parent.

Similarly, participants who used the parental roles or disownment discourse also drew on a global meaning when describing why they were affected by the loss of their biological parent. These youth had been emotionally or physically abandoned by their parents, or had been separated from their parents by the criminal justice system or child protective services. In describing why this loss affected them, they compared the situational meaning of abandonment or separation to the global meaning of a social/cultural norm of parental roles. These youth drew on a global meaning of parents serving specific roles in the lives of their families and their children; they believed that parents needed to fulfill these

roles set by social or cultural norms. However, the loss of their parents set up a discrepancy between this global meaning and the situational meaning of being abandoned. This discrepancy is key to their explanation of why they were negatively affected by the loss of their biological parent.

### **How do I make sense of it?**

In answering the *why* question, participants in this study moved to answering the question of *how* to make sense of their experience within the scope of their life. In *Figure 5*, the text-arrows and oval that form the middle half of the illustration represent this. Because *RQ3* dealt with the loss of a biological parent, this “sense” was mainly made through the repositioning of the parent-child relationship and other stakeholders (like foster parents). In using one of the three discourses discussed above, the participants repositioned individuals to not only assign new duties and responsibilities but also navigate the power that each individual had in the situation.

As discussed in *RQ3* these positions varied within and between the three different discourses. The most frequently used self-position was that of a victim: participants used one of the three discourses to position themselves as the casualty of an uncontrollable situation. Similarly, using the different discourses allowed the adolescents to position their biological parents, the one they had lost and/or the one they had not, and other stakeholders. This positioning allowed the students to navigate the power dynamics in their relationship with their parents. In some cases it allowed them to fill the gap left by a parent who abandoned them with a foster parent or the other biological parent. In other cases it allowed the participants to justify their delinquency or problem behaviors after they lost their biological parent. Navigating the *how* question allowed participants to not only position themselves and their biological parents, but also the experience of losing a biological parent. It allowed them

to renegotiate their understanding of what their relationship was like with their parents so that they could better understand how the effect of this loss fit into their life. This positioning allowed the youth to make meaning of the loss of a biological parent. Indeed, all the youth who used one of the three discourses and positioned themselves and their parents also ended up using one or more of the six meaning-making themes described in *RQ2*. But the use of these meaning-making themes highlighted the meaning-making process that the youth went through in getting to the six themes. In this study, this meaning-making process was represented by the process of *INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION* used by the youth in constructing the six meaning-making themes.

The *INTERNALIZATION* process was a representation of how well youth were able to internalize each of the six different meaning-making themes into their schema, into their understanding of themselves and their ecological systems. Youth who used the *IDENTITY* or *OPTIMISM* meaning-making themes demonstrated the fact that they had internalized the meaning of this loss. They saw the negative life experience, the loss of a biological parent in this case, as being part of who they had become. In other words, they did not describe the loss of a biological parent as an external event but rather as part of their schema. They had managed to modify their schema to include this negative life experience.

A parallel to *INTERNALIZATION* exists in research about the meaning-making framework. Individuals that recognize a discrepancy between their global meaning and situational meaning go through a meaning-making process where they try to change the appraisal of the event in the situation, modify their global meaning, or both. This has been described as the process of assimilation and accommodation in research on the meaning-making framework (Block, 1982; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003). Based on Jean Piaget's theory of assimilation and accommodation, these two

processes are seen as central to the meaning-making process that individuals undertake consciously or unconsciously. Assimilation is the process by which individuals try to change the appraised meaning of the event in the situation to better fit the global meaning, reducing the discrepancy between global and situational meaning. However, in some situations the appraised meaning in the situation cannot be readily modified, it has to be accommodated into the schema: the global meaning of how the individual sees the world. It bears note that these two processes—assimilation and accommodation—are not mutually exclusive. They can occur in tandem and often are used simultaneously by an individual trying to reduce any discrepancy between situational and global meaning (Park, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997).

In this study individuals who used meaning-making themes characterized by the *INTERNALIZATION* of the negative life experience(s) into their understanding of the world demonstrated the process of accommodation. On the other hand, some individuals did not express the fact that they had internalized the negative life experiences into their schema. Rather, these individuals understood the negative life experience as having changed how they viewed the situational meaning of the loss of a biological parent. In using the *BETTERMENT*, *SELF-RELLANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION* meaning-making themes, the youth described their meaning-making process as culminating in an external process of change or a process of skill building. There was little reference to changes in the self or in their identity. This represented a process of assimilation.

But *INTERNALIZATION* was not the only dimension in the meaning-making process identified in this study. The other dimension was *REDEFINITION*: whether or not the participant changed the detriment linked to some negative life experiences. For example, when constructing the *OPTIMISM* and *BETTERMENT* theme, youth distinctly described how they had moved past the detrimental effects of negative life experiences; they had come

to see the “silver lining” behind these experiences. They redefined negative life experiences as being beneficial. This *REDEFINITION* from negative to positive was critical to how youth constructed the *OPTIMISM* and *BETTERMENT* themes. In the process of explaining the effect of negative life experiences using these 2 themes, participants explained why the past experience was negative for them before describing how the same experience had had a positive, beneficial, impact on their life. However, when constructing the themes of *IDENTITY*, *SELF-RELLANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION*, the participants did not actively describe how they had changed the meaning of past experiences, or how the meaning of past experiences had changed for them.

Research using the meaning-making framework has uncovered a similar type of *REDEFINITION* in individuals who are dealing with severe stress or trauma, especially when dealing with the diagnosis of an illness or with bereavement following the death of a family member (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Resick et al., 2008; Thompson, 1985). In this research “Individuals often transform the appraised meaning of an event, rendering it less noxious and more consistent with their preexisting global beliefs and desires” (Park, 2010; p. 261). Some individuals compare their experience to what others have experienced and explain how the effect on their lives was less traumatic; they explain that they are better off than they could have been. Others describe how their lives are better off because they managed to live through an experience. Lastly, some individuals explain how they reevaluated experiences in a more optimistic light. All three types of *REDEFINITION* were part of the meaning-making process used by the youth in this study.

### **What has changed in my life?**

In answering the *how* question, participants in this study moved to answering the question of what had changed because of these negative life experiences? This was the main



focus of *RQ2*. While *RQ2* was focused on negative life experiences in general, we can drill down to a single negative life experience, like losing a biological parent. As I found in examining the discourse constructions in *RQ3*, the participants used the discourses and the subsequent positioning of themselves and their biological parents to understand why and how they had been affected. By working through how they had internalized or redefined these experiences the participants were able to reflect on how their life had changed because they lost a biological parent. Youth used a combination of the 6 meaning-making themes—*IDENTITY*, *BETTERMENT*, *SELF-RELLANCE*, *OPTIMISM*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and/or *PREPARATION*—to express what had changed in their life.

There are a few similarities and differences between the meaning-making themes in this study and the “meanings made” that have been highlighted through research on the meaning-making framework. For example, there is consistent evidence from the literature on the meaning-making framework that one of the most frequently used *meanings* is that of positive life changes. (Park & Helgeson, 2006; Park, 2008). After going through the meaning-making process, individuals have reported three types of positive changes. First, individuals have reported on how the stress of events has helped them make positive life changes. This has often been articulated in terms of relationships; individuals have described how their relationships were enhanced because of having experienced a stressor (Park & Helgeson, 2006). Second, individuals have reported positive changes to their outlook on life. This is more personality driven and reflects a change in the global meaning that people attribute to how stressors affect them (Park, 2008). Last, individuals have mentioned positive externalities because of their experiences with stressors. For example, children who have their tonsils removed may note that eating ice cream for the day after the operation is a positive externality. While the youth in the current study did not reach a *meaning* of the third

variety, they did draw on the first two types of positive change through the *BETTERMENT* and *OPTIMISM* meaning-making themes.

One of the other frequently used *meanings* that come from the literature that uses the meaning-making framework is of how stressful experiences are integrated into the individual's identity (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Zakowski, Valdimarsdottir, & Bovbjerg, 2001). In attaining this *meaning*, individuals have described how they have come to integrate the stressor, the experience of the stressor, or both into their sense of self. In other words, they come to see the stressor as being a pivotal component of who they are, something that cannot be easily separated or segregated from the self. This is very similar to the *IDENTITY* meaning-making theme that is used by some of the youth in this study. They consistently describe, in their narratives and interviews, how the negative life experiences (or a specific experience) have become part of who they are.

But while these three meaning-making themes of *BETTERMENT*, *OPTIMISM* and *IDENTITY* point to the similarities between my findings and the findings from the literature using the meaning-making framework, there are also some marked differences. Namely, there is little literature on the meaning-making framework that references the *SELF-RELIANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION* meaning-making themes. These three meaning-making themes did not reflect the process of *INTERNALIZATION* or *REDEFINITION* like the other three. They were also used less frequently than the other three. Yet, the meaning-making process that the youth went through in their narratives and interviews, the process that is laid out in RQ2 and RQ3, does point to these three themes as being legitimate *meanings* that the youth have landed on through their last iteration through the meaning-making process.

**Addressing the Limitations of the Meaning-Making Framework**

These three meaning-making themes are not the only contribution of this study to the field. My review of the literature has highlighted that this is one of the first studies that has used the concept of meaning-making comprehensively beyond the medical and bereavement context. Additionally, this study puts forth an indirect method of addressing meaning-making, one that goes beyond simply asking individuals to interpret their meaning of events. This study has addressed risk factors that are beyond “shocks to the system”; it addresses risk factors that are persistent and occur with varying intensity across the life-span of these youth. In doing this, the findings of this study, quite unintentionally, provide a verification of the entire meaning-making framework, rather than focusing on a single component. In the next section of this chapter I cover these four limitations of the meaning-making framework and how this study addressed each.

**Extension beyond the medical and bereavement context**

One of the most pertinent limitations of the previous research that has used or referenced the meaning-making framework is that this literature has been embedded in a medical and/or bereavement context. The meaning-making framework has been used to explore how individuals who have been given a medical diagnosis (often the diagnosis of a terminal illness), or individuals who are dealing with the death of someone close, make meaning of their experience; 82% of the 78 pre-2010 articles that used the meaning-making framework (either directly or indirectly) deal with this medical or bereavement perspective (Park, 2010). The issue with this focus is that it restricts the generalization of the meaning-making framework to other disciplines and perspectives. More troublingly, the meaning-making framework is described as a paradigm that universally explains experiences of stress and trauma; but there is limited evidence of what this framework looks like in a non-medical

or bereavement context. This could add bias to the theory of the meaning-making framework that we are not aware of because of the limited use and extension of this framework to other contexts. Indeed, as I have argued above, risk factors (stressor or negative life experiences) are contextual in their very nature. Their effect and manifestation depend on the context. Meaning-making about risk factors is similarly contextual. The structure of the framework and the meanings achieved could be different based on the context.

The work I have done in this study supports the overall structure of the meaning-making framework. As the framework suggested, individuals in this study did have a sense of global meaning. They also described how their distress emerged when the ascribed meaning in a situation did not meet their global meaning. The meaning-making process on which they embarked required them to attend to the discrepancy between their global and situational meaning through a meaning-making process, arriving at a meaning through this process. This would suggest that the meaning-making framework does have support and utility outside of the medical and bereavement context. The support for the meaning-making framework that emerged in this study was developed when thinking of the meaning-making themes being used across all negative life experiences (*RQ2*) and the discourses from the loss of a biological parent (*RQ3*). However, the variety of experiences in this study suggests that this framework could be viewed as a valid framework to explain meaning-making in more diverse risk-contexts. The talk of these youth are filled with examples of them asking the *why*, *how*, and *what* questions (see previous section) about negative life experiences and the place of these experiences in their lives.

While the overarching process was very similar, the meaning that youth identified through the process extended what we know of the meanings that most individuals use. Prior

work on the meaning-making framework did not find support for the *SELF-RELLANCE*, *PERSEVERANCE*, and *PREPARATION* meaning-making themes. These meanings are new to our understanding of how people understand the effect and impact of stressors, albeit as reflected in a small sample of 38 inner-city youth at an alternative charter school. This extension of *meanings* could be explained by the focus of this study. Compared to prior studies that have focused on a medical or bereavement context, this study did not identify objective stressors; I allowed the youth to define what experiences they believe to have had a negative effect on their life. Because of this self-report approach, the scope of the identified risk factors was much wider than some of the other studies that have referenced the meaning-making framework. The variety of risk factors—in terms of ACEs or other negative life experiences—could explain the new meanings that were identified through this study.

### **Exploring meaning-making indirectly**

Another limitation that I identified in the use of the meaning-making framework was in the methods that have been used. The predominant method has been to identify an objectively defined “stressor” and ask individuals (mostly college-age students and adults) how they understand the meaning of this stressor in their life. From the pilot interviews in this study I found that this method was not very successful with the population of urban youth who experienced a significant number of risk factors in their lives. Because of the range of experiences that they had, understanding and verbalizing the “meaning” of a single event was extremely hard. Indeed, most of them did not seem to have the language or the scope to answer a direct question without room to reflect on their life experiences. Moreover, asking individuals a direct question about “meaning” leads them to search for and answer the question in terms of what they think “meaning” looks like (Foddy, 1993). This

could bias findings toward socially acceptable or culturally normed perspectives of “meaning”.

The methods I used in this study were a reaction to this directed nature of past explorations as well as observations made during the pilot interviews. Instead of asking youth how they made meaning of negative life experiences I found the two-pronged process of narrative and interview exploration to be more fruitful in three ways. First, instead of using an objectively defined risk factor, I allowed the youth to express what events they believed to have had a negative effect on their life. This allowed me to delve into the meaning-making process of experiences that the youth found stressful instead of me imposing a framework for what constitutes a “stressful” event on them. Second, the narratives gave the youth the opportunity to reflect on their life experiences and understand their own meaning-making process. Since the youth in this study were moving toward emerging adulthood, they were in the process of defining and redefining global meaning. The narratives gave them an opportunity to articulate their current thoughts over the space of several months instead of forcing them to define it within a single interview. Last, the interviews allowed me to ask youth about the effect and impact of negative life experiences instead of focusing directly on meaning. These questions allowed me to get to the meaning-making process, and meanings made, through an indirect process that did not lead the participants to think about “meaning” and what it *should* look like. This research approach is another explanation for why this study identified additional meaning-making themes that have not been captured by the literature on the meaning-making framework thus far.

### **Beyond “shocks to the system”**

Another limitation that I identified in the literature that uses the meaning-making framework is the focus on “shocks to the system”. Previous research has primarily focused

on a single event, like the loss of a loved one or the diagnosis of an illness, as the stressor for individuals. Only 5 of the 78 studies identified by Park (2010) as using or referring the meaning-making framework actually focused on multiple risk factors, or the accumulation of risk factors over time. This distinction is similar to the one I made in the *Theoretical Foundation* chapter regarding the severe and cumulative risk approaches. Thus far, the studies that have contributed to the formation and validation of the meaning-making framework have primarily used a severe risks approach. They have focused on a single stressor, and how the emergence and evolution of this stressor, affects the meaning-making process and the meanings made. However, there is overwhelming evidence that risk factors do not appear in isolation; they appear in clusters in individuals' lives (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). Moreover, the accumulation of risk factors seems to have a stronger negative impact on developmental trajectories than the impact of any single risk factor (Anda et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998). Using a primarily severe risk approach could limit the scope and depth of our understanding of the meaning-making process and the types of meanings made.

This study moved beyond the severe risk approach. Rather, this study used the youth's explanation for the accumulation of negative life events over time to understand how their meaning-making process differed by experience. For example, when looking at the loss of a biological parent, the youth often described an accumulation of risk factors, like domestic violence, parental drug use, household chaos, and other events that led to the loss of a biological parent. Additionally, they accounted for the accumulation of negative life experiences after the loss of their biological parent as well, like delinquency, self-harm, academic failure, etc. The meaning-making process that is captured in this study, as well as the meanings made, are constructed based off of this accumulation of experiences and not

only the “shock to the system” that resulted from the loss of their biological parent. Thus, this study found validity for the meaning-making framework beyond the “shock to the system” approach to understanding the stress of negative life experiences.

### **Focusing on the entire framework**

Last, Park (2010) points out that one of the limitations of how the meaning-making framework has been used in the past is that researchers have often focused on one part of the framework over others, without highlighting the entire framework and its functioning. This has limited the process of validating the meaning-making framework since it is not always clear if the entire framework functions in the same way across studies and contexts. This has limited what can be said about the validity of the meaning-making framework and how it can be used.

Quite unintentionally, this study ended up offering a case study for the entire meaning-making framework. Validating the functioning of the entire framework was not an aim of this study. Because I wanted to stay close to what the youth were telling me in their narratives and interviews, I was not willing to actively look for the different components of the meaning-making framework in this study. I was willing to accept the fact that this study only focused on part of the framework, if the youth’s narratives and interviews indicated this. However, the findings from *RQ2* and *RQ3* in this study were jointly able to offer an illustration of the entire meaning-making process and the framework (see *Figure 5*).

### **Implications for the Study of Risk Factors and Resilience**

Beyond the support for the meaning-making framework that has emerged in the findings of this study, there are several implications for the study of risk factors and resilience that need to be discussed. There are four main implications of the findings of this study.



**Implication 1: Addressing the limitations of past risk research**

The findings from this study have highlighted the importance of understanding the meaning-making process that individuals undergo during, and after, experiencing risk factors. While meaning-making has been understood as an important construct within the study of risk factors in developmental psychology, this context-driven exploration has often taken a back-seat to the variables-based approach to exploring the impact of risk factors on poor developmental outcomes (Rutter, 1981). But the variables-based approach has limited our exploration of the actual mechanisms through which risk factors manifest in distress, and ultimately poor developmental outcome, in individuals. Even when we have adopted a person-based approach to the exploration of contextual risk factors, we have been faced with three major limitations. First, while the person-based approach offers a more nuanced way of identifying context-driven factors, it is limited in its capacity to delve into the actual mechanisms that result in risk factors having an effect on development. Second, the person-based approach has been limited in its exploration of the subjective nature of risk factors (Luthar, 1993; Park, 2004); the way individuals understand the meaning of salient life events could differ from how they are understood by researchers in developmental psychology (Bartlett, 1994; Gordon & Song, 1994). Third, there is a distinct difference between statistical risk and actual risk. Knowing that the average individual's balance beam is expected to tip negative because of a given set of risk factors tells us little about what actually happens to a given individual. This affects the efficacy of targeted programming that uses evidence from variables-based and person-based studies to decide not only which individuals should receive the program but also what services they should receive.

While it is too early to make any sweeping conclusions from the findings of this study, they do offer some initial insight into how we can address these three limitations.

First, the findings of this study have highlighted a mechanism that could explain why some individuals are negatively affected by certain life experiences. This mechanism is the discrepancy between global and situational meaning. In explaining why they had been negatively affected by the loss of their biological parent, the youth in this study relied on their previous experiences with their parents, and their families to describe a global belief about the role of parents and the importance of family unity. In other words, these youth had created a global meaning of what their family structure *should* look like, and what the parent-child relationship *should* look like, based on prior experiences.

But the global meanings differed based on the type of parental loss that the youth experienced. For youth who had lost their biological parent to divorce or separation, their global meaning was one of family unity. These youth relied on their experiences with their families prior to the divorce/separation to create their understanding of what families should look like and what the parent-child relationship should entail. For youth who were abandoned by their parent physically or emotionally, or were separated from their parent because of legal reasons, the global meaning seemed to come more from experiences with a social and cultural norm than with prior direct experiences with their parents. These youth drew on a socio-cultural norm of what the family unit should look like and what roles biological parents should fulfill. However, in both cases—loss due to divorce/separation or some form of abandonment—the youth referred to a situational meaning of unfulfilled expectations. Their parents failed to meet the expectations that the youth had created for the parent-child relationship or the family unit based on their global meaning. It was this discrepancy, between what occurred and what was expected, that added to the youth's overall distress.

There is evidence from the wider sociological and psychological literature on the impact of parental loss on children and adolescents that supports these findings. First, several studies have suggested that the relationship that a child or adolescent has with their parents before the divorce/separation does have an impact on their adjustment after the divorce/separation. Youth who have a close relationship with the biological parent who they “lose” because of the divorce/separation show more signs of poor psychosocial development, especially development of delinquent behavior, after the divorce/separation (Videon, 2002). On the other hand, if the youth can stay with the parent with whom they have the stronger relationship, they show fewer signs of distress after the divorce/separation (Hines, 1997). To some extent, this supports the findings from this study. If youth are able to stay with the parent with whom they have the stronger relationship, they are likely to experience less of a discrepancy between the situational meaning after the divorce/separation and their global belief about the expectations of the parent-child relationship. Moreover, the parent with whom they have a stronger relationship may be able to fill the gap left by the parent the child lost, helping the child resolve the discrepancy between global and situation meaning.

Additionally, prior research has drawn on the idea of social and cultural norms to understand the effects of parental abandonment and loss on children and youth. In studying these norms, the predominant understanding has been that parenting in contemporary America, especially fathering, “includes some degree of abandonment, and that fathers are normally absent from family life and from emotional relationships” (Balcom, 1998; p. 283) with their children. But even in this context of abandonment, children still draw on a norm of attachment and nurturing to explain what roles parents should fulfill (Steinberg, 2001). This would suggest that parenting, especially in the US is built around a norm of presence

and a normed set of expectations for the roles that the parent should fulfill. The youth in this study draw on these norms to express the discrepancy between their global and situational meaning.

The findings from this study have highlighted the importance of understanding the subjective nature of risk factors, namely the global meaning that the risk factors challenge, the situational meaning they create, and the discrepancy between the two sets of meanings. Additionally, the findings have addressed a second limitation; they have allowed us to capture the subjective nature of risk factors and the process that individuals go through when understanding why a risk factor had a detrimental impact on their life. Beyond the global and situational meaning, the findings extend our understanding of *how* these youth resolved the discrepancy between these two types of meaning. The participants positioned themselves, their parents, and other important stakeholders into positions of power or vulnerability in order to resolve the discrepancy between what they expected from their biological parents and what actually occurred. This allowed them to make varying use of the process of *INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION*. In some cases they were able to internalize the situational meaning into their global belief. In other words, they were able to accommodate the situational meaning into their global schema. On other occasions they were more readily able to assimilate the situational meaning into their existing global schema without completely changing the schema. Additionally, the youth worked through a process of redefining the meaning of the negative life experiences. In some situations they actively changed the meaning of a negative life experience so that it had a positive outcome. In other cases they refrained from this *REDEFINITION*, leaving the meaning of the event as something negative and detrimental.

The processes of *INTERNALIZATION* and *REDEFINITION* offer a theoretical picture of the way youth in this study subjectively worked through the discrepancy between global and situational meaning. It offers a picture of how individuals characterize events as detrimental or not, and of how they choose to deal with them. A deeper exploration into these processes, on a wider range of risk factors, could add to our understanding of the effect of risk factors and resilience. This could help us move closer to identifying the similarities and differences between processes used by different groups of individuals, in different contexts, with different risk profiles. This should help us add nuance to the kinds of interventions we can offer individuals.

### **Implication 2: Redefining resilience constructively**

Another implication of this study is for our understanding of resilience. In developmental psychology we have come to understand resilience as a probability construct: individuals doing better than we would expect given the risk factors they have experienced (Luthar, 1993; Masten, 2001). Given statistical models of psychosocial development, individuals who are positive outliers, who develop better than our statistical expectations given a certain amount of risk, are termed “resilient”. But this probability based perspective of resilience limits our understanding of what resilience could actually look like for individuals in different settings and environments. More importantly, limiting our definition of resilience to this probability construct may restrict the types of interventions we design to engender resilience in larger groups of children and youth.

Ungar and his colleagues at the Resilience Research Center in Halifax, Canada have been spearheading an alternative approach to understanding resilience. They describe the traditional approach to understanding resilience as part of ecological approaches to understanding development that are “informed by Systems Theory and emphasize

predictable relationships between risk and protective factors, circular causality and transactional processes that foster resilience” (Ungar, 2004; p. 342). A primary concern that Ungar and his colleagues have with this ecological approach is that it presupposes what the relationship between risk factors and resilience look like. In other words, it relies on a probability definition of risk factors and resilience to estimate developmental outcomes. However, there is considerable evidence that individuals from different communities and cultures define risk, wellness, and resilience in varying ways (Ungar, 2011; Ungar et al., 2007). For example, a recent study (Ungar, 2001) of youth who were placed in the child welfare system in Ontario, Canada found that they defined their deviant and problem behaviors very differently from the objective definition. Often, these youth are categorized as “high-risk” or “problem youth.” However, in an in-depth exploration of their justifications for their actions, the youth defined their deviant behavior as a means of coping; they described their deviance as a way to deal with the risk factors that they faced through the child welfare system and while living with their parents.

This resonates with the findings of this study. In discussing why they were negatively affected by the loss of their biological parent(s), the youth used one of three discourses: family unity, parental roles, or disownment. In using these discourses they were able to position themselves, their parents, and other stakeholder (like their foster parents) into new roles, with varying amounts of power and responsibility. Overwhelmingly, the youth in this study tended to position one or both of their biological parents as the cause of their distress; they repositioned themselves as the victim of an uncontrollable situation. This positioning allowed them to absolve themselves of responsibility of the deviant and problem behaviors, placing the onus on the biological parent(s) whom they held responsible for the distress. In so doing they were able to position their deviant and problem behaviors as an outcome of

their situation or as a method through which they coped with their situation. For example, some youth described their deviant behavior as necessary to help them “find a new family” or “earn a living” in any way possible, after the loss of their biological parent.

Studying the meaning-making process of these 38 youth provides new insight into how we can conceptualize risk factors and resilience for this population. From an ecological perspective we would view the loss of a biological parent and the subsequent delinquent behavior as an accumulation of risk factors. These risk factors could be treated as a unit-weighted accumulation of risk (Watson et al., 2004) or as a cascade of risk factors with the temporal occurrence of these events acting as predictors of developmental outcomes (Cox, Mills-Koonce, Proper, & Gariépy, 2010; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). In both cases, the deviant behavior would be treated as a negative occurrence, either as a risk factor or as a subsequent negative outcome. However, the meaning-making paradigm used by the youth in this study would suggest that the deviant behavior that followed the loss of their biological parent(s) was a coping strategy that actually benefited them in the long run; it allowed them to make meaning of the stress of losing a biological parent, and place this experience within the scope of their life.

This meaning-making paradigm provides new insight into how these youth come to be defined as resilient. The conventional definition of resilience restricts us to an ecological approach that is mostly objective. However, in the case of the 38 youth in this study, resilience is less about the developmental outcome and more about the process of making meaning of negative life experiences. Given the meaning-making process used by the youth in this study, and the extensive research on the meaning-making framework, resilience could be explained from this meaning-making perspective. The discrepancy between global and situational meaning is an important component of the distress that individuals experience,

distress that often leads to poor developmental outcomes (Park & Helgeson, 2006; Park, 2008). The better individuals are at resolving this discrepancy, the less distress they experience, and the better their developmental trajectories look compared to their peers experiencing similar events. Resilience could be explained by the ease with which the discrepancy between global meaning and situational meaning is resolved. The flexibility in an individual's global meaning to allow for assimilation or accommodation of newly forming situational meanings could be an important protective mechanism that engenders resilience.

This conception of resilience fits with the more constructivist perspective of resilience that Ungar and his colleagues put forth. Their postmodern interpretation of resilience defines the construct as the negotiation between the individual and his/her environment for the resources to define oneself as healthy, when exposed to events or experiences that are collectively determined to be disruptive (Ungar, 2004). This definition of resilience purports a nonhierarchical and noncyclical relationship between exposure to risk factors and developmental outcomes, relying on the relative nature of personal meaning-making to help define what wellness, sickness, and resilience looks like. From this perspective, "Resilience is successful negotiation by individuals for health resources, with success depending for its definition on the reciprocity individuals experience between themselves and the social constructions of well-being that shape their interpretations of their health status" (Ungar, 2004; p. 352). Thus, the youth in this study determine their health (academic health, social health, psychological health) after experiencing negative life experiences, like the loss of a biological parent, based on the collective experiences of their communities and their peers. This is why the youth draw on powerful self-defined or socially-normed discourses to explain the loss of a biological parent. They compare their situation to an expectation of family unity and parental roles to explain not only why they



were detrimentally affected by the loss of their parent but also how they ended up making-meaning of this loss in the scope of their life. Thus, resilience for these youth is intimately tied to their ability to make meaning of negative life experiences, a process that is determined by the collective experience of such negative life experiences and what resources one can draw on to deal with them.

Of course, it should be noted that this conceptualization of resilience does not annul the more traditional view of resilience as health despite adversity. The constructionist perspective of resilience does not purport that one definition of resilience is better than another (Ungar, 2004). The ecological definition of resilience is one way to conceive of resilience that satisfies certain parameters. It is more easily measurable and can be operationalized more readily. But it is an objectively constructed, probabilistically driven, narrative. The constructionist approach to resilience adds to the multi-dimensional nature of resilience, pushing us to think about the individual and social construction of wellness and health. However, a constructionist perspective does not mean we need to adopt a stance of absolute relativism. Not every perspective of health or coping behaviors will gain collective traction; however, the constructionist perspective does require us to appreciate the fact that there are alternative discourses around risk factors and resilience that should be highlighted and accounted for though our research (Ungar, 2004). In other words, we need not look at all the deviant coping behaviors described by the youth in this study as being adaptive; however, we should be willing to accept that individuals do view their health and adaptation in unique ways and their meaning-making process could incorporate coping through deviant mechanisms.

**Implication 3: Focusing on future research**

An important contribution of this study is the focus on the entire meaning-making framework and especially the discrepancy between global and situational meaning. As a research community, we could be more articulate about identifying risk factors objectively, and their impact subjectively, if we are able to better capture an individual's global and situational meaning about negative life experiences, and the discrepancy between these two. The findings from this study also highlight the need for further research on the different elements of the meaning-making framework and how this framework is used by a more diverse population of youth. As I noted above, this is one of the few studies that has used the meaning-making framework outside a medical and bereavement context. In validating this approach to understanding how individuals make meaning of negative life experiences, there is a need to expand this approach to a larger sample of youth from more varied backgrounds. This will allow us to better understand whether the meaning-making framework can be generalized to a more varied population of youth and children. Additionally, future research needs to focus on a larger variety of risk factors. While this study did cover a range of self-defined negative life experiences, the primary focus was on the loss of a biological parent; this was the focus of *RQ3*. In order to understand if this meaning-making framework can actually be generalized to other risk factors, we need to conduct further research about the applicability of this framework in different risk settings.

Future research could build off of these findings and use a less time-intensive method to collecting data and understanding the use of the meaning-making framework. In a recent article, Park and George (2013) provide an extensive list of survey instruments that can be used to measure global and situational meaning to understand the discrepancy between these two levels of meaning. Their list of survey and research tools are directed

mostly toward research focused on research in a medical or bereavement context. However, there are validated measures that can be used for wider research about the impacts of risk factors on psychosocial development. For example, one of the measures for global beliefs is the Trauma and Attachment Belief Scale (Pearlman, 2003). This scale has two sub-scales that cover global beliefs about the self and the other when faced with trauma or stress. Overall, these two sub-scales cover topics of trust, safety, esteem, intimacy, and control, topics that were part of the discourse around loss of a biological parent in this study. Similarly, Park and George have several suggestions for surveys that can help us understand the individual's appraisal of the stressor, the discrepancies between situational and global meaning, as well as surveys about the meaning-making process.

However, most of these surveys do have a similar limitation to one that I have identified above: they ask children and youth direct questions about beliefs and meaning. They assume that the individual has had the time and space to reflect on their experiences, develop the language to explain their experiences, and understand how to articulate the meaning that has emerged. These are tenuous assumptions, especially when it comes to research with children and youth. For this reason, I would recommend pairing this survey strategy with some qualitative research approaches, like the ones used in this study, which can provide individuals, especially children and youth, the space to go through the meaning-making process and articulate their understanding.

#### **Implication 4: Narrative writing as an intervention approach**

Giving the youth in this study the space to write a narrative and develop their understanding of negative life experiences was a limitation and an implication of this study. It is hard to parse out the effect of *Senior Seminar* from the “true” meaning-making process that the youth may have implemented in their lives if the course did not exist. Even though I

tried to remain unbiased while I was a teacher in the classroom, my suggestions to students and my comments on drafts of their narratives did influence their meaning-making process. All narrative constructions are situated (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007); they are affected by who constructs them, for what reason, and in what situation. Thus, the exercises we used in *Senior Seminar*, the comments that the students received from myself and the co-teacher, their discussions with their peers, and the fact that they were writing their narratives in a charter school setting affected their actual and reported meaning-making process. For example, students in the class were very aware of the fact that the co-teacher and I were mandated reporters; this could have limited their narration of negative life experiences to those that would not call out the attention of the administration or the legal system, especially if the youth were minors.

But the notion of a situated narrative would have emerged no matter what method I used in this study (Foddy, 1993). Even if I had worked primarily through interviews, the questions I asked, my limited rapport with students, and the setting with which the interviews were conducted would have affected the narratives the youth created, and the meaning-making process I was able to uncover in this study. The decisions to be part of *Senior Seminar* and to use the particular methods that I used in this study were done very purposefully and I believe that the benefit that they accrued in terms of the findings from this study outweigh the costs of a situated narrative.

One of the positive externalities (unintended positive outcomes) of this study is the fact that the narrative construction that I used with youth in this study points to an intervention approach that could be used in the future. While it is premature to suggest sweeping application-based implications for these findings, we can make some preliminary assessments about directions for future work. Notably, the charter school and the *Senior*

*Seminar* course served as an incubator for the youth to help them in the meaning-making process. Giving the youth the time and space within which to reflect on the broader implications of their experiences allowed them to find the language and the temporal continuity with which to make meaning of their experiences and the relationships between experiences. Similar school-based narrative writing classes could be helpful for youth in understanding the place of negative life experiences within the scope of their life.

In a review of the literature on the formation of global meaning, especially global goals and beliefs, Austin and Vancouver (1996) pointed out that global meaning starts to form early in childhood. In reviewing the concept of global meaning from different fields, including branches of psychology and sociology, the authors found that there was a theoretical and empirical consensus that the foundations of global meaning lay in early childhood experiences. Through childhood and adolescence, individuals go through an iterative process of reassessing and molding their global meaning to incorporate the diversity of experiences they incur. In late adolescence, the basic tenets of an individual's global meaning are concretized; while there is room for negotiation and change in this global meaning throughout the lifespan, by late adolescence the individual has a fairly well established sense of his/her global meaning (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Park, 2010). Thus, adolescence and early adulthood may be a developmentally appropriate time in which to intervene through programming that helps individuals shape their global meaning to deal with prior negative life experiences and future events as well.

At the same time, adolescence is an opportune time to help individuals develop their narrative identity. The identity formation process as a whole is seen as one that is of paramount importance during adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Adolescence is the developmental period where individuals develop their sense of self. The process of trying on

alternative identities, committing to some, and discarding others is an iterative process that occurs primarily during adolescence (Meeus, 2011; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2009). As part of this identity development process, adolescents are working on forming their narrative identity. There is theoretical and empirical support for the formation of narrative identity as one component of the identity formation process during adolescence (McLean et al., 2007; McLean, 2005). “Narrative identity is conceptualized as the life story, which is a narrative with selectively appropriated past events that are woven together to form a broader story of how one came to be the person one is” (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; p 136). The individual’s formation of a narrative identity—a story about the self—affects their overall identity formation process by influencing what alternative roles they are willing to try on and in what context. It can also affect how the individual views him or herself in the context of family, peers, community, and other important ecological settings.

More importantly, the formation of narrative identity is part of the formation of global and situational meaning. Intimately linked to the formation of a personal story, is the meaning that individuals make of the experiences they have had and how these experiences fit within their overall narrative (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). In other words, narrative identity can also be viewed as the process by which individuals “develop, confirm, sustain, and potentially alter the personal meaning” (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; p. 136) of their stories and the events that make up their story. Individuals form their narrative identity by making meaning of the experiences that have occurred in their life, attempting to understand how they were affected by different experiences, the relationship between experiences, and the salience of each to the larger narrative about the self.

Thus, the formation of meaning during adolescence, the identity formation process, and the construction of narrative identity are intimately intertwined. More importantly, the formation of global meaning, the identity formation process, and the narrative identity construction all seem to reach a nadir during adolescence. Because they are so closely linked, these different developmental processes reach a moment of actualization during adolescence, making this developmental period especially ripe for interventions. While all three processes develop and evolve over the life span, the underlying foundations seem to be set by the time the individual enters early adulthood. Intervening during adolescence could allow us to offer youth more developmentally appropriate modalities through which to construct their global meaning and find their narrative identity.

One way in which to support youth is through a classroom-based intervention like *Senior Seminar*. I collaborated with the co-teacher on *Senior Seminar* because of the limitations I noticed in the student's narratives during the pilot interviews. Most of the youth in the pilot interviews had not been through a class like *Senior Seminar* and they did not have the language with which to discuss the short-term effect and long-term impact of negative life experiences. I noted that these youth had a hard time drawing parallels between different experiences, articulating why they were affected by certain experiences, and were not always clear about the temporal continuity that ran through their narrative. In other words, they struggled with the narrative identity of their experiences and with articulating the meaning-making process that they had gone through. I hypothesized that *Senior Seminar* was one way to give these youth the opportunity to articulate their meaning-making process through the construction of a cohesive narrative. We need further research on how this narrative-based intervention strategy could be used in the future as a method to help youth through the meaning-making process.

### Conclusion

When students at the charter school asked why I was doing the study, or when I was telling them about the study, I narrated a memorized script. One of the parts of this script highlighted the importance of having the youth's voice, their stories, in the broader developmental psychology literature. I would note: "I want to hear your perspective about your life experiences. There are many studies that tell us how you will react when you go through an experience. But I think it is important to add your voice, your stories, to this academic literature." This has been the aim of this study: to include the youth's perspective about what events were particularly "risky" for them and to allow them the space to articulate why. More importantly, I wanted to allow them to tell us how they had dealt with the short-term effect and long-term impact of these experiences. If nothing else, I hope that I have managed to achieve this in this study. But beyond this personal and professional goal, the academic goal of this study was to generate hypotheses that could guide future research in this area. This study was conceptualized, designed, and implemented as a hypothesis generating exercise. After going through the process, there are three main hypotheses that have emerged from this work.

The first hypothesis is that one of the mechanisms that explains the emergence of resilience is the flexibility with which individuals are able to resolve any discrepancy between global and situational meaning. This study does not provide direct evidence of the functioning of this mechanism; however, the findings do highlight the importance of global and situational meaning, and resolving the discrepancy between the two. Beyond the support from the extant literature on the need to resolve this discrepancy, the youth in this study articulated that the reason they were negatively affected by life events was that the situational meaning did not match with their global beliefs and expectations. Their meaning-making



process highlighted an effort to deal with this discrepancy and resolve the same. It is possible, based on these findings, to hypothesize that individuals who are better at resolving this discrepancy (or who find themselves in contexts that support its resolution) are less likely to experience the distress that these youth, and the literature, demonstrate. Individuals able to resolve the discrepancy with ease would, from an objective standpoint, do a lot better than their peers who had experienced the same event.

To explore this hypothesis we would first need to adopt a person-based approach. It would require us to have an objective measure of exposure to risk as well as a measure of positive adaptation. This would allow us to categorize individuals as resilient versus non-resilient. This would then be followed by an exploration of the meaning-making processes that each individual used. This could be done with a mix of the survey measures on global and situational meaning that are present in the extant literature, and with a qualitative exploration that looks similar to the one I adopted in this study. This study would explore the meaning-making process of resilient versus non-resilient youth; it would allow us to test the hypothesis that youth who demonstrate resilience have a more flexible method of resolving the discrepancy between their situational and global meaning.

The second hypothesis is that youth who have experienced a substantial amount of risk—especially early neglect and/or abuse—understand subsequent delinquent behaviors as a coping strategy. As described in this study and work by Ungar (Ungar, 2001), youth who have experienced severe stress and trauma in their lives do report participating in delinquent and problem behaviors as well. However, while the delinquent behavior is viewed as an objective risk factor or negative developmental outcome by some researchers, the youth themselves view it as a coping mechanism; this delinquent behavior allows them to cope with the loss of a biological parent, or other neglect or abuse.

While this study, and Ungar's work, offers some evidence to support this hypothesis, there needs to be further research on about the dynamics of this hypothesis. For example, in what contexts, and with what risk factors, do youth report using delinquent behaviors as a coping mechanism? Are there trends in the types of delinquent behaviors that are used and the types of risk factors that are experienced? Additionally, the work thus far has been retrospective: youth have made meaning of this coping behavior after they have stopped participating in the delinquent acts. Future research needs to parse out the meaning-making process that youth go through during the experience of risk factors and coping-based delinquency.

The third hypothesis is that meaning-making can be used as an intervention strategy. On a theoretical level, research on the meaning-making framework has demonstrated that an important part of reducing distress and supporting positive developmental outcomes is the timely resolution of the discrepancy between global and situational meaning. Rumination within this meaning-making process, with no resolution of the discrepancy, can lead to poor psychosocial outcomes and developmental issues like depression and other internalizing behaviors. On a practical level, this study offers an example of how youth who have gone through a school-based intervention—*Senior Seminar*—to help them with their situated narrative can demonstrate a more articulate understanding of their meaning-making process. Thus, on a practical and a theoretical level, this study has offered some evidence that resolving the discrepancy in the meaning-making process through an intervention that works with adolescents on their situated narrative can be helpful. Future research could explore the possibility of a randomized control trial of such an intervention to understand its merits for youth and their meaning-making process.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Senior Seminar Writing Prompt 1

*"It's surprising how much of memory  
is built around things unnoticed at the time."*

*- Barbara Kingsolver (b. 1955)*

Background: You've heard about it... You've worried about it... What you don't realize, however, is that you've already begun work on it. It's time at last to sink our teeth into *writing* the 5 Year Plan!

Assignment: The Five-Year Plan consists of three parts – the past, the present and the future. That is, Part I will be your statement about where you've been, how you grew up, how the people and places of your childhood and adolescence brought you to where you are today. It is *your* narrative of *your* life; your genogram assignment was partly designed as pre-writing for the Five-Year Plan. Continue the honest reflection that informed that earlier assignment (and, hopefully, others). Dig deep, deeper, deepest, and determine which were the circumstances and experiences that were most important in shaping *you*.

Remember: No one said this would be easy...

- Some memories are painful; tell [your teacher] if the work is upsetting.
- Outline first, draft second.
- 600 word minimum (use MS Word word count).
- 12 pt. Times New Roman font.
- Double-space.

Due Dates: I mean it!...

- Outlines are due at the end of class on Monday, 10/4.
- Drafts are due at the end of class on Thursday, 10/7.
- Final essays are due at the end of class on Thursday, 10/14.

*(Please see the writing rubric on the back of this page).*

Be Bold! · Dig Deep! · Good Luck!

<p>A</p> <p>Excellent Work</p>	<p>--The writing effectively addresses the writing task; the main idea is clear</p> <p>--The writing is well organized and well developed</p> <p>--The writing employs clearly appropriate details to illustrate ideas</p> <p>--The writing uses effective word-choice which gives a sense of style</p> <p>--The writing uses appropriate transitions to give a flow to the essay</p> <p>--The writing shows creativity in its presentation</p> <p>--Few, if any, errors in spelling, grammar, and usage</p>
<p>B</p> <p>Above Average Work</p>	<p>--The subject and main idea are clear; the writing addresses some parts of the task more effectively than others</p> <p>--The writing is generally well organized and developed, with effective transitions between main points</p> <p>--The writing employs details to illustrate ideas</p> <p>--Errors in spelling, grammar, and usage are minor</p>
<p>C</p> <p>Average Work</p>	<p>--The subject is clear, but the main idea may not be clear; the writing only adequately addresses the writing task</p> <p>--The writing is adequately organized and developed</p> <p>--Little or no detail, or points are developed with inappropriate or insufficient details</p> <p>--May contain some errors in spelling, grammar and usage that interfere with meaning</p>
<p>D</p> <p>Inadequate Work</p>	<p>--The subject may be clear, but the main idea is unclear</p> <p>--Inadequate organization and development</p> <p>--Little or no detail, or irrelevant specific detail</p> <p>--Serious and frequent errors in spelling, grammar, and usage</p>
<p>F</p> <p>Failing Work</p>	<p>--Subject and main idea unclear or off-topic</p> <p>--No clear plan</p> <p>--No support or support is confusing</p> <p>--Severe errors in language create a general impression of incoherence</p>

**Appendix B: Senior Seminar Writing Prompt 2**

*"I would rather have a good plan today than a perfect plan two weeks from now."*  
- George S. Patton (1885-1945)

Background: Congratulations! You made it through your past! Be proud of your effort thus far, and look forward to working on Parts II and III. Stay focused! Stay bold!

Assignment: Parts II and III of the Five-Year Plan are a statement about education and career plans, from now through graduation (Part II) and from graduation through June, 2015, (Part III). Think of it as a timeline of the future. Use all the job planning skills you've been practicing to create your plan. Start by researching/answering the following:

- 1) What Occupational Field do you want to try first?
- 2) What can you do between now and June to help secure a job in your field?
- 3) What is an entry level job in your field?
- 4) What education or training does your entry level job require?
- 5) What is the next level job in your field?
- 6) What education or training is required for the next level job in your field?
- 7) How long does it usually take to advance to the next level job in your field?
- 8) What is the job in your field you could be doing five years after graduation?
- 9) What education or training is required for your five year job?
- 10) What will you do to stay on track for your job during the five years?

These answers are your brainstorming. Turn them into an outline before you draft.

Remember: You control your future...

- Outline first, draft second.
- 750 word minimum (use MS Word word count).
- 12 pt. Times New Roman font.
- Double-space.

Due Dates: It's an ambitious schedule but we will meet all deadlines!...

- Outlines are due at the end of class on Tuesday, 10/26.
- Drafts are due at the end of class on Thursday, 10/28.
- Final essays are due at the end of class on Tuesday, 11/2.

*(Please see the writing rubric on the back of this page).*

Good Luck!

<p>A</p> <p>Excellent Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The writing effectively addresses the writing task; the main idea is clear</li> <li>--The writing is well organized and well developed</li> <li>--The writing employs clearly appropriate details to illustrate ideas</li> <li>--The writing uses effective word-choice which gives a sense of style</li> <li>--The writing uses appropriate transitions to give a flow to the essay</li> <li>--The writing shows creativity in its presentation</li> <li>--Few, if any, errors in spelling, grammar, and usage</li> </ul>
<p>B</p> <p>Above Average Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The subject and main idea are clear; the writing addresses some parts of the task more effectively than others</li> <li>--The writing is generally well organized and developed, with effective transitions between main points</li> <li>--The writing employs details to illustrate ideas</li> <li>--Errors in spelling, grammar, and usage are minor</li> </ul>
<p>C</p> <p>Average Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The subject is clear, but the main idea may not be clear; the writing only adequately addresses the writing task</li> <li>--The writing is adequately organized and developed</li> <li>--Little or no detail, or points are developed with inappropriate or insufficient details</li> <li>--May contain some errors in spelling, grammar and usage that interfere with meaning</li> </ul>
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<p>F</p> <p>Failing Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Subject and main idea unclear or off-topic</li> <li>--No clear plan</li> <li>--No support or support is confusing</li> <li>--Severe errors in language create a general impression of incoherence</li> </ul>



**Appendix C: Senior Seminar Writing Prompt 3**

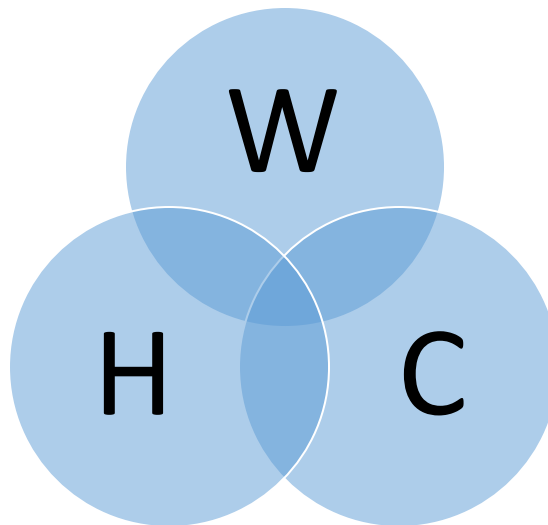
*“Open your arms to change, but don’t let go of your values.”*

*- Dalai Lama (b. 1935)*

Background: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the home stretch! You’ve written a lot about what you plan to do; now write about who you plan to be. You CAN do this...

Assignment: Who will you be five years from now? What kind of life do you plan to be leading? Which ethical values will remain important to you and how will they inform your daily life? How will you promote what you value within your Workplace, within your Community, at Home within your personal relationships. Imagine your life in 2015 and describe who you will see when you look in the mirror.

Hint:



Remember:

- 500 word minimum (use MS Word word count).
- 12 pt. Times New Roman font.
- Double-space.

Due Dates:

- Outlines are due at the start of class on Thursday, 2/25.
- Drafts are due at the end of class on Monday, 3/1.
- Final essays are due at the end of class on Thursday, 3/4.

Good Luck!

*(Please see the writing rubric on the back of this page).*

<p>A</p> <p>Excellent Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The writing effectively addresses the writing task; the main idea is clear</li> <li>--The writing is well organized and well developed</li> <li>--The writing employs clearly appropriate details to illustrate ideas</li> <li>--The writing uses effective word-choice which gives a sense of style</li> <li>--The writing uses appropriate transitions to give a flow to the essay</li> <li>--The writing shows creativity in its presentation</li> <li>--Few, if any, errors in spelling, grammar, and usage</li> </ul>
<p>B</p> <p>Above Average Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The subject and main idea are clear; the writing addresses some parts of the task more effectively than others</li> <li>--The writing is generally well organized and developed, with effective transitions between main points</li> <li>--The writing employs details to illustrate ideas</li> <li>--Errors in spelling, grammar, and usage are minor</li> </ul>
<p>C</p> <p>Average Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The subject is clear, but the main idea may not be clear; the writing only adequately addresses the writing task</li> <li>--The writing is adequately organized and developed</li> <li>--Little or no detail, or points are developed with inappropriate or insufficient details</li> <li>--May contain some errors in spelling, grammar and usage that interfere with meaning</li> </ul>
<p>D</p> <p>Inadequate Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--The subject may be clear, but the main idea is unclear</li> <li>--Inadequate organization and development</li> <li>--Little or no detail, or irrelevant specific detail</li> <li>--Serious and frequent errors in spelling, grammar, and usage</li> </ul>
<p>F</p> <p>Failing Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Subject and main idea unclear or off-topic</li> <li>--No clear plan</li> <li>--No support or support is confusing</li> <li>--Severe errors in language create a general impression of incoherence</li> </ul>

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

### *Introduction and Assent*

- Welcome student to interview and present assent form. Explain assent and tell students about confidentiality and privacy:

“Before we start this study I need you to read and sign this assent form. If you have any questions after reading the agreement, I would be happy to answer them.

Also, I would like to reiterate that you may withdraw from the study at any time. You can also skip specific questions I ask you during the interview if you do not want to answer them. There is no penalty or punishment for skipping questions or deciding to stop the interview, and no one outside this room will know what answers you give to the questions. When I talk or write about this interview, I will use a fake name so that no one knows who you are.

I will be tape-recording this interview so that I do not have to take too many notes. I will destroy this recording as soon as I have transcribed this interview without your name”

- Explain reason for interview: “In this interview I want to understand what you think about the experiences you have had in your life. I am interested in how you rate these life events in comparison to others. We will also talk about the effect that an event may have had on the rest of your life.”

### *Risk and protective factors*

- Explanation: “People who study these kinds of events and risks in the lives of youth have ideas about what has an effect on their lives and how much different events affect youth. I wanted to take a different approach and just ask you what you think about these different factors and how much they may have affected your life. I will present you with a list of life events and I want you to mark a tick next to the ones you have experienced.”
- Present following list:
  - Seen another person being beaten
  - Seen another person being stabbed
  - Parents separated or got a divorce
  - Had a baby (Became a parent)
  - Lived in a home where adults argue very loudly and fight with each other
  - Lived in a home where one or more adults have an alcohol or drug problem
  - Lived in a neighborhood that outsiders consider "poor"
  - Lived in a neighborhood that outsiders consider "violent" or "unsafe"
  - Been arrested
  - Spent time in jail or detention center
  - Been involved in gang activity
  - Friends who are part of a violent gang
  - Problems making and keeping friends
  - Beaten-up by other youth
  - Verbally bullied or teased by other youth
  - Failed a class
  - Trouble with teachers at school (or previous school)
  - Sent to school office (or previous school) for misbehavior
  - Dropped out of school

Asked to repeat a grade  
 Attended a safe and engaging after-school program  
 Caring and loving relationship with a parent or guardian  
 Strong, close relationship with an adult other than a parent (e.g., teacher, counselor)  
 Strong and supportive friendships with other people of your age  
 Lived in a neighborhood that outsiders consider "safe"  
 Attended a safe and engaging school

- Question
  - Are there events on this list that do not make sense?
  - Are there events that you or your friends have experienced that are not on this list?

### *Life-graph*

- Show student example of life-graph (see end of interview protocol)

“We’re going to create a picture that reflects the flow of your life just like this graph here. Sometimes we have events or experiences that are memorable because they affect our lives positively; other events may affect our lives negatively. And there are still other times when our life is just flowing smoothly, neither positive nor negative. Take a few minutes to consider how your life would look from birth till now, and what has been significant in shaping the direction of your life.”

- Point out how the highs and lows from one point in life can affect activities in another part of life (later in time). Point out how highs and lows can be more than a single event; it can be a collection of events and risks. Make sure students know that you will be taking graph with you at end of interview. Ask students to label graph for reference
- Questions
  - General
    - Could you please explain your life-graph to me? (Ask students to write on the graph and label events while they talk)
    - Could you please explain this “normal flow” to me? (This gives me a baseline at different points in their life from which to evaluate the rest of their responses)
  - Negative
    - Could you please explain this event/risk to me?
    - Why was this experience negative for you?
    - Do you think this event would be negative for everybody?
    - Did this event affect the rest of your life? How?
    - Compared to the other events on this graph, how much did this event affect your life?
    - Would your life be very different if that had not happened? Why?
  - Positive
    - Could you please explain this event/protective factor to me?
    - Why was this experience positive for you?
    - Do you think this event would be positive for everybody?
    - Did this event affect the rest of your life? How?

- Compared to the other events on this graph, how much did this event affect your life?

### *Narratives*

The component of the interview only applies to students who have shared their life stories with the researcher.

- Process
  - Could you tell me about how you went about writing your life story?
  - What was the hardest part? What part did you find easy to write? Why?
  - If you were going to write your life story again, what would you do differently?
- Life story versus life-graph
  - Are there things in your life story that should be on your life-graph or vice versa? Why?
- Clarifications: In this part of the interview I will ask students questions about specific parts of their life story that did not make sense or that I could not understand. I will give them time to clarify my misunderstandings.

**VITA****Nikhil D'Sa**

2002-06	College of the Atlantic Bar Harbor, Maine	B.A. June 2006
2005	Research Fellow Cornell University Ithaca, New York	
2005-06	Teaching Assistant College of the Atlantic Bar Harbor, Maine	
2007-09	Teachers College, Columbia University New York City, New York	M.A. February 2009
2009-12	Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts	M.Ed. May 2012
2009-13	Research Assistant Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts	
2010-14	Teaching Fellow Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts	
2010	Instructor Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts	
2011-12	Research Fellow Save the Children Washington, District of Columbia	
2012-14	Research Consultant Save the Children Washington, District of Columbia	
2013-14	Lecturer on Education Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts	

2014	Research Consultant Room to Read San Francisco, California
2013-Current	Doctor of Education Candidate Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts
2014-Current	Senior Specialist, Youth Research Save the Children Washington, District of Columbia