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# Time In, Time Out: Resilience Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

TIME IN, TIME OUT: RESILIENCE NARRATIVES OF  
FORMERLY INCARCERATED EMERGING ADULTS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Jennifer Jo Buser

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
School Psychology

August 2015

This Dissertation by: Jennifer Jo Buser

Entitled: *Time In, Time Out: Resilience Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of School Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

Buser, Jennifer Jo. *Time In, Time Out: Resilience Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2015.

Juvenile delinquency, incarceration, and recidivism have gained much attention from community members, law enforcement, policymakers, and school professionals in recent years. Appropriate interventions and transition practices for justice-involved youth have long been debated. Much is known about the factors that impact initial engagement in at-risk behavior that leads to juvenile incarceration; however, less is known about resilience processes that mitigate continued at-risk behavior. Many youth entering the juvenile justice system transition back into the community around the beginning of emerging adulthood, a crucial period of identity development. The aim of this study was to examine the perspectives of formerly incarcerated emerging adults in an effort to learn more about their socio-ecological resilience, negotiating identity in emerging adulthood, and aspects of coping.

In this study, six emerging adults who had been incarcerated for at least six months during adolescence, living in the community for at least six months since being released, and not on probation or parole were interviewed using a narrative inquiry approach. Their stories were analyzed using a staged-process, and themes emerged across the domains of recapturing identity, outlining character, and internalized coping. Recapturing identity included the themes of reciprocity of respect,

role transformation, redefining relationship with self and others (subthemes: loss and gain, betrayal to giving back, and self-efficacy), and culture undefined. Outlining character included the themes of protection of self and others (subtheme: boundaries) and perseverance and hope. Internalized coping included the following themes: problem-solving, creative expression, physical movement, self-acceptance, and community engagement.

These findings clarify some of the hidden resilience processes that exist for incarcerated youth and formerly incarcerated emerging adults in an effort to inform prevention, intervention, and transition practices. Significance is given to reframing the conceptualization of juvenile incarceration as a possible developmental intervention within a potentially facilitative environment. The discussion addresses that many of these resilience processes were able to emerge through the physical and social ecologies that participants encountered. Implications of these research findings will hopefully inform, educate, and contribute to the development of stronger programming and transition practices for youth and emerging adults at different stages of their transition out of incarceration. Findings are particularly relevant for policymakers and school professionals in fostering awareness of negotiating identity in light of juvenile incarceration to strengthen community support services. Future research opportunities include a closer glance at the impact of juvenile incarceration on cultural identity development as well as the interplay between justice-involved youth and the power of defining health status.

*Keywords:* juvenile incarceration, emerging adulthood, transition practices, identity development, resilience, physical ecologies, social ecologies, narrative, coping

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I feel gratitude for numerous people who have been a part of my research process. First and foremost, I am grateful for the participants and their bravery and willingness to share their stories. I have a deep sense of appreciation for each participant's resilience and identity development in light of their life experiences. I will always remember their stories, the way in which they were told, and the significance in the quest to better understand resilience in a population incarcerated as adolescents.

My Research Advisor, Robyn Hess, has been monumental in helping me organize theories, conceptualize meaning, and actualize my ideas into this evolved piece of work. She has been patient with my abstract thought and timelines with her consistent support and challenge; I am indebted to her encouragement to see me through this process. I am thankful to all of my committee members for supporting my research vision and helping me strengthen my ideas through their critical questions and reflections.

Last but not least, my parents have always fueled my strength for my academic pursuits with their belief in me, my ideas, and my work; I am thankful to them for instilling in me the value of education, work ethic, and sheer determination. Without the love and backing of my family and friends, this dissertation and degree would not have been a reality. I am forever grateful to those around me for their unwavering

confidence in me and for providing the nudges to keep going despite the many distractions that I prioritized along the way. I have learned a tremendous amount about myself, research, in general, and the human capacity to thrive.

In my personal statement for applying to the University of Northern Colorado, I opened with a quote by Marcel Proust, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes,” which has rung true with my progression to becoming a doctor, learning in-depth about research, and understanding the complexity of resilience.



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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As of 2008 in the United States, 263 juvenile offenders were in residential placement for every 100,000 juveniles in the general population (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) (Sickmund, 2010). The census data from the OJJDP reports that according to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement and the Juvenile Residential Facility Census, the rate of juvenile offenders held in public and private placement has significantly fluctuated over the past 20 years, with an increase in the 1990s then a gradual decrease since 2000 (OJJDP, 2003; Sickmund, 2010). Although the national rate of incarceration has ultimately declined, improving youth corrections practices has remained of interest to policymakers, treatment providers, and community agencies.

Predominantly, incarcerated youth are male and disproportionately of ethnic minority backgrounds (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Many individual, family, and community risk factors impact a youth's initial engagement and recidivism in delinquent behavior including mental health concerns, academic issues, disrupted home life, and disorganized neighborhoods (Nelson, Leone, & Rutherford, 2004). Less is known about protective factors for youth and the process of resilience that mitigates continued at-risk behavior.

Adolescence is a critical period of negotiating identity, relationships, and environments (Arnett, 2001, 2004). Incarceration poses a unique challenge to the developmental process (Greve, 2001). Given that the average age of incarcerated youth is around 15 years old (OJJDP, 2003), reentry and transition begins right as individuals are embarking upon emerging adulthood, which is marked by the years of roughly 18 to 25, a complicated time in life in terms of identity exploration (Arnett, 2001). Navigating a system with many labels, treatment perspectives, and agendas for health, behavior, and functioning can be a confusing experience for individuals in late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Greve, 2001; Griel & Loeb, 2009; Mota & Matos, 2013; Shulman & Cauffman, 2011). Understanding the resilience of formerly incarcerated individuals upon reentry and self-definitions related to health and empowerment is necessary for informing transition efforts with this population. Rarely do these individuals have a voice in the juvenile justice process.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Youth who engage in delinquent behaviors and come into contact with the juvenile justice system are marginalized and stigmatized by others. Adolescence is a period of dynamic growth, and these negative interactions can become an integral part of individual identity and relationships. When youth or emerging adults reenter communities after a period of incarceration their personal narratives often form around their experiences leading up to and during incarceration. Complex identifiers and terminology are used with youth throughout the court process, while incarcerated and during treatment, to define their behaviors, mental health status, and identity. Unfortunately, these labels, such as “delinquent” and “offender,” may become internalized for individuals as they reintegrate into the community, yet little is known

about how this conceptualization impacts their success. While there have been many studies that have focused on the risk factors of youth who are incarcerated, fewer studies highlight the process of resilience and how individuals interface with social ecologies.

Recidivism is difficult to gauge and understand with juveniles as what constitutes recidivism varies. While recidivism can mean the continuation of engaging in delinquent behavior, it is most often tracked as re-arrests, court contact, and/or re-incarceration. There is no way to accurately account for unreported offenses, contact with law enforcement, or offenses settled outside of the court system. Therefore, reported rates of recidivism are most likely much lower than actual rates. Recidivism research reveals that anywhere from 48% to 96% of individuals incarcerated during their youth tend to reoffend during the span of 1 to 15 years post-incarceration (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Haapanen, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Trulson, Marquart, Mullings, & Caeti, 2005; Winokur, Cass, & Blankenship, 2003). Thus, on average, about three-fourths of juveniles who were once incarcerated subsequently reoffend (Greve, 2001). Winokur et al. (2003) found that youth incarcerated for a period of one year or less were more likely to reoffend than those incarcerated for more than one year. In general, the national average length of juvenile incarceration is around three months (OJJDP, 2003). Given that most youth are incarcerated for a period of one year or less, recidivism is an alarming concern and an issue that begs considerable attention.

Although risk factors associated with recidivism are well documented, less is known about mitigation with the exception of noted protective factors which tend to be outcomes-based. The lens of many resilience studies focuses on protective

characteristics of individuals and not the environment, interactions between individuals and their environment, or underlying processes related to transition. Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, and D'Ambrosio (2001) conducted a five-year longitudinal ethnographic study examining factors that contributed to resilience in adolescents who engaged in early criminal activity. By contacting correctional staff, Todis et al. (2001) recruited male and female formerly incarcerated individuals identified to be potentially resilient across a wide variation of cultural background and histories. They gathered extensive life histories and interviewed parents, friends, teachers, and correctional staff in relation to formerly incarcerated individuals focusing on pre-delinquent lives, family and social histories, and current life status. Along with obtaining life history details such as diagnoses, criminal activity, disabilities, drug and alcohol history, and gang affiliation, perspectives of youth about what was most and least helpful in terms of interventions were also gathered (Todis et al., 2001). Outcomes were tracked over the course of the study including person-based and environmental variables associated with resilience. The framework aimed to generate a theoretical foundation of factors.

While some aspects of this study are similar to that of Todis et al. (2001), the current study builds on this work by employing a socio-ecological definition of resilience which is more specific and focuses on the interactions between individuals and contexts. This framework is guided by the resilience research principles proposed by Ungar (2011) to include decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity. Second, while outcomes may emerge in the context of interviewing, my focus was on the processes related to resilience such as identity formation, interactions with social and physical ecologies, and coping. Third, my methodology was that of

narrative inquiry which gauges the stories of individuals over the course of three months, resulting in a snapshot of understanding and meaning versus tracking outcomes long term. Fourth, I did not directly collect in-depth histories as using a postmodern framework allows individuals to define and share what they believe to be most important. Lastly, I incorporated an understanding of emerging adulthood, the unique developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood. These elements addressed the recidivism literature gap by attending to the multi-faceted underlying processes that contribute to resilience in the face of community transition from incarceration.

Juvenile incarceration is almost by definition a developmental intervention which inherently carries with it many dilemmas, namely that the developmental goals of achieving social autonomy and social integration are restricted given the environment (Greve, 2001). Thus, identity formation, coping, and well-being are naturally compromised. Contemporary theories of identity development pose that multiple identities form across the various layers of personal, cultural, and contextual realms (Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2013). For the purpose of this study, identity formation refers to the intersection of personal and cultural identities during emerging adulthood in the context of transition from incarceration. Goals, values, and beliefs as well as ethnic, cultural, and societal group memberships were taken into consideration in order to understand identity formation and how it is impacted by the incarceration process (Schwartz et al., 2013). Well-being refers to psychosocial adjustment, and coping refers to the strategies employed to navigate and negotiate life circumstances. Social contexts, roles, and responsibilities relate to well-being and health-seeking or comprising behaviors and outcomes. Coping in the



context of incarceration and transitioning out of incarceration is crucial to understanding resilience. Empowerment relates to the complex social process reflecting strengths of marginalized individuals and communities to access basic opportunities (Ungar & Teram, 2000). Understanding more about the processes and personal experiences across these domains will provide a unique developmental and socio-ecological perspective of resilience for emerging adults reentering communities.

Transition practices are in need of much attention from policymakers, mental health professionals, school personnel, and the juvenile justice system. By giving voice to their life experiences and perspectives, individuals may offer insight into how they make meaning out of the incarceration process and how this informs their identity, notions of health, and self-empowerment. In order to provide better support upon reentry, there needs to be a greater understanding about their self-definitions and personal narratives of resilience. Resilience narratives of formerly incarcerated individuals reflect valuable perspectives that may inform approaches to programming, treatment, and transition. Individuals may also find power and healing in telling their story through this lens. This approach is supported by the contributions of Freire (1970) who challenged power relations within the education system, developed a movement toward empowerment for the oppressed, created strategies to give voice to the often silenced, and made great strides in Western culture related to social justice.

### **Need for the Study**

While there are many large scale quantitative studies examining risk and protective factors, mental health symptoms, criminal histories, and recidivism of incarcerated youth, there are fewer qualitative studies that give voice to individuals incarcerated as youth, their experiences, and different perspectives. Of the qualitative

studies involving justice-involved youth, many focus on risk and protective factors, with the emphasis on risk. Fewer studies focus on identity, and even fewer focus on the conceptualization and interpretation of resilience and empowerment as a process and personal meanings for mental health. Conducting research with young at-risk individuals and interpreting findings through an adult lens poses many challenges at the onset. By providing a platform to tell their stories from a strengths-based perspective and portray images of resilience, form is given to the complexity of identity formation, personal understanding of mental health, means of empowerment, and aspects of resilience for individuals incarcerated during adolescence.

### **Purpose of the Study**

I undertook this study in order to gain a better understanding of formerly incarcerated emerging adults and their self-perceptions—specifically, in terms of resilience, empowerment, and definitions of mental health. By giving voice to a population that has historically been silenced, others can understand how they define for themselves concepts that have largely been defined for them. By creating the space for individuals to share their unique, contextual, and cultural resilience narratives, I hoped to gain insight into aspects that will help better inform transition practices for youth who engage in delinquent behaviors. Policymakers, administrators, and treatment providers who make decisions about programming in schools, treatment during incarceration, and transition services may hopefully benefit from hearing the voices and interpretations of formerly incarcerated individuals, their personal definitions, and experiences.

## Theoretical Orientation

A few different theories, such as a socio-ecological understanding of resilience, postmodernism, and constructionism, were used to guide my understanding of how formerly incarcerated emerging adults make sense of their experiences and define their personal resilience in the context of post-incarceration. Overall, an emic model of research honors ways of expression used by members in a particular group or setting to describe their experiences (Schwandt, 2007). Through this approach, one can attempt to understand the daily lives and perspectives of individuals while acknowledging cultural considerations. My understanding of the resilience process and aspects of power, empowerment, mental health, identity, and well-being were guided by the work of Ungar (2000, 2001, 2004a, 2011) who has been a leader in research with respect to at-risk youth and the resilience process. Of particular interest are his earlier studies utilizing a postmodern framework and social constructionist discourse to understand resilience narratives of at-risk youth combined, with his most recent work presenting a social ecology of resilience to address the contextual and cultural ambiguity of the construct. With the combination of these theoretical perspectives, I sought to more fully understand the experiences and perceptions of formerly incarcerated, at-risk individuals.

The early work of Ungar (2000, 2004a) utilized a postmodern perspective to explain how social realities are constructed by interactions and hinge on the language used to describe human experiences. He originally juxtaposed an ecological versus a constructionist approach to understand resilience (Ungar, 2004a). The main differences between these two approaches are based on who holds the power to create the definition and the sensitivity to context. Ungar (2004a) posited that the

nonsystemic, nonhierarchical relationship between factors across cultures and settings is chaotic, complex, relative, and contextual. The application of a constructionist perspective seems fitting to a study examining how at-risk individuals define themselves and their resilience.

In the latest work of Ungar (2011) and Ungar, Liebenberg, Landry, and Ikeda (2012), they posited that a study of resilience should involve the context first and the individual second. Aside from the power of who is informing definitions, there has long been a debate in the field of resilience research about whether to consider resilience a trait, process, or outcome. As a means of merging context, culture, and definitions to conceptualize the construct of resilience, Ungar (2011) accounted for individual qualities activated by facilitative environments, meaning social and physical ecologies, in which a process develops that protects against risk and promotes positive development. He proposed four principles to guide research and theory development: (a) decentrality, (b) complexity, (c) atypicality, and (d) cultural relativity.

A major problem with most resilience research is that it focuses on outcomes at the individual level as related to the environment instead of examining the interaction between individuals and environments as the source of resilience (Ungar, 2011). Decentrality provides a shift from the aim to change individuals to the idea of making social and physical ecologies more facilitative. Complexity emphasizes the notion of equifinality: “Many different starting points can lead to many different but equally desirable ends by many different processes relevant to different ecologies” (Ungar, 2011, p. 7). Atypicality refers to the fact that resilience may manifest in ways that are not socially acceptable based on the condition of the environment which has less to do

with individual traits (Ungar, 2011). Cultural relativity highlights that when there are positive growth processes that occur in the face of stress, they are culturally, temporally, and historically embedded (Ungar, 2011). Therefore, in addition to personal definitions of resilience, it is also crucial to consider context, culture (meaning everyday practices reflecting group and individual values, beliefs, language, and customs), and how resilience emerges from the interplay between a person and his or her environment. In the present study, these four principles were taken into account to guide research questions and serve as a framework to better understand resilience.

Ungar (2008) provided the following socio-ecological definition of resilience:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways. (p. 225)

Resilience research has its challenges, namely that there is a tendency for outcome variables to be measured arbitrarily, and sociocultural context is not always taken into account (Ungar, 2003). There are five ways in which these dilemmas can be resolved through qualitative research; qualitative methodology (a) uncovers unnamed protective processes relevant to the lived experience of participants, (b) provides thick description of context-specific phenomenon, (c) gives power to minority voices and positive outcomes from localized perspectives, (d) avoids generalization and facilitates transferability of results, and (e) requires researchers to factor in biased standpoints (Ungar, 2003).

Various layers of ethics can combine in complex ways (Nash, 2002). Lebacqz (1985) proposed that people find power in definition, the right to define reality, and the construction of reality. Constructionism underlies social science practice and basic

qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), and it is implied that meaning is constructed rather than discovered (Crotty, 1998). From a constructionist viewpoint, knowledge is dependent on human practices, meaning that humans construct knowledge by way of interacting with one another and their environment (Crotty, 1998). Within a constructionist framework, the goal is to gain an understanding of how individuals build their reality based on their experiences with others and their immediate surroundings. Constructionism lends itself to descriptive information from participants as to how they see and experience the world. Research employed through a constructionist lens honors the voice of participants and subjective meanings of experience (Creswell, 2007) and takes into account relational ethics, valuing mutual respect between researchers, individuals participating in research, and involved communities (Ellis, 2007).

Even though the research community has gone to great lengths to increase ethical awareness, there are still no definitive rules about the absolute right thing to do in every situation encountered within the field (Ellis, 2007; Nash, 2002). Thus, ethical dilemmas and debates abound. Postmodernism abandons claims to truth and deconstructs different discourses, marginalized groups in society, language, hierarchies, oppositions, inconsistencies, and contradictions (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2007). A postmodernist view offers a description of contemporary social, economic, cultural, and political conditions (Crotty, 1998) and fosters research approaches with these factors in mind. Given that social science research, especially with vulnerable populations, delves into the subjective experiences of participants, an emphasis on relativity and challenging ways of thinking seems a relevant and meaningful perspective to adopt.

Liamputtong (2007) invited researchers to consider the risks and benefits for participants, especially if participants are part of a vulnerable population which brings to light Lebacqz's (1985) conceptualization of the good professional, ideally avoiding the research approach of "pimping" the participants, merely using their contributions for personal gain. Negative consequences for participants must always be considered as well as how participants might benefit from involvement in the study so as to not end up stigmatizing certain groups. In the case of research with formerly incarcerated emerging adults, the participants may already feel marginalized; therefore, special measures need to be taken to highlight the value of their participation and decrease the perception of being "used."

Narrative inquiry is one type of qualitative methodology that lends itself well to researching the resilience of formerly incarcerated emerging adults. The process allows participants to tell their stories and allows for a postmodern representation of participants' personal definitions of resilience, mental health, identity, empowerment, and well-being. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed the three-dimensions of narrative inquiry: (a) the interaction between the personal and social space, (b) the continuity of the past, present, and future, and (c) the place or situation. For this particular study, which honors personal definitions as well as interactions with social ecologies, narrative inquiry gives way to the construction of experiences as well as the meaning derived from these encounters.

Liebenberg (2009) made a strong case for using visual images in narrative research as a means to (a) highlight values and expectations, (b) provide information regarding the cultural reality of the participants' communities, (c) bring greater depth to the area of study, (d) reflect richer contextual knowledge, and (e) close the gap of

possible misunderstandings and misinterpretations when engaging marginalized groups in the research process. By utilizing visual images to draw out narratives, personal representations emerge as opposed to dominant representations (Liebenberg, 2009) which lends to an emic approach to research.

Ungar (2011) identified seven challenges in attempting to understand narratives of resilience: “1) access to material resources, 2) relationships, 3) identity, 4) power and control, 5) cultural adherence, 6) social justice, and 7) cohesion” (p. 13). With context and culture in mind, resilience can be viewed as an interaction between a person and his or her social and physical ecologies which address the challenges of overlooking cultural and contextual power differentiation and definitions. Didkowsky, Ungar, and Liebenberg (2010) acknowledged three problems with using interviews alone to understand the process of resilience: (a) power imbalances between the researcher and those participating in research, (b) lack of engagement in the research process on the part of adolescent and young adult participants, and (c) barriers with respect to language. By utilizing a visual method to help elicit stories and meaning from participants, I hoped to increase the validity of the study. In-depth interviewing with a visual component provides the basis to better understand the embedded resilience processes of individuals incarcerated during adolescence, gives form to self-definitions, and gains perspective about how youth interact with their social and physical ecologies.



## **Research Questions**

As qualitative research is flexible in nature, there was a strong possibility that my research questions would shift over the course of this study. Due to the complexity of studying and understanding the process of resilience, especially with emerging adults, my own perspective became more developed over time which led to further questions. The elements of this study were inspired by the work of Ungar (2000, 2011) and his advances in the field of resilience research. Although much of his work focused on research, clinical work, and understanding the interaction of personal, contextual, and cultural factors impacting resilience in at-risk youth, very few of his studies have focused on resilience in relation to involvement with the juvenile justice system, incarceration, or post-incarceration. In my study, I aimed to adapt Ungar's concepts in application to emerging adults formerly incarcerated as adolescents. The foundational research questions I set out to answer through the responses of the participants are as follows:

- Q1 How do formerly incarcerated emerging adults define themselves in relation to their unique contextual, cultural, social, physical, and developmental ecologies?
- Q2 What definitions do formerly incarcerated emerging adults provide for concepts such as resilience, mental health, well-being, and empowerment?
- Q3 What aspects of their lives do formerly incarcerated emerging adults identify that help explain how they cope with adversity?

## **Assumptions**

Acknowledging inherent personal and methodological assumptions at the outset of a qualitative study is an integral part of understanding the beliefs that guide the research. The following assumptions were recognized in the research process:

**Personal Assumptions**

1. Youth come into contact with the juvenile justice system due to the interplay of many individual, contextual, and cultural factors;
2. At-risk youth experience a multitude of contexts and realities leading up to incarceration, during incarceration, and upon reentry into the community;
3. The strengths and resilience of at-risk, incarcerated, and formerly incarcerated individuals are often overlooked and unacknowledged by community members; and
4. Formerly incarcerated individuals are met with many challenges upon reentry into their communities which may pose as barriers to successful transition.

**Methodological Assumptions**

1. By utilizing narrative inquiry and visual methodology, participants are empowered by sharing their stories of resilience, strengths, and how they overcome adversity;
2. Participants become engaged in the research process, and power differentiation between the researcher and individuals are reduced through the choice of methodology;
3. The use of visual imagery accounts for possible language barriers and difficulties in articulating lived experiences;
4. Participants have the opportunity to communicate a resilience narrative and re-story their understanding of themselves, terms applied to them, and aspects of their unique ecologies that help them cope; and
5. Adopting a postmodern perspective allows space for marginalized individuals and groups to express and create personal meaning in times of transition.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have several implications for individuals at-risk and formerly incarcerated as juveniles, treatment providers, correctional staff, school personnel, and community members. First, by operating within a postmodernist framework, I hoped to change ways of thinking about juvenile incarceration and treatment while honoring multiple perspectives surrounding the power of definitions, positive growth in the face of significant adversity, and ways of coping. Second, I intended to highlight the positive experiences of marginalized individuals who are otherwise defined through delinquent, pathological, and antisocial lenses. Third, a greater understanding of the interaction between individuals and their environments was developed. Finally, it was expected that insights from formerly incarcerated individuals would be gained in an effort to better inform transition efforts and practices.

### **Limitations**

Some possible limitations of this study include difficulty recruiting participants and decreasing potential attrition. Second, the selection of participants was a convenience sample based on purposive sampling which is a weakness consistent with qualitative or quantitative research. Third, establishing trust with participants took some time. Finally, merging the theoretical perspectives of postmodernism, social constructionism, and the social ecology of resilience proved challenging.

### **Definitions of Terms**

A postmodern-constructionist framework seldom lends itself to objective definitions about concepts as the intention is for participants to provide their own definitions. However, there may be terms discussed that are unknown to the reader or

defined a certain way in the context of this study. For consistency purposes, a short list of uncommon term definitions is provided.

**Adjudication.** Decision, judgment, or sentence made through a legal process and/or court proceedings.

**Commitment.** Juvenile is confined at a restrictiveness level determined by statute to exercise active control.

**Detainment.** Temporary care of a juvenile in a secure, non-secure, or community setting pending court adjudication, disposition, or execution of a court order.

**Incarceration.** Confinement based on accountability and punishment for a crime.

**Narrative inquiry.** A qualitative research methodology that utilizes field texts, interviews, photos, and other artifacts to understand how people make meaning of their lives through the use of stories.

**Photo-elicitation.** A methodological tool of utilizing visual material to elicit information from people and assist with the meaning-making process; it is thought to be especially effective with youth and marginalized populations.

**Reentry.** The process of transitioning back into one's community after a period of being incarcerated.

**Resilience.** Ungar (2008) stated:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways. (p. 225)

**Resilience research principles.** Proposed by Ungar (2011) to frame research and theory development in the area of resilience:

*Atypicality.* Resilience may manifest in socially unacceptable ways based on conditions in the environment versus individual traits.

*Complexity.* Emphasizes the notion of equifinality: “Many different starting points can lead to many different but equally desirable ends by many different processes relevant to different ecologies” (p. 7).

*Cultural relativity.* Highlights that when there are positive growth processes that occur in the face of stress, they are culturally, temporally, and historically embedded.

*Decentrality.* Shifts focus from the individual level to examining facilitative components within social and physical ecologies.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Youth Incarceration and Recidivism**

Approximately one quarter of the United States population is comprised of youth under the age of 18 (Puzzanchera, Finnegan, & Kang, 2004). An estimated 2.18 million juveniles were arrested by United States law enforcement agencies in 2007, accounting for 16% of all violent crime arrests and 26% of all property crime arrests (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007). According to the *Juvenile Court Statistics 2001-2002*, the juvenile courts handle over 1.5 million delinquency cases annually (Stahl, Puzzanchera, Finnegan, Tierney, & Snyder, 2002). On the census date in 2003, nearly 92,000 youth were held in juvenile detention and correctional facilities (OJJDP, 2003), a decrease since the peak in 2000 with 108,802 juvenile offenders (Sickmund, 2010). Although national juvenile incarceration rates have fluctuated (OJJDP, 2003), fewer than 81,000 juveniles were housed in correctional facilities in 2008 (Sickmund, 2010). Regardless, a significant number of youth are processed through the juvenile justice system each year, and incarceration continues to be a concern.

#### **The Juvenile Justice System**

In many ways, the juvenile justice system of today is still in its infancy. The structure was developed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a means to process youth through the legal system differently than adults, taking into consideration development and the

potential for rehabilitation. Juvenile courts were established with the sole intention of protecting and rehabilitating youth while creating dispositions that were in their best interest. In the 1960s, partially in response to the public's expressed concern about the length of time youth were incarcerated and the system's effectiveness, the United States Supreme Court required juvenile courts to become more formalized in terms of sentencing. Previously, youth were held until they were either "cured" or turned 21 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Additionally, juvenile courts were required to adhere to certain standards that exist within the criminal justice system for adults such as the rights to be notified of charges, present witnesses, and have an attorney. Despite legislative attempts to establish consistent operations within the juvenile justice system, each state has adopted different definitions of what it means to be a juvenile and the codes applied to address the behaviors of youth processed through the system. While some codes emphasize prevention and treatment goals and others stress punishment, most codes attempt a balanced approach of both management and retribution (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Since the inception of the OJJDP in the mid-1990s housed within the United States Department of Justice, many systems have been put into place to track juvenile arrests, court hearings, and incarceration rates (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

### **Demographics**

To compile national demographic data, most systems utilize a four-race coding structure including the terms White, Black, American Indian, and Asian. According to the United States Census Bureau, as of 2002, 77.9% of the juvenile population was classified as White, 16.4% Black, 1.4% American Indian, and 4.4% Asian, while 2.5% of juveniles classified themselves as multiracial and 18% were of Hispanic ethnicity

(Puzzanchera et al., 2004). National demographic information does not seem to portray a detailed report of the ethnic differences of youth, even though Hispanic youth represent the third largest incarcerated population next to Black youth with a 2.8:1 ratio of the custody rate for minorities to that of White youth (Sickmund, 2010, 2010). Data for Hispanic youth are not typically disaggregated from the White category which masks the disproportionality of Hispanic youth in correctional facilities.

Criminal behavior tends to be broken down into two categories: violent and property. Violent crimes include murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. In examining arrests for violent crimes in 2007, 47% of crimes involved White youth, 51% Black youth, 1% American Indian youth, and 1% Asian youth. In terms of property crime arrests in 2007, the breakdown involved 66% White youth, 23% Black youth, 1% American Indian youth, and 1% Asian youth. Property crimes include burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft. Regardless of the type of offense, females accounted for 29% of the juvenile arrests and males 71% of arrests (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007).

In general, juvenile delinquent behavior is underrepresented in official records as many crimes committed by juveniles are never reported to authorities, and often times, even if a crime is reported, a juvenile is not always arrested (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). In 2007, 19% of arrests involving youth were handled within law enforcement agencies (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007) meaning that they were not processed through the juvenile courts. Overall, there has been a strong trend of significantly more male and a disproportionate number of minority youth represented throughout the juvenile justice system continuum from arrests to incarceration. These



disproportionate rates are reflected throughout the literature on juvenile offenders, youth incarceration, and recidivism.

### **Incarceration**

Juveniles are incarcerated in various types of facilities for a myriad of reasons with variable lengths of stay. As noted, the definition of juvenile varies from state to state with most adhering to the legal definition of individuals under the age of 18, while some states define juveniles to be under the age of 16 or 17, and yet other states consider anyone under the age of 21 to be a juvenile (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Regardless, most facilities that house juveniles have a small percentage of residents between the ages of 18 to 21 years and older. As for the type of facility, the reason for incarceration, and the duration of stay, there is a wide variation.

As a result of contact with the legal system, some juveniles are either committed or detained to public or private residential placement facilities. Commitment means a youth is apprehended to a facility as part of a court-ordered disposition or outcome and usually involves a longer stay. Detainment means a youth is held prior to or after adjudication or sentencing while awaiting disposition or placement elsewhere or as part of a diversion agreement which usually involves a shorter stay (OJJDP, 2003). According to the OJJDP (2003), based on the 2003 census statistics, the median length of time for juvenile offenders held in placement was 68 days. The median time was greater for males (71 days) than females (48 days) and greater for White youth (72 days) than minority youth (64 days). Youth who are detained can be held anywhere from a few hours to a few months or longer, while committed youth are typically held for several months to years depending on their sentence.

Public and private juvenile residential facilities include detention centers, shelters, reception and diagnostic centers, group homes, boot camps, ranch and wilderness camps, and long-term secure facilities. Based on data from 2002, detention centers tend to be run by local agencies and long-term facilities managed by the state, while group homes are privately operated (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). According to the *Juvenile Offenders and Victims:2006 National Report* (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), more than half of all public facilities are local facilities; however, state facilities held more than half of all juvenile offenders in public facilities. Private facilities are more numerous, yet they house fewer offenders. Locally operated public facilities hold more youth than private facilities, but overall, long-term, state-run secure facilities contain the most youth.

The OJJDP collects information on juveniles held in detention and correctional facilities using primarily two data collection programs: the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement and the Juvenile Residential Facility Census. The programs are administered in alternating years, collecting individual and facility information from all secure and non-secure residential placement facilities. These programs calibrate a snapshot of census data from facilities one day out of each year. On the census date in 2003, 88% of the residents in juvenile placement facilities were accused or adjudicated juvenile offenders, 78% of all residents for delinquency offenses along with 95% of all juvenile offenders, and the remaining 5% were status offenders (OJJDP, 2003). A delinquency offense refers to an offense that an adult can be processed for in criminal court, and a status offense is specific to juveniles and does not apply to adults (e.g., violating curfew, truancy) (Stahl et al., 2002). Some youth were held but not charged with or adjudicated for an offense. Non-offenders and youth ages 21 years or older

accounted for 12% of all residents (OJJDP, 2003). Surprisingly, the average length of time status offenders were held was comparable to the average length of time for weapons, auto theft, burglary, and theft offenders (103 to 107 days) (Stahl et al., 2002).

Further examination of the statistics reveals that youth ages 16 and 17 years old comprise 25% of the entire youth population ages 10 to 17, 50% of juvenile arrests, almost 40% of delinquent court cases, and more than 50% of juveniles in residential placement (OJJDP, 2003). These data may suggest that youth are most at risk at about age 16 which is also the legal driving age. In 2003, females accounted for 15% of juvenile offenders in custody, totaling around 14,590 females, leaving males to account for roughly 85% of juveniles in residential placement (OJJDP, 2003). Females who are incarcerated tend to be younger, on average, than males. For juveniles 15 years old and younger in 2003, 46% were female and 33% were male. Non-Hispanic Whites made up 45% of the female juvenile offender population and 38% of males. Minority youth accounted for the majority of both males (62%) and females (55%) in residential placement (OJJDP, 2003).

Even though youth are not detained in most delinquency cases, they may be detained when a case is referred and held in a detention facility while the case is being processed for the following reasons if the youth (a) is a threat to the community, (b) will be at risk if returned to the community, (c) may fail to appear at an upcoming hearing, or (d) is in need of diagnostic evaluation (Stahl et al., 2002). Some administrators and policymakers argue that holding youth in detention facilities for reasons related to severe mental health concerns, developmental disabilities, or diagnostic evaluation is not the purpose of juvenile corrections. Moreover, detention

staff is not trained to handle or treat concerns of this magnitude. However, a high percentage of incarcerated youth meet criteria for clinical diagnoses. The National Juvenile Detention Association advocates that juvenile offenders with serious mental health issues should be placed in therapeutic environments instead of juvenile detention facilities (National Juvenile Detention Association, 2001).

The very goals of the juvenile justice system and incarceration are in competition with the cycle of recidivism and the tendency for youth to continue coming into contact with law enforcement. Regardless of the reason a youth is incarcerated or the length of time held, incarceration instead of diversion increases the likelihood that a youth will continue to reoffend and be recommitted to a residential facility. The factors that impact a youth's risk of offending and reoffending are often closely related.

### **Recidivism**

Recidivism can be defined as the repetition of criminal behavior and can include anything from a correctional status change to reoffending, rearrests, court referrals, convictions, and correctional commitments (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The difficulty in measuring recidivism is that not all offenses are reported, especially juvenile offenses, and no national recidivism data exist due to the wide variation in how juvenile justice systems operate across the country.

Cottle et al., (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of research studies between 1983 and 2000 to determine risk factors that best predict juvenile recidivism. The analysis included 22 published studies with unique samples examining juveniles between the ages of 12 and 21 years old with either official record or self-report recidivism data. Of 15,265 participants (83.31% male, 47.9% White, 38.18% Black)

with a mean age of 14.7, a mean sample size of 688.4 participants, and a mean follow-up period of 45.26 months, the overall mean recidivism rate was 48% (Cottle et al., 2001). Predictor variables were identified and divided into eight domains, including (a) demographic information, (b) offense history, (c) family and social factors, (d) educational factors, (e) standardized test scores, (f) substance use history, (g) clinical factors, and (h) formal risk assessment.

Among the variables significantly associated with recidivism, demographic information such as being male, of a minority race, and from a low socioeconomic background increased risk of reoffending. Offense history variables such as earlier age of first contact with the law, earlier age at first commitment, more prior arrests, more previous commitments, longer incarcerations, and those who committed more serious crimes were also at high risk for recidivism. A history of physical or sexual abuse, being raised in a single-parent home, having a greater number of out-of-home placements, or having significant family problems also increased risk for recidivism. Social variables positively related to recidivism included juveniles who did not use their time effectively and those with delinquent peers. In terms of educational factors, a history of special education increased risk of recidivism. Lower standardized test scores, lower full-scale IQ scores, and lower verbal IQ scores were significantly associated with recidivism along with substance abuse, a history of conduct problems, non-severe pathology, and any kind of formal risk assessment. Cottle et al. (2001) concluded that the domains of offense history and family and social factors consistently associated with recidivism, and the strongest individual predictors were a younger age at first commitment, younger age at first contact with the law, and history of non-severe pathology.

In addition to holding youth accountable for their behaviors, another goal of the juvenile justice system is to reduce recidivism. Some researchers have examined the length of stay in a juvenile correctional setting to determine if it makes a difference on recidivism. For example, within high-risk residential facilities in Florida, it was found that youth who were incarcerated for 12 months or less were more likely to offend than those who stayed 13 months or longer; there was a 56% probability of reoffending with a 4- to 6-month stay (Winokur et al., 2003). Trulson et al. (2005) also found that youth who had longer stays were less likely to be re-arrested. However, there is no consistent relationship between length of confinement and recidivism. There are differences between low-level versus high-level facilities, treatment provided, and types of offenses youth in different settings have committed. Thus, the length of stay does not seem to be as significant as other factors impacting recidivism.

Consistent factors affecting recidivism appear to be the age at first point of contact with the system, mental health, and substance use (Cottle et al., 2001; McReynolds, Schwalbe, & Wasserman, 2010; Trulson et al., 2005). Youth who first come into contact with the system at a young age are at an increased risk of reoffending upon release. When examining recidivism for serious, violent, and chronic youth released from a juvenile correctional system, out of 2,436 youth, 85% were rearrested within 5 years following release, and 80% were rearrested for a felony (Trulson et al., 2005). Similarly, among 500 juvenile males incarcerated and released in Massachusetts in the 1940s and 1950s who engaged in follow-up interviews until the age of 70, 85% were rearrested at least once during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (ages 17 to 24) (Sampson & Laub, 2003).

Youth with mental health diagnoses, substance use disorders, and special educational needs are not only at higher risk for involvement with the juvenile justice system, but they also make up a large percentage of the incarcerated population and remain at increased risk for reoffending upon release. Given the difficulties incarcerated youth face, it is important to understand more about the programming youth encounter on the juvenile justice continuum.

### **Program and Transition Considerations**

The philosophy of a balanced management and retribution approach applied by the juvenile justice system in terms of behaviors concurrently addresses the mental health and substance use concerns that youth experience and the impact these conditions have on a youth's offending behavior. Depending on the type of facility and resources available, correctional placements take different approaches to programming, treatment, and transition services based on state regulations, training level of staff, and the needs of youth incarcerated in the facility. Extensive research has been conducted on elements of programming, treatment effectiveness, and aftercare considerations for youth involved with the justice system. Several limitations have been discovered which have posed various dilemmas for policymakers, correctional facility staff, community agencies, and youth themselves. Continuity of care is one of the main ideals identified when considering appropriate and effective treatment and transition options for justice-involved youth. Understanding types of programming in juvenile correctional settings is important as it has a direct impact on identity development and how individuals might perceive and conduct themselves upon discharge.

## **Programming**

All residential correctional facilities that house youth offenders are structured around elements of programming such as correctional education, behavior management, restorative justice, treatment practices, and transition services. Most facilities maintain behavior management programs with educational programming embedded into the system. Behavior modification through methods such as point systems, token economies, and behavioral contracting are often implemented in youth correctional settings (Abrams, Kim, & Anderson-Nathe, 2005). Restorative justice and treatment components tend to be more individualized to accommodate youth and their specific needs. Program factors either aid or hinder a youth's development and success throughout the transition to community process. These different approaches are discussed separately with the understanding that they operate concurrently throughout the duration of a youth's stay at a correctional facility. Unfortunately, most juvenile justice programs focus on the needs of males and overlook the unique needs of females. While the general male mode of programming targets aggression and externalizing behaviors, the National Juvenile Detention Association (2005) advocates that females are in need of programming that emphasizes relationships, a safe environment, and female role models.

**Correctional education.** Given that negative school experiences, academic failure, and low interest in school are predictors of juvenile delinquency, many challenges are involved in educational programming within juvenile justice settings. In a review of literature to identify academic characteristics of youth and correctional programs, Foley (2001) examined 64 different journals across several academic disciplines from 1975 to 1999 and conducted a computer database search for the years



1975 to 2000 related to juvenile delinquents and correctional education. The reviewed studies concluded that incarcerated youth tend to function within below average to average levels of intelligence and academic functioning averages from one year to several years behind grade level, typically from a 5<sup>th</sup> to a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, which negatively impacts skills in the areas of reading, writing, oral language, and math achievement (Foley, 2001).

With the diversity of individual characteristics, correctional education faces the challenge of targeting grade school to postsecondary education levels. In addition to catering to different levels of learning, correctional teachers also have to contend with a high rate of transition as new youth are detained, committed, and discharged on a daily basis. Foley (2001) found that academic programming in correctional settings shared the features of instructional groupings and diverse curricula. Various educational assessment models were implemented in which a high number of youth were identified as needing special education services. Other instructional strategies in correctional education entail a General Educational Development track, data-based instruction, content area instruction, cooperative learning, and tutoring (Foley, 2001). Explicitly teaching literacy-related skills on a daily or weekly basis has been shown to be effective in helping incarcerated youth develop the basic skills for any educational or vocational trajectory (Foley, 2001; Gagnon & Barber, 2010). In a qualitative study of nine successful graduates of juvenile residential programs ages 18 to 23, several participants identified that the schools in their residential settings helped them become involved and changed their perspectives of structured learning which contributed to their personal success (Mincey, Maldonado, Lacey, & Thompson, 2008).

**Restorative justice.** Restorative justice is a philosophy and process based on the needs and roles that crime creates, victim harm and repair, and offender responsibility (Zehr, 2002). The restorative justice perspective views crimes as interpersonal violations instead of simply breaking the law, and the philosophical shift focuses on the obligations of offenders to make wrongs right and repair the harm imposed on their victims (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011; Zehr, 2002). There has been a trend in recent years of juvenile justice settings adopting restorative justice programming to engage youth in developing victim empathy and understanding the impact of their crimes. Some restorative justice practices involve youth meeting their victims, and through a facilitated discussion, learning more about the harm they inflicted and having the opportunity to apologize. Through semi-structured interviews with 37 youth recruited from juvenile probation departments, themes emerged that the participants did not find the process to be easy, but overall, viewed meeting their victims as a “good punishment” (Choi et al., 2011). Choi and colleagues (2011) found that engaging youth in mediations with their victims provided a learning opportunity, the ability to see different aspects of their crimes, a chance to better understand their victims, and helped to put a human face on a crime.

**Mental health treatment practices.** Treatment practices tend to vary widely from one facility to another depending on staff expertise and experience, resources available, and the philosophical approach to programming. However, most correctional facilities incorporate some degree of treatment in the form of individual and group therapy for committed youth. Most of the treatment available to youth appears to follow cognitive behavior therapy principles, including elements of teaching dialectical, problem-solving, and life skills; these approaches are helping to

improve outcomes, reduce recidivism, and reduce mental health symptoms of incarcerated youth (Gagnon & Barber, 2010; Greenwood, 2008).

Abrams and colleagues (2005) examined the paradoxes of treatment in juvenile corrections by interviewing 12 male residents in a facility that operates with the combined approaches of behavior modification, psychological treatment, and traditional corrections. Participants identified three major tensions between the interplay of these approaches. Emotional expression, delinquency interpretation, and “jumping through hoops” were the paradoxes that youth experienced while incarcerated in a facility that implemented various treatment approaches (Abrams et al., 2005). While treatment encourages the expression of emotion, correctional practices encourage greater control of emotion. In therapy, youth learn that their delinquent behavior may stem from interpersonal issues, yet a correctional model emphasizes “bad choices” and “criminal thinking” (Abrams et al., 2005). Lastly, youth can expedite their release date by faking change in treatment activities to present in a favorable light for staff which promotes manipulation instead of rehabilitation. Programming can only go so far in helping youth; internal aspects of identity resilience will play a role in a youth’s ability to transition successfully.

In a compelling study about how adolescents construct their narrative identities in correctional institutions, Miller (2011) interviewed seven young women who completed a specialized treatment program for sex offenders in a juvenile residential facility about how they made meaning of their treatment experiences. Through telling their narratives, the participants described the expectations and stages of treatment they underwent. The stages of treatment that emerged from the narratives included (a) taking responsibility for the offense, (b) aligning language and behavior with that of

treatment discourse, (c) learning ways of talking, and (d) separating people from their actions (Miller, 2011). Miller utilized the work of Penuel and Wertsch (1995) which merged Erikson's (1968) theory on adolescent identity development with Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) sociocultural theory of learning to understand that identity formation of adolescents in the context of an institutional setting is a collaborative process of meaning-making between youth and staff through guided learning. This study provided valuable insight into the process of identity formation of youth while incarcerated during a critical period of development and how treatment may impact a youth's narrative identity.

Unfortunately, due to varying lengths of stay, youth rarely receive consistent treatment, and it does not always carry over when a youth transitions from a facility back into the community. Teplin and colleagues (2006) found that approximately 15% to 30% of detained youth with a mental disorder received treatment. When youth are detained in secure facilities, they are not involved in the regular programming that youth receive when they are committed for longer stays. Therefore, when treatment is consistent and continuous over time, it has more of a positive impact on youth; but due to challenges in the length of stay and continued care in the community upon transition, treatment is often implemented sporadically. While consistent treatment during incarceration may impact positive outcomes upon release, it seems youth would need to be incarcerated for a longer period of time for treatment to be most effective. Most youth are incarcerated for less than a year; thus the impact of treatment on successful transition is difficult to gauge.

## **Transition Services**

There is overlap in the protective factors that help support youth from engaging in or continuing delinquent behavior and elements that cater to a successful transition. As many of the risk factors that serve as predictors of delinquent behavior, those that maintain it, lead to incarceration, and contribute to the recidivism cycle, the protective factors and components of successful transition that decrease the rate of offending and recidivating are also closely related. Close relationships with pro-social adults, treatment providers, and peers are significant as well as the organization of facilitative environments and systems of support.

Hartwell, McMackin, Tansi, and Bartlett (2010) interviewed 35 male juvenile offenders ages 14 to 20 in Massachusetts about community reentry experiences and post discharge issues utilizing a mixed methodological approach focusing on nine areas: (a) family, (b) criminal history, (c) education and employment, (d) religion and spirituality, (e) health and mental health, (f) peers, (g) substance use, (h) trauma, and (i) perspectives on programs, services, and needs. The study consisted of youth who had spent at least six months in a residential treatment facility. They found that nearly half of the youth (17 of 35) were rearrested immediately after discharge, and 18 youth remained arrest free while in the community for at least three months or more after being discharged (Hartwell et al., 2010). A high number of risk factors consistent with other research findings were identified for these particular youth such as family instability, academic difficulty, delinquent peers, substance abuse, exposure to trauma, early onset of criminal behavior, and lack of involvement in religious training or practice (Hartwell et al., 2010). Of particular interest, youth provided insight into the interpersonal relationships that would be helpful in terms of post discharge

programming and community reentry: mentorship by individuals with similar backgrounds and life experiences, one-on-one time with youth services staff, family contact, strong bonds with mothers, and role modeling and teaching about respect by youth service workers (Hartwell et al., 2010). These findings emphasized the importance of the type and quality of interpersonal relationships when reentering the community from incarceration.

Ungar et al. (2012) examined provider–caregiver–adolescent interaction from 44 youth with complex needs who were utilizing more than one psychosocial service, such as child welfare, mental health, addictions, juvenile justice, and special education. Five patterns of service provider–caregiver–adolescent interaction were documented: (a) family empowerment, (b) system responsibility, (c) conflicted caregivers, (d) seeking an alliance, and (e) responsabilization (when service providers expect youth and caregivers to take responsibility for their own care) (Ungar et al., 2012). Youth perceived family empowerment as a protective factor, while the other interaction patterns produced triangulation which led to conflict and were ultimately unsupportive (Ungar et al., 2012). This study demonstrated the complexity of interactions that service providers, families, and youth encounter while navigating psychosocial services. Too often a dynamic arises where families and youth are reliant upon services to sustain well-being, while service providers expect youth and families to take responsibility for seeking the services they need. The process of transition for justice-involved youth is one that requires much attention and consideration especially in light of the goal to reduce recidivism.

Abrams (2006) interviewed 10 youth released from a 12-month therapeutic correctional institution in Minnesota about their perceptions of the challenges of

transition—specifically if perceptions change over the course of the transition process and what coping strategies and sources of support are useful. Youth identified logistical challenges related to the transition period such as obtaining jobs, accessing transportation, and attending school as well as social challenges such as the influence of old friends (Abrams, 2006). Most youth described selective involvement with old friends and staying busy to be primary coping skills, and the support of family members appeared to be more valued than the use of formal supports such as therapists or social workers (Abrams, 2006). Overwhelmingly, across qualitative findings about supports and protective factors, it meant a lot for youth to stay connected to family members and repair relationships upon discharge from incarceration even if the relationships were strained prior to and during incarceration.

In a process-oriented evaluation of an intensive aftercare program for youth transitioning out of residential settings, Flynn and Hanks (2003) evaluated a network aftercare system in Alabama. Using multiple methods such as focus groups, interviews, and notes from meetings with residential staff, case managers, aftercare counselors, administrators, and program directors, there was a consensus that while interpersonal relationships were good, there was low morale, high caseloads, and poor communication; further, treatment philosophies of program administrators differed greatly (Flynn & Hanks, 2003). Many aftercare programs run into issues of inconsistency in the implementation of services due to staff burnout, staff turnover, and a break in continuity of care. These are just some of the concerns facing transitioning youth.

It is unlikely that one system can provide the support and services needed to effectively assist youth in their transition. More often, a combination of services is

necessary to support the complex needs of youth. Shufelt, Coccozza, and Skowrya (2010) posed that there are many advantages, challenges, and strategies for collaborating with the juvenile justice system. Among recipients, families, youth, programs, systems, and the community may benefit if mental health and juvenile justice systems increase collaboration when providing services to incarcerated and transitioning youth due to less fragmentation of systems, program sustainability, and joint responsibility (Shufelt et al., 2010). Strategies to address the philosophical barriers include early involvement of justice system representatives in planning, appointing liaisons to bridge the gap between systems, and tracking the cost savings of collaboration; in addition, cross-training of staff and collaboratively developing program manuals are strategies for navigating communication barriers (Shufelt et al., 2010).

The Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in Community Settings project examined the transition of 531 incarcerated youth (58% with a disability) from Oregon's juvenile justice system over a five-year longitudinal study (Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002). A prospective survey approach for interviewing was used, and youth were asked about work, education, social services, and reflections of the juvenile justice system. The findings suggested that males, special education status, and those not engaged in work or school were more likely to return to the juvenile correctional system (Bullis et al., 2002). Therefore, as many studies have revealed, youth who keep to a schedule and remain engaged in work and/or school routines tend to refrain, at least in frequency, from criminal behavior.



## **Risk and Vulnerability**

The factors that increase the risk of youth offending, incarceration, recidivism, and adapting to “life on the outs” (outside of incarceration) are complex and often involve an interaction between several components rather than a singular cause. Youth exposed to risk factors, especially multiple risk factors, at younger ages are at increased risk for delinquency, incarceration, and recidivism throughout adolescence and into adulthood. There are many personal, environmental, and community risk factors that contribute to delinquent and offending behaviors. Different combinations of individual and environmental factors make some youth more vulnerable than others, thus heightening the risk of delinquency and incarceration. Depending on when the risk factors first occur in the development process, they may have varying impact on the propensity for delinquency.

Typically, youth who are involved in the justice system share certain characteristics such as ethnic minority identities, difficulties at school, poor academic performance, low reading levels, history of suspension and expulsion, dropping out of school, learning disabilities, and mental health diagnoses (Nelson et al., 2004). However, none of these characteristics, individually or combined, absolutely equate with delinquency. Risk factors for juvenile delinquency are almost identical to risks for poor educational and life outcomes of youth, and they span across individual attributes of demographic, psychological, educational, and psychiatric domains as well as the areas of family, school, peers, and communities (Nelson et al., 2004).

In a review of literature, Christle, Nelson, and Jolivette (2002) determined that low socioeconomic status is the most common risk factor among youth who experience poor educational and life outcomes such as failing or dropping out of

school, unemployment, instability in relationships, homelessness, substance abuse, and criminal activity. For youth who grow up in a low socioeconomic household, their parent(s) or caregiver(s) tend to have a low education level; therefore, reading may not be valued or modeled, and there are multiple family stressors present (Druian & Butler, 2001). Other factors within the home such as parent criminality or favorable perceptions of criminal behavior, parenting practices such as harsh, ineffective, and inconsistent discipline, lack of parental involvement, supervision or rejection by parents, in addition to child abuse and/or neglect also influence development and delinquent behaviors (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Quinsey, Skilling, Lalumiere, & Craig, 2004). Some theorists hypothesize that there is a close relationship between economic stress and child maltreatment and that given poor and ineffective parenting and a distant bond between parent and child, the risk of juvenile delinquency increases greatly (Weatherburn & Lind, 2006). In addition, youth from low income households are more likely to be incarcerated than youth from families who have the means to intervene.

In a study of perceived barriers and protective factors of juvenile offenders on their developmental pathway to adulthood, Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk, and Yamamoto (2009) interviewed 51 adjudicated adolescents using naturalist inquiry and asked youth to describe both barriers and supports expected upon returning to the community or while on probation. Utilizing a constant comparative method for data analysis, the findings warranted themes across the following domains: individual, family, peers, community, education, employment, and independent living. Poor decision-making, lack of family support, antisocial peers, access to drugs, and affordable housing were the main potential barriers described by adolescents when

asked about possible factors that would have a negative impact on their development (Unruh et al., 2009). The youth interviewed identified that these factors increased the risk of continued involvement with the legal system, offending, and future incarceration.

Communities that are disorganized, lack social control, and have a high crime rate are deemed to be delinquent-prone (Weatherburn & Lind, 2006). Some other possible neighborhood risk factors include a high turnover rate, many single-parent or disrupted households, little adult supervision, and poor housing conditions (Calhoun, Glaser, & Bartolomucci, 2001). The existence of gang involvement, drug dealing, and other antisocial behaviors exhibited may also contribute to youth engaging in delinquent behavior (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Nelson et al., 2004).

Academic concerns, behavioral difficulties in the school setting, and learning difficulties are consistently identified as risk factors that may lead to a trajectory of delinquent behavior and involvement with the legal system. Beyond family dynamics and community influences, schools provide another setting in which youth encounter additional risk or protective factors. Depending on teachers' attitudes toward youth with learning and behavioral difficulties, in some cases, the school setting can contribute to delinquent behavior or provide a context for positive social learning to occur. Discipline practices within schools, especially when students are removed from the classroom or school setting, may contribute to academic failure (Nelson et al., 2004) and more time that is less structured and lacking supervision. Students with disabilities and minority groups are overrepresented when examining statistics on school disciplinary practices that are exclusionary (Nelson et al., 2004) and, consequently, are also overrepresented among delinquent and incarcerated youth.

There is a tendency for academic success and motivation to decrease when youth are paired with other peers who are disengaged and struggling academically.

Despite the environment, peer influences play a significant role in juvenile delinquency as youth who engage in delinquent behavior are drawn to other delinquent youth; furthermore, many juvenile offenses often take place with a group of peers. Due to the importance of social influence during adolescence, youth are affected by peer behavior which serves as modeling within a peer group. There seems to be an interaction effect whereby delinquent youth actively seek out environments, activities, and individuals that reinforce delinquent behavior (Quinsey et al., 2004), thus creating a cycle of repeat offending.

The above risk factors serve as predictors for juvenile delinquency, factors that may initiate or maintain delinquent behavior, and also contributors of recidivism. Mental health is a significant individual risk factor that plays a role in the behaviors of youth and contact with law enforcement. In recent years, a good portion of the research related to juvenile delinquency, policy, and incarceration involved a closer examination of mental health concerns as a key risk factor for youth incarceration.

### **Mental Health**

As with other aspects of the juvenile justice system, there are embedded inconsistencies when it comes to the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health needs. The mental health issues facing incarcerated youth are often times complex, misdiagnosed, and untreated due to a number of factors. Funding concerns, lack of training, lack of resources, lack of quality research, and a disparity in the goals of juvenile incarceration compared to the mental health system account for the gap in providing effective treatment to youth who have mental health needs (Abram, Teplin,

McClelland, & Dulcan, 2003; Coccozza & Skowyra, 2000; Coccozza, Skowyra, & Shufelt, 2010; Kinscherff, 2012). Philosophically, the juvenile justice system and mental health system have different approaches: sanctions versus rehabilitation, holding families accountable versus family-driven care, and holding the youth accountable versus strengths-based treatment (Coccozza et al., 2010). However, mental health concerns tend to be one of the leading risk factors that contribute to juvenile offending, incarceration, and recidivism.

Among incarcerated youth, it is estimated that roughly 70% of females and 60% of males meet the criteria for at least one mental health disorder even at the exclusion of conduct disorders with nearly half of females also meeting criteria for a substance use disorder and over 40% of all incarcerated youth meeting the criteria for a disruptive behavior disorder (Teplin et al., 2002). Abram et al. (2003) found that out of 1,829 male and female youth ages 10 to 18 randomly selected and stratified at intake in an urban Illinois detention facility and interviewed using the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children, 55.5% of females and 45.9% of males met criteria for two or more disorders. Approximately one-third of females (29.5%) and males (30.8%) had both substance abuse disorders and behavioral disorders, and among non-Hispanic White male and female youth, about 60% had two or more disorders compared to Black youth (40%) (Abram et al., 2003). These data derived from a sample of detained youth are valuable considering most youth do not receive mental health treatment while incarcerated.

The criticism of many studies conducted within juvenile corrections settings is that the results are limited to one facility or one region, thus generalizability is limited. Many studies only rely on self-report measures, small sample sizes, one level of care,

or male offenders (Shufelt & Coccozza, 2006). Also in question are the validity and reliability of screening and assessment tools used within juvenile justice settings, the adequacy of use with incarcerated populations, and the clinical judgment involved in assessing complex mental health concerns. Many adolescent measures assume that adolescents have the freedom to “hang out with friends,” “go for a walk,” “go for a drive,” or “ride their bike.” Thus, several items on adolescent assessment tools tailored for the general population do not apply to youth who are incarcerated. For all of these reasons, gaining an accurate picture of the mental health needs of incarcerated youth becomes difficult. However, the bottom line is that co-occurring mental health concerns are prevalent among incarcerated youth.

In an effort to address the gap in research, Shufelt and Coccozza (2006) conducted a comprehensive examination of the prevalence of mental health and substance use disorders in three understudied areas, Texas, Louisiana, and Washington, collecting data from over 1,400 youth from 29 different community-based programs, detention centers, and secure residential facilities. Similar to other studies, the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children, based on criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, Fourth Edition*, was utilized to determine if youth met criteria for mental disorders. To increase the knowledge base about females and certain ethnic minorities (Hispanics and Native Americans), they oversampled these populations. Consistent with findings from previous studies, 70% of all youth in the juvenile justice system were found to meet criteria for at least one mental health disorder with disruptive disorders (46.5%) being the most common, followed by substance use disorders (46.2%), anxiety disorders (34.4%), and mood disorders (18.3%) (Shufelt & Coccozza, 2006). Even upon removing both conduct

disorder and substance use disorders separately and concurrently from the analysis, half of all youth were still identified as having different mental health diagnoses. Astoundingly, over 60% of youth were diagnosed with three or more disorders, 60% with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders, and 27% with severe mental health disorders (Shufelt & Coccozza, 2006).

Over the past 20 years, there has been an increased interest in research and practices in juvenile justice facilities based on heightening concerns regarding at-risk juveniles. This interest has led to investigations documenting the inadequacy of identification, assessment, and treatment of mental health concerns in juvenile correctional facilities (Coccozza & Skowyra, 2000) especially since mental health functioning has been linked to recidivism. Ultimately, if youth are struggling with a clinical disorder, it will likely impact their resilience, sense of well-being, and empowerment as they attempt to transition out of a system that pinpoints mental health concerns as significantly contributing to criminal behavior.

### **Limitations**

There are numerous limitations when it comes to adequate programming and transition services for incarcerated youth. Threaded throughout many discussions about policy, recidivism, mental health, assessment, treatment, program, and transition considerations, arguments about resources, funding, time, training, laws, and consistency can be found. There appears to be a movement toward more comprehensive services and continuity of care when considering prevention, intervention, treatment, and transition efforts for justice-involved youth. While increased communication is occurring at higher administrative levels, effective implementation is not consistently unfolding at the service level.

Due to the prevalence of youth entering the juvenile justice system with untreated mental health concerns, adequate assessment, diagnosis, and individual treatment planning is necessary to accurately identify mental health concerns and efficiently lay the groundwork for programming and transition services to meet the unique needs of each individual youth. As clearly demonstrated, most youth entering the justice system have academic difficulties, have lower reading levels, and have missed a significant amount of school which leaves them grade levels behind in academic achievement. The training level of staff differs across the spectrum of service delivery with at-risk and justice-involved youth. There is a general concern about the complex academic and mental health needs of incarcerated youth and the ability of staff in residential settings to provide gender-specific, mental health-specific, and special education-specific services to youth beyond the behavioral and accountability models that concurrently operate in residential environments.

Treatment approaches for adolescents, especially those with disruptive behavior disorders, often include parent or family involvement. Many incarcerated youth have been involved with welfare services; lived in foster care or other therapeutic placements; have been adopted; were raised in single-parent households; endured physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse by caregivers; and in general, have disrupted family dynamics. Involving caregivers in the treatment of incarcerated youth is a major challenge for the juvenile justice system. While family therapy is an option at many facilities, transportation is often an issue which leads to difficulty with consistency. From another angle, many caregivers of incarcerated youth have also served time in the criminal justice system, so there may be hesitation, reluctance, or inability for them to be involved if they are currently incarcerated. In general, for



family therapy to be effective there needs to be interest and motivation from both the youth and their families; this is yet another barrier. While an ideal snapshot of treatment services can be developed, the reality is that there are many factors that impact feasibility.

### **Identity and Coping**

Most of the research about the juvenile justice system and incarcerated youth involves large, quantitative designs aimed to further understand predictors and risk factors impacting criminal behavior, incarceration, and recidivism. There are fewer qualitative studies that create more holistic portraits of justice-involved youth beyond the risk factors that led to their delinquent behavior, traumatic experiences, and perspectives of incarceration. With the positive psychology movement of the past decade, there has been a shift in research practices to focus on protective factors, especially with vulnerable populations, and learn more about individuals who overcome the odds, transcend multiple risk factors, and develop qualities that help ameliorate life situations.

Approaching research with justice-involved youth from a resilience framework may help shed some light on how youth develop strengths over the course of being involved with the system and what factors prevent immediate recidivism upon release. Previous research has thoroughly covered risk factors, mental health concerns, academic difficulties, and all of the struggles that youth have encountered leading up to their involvement with the justice system and upon transitioning out of incarceration. There is also strong evidence for individual and environmental protective factors that buffer risks of initial and continuous involvement with the juvenile system. Included in discussions about protective factors, social support is

typically mentioned, yet little is known about the intrapersonal and interpersonal development of youth on the justice continuum and how positive, supportive relationships are utilized upon community reentry.

### **Identity Development**

The development of identity is an important consideration when attempting to understand what 18- to 25-year-olds might be experiencing even without the complication of incarceration. In general, 18- to 25-year-olds up to age 30 in Western culture experience an extension of adolescence and transition to adulthood called “emerging adulthood,” which marks the period of time when individuals attend to issues related to identity and explore self-development (Arnett, 2001). It is a difficult time to navigate and encompasses many layers of development including personality, social roles, commitments, moral standards, goals, values, beliefs, and group memberships as well as cultural and ethnic identities (Schwartz et al., 2013). Incarceration during adolescence interrupts the social autonomy and integration processes that typically occur in development, thus having a significant impact on development and identity formation.

Although there seem to be several studies related to interventions in juvenile correctional settings, there are very few studies that take into account development in relation to incarceration, personal and social conditions of recidivism, and perceptions of juvenile incarceration; therefore, not a lot is known about the developmental consequences of incarcerating youth (Greve, 2001). Lerner’s (1985) dynamic-interactive view on adolescent development brought to light ways in which adolescents actively (co)produce their own development by (a) changing characteristics of physical or behavioral individuality; (b) processing the physical and

social environment differently; and (c) selecting persons and situations, influencing and shaping them, and creating new situational circumstances for others as well as themselves. It is a time when coping and self-regulation is crucial.

### **Coping While Incarcerated**

Psychosocial development during adolescence is the primary component related to coping skills, self-esteem, and navigating this difficult period in life. There have been a few studies examining the coping skills and health of juveniles while institutionalized or incarcerated (Griel & Loeb, 2009; Mota & Matos, 2013; Shulman & Cauffman, 2011). Shulman and Cauffman (2011) looked at the associations between coping efforts and psychological and behavioral adjustment among 373 male juvenile offenders, ages 14 to 17 years old, during the first month of incarceration. Youth who engaged in social support-seeking seemed to adjust more positively even though social support-seeking in a correctional setting primarily occurs with other delinquent youth. Acceptance and active coping strategies seemed to buffer stress and violence related to internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Shulman & Cauffman, 2011). Typical coping skills for adolescents included self-distraction such as exercise, television, or music; however, these options are significantly limited in a correctional environment.

Mota and Matos (2013) analyzed peer attachment, active coping, and self-esteem among 109 institutionalized adolescents and found that social skills were a mediating role between the quality of peer attachment and the development of active coping skills. The quality of peer relationships seemed to increase expression, active coping, and self-esteem providing a secure base within an otherwise difficult setting. Inadequate coping skills led to a high level of health problems for incarcerated

adolescents when compared to adolescents in the general population (Griel & Loeb, 2009). Peer interactions are limited within the context of incarceration. Teaching and reinforcing positive coping skills in a correctional setting is challenging and restricted to certain strategies that are not necessarily dependent upon peers, such as deep breathing, journaling, expression in the context of counseling, and structured exercise. Understanding coping and resilience through the stories and experiences of individuals incarcerated during adolescence would provide unique insight into how adolescents navigate through the juvenile justice system and its embedded paradoxes of “care or correction, encouragement or punishment, education or therapy, protection or intervention, [and] support or deterrence” (Greve, 2001, p. 21).

### **Models of Resilience**

Researching the construct of resilience has taken on many different forms over time. Since the 1950s, there has been a trend in the research of resilience in that focused attention has been given to outcomes (beating the odds in the face of adversity) and personal traits such as temperament (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Another wave of resilience research has examined protective mechanisms and processes, acknowledging the interaction between person and environment (Rutter, 1987). Third, assets of youth have been examined in relation to positive development, coping, and resilience with respect to internal and external resources (Benson & Lerner, 2003). More recently, some researchers have been interested in how resilience is understood, negotiated, and influenced by the culture and context in which it exists (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Ungar, 2004a). Therefore, the word resilience carries many different meanings. As a construct, resilience tends to be misunderstood and misinterpreted as well as both clearly and ambiguously defined in a number of ways.

## **Definitions**

While the baseline definition of resilience refers to positive adaptation in the context of significant risk, Masten and Coatsworth (1998) posited that there are two fundamental judgments required for defining resilience: (a) a person is “doing okay,” and (b) there is currently or has been significant risk to overcome. There has been much controversy in the field about what constitutes positive adaptation and significant adversity. There have been a wide variation of definitions for both which has led to confusion in the field with consistency in research. Adversity has been construed as anything from a single stressful event to multiple negative events, and positive adaptation has referred to excelling in one domain to positive adjustment within multiple domains (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). For the purpose of strengthening resilience research, clear definitions of adversity and positive adaptation need to be determined and conceptually justified at the onset of conducting a resilience study.

There is also confusion in the use of terminology—resilience, resilient, and resiliency. Luthar and colleagues (2000) noted that these terms are often used interchangeably when actually referring to different concepts—a process, conditions, and personality traits. Resiliency, deriving from Block’s (1969) definition of ego-resiliency, refers to a person’s traits of resourcefulness and flexibility in response to situations, yet does not presuppose exposure to adversity; whereas, resilience, Masten (1994) recommended, should always be used in reference to the process of positive adjustment under challenging circumstances. To refer to someone as resilient means that the person meets the conditions of the resilience process; a person has positively adapted in the face of adversity. In the research literature, there have been

inconsistencies with using the term resilient to denote personal attributes and resiliency to refer to a process when conceptually it is the other way around.

Resilience remains the most acceptable and commonly used word that encapsulates both the presupposition to significant risk and the achievement of positive adaptation.

Language around the use of the term protective has also been called into question in terms of protective qualities, factors, or processes. Originally, the term, protective, referred to effects involving interactions, and then researchers began using the word to describe direct ameliorative effects (Luthar et al., 2000). The term, protective factors, appears to be used interchangeably in the literature to refer to main effects as well as interactive processes. Clearly, there is a need for greater precision in terminology within the research of resilience and protective processes.

### **Protective Factors**

Protective factors can be viewed as individual attributes, contextual qualities, and the process of interaction between the individual and environment. Garmezy (1985) discovered three main categories of protective factors based on early literature reviews: (a) individual attributes, (b) family qualities, and (c) supportive systems outside of the family. Examples of these factors often associated with resilience are individual differences with relation to cognitive abilities; self-perceptions of competence and personality; relationships such as parenting quality and close connections with competent and pro-social adults and peers; and the availability of community resources such as good schools, pro-social organizations, and neighborhood quality (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009; Masten & Powell, 2003).

There has been a small collection of studies that have aimed to uncover underlying protective factors among incarcerated youth and those transitioning into the community to determine the impact on developmental processes. Unruh and colleagues (2009), when interviewing 51 adjudicated adolescents about perceived protective factors, found that youth identified positive decision-making; emotional support from family; positive peers; and access to education, employment, and community resources as protective factors on their developmental pathway to adulthood. These findings are consistent with the earlier literature regarding individual, family, and community qualities.

Feinstein, Baartman, Buboltz, Sonnichsen, and Solomon (2008) examined resiliency in adolescent males within a correctional facility and interviewed 18 males to determine approaches which foster resiliency. This study appears to be an example to learn from in terms of terminology and what exactly is being studied. Framed using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the researchers set out to understand more about the individual and environmental factors of resiliency. The internal resilient factors identified were positive identity, positive self-concept, and having future expectations, while the external resilient factors identified by the youth included consistency, structure, support, and good relationships with adults (Feinstein et al., 2008). Protective factors span the individual, family, and community levels, and often it is the interaction between multiple factors that leads to building resilience.

Another resiliency study conducted by Hartman, Turner, Daigle, Exum, and Cullen (2009) explored how protective factors might vary across gender by using a sample of 711 individuals from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Child-Mother data set when examining two measures of resiliency related to the lack of

involvement in serious delinquency and drug use. The terms, resilient and resiliency, appear to be used interchangeably throughout the study, and the range of protective factors varies from self-esteem and religiosity to positive school environment and cognitive stimulation to emotional support and academic competence. Based on statistical analyses at the bivariate level, it was determined that the factors of religiosity and positive school environment influenced females but not males in terms of resiliency from delinquency; however, there were no significant differences across gender for any protective factors (Hartman et al., 2009). While some protective factors appear to prevent females from engaging in delinquent behavior, there are not many gender differences between the protective factors that impact delinquency overall.

Todis et al. (2001) explored resilience among formerly incarcerated adolescents in a five-year qualitative examination focusing on pre-delinquent histories, experiences in the correctional system, and post-corrections transition. It appears as though they mostly looked at internal and situational factors that accounted for successful outcomes of participants measured by employment, education, and raising children. Their main research question was, “What factors contribute to resilience in adolescents who engage in early criminal activity?” (Todis et al., 2001, p. 120). Using an ethnographic approach, the researchers interviewed 15 adolescents (8 male, 7 female) who had been incarcerated and identified 6 of these participants as successful. Common qualities included the tendency to be more verbal and reflective than the other youth, confronted rather than avoided problems, characterized by determination, positive outlook and approach to life, and a strong future orientation (Todis et al., 2001). Namely, interpersonal qualities, internal drive, and a goal-oriented stance are



protective factors that lead to successful outcomes in terms of youth being engaged in pro-social activities (e.g., employment, education) post-incarceration.

The literature examining protective factors from the perspective of formerly incarcerated youth themselves is sparse and tends to be outcomes-based versus process-based. There is a gap in the literature when it comes to how youth make meaning of incarceration, what they take from it, and their own personal definitions of resilience, health, and what they find empowering. Due to the inconsistency with regard to the use of resilience language, the trustworthiness of these studies is difficult to determine.

### **Models**

When examining resilience in development, two major approaches have guided the research: variable-focused and person-focused (Masten et al., 2009). Masten and colleagues (2009) clarified that variable-focused approaches center on the statistical connections when examining characteristics of individuals, environments, and experiences while person-focused approaches identify resilient people in an effort to understand how they differ from others who do not seem to be doing well in the face of adversity. Therefore, variable approaches narrow in on specific protective factors, and person approaches tend to be more holistic and explore multiple dimensions of functioning.

Many examples of both variable-focused and person-focused approaches are found throughout the resilience literature. Variable-focused models include additive, interactive, and indirect models which focus on the examination of main, moderating, and mediating effects, while person-focused models entail case studies, subgroups, and full diagnostic models of resilience (Masten et al., 2009). Luthar and colleagues

(2000) acknowledged the multidimensional nature of resilience and highlighted difficulties that can be encountered operating within either model.

Even if an adolescent demonstrates resilience in one domain, for example academics, does not mean he or she will manifest resilience in social competence or other positive adaptations. There is evidence to believe that adolescents who may overtly reflect successful adaptation could be experiencing covert psychological difficulties (Luthar, 1991; Masten et al., 2009). Therefore, there are many different types of resilience, and it can be helpful to clarify in terms of educational resilience or emotional resilience, as even individuals on normal trajectories, as opposed to abnormal or resilient, typically do not demonstrate resilience within every facet of life (Masten et al., 2009).

Other issues of defining successful outcomes, prioritizing which adaptations are most important for healthy functioning, determining what qualifies as significant risk, and making decisions about whether average or above average functioning constitutes resilience depending on the population are among many other difficulties when it comes to conducting resilience research (Masten et al., 2009). For these reasons, Ungar (2011) argued the importance of physical ecologies in attempting to understand the process of resilience. Without attention to the culture and context of the individuals, the interpretation of resilience findings is not nearly as meaningful. Using Ungar's (2011) previously described framework based on the four principles of decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity allows for a more comprehensive focus on the contexts of previously incarcerated youth. These principles emphasize antecedents in the environment that promote positive growth

while taking into account the interaction between the individual and his or her environment.

### **Summary**

Much of the research with formerly incarcerated youth has focused on the individual, family, and community risk factors that precede incarceration and impact recidivism. The majority of the research includes quantitative studies that examine behaviors, mental health symptoms, substance use, and criminal histories of youth. Even the qualitative studies tend to highlight the negative experiences of youth within their families, communities, and correctional systems. Given that youth are defined in numerous ways throughout the juvenile justice continuum from their level of risk to legal terminology related to arrests and court hearings to residential placement and reentry categories, it is important to hear from formerly incarcerated youth themselves about their identities, definitions of mental health, well-being and empowerment, and discover directly from youth the factors within their context and culture that foster resilience.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **A Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative research is based on the central characteristic that individuals, when interacting with their social environment, construct their own reality, and a qualitative approach aims to understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). In contrast to quantitative research, where the purpose is prediction and control, qualitative research forms around assumptions about human actions and interpretation (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Narrative inquiry is a specific qualitative approach that focuses on the stories of individuals. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posed that narrative inquiry is based on the Deweyan theory of experience involving situation, continuity, and interaction which allows inquiry to be multidirectional—inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place. The method of narrative inquiry supports a postmodern social-constructionist stance and is thus a good fit for studying the resilience of formerly incarcerated individuals where there is tension in the boundaries of the research. I chose this method of inquiry to better understand the experiences and definitions of this population as it allows for richer descriptions and depth of resilience narratives.

## **The Researcher**

The researcher is the primary tool through which qualitative research is conducted (Merriam, 2009); essentially, all data and analyses are filtered through the researcher's life experiences, values, and biases. In order to strengthen the trustworthiness of findings, it is common practice in qualitative research for the researcher to disclose any previous experience and knowledge as it relates to the study at hand. Many personal and professional experiences have led to my interest in conducting a study that explores the resilience of formerly incarcerated individuals. The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of this information.

I grew up in a fairly protected family and community until my adolescent years when I transitioned from private to public school. Throughout my adolescence, I was exposed to many friends and peers who faced significant adversity (e.g., low socioeconomic status, abusive and/or alcoholic caregivers, gang involvement, violence, drop-out, substance use, pregnancy, and suicide). Some of my friends never made it out of high school, and many of them graduated yet continued to experience disadvantage and poor outcomes. A few of them, despite the difficulties they encountered, went on to college and created lives for themselves that no one would have predicted. During my college years, I developed an interest in social psychology and gained experiences working with adult probation and community mental health programs. For the past 10 years, I have been committed to working with at-risk youth and discovering better ways to support an otherwise marginalized population.

During my doctoral training, I have spent over two years working at a juvenile assessment, treatment, and detention facility. While I had previous experience working with youth transitioning in and out of incarceration and treatment facilities, working at

a detention facility for a good portion of my advanced training in school psychology has opened my eyes to the level of need among this population. My supervisor at the facility exposed me to applied strength-based approaches with incarcerated youth, and I learned the value of explicitly teaching youth about protective factors, helping them identify their own, and discussing how this awareness might help facilitate a more successful transition upon discharge. In my time at the detention facility, I have seen many youth return to incarceration shortly after release for probation/parole violations and re-offenses; yet, some remain in the community and build lives against the odds.

While much of the research with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth is focused on risk factors and poor life outcomes, I am more interested in the individuals who do not immediately recidivate and how they make sense of remaining in the community and changing the way they operate. I believe there is much to learn from the voice, insight, experiences, and definitions of individuals incarcerated during adolescence. A better understanding of resilience in light of juvenile incarceration may lead to valuable ideas about improving transition efforts related to juvenile justice involvement and the incarceration process.

My personal philosophy of juvenile justice has fluctuated throughout my training. As I believe youth become involved in the justice system through a complex interplay of individual, family, environmental, and community factors, there seems to be a significant number of youth who have high level needs related to learning, coping, and mental health. As complex as the factors leading up to incarceration, many youth have complex needs that the justice system is not always able to meet. From working with incarcerated youth, I have encountered some who have found comfort in the structure and consistency incarceration provides as they may otherwise

be homeless, not in school, and/or engaging in maladaptive behaviors in order to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety. Other youth demonstrate frustration due to the quality of services especially related to substance and mental health treatment, access to resources, and transition planning. Statistically, many incarcerated youth will go on to reoffend through middle adulthood and serve time in the adult criminal justice system. I find resilience in this population, despite all odds, to be remarkable and unique. Individuals stumble upon both strength and stigmatization while encountering the juvenile justice system. I am interested in the interactions, shifting conceptualization of self and identity, sources of determination, and how individuals have navigated being “on the outs.” These are the main preconceived ideas and notions I hold that may have impacted the research lens for this study and interpretation of findings.

### **Research Model**

Qualitative research is framed by the assumptions of the researcher’s epistemological and theoretical stance. The method of narrative inquiry lends itself to a constructionist way of knowing through a postmodern lens; that is, understanding about human experiences derives from socially constructed experience and the deconstruction by individuals to create a sense of meaning in their lives. Ungar (2011) recommended a four-principle framework when researching the social ecological conceptualization of resilience. The principles include decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity.

### **Researcher Stance**

With respect to the current study, I believed that individuals would construct different meanings related to their experiences of transitioning from incarceration to

the community. By participants identifying factors that helped them cope and defining resilience, mental-health, well-being, and empowerment, I aimed to tap into the internal process of resilience. I had hoped to learn more about the interplay between the elements influencing their resilience. I hypothesized that their individual contexts and cultures may have impacted the ways in which they constructed meaning of their experiences through telling narratives. I used Ungar's (2011) work as a lens in which to conduct, understand, and conceptualize this study.

To explore resilience as an interaction between an individual and his or her social ecologies, the principle of decentrality removes the focus from only examining individual qualities to considering how facilitative the environment is, and complexity relates to the multiple contexts that individuals encounter and how individual qualities may change over time. The interaction between an individual and his or her environment is complex as it is always changing. Individual traits are responsive to the environments one experiences which may either be facilitative or disorganized (Ungar, 2011). Atypicality refers to the notion that resilience may not manifest in socially acceptable ways which is in line with a postmodern view that challenges definitions and deconstructs meaning. Lastly, cultural relativity implies that the process of resilience does not occur independently of the culture in which one is a part of; resilience is often defined by the everyday practices adopted by the group to which a person belongs. Therefore, the contextualization of resilience is sensitive to the opportunity structure of the environment (Ungar, 2011).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a relational qualitative methodology that relies on the engagement of the researcher and the participants to explore the landscape of the



three-dimensional metaphoric narrative inquiry space: the interaction of the personal and social; the continuity of the past, present, and future; and situation or place (Clandinin, 2006). This particular methodology is a good fit for giving voice to the stories of emerging adults, learning more about the interaction between individual traits and social ecologies, and understanding how the perspectives of participants have shifted over time. Clandinin (2006) described the process of narrative inquiry as entering into the midst of stories—“Participants’ stories, inquirers’ stories, social, cultural, and institutional stories, are all ongoing as narrative inquiries begin. . . . We negotiate relationships, research purposes, transitions” (p. 47). Narrative inquiry as a methodology is intended to be informal, fluid, and organic as stories unfold and the narrative landscape is shaped.

By examining the narrative meaning of experience, there are three basic suppositions made about the human experience. According to Polkinghorne (1988), human experience is:

- 1) enveloped in a personal and cultural realm of non-material meanings and thoughts;
- 2) a construction fashioned out of an interaction between a person’s organizing cognitive schemes and the impact of the environment on his or her sense apparatus; and
- 3) not organized according to the same model we have constructed for the material realm. (pp. 15–16)

Thus, meaning-making is not static. It is an ongoing process that changes over time involving reflection and refiguring. Narratives are a blend of perceptions and expectations that do not follow the rules of logic and often take the shape of metaphor. Therefore, along constructionist lines, many truths may emerge.

The process of narrative inquiry can take on many different forms and incorporate various types of field texts. For the purpose of this study, I conducted in-depth narrative interviews and utilized visual artifacts as a means for resilience

narratives to emerge. Clandinin (2006) purported that the ethics of narrative inquiry are about “negotiation, respect, mutuality, and openness to multiple voices” (p. 52). The interpretation of narratives becomes co-created between the researcher and participants. Each facet of narrative inquiry shapes those engaged as well as the narratives that emerge.

## **Research Methods**

### **Participants**

I had originally proposed that the participants in this study would be formerly incarcerated emerging adults, who are currently between the ages of 18 to 25 years old and living in the community for a minimum of six months. The recruitment process proved difficult. For over one year of attempting to recruit 18- to 25-year-olds, I was contacted by many individuals older than this specific age range. Initially, I was committed to only including 18- to 25-year-olds until I realized the pattern of individuals contacting me in the upper age range of emerging adulthood, 26 to 30 years old. I sought approval from my committee and the Institutional Review Board to include 26- and 27-year-olds in my study (see Appendix A); thus, the range of individuals who participated was 18 to 27 years old. Arnett (2001) purported that emerging adulthood is primarily ages 18 to 25 years old, but that this developmental period can extend to age 30 by some definitions. I aimed to include both male and female participants with the expectation that my sample would most likely be representative of juvenile incarceration demographics with the majority of participants being ethnic minority and male. Most of the participants were ethnic minorities. However, contrary to my prediction, I had more female than male participants, partially due to the snowball referral method I had in place. Research findings

demonstrate that individuals who recidivate tend to do so within the first few months after release (Winokur et al., 2003). By ensuring a period of six months upon discharge, by definition, these individuals were considered to demonstrate resilience with the chance of reoffending being much lower than if a shorter period was set.

In line with ethical research practices, the identities of the participants were kept confidential. Other than myself, my research advisor was the only other person with access to the names of individuals included in this study. The transcribed interviews, audio recordings, and other details related to participants were kept password-protected on my computer. Transcriptions reflected pseudonyms instead of the actual names of participants. Documents with the participant names and assigned pseudonyms were kept in separate file spaces. Before participating in this study, participants were asked to sign consent forms in accordance with the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board policies (see Appendix B). All participants signed consent forms prior to engaging in the research process.

I utilized a demographic sheet and checklist during the interview process to ground the research with respect to the various contexts of participants. These questions were not directly asked as to not interrupt the narrative. However, I tracked and recorded demographic information that participants spontaneously shared about themselves and backfilled during the final interviews if I did not yet have the demographic information pertinent to the study. This information included but was not limited to the following demographics: age, race, ethnicity, offenses, type of correctional facility, length of time incarcerated, length of time since most recent release date, disabilities, diagnoses, gang affiliation, employment, education status, and geographic origin, such as rural or urban.

It is important to note that it was difficult to measure time in and time out (see Table 1 *Note*); participants tended to define their “time in” differently. Time incarcerated is presented as an approximate time according to what participants reported. More than half of the participants casually referenced a process of “bouncing in and out” in reference to being released and then immediately locked up again (i.e., recidivating). Therefore, it was not a matter of not reoffending or being incarcerated again at all; rather, participants’ time out was measured from the last time they reported being released to the present. Most participants referred to their total time in which may not necessarily be consecutive time; however, it is important to note that this is how participants viewed their time. It would be a misperception to believe that once participants were released the first time that they did not reoffend or become incarcerated again. Participants were not clear about how many times they bounced in and out, how this process occurred for them, or other details related to recidivism. Perhaps there was a poor historian effect or difficulty remembering particular time frames, especially for some participants who have been out 8 to 13 years.

Table 1 shows the basic information about the participants. In-depth participant portraits will be presented in Chapter IV.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Time in	Time out	Interviews
Cole	19	Male	Latino	4 years	1 year	3 (160 min.)
Tessa	18	Female	Latina	1 year	8 months	2 (95 min.)
Sid	26	Male	Latino	2 years	13 years	3 (206 min.)
Ava	26	Female	Caucasian	7 years	8 years	4 (227 min.)
Nell	26	Female	African American El Salvadorian	6 years	8 years	3 (168 min.)
Rae	27	Female	African American	2 years	9 years	1 (76 min.)

*Note.* Participants referred to their “time in” and “time out.” Time in refers to the length of time incarcerated. Time out refers to the length of time since being released from incarceration which is the length of time the participants have been living in the community. Interview length varied. Following the number of interviews conducted with each participant is the total interview time in minutes.

### **Recruitment**

I began recruitment in a western region of the United States (see Appendix C). Given the difficulty in finding participants who met my criteria, I expanded recruitment to include a southern region. I sought committee and Institutional Review Board approval prior to expansion of the recruitment area (see Appendix D). Participants were recruited using a few different methodologies. The recruitment areas were mostly rural consisting of a diverse population of low-income, working class,

Hispanic/Latino, immigrant, and agricultural populations. First, I asked therapists and diagnosticians at juvenile detention facilities if they knew of any youth who met the criteria for my study. The facilities housed youth from both rural and urban areas. I sent e-mails, made phone calls, and personally talked with many professionals about my study criteria. I also asked client managers, probation/parole officers, and treatment providers for assistance in recruiting participants. I networked with advisors at community colleges to see if they knew of any individuals who met my criteria and would be interested in participating. I expanded my search to include organizations that coordinate community service, job corps services, other mental health service providers, in addition to various colleagues working in education and helping professions. In total, I contacted approximately 20 different agencies in two different states and about 50 different individuals who were initial contacts. They provided my contact information to other individuals and agencies. Second, I utilized snowball sampling based on word-of-mouth recruitment by participants. I selected a purposive sample, meaning that participants were chosen on the basis of relevance to the study.

For the most part, I was contacted by participants through my private phone line. When I received a call to my private phone line, it was forwarded to my cell phone. If participants left a message, I received it in e-mail, text, and audio form. During my recruitment period which extended nearly a year and a half, I received approximately 15 calls from different numbers to my private phone line. Of these phone calls, six individuals left messages pertaining to my study. As a result of the other calls, no messages were left; however, I still returned the calls. From the six voice messages left, three of those individuals participated in the study as they met all criteria for participation. Regarding the other three messages, I spoke with one

individual who expressed interest. We scheduled a weekend in which to meet. I flew into the western region to meet with the participant; however, by that time, his number had changed, and he did not contact me again. The other two individuals never returned my calls following up on their inquiry to participate in the study. When I spoke on the phone with interested individuals, I utilized my initial contact script (see Appendix E) and screened potential participants with the outlined criteria for study participation. Of the three participants who contacted me by phone and participated, two of them were referred by their probation officers, and one was referred by a psychologist at a juvenile detention facility. The other individual I spoke with who did not end up participating was referred by his counselor. The referral sources for the other phone calls are unknown as I did not have the opportunity to speak with the other individuals.

By e-mail, I received four inquiries to participate in my study. Of the four e-mails, two individuals were eliminated immediately as they did not meet the age requirement for my study. They were ages 32 and 39 years old. They were either friends or acquaintances of work colleagues; they were referred by word of mouth. Another e-mail was from a friend of a work colleague who stated that her husband met the study criteria, and he would be interested in participating. After several e-mails back and forth and two phone calls, there was no follow-through on the husband's part; I never directly spoke with him. The other e-mail resulted from word of mouth on a community college campus; the individual participated in the study as my fourth participant.

By text, I received two messages from interested parties. They were referred by other participants. Again, I went through the screening questions regarding my

research criteria upon initial contact with each potential participant. These two individuals seemed to also meet my criteria. In summary, 12 known individuals contacted me to participate in my study within the nearly 16 months of recruitment. The other missed calls on my private phone line are unknown. When returning the calls, some of the voicemail recordings appeared to be the voice of young individuals, possibly the age of my recruitment range, yet there was no response to my messages. Relevance of participants was determined according to the research criteria; in order to participate, individuals needed to meet all research criteria.

Therefore, all participants were between the ages of 18 to 27 years old, formerly incarcerated for a period of at least six months during adolescence, living in the community for a period of at least six months upon being discharged, and not currently on probation or parole. Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period. To provide more context, in the United States this period of development is marked by many unique processes including: (a) seeking identity, (b) experiencing instability, (c) focusing on self-development, (d) feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and (e) optimistically believing in many possible life pathways (Arnett, 2004; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011). Compounded by transition out of incarceration, emerging adulthood is a complex and crucial period in terms of identity formation, personality organization, cognitive and neurological development, psychopathology, well-being, relationships, and vocation (Arnett et al., 2011). Drawing upon the work of Todis et al. (2001), to meet criteria, participants were not to have been re-arrested or institutionalized for mental health or substance abuse issues since discharge from a facility. By meeting these conditions, participants were considered as demonstrating resilience. Upon meeting with one participant, I learned



that she had been re-arrested as an adult. Her story took a different trajectory than the others, highlighting Ungar's (2011) concept of atypicality; aspects of her story are still included.

### **Compensation**

Participants were compensated following the completion of each interview. Compensation included a \$10 gift certificate to a chosen business after each of the first two interviews and a \$20 gift certificate after the third interview. Participants were also compensated a \$5 gift certificate to the business of their choice for every participant they recruited. The first participant requested a Visa Check card for compensation. In an effort to be consistent, I provided this option for the other participants. Most participants chose the Visa Check card option which came at an extra charge of \$5 per card for the researcher due to activation fees.

### **Settings**

I requested to interview participants at public locations in the communities where they lived (e.g., library, coffee shop, and community center). Participants were interviewed in the settings most convenient to them, at locations where there were private rooms with minimal distractions. While my intention was to allow participants to choose a location, I set limits to ensure safety and confidentiality. Prior to meeting with participants, I researched possible meeting places in the areas in which they lived in order to provide suggestions. The idea of having conversations with people in their homes is in line with qualitative methodology; however, given the participants were a vulnerable population, it was more appropriate to meet in public places. My goal was to create a space that felt comfortable and informal for participants so that they were able to be open and engaged in the research process.

Most participants were able to meet at public libraries nearest them. There were a number of logistical barriers to using study rooms or private rooms in public libraries. Most libraries had a two-hour time limit for use of the rooms. For one library, I could only reserve a room once within a seven-day time period, and then the participant continued to cancel and/or reschedule our meeting times. One participant offered to meet at her house; however, I had to set a boundary and decline. I met another participant at her community college either before or after her classes. Another participant, I met at his work site. I worked with each individual participant to accommodate meeting times and locations around their schedules.

### **Procedures**

Before recruiting participants or undertaking this study, I submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Northern Colorado and obtained permission to conduct the study (see Appendix B). I developed scripts for every step of the recruitment process to maintain consistency across communication. Upon receiving permission, I contacted therapists and diagnosticians at juvenile correctional facilities, client managers, probation/parole officers, treatment providers, and academic advisors at community colleges in the western region of the United States. Upon a modification to include a southern region, I proceeded with a similar recruitment process in a different area of the country. I provided individuals with my contact information and details of the study to give to potential participants (see Appendix C). Given difficulties with recruitment, I submitted another addendum to the Institutional Review Board; this time, I created a Consent to Provide Contact Information form (see Appendix F). This form allowed professionals to obtain consent from potential participants to provide me with their contact information instead of the

participant having to independently contact me. However, I did not end up utilizing this form during the research process. Although I provided the form to a few professionals, it was not used.

For the purpose of the study, I created a temporary e-mail account and used a temporary phone number for correspondence. I initially provided my office phone number for recruiting purposes and then used a temporary phone number to communicate with participants. This method was intended to protect my personal information and ensure appropriate boundaries throughout the duration and following the study. However, what I discovered was that potential participants, and individuals who eventually participated, were much more comfortable with a texting option. I had my research phone line set up to forward to my cell phone. When people left messages, I would get the message in audio, text, and e-mail format which seemed efficient at first. However, given the times of day available for me to return calls, I often had to use my personal cell phone. When using my personal cell phone, I initially blocked my number when returning calls, and I would provide the number to my research line on voice messages. In an effort to ensure safety, I believe I may have lost participants as a result due to the impersonal factor of calling from a blocked number and not being available via text. Using critical judgment, I decided it was necessary to provide a contact number where I could be reached more readily and that I seriously needed to consider texting as an option to build trust. Given that my personal cell phone number was an out-of-state number for both of the regions where I was recruiting, I felt safe providing it as an option for participants to contact me. My cell phone number was not connected to my mailing address or physical address; thus providing the phone number still allowed for the boundary to protect personal

information. From that point forward, every participant preferred texting as the primary form of communicating, coordinating, and general back-and-forth correspondence about research details.

Once I was contacted by interested parties, I explained the details of the study and that interviews would be audio-recorded. If individuals were still interested, I scheduled the first interview and notified them that all information would be treated with confidentiality. When I first met with participants, I described the purpose of the study, asked them to sign the Informed Consent, and provided them with a copy (see Appendix G). I clearly communicated that participation was voluntary, and they could choose to discontinue involvement at any time throughout the process.

I had planned to interview approximately 6 to 10 participants three times each until reaching a point of redundancy and saturation in the data. Redundancy means reaching a point in data collection where no new information is being gained, and saturation refers to themes that are “fully fleshed out and that reflect the depth and complexity of human life” (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p. 578). This approach is meant to allow a greater level of trust to develop in the research process, increase engagement, and the development of understanding over time. The process is intended to warrant thick descriptions from participants in order for rich themes to emerge from the data. I interviewed six participants total. For two participants, I met with them four times. One participant, I met with two times. Two other participants, I met with three times. The last participant, I met with only one time. Interview time varied based on how each participant engaged in the narrative process. Individual interviews ranged from 25 to 75 minutes. Total interview time per participant ranged from 95 to 277 minutes. There were 310 pages total of transcribed interviews.

## **Data Collection**

Creswell (2007) identified that observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials are the main methods of data collection approaches in qualitative research. Narrative inquiry relies on the retelling of past facts. Therefore, narratives are developed on the basis of traces of personal memory and accompanying documents and are often reshaped by later happenings (Polkinghorne, 1988). As data collection from multiple sources is recommended for a strong qualitative study (Merriam, 2009), I utilized observations, in-depth narrative interviews, and visual materials in the context of the current study to understand resilience in formerly incarcerated youth, their personal definitions of various concepts, and the aspects that explained how they coped with adversity.

Interviewing in the context of narrative inquiry can range from structured to unstructured; yet, typically, the common denominator is that the nature of the interviews is conversational. As narrative inquiry honors a collaborative, relational approach, interviewing is intended to be more informal versus a question and answer format. For the purpose of this study, I utilized a semi-structured, in-depth interview style which included a flexible mix of questions with no working order (Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured approach caters well to constructionism in that it allows flexibility for participants to construct, interpret, and attribute meaning to their experiences given the casual nature of the interview style. I did not ask participants explicit questions about their delinquent offenses or any risk factors leading to incarceration. Due to the resilience framework of the study, I was more interested in gaining a sense of identity and meaning without introducing pejorative terms and categories used within the juvenile justice setting. I demonstrated sensitivity and

respect toward participants by not directly requesting this information. Some participants chose to share offense, family, and criminal history details independently. I tracked what naturally emerged in conversation.

The semi-structured questions of this study related to how participants viewed themselves and their resilience (see Appendix H). The formation of questions was derived from the resilience research principles of decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity proposed by Ungar (2011) and the developmental theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett et al., 2011). Before interviewing participants, I piloted the interview questions with currently incarcerated youth and juvenile detention staff to gauge readability, understanding, and quality of responses. I was interested in obtaining feedback and perspectives about the questions and language used to determine if the questions would adequately lead to meaningful responses. When I piloted the questions, I did not audio-record my conversations or collect any information about the youth involved. I modified the wording of several questions based on the feedback I received. For example, instead of using the language of “being committed,” youth preferred the language of “being locked up,” or “being in;” thus, I modified the wording of questions to reflect the language more typically used among this population.

Through multiple interviews with participants, I sought to establish a relationship, build trust, increase engagement, and allow for understanding to develop over a period of time. It was my original plan that after conducting the first interview with all participants, I would code for initial themes and have a second coder, through a process of peer review, also code the data. However, the participants for the study were spread out over a longer time period than anticipated; thus, it was not efficient to

wait until I had six participants to code all first interviews. I modified the order in which I coded the interviews and asked participants for feedback. Instead of using the themes that emerged from the first interview in the context of the second interview as a means of member checking to allow for feedback, clarification, and additional information from participants, I presented individual and group themes to each participant at the end of the study for the same purpose. I then had a second coder develop themes which I also integrated into my analysis. The nature of the interviews addressed past, present, and future experiences of participants in an effort to understand the multi-dimensional social, contextual, and cultural facets of their stories.

The second coder was a Master's level colleague with Licensed Professional Counselor credentials at a juvenile detention facility with six years of assessment experience. She was provided with all interview transcripts, void of participants' real names and/or identifying information, and I provided a brief training about open-coding and axial-coding with qualitative data. She was provided with the transcripts independent of any themes or ideas I had already developed. I remained available for coding questions; however, the second coder had no difficulty developing themes in a way that we could discuss and I could integrate into my final analysis. We also debriefed on the final draft of the analysis, and she provided further insights.

Liebenberg (2009) proposed that visual methods contribute to increased validity of interview data, especially with at-risk populations, as images can be used as a communication tool to increase participant control in the research process and improve contextual accuracy. Modeled, in part, from Theron et al. (2011) "Day in the Lives" studies of youth resilience, I incorporated photo-elicitation into my study. For the first interview, I presented an online photo gallery of culturally diverse stock

photos that I used for photo-elicitation. During the first interview, I asked participants to bring with them to the second and third interviews visual materials from home that would serve as artifacts for identifying aspects in their environment that have helped them do well and cope with adversity. Visual materials could include photographs; drawings; artwork; pictures from books, magazines, and/or newspapers; or other visual materials participants found relevant and significant in demonstrating what has helped them cope. I only used the materials at the end of the interview to elicit stories from participants. If participants did not bring visual materials from home, I used the online photo gallery as an alternative. Visual items were to be a component of all three interviews. None of the participants' personal photographs, drawings, or artwork were kept or stored as part of data collection.

Inherent to qualitative research, the idea of visual materials evolved to include other media, such as YouTube videos, that have influenced participants. After interviewing my first participant, I realized how intimate or vulnerable it might be sharing personal photographs or artwork for the purpose of research. At that point, I decided to create an additional photo gallery for the second and third interviews as I was not sure how comfortable participants would be sharing visual materials from their own lives. For the most part, participants did not bring materials of their own to the interviews. However, a couple of participants did show me pictures from their cell phones that held personal significance. These pictures were of family, friends, important places, and pets. Participants had a tendency to share these pictures and details off-record, meaning either before or after the audio-recorded interview. One participant brought in a journal, and she read several poems that she had written while incarcerated. The idea of using other materials, whether it was the pictures I provided,



the YouTube videos, or poems shared, was to elicit emotion, depth, and richness that may not have come from the interview questions alone.

Observation is a key element in qualitative research and is integrated into most qualitative designs. Merriam (2009) recommended carefully observing the following components: physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors, and your own behavior. During and after my interviews with participants, I observed and documented details about the aforementioned elements. I paid particular attention to context, roles, norms, nonverbal communication, and my own thoughts. These observations served as field notes in my study to learn more about the resilience of formerly incarcerated individuals. The use of field notes is intended to describe the experiences and observations of the researcher while being involved in the research process in an effort to gain more information about the true perspectives of participants in a noninvasive manner (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis incorporates three core parts: reducing the transcribed data into meaningful segments; combining these segments into broader themes; and displaying the data comparisons in a graph, chart, or table format (Creswell, 2007; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Madison, 2005; Wolcott, 1994). Inductive and comparative strategies were used to identify recurring patterns and themes consistent across the data which resulted in a descriptive account of the findings with the incorporation of relevant literature.

Narrative data can be analyzed using Giorgi's (1975) staged process, originally intended for analyzing phenomenological and linguistic data, designed for use in human science research. As a guideline, I utilized the following steps for analyzing

interview data: (a) read through entire protocol to get a sense of the “whole,” (b) determined natural meaning units and central themes expressed by participants, (c) determined revelatory themes in relation to the purpose of the research, and (d) tied together the essential, non-redundant themes into a descriptive statement (Giorgi, 1975). I categorized words, phrases, statements, and quotes into meaning units that reflected categories and themes pertaining to the responses of participants and related to the research questions. Peer review was incorporated to increase trustworthiness and integrity of the data. At each step in the data analysis process, I had a colleague separately code the interview transcripts, and a consensus was reached as to the themes. Again, I modified the order in which I coded the interviews as it was not feasible to code all first interviews, then second interviews, then third interviews. Therefore, I coded the interviews for each participant; for example, I coded all three interviews for the first participant, and then I had the second coder do all three interviews for the first participant. I repeated this process for each participant. I was still able to derive themes from all first interviews, second interviews, third interviews, then all together; a major modification to the study was that I had to then present the themes to the participants at the end of the study rather than weave them throughout the research process. Some common themes naturally emerged across participants during my interviews which I shared in the moment. Feedback from participants was integrated during and at the end of the data collection process, and the themes were adjusted based on information that emerged from member checking.

The observations, interviews, and field notes were transcribed and saved using Microsoft Word. All data were coded by hand in a systematic and organized manner. I underlined, circled, highlighted, color-coded, and wrote key words throughout the

transcripts. As I coded, I kept the research questions in mind, and I looked for themes related to my overarching questions. While coding, I denoted, by key words and color-coding, which material related to which research question. I sectioned out, by a process of copying and pasting, portions of the transcripts related to the initial themes. Looking at the categorized material more carefully, I was able to draw out more specific themes from the original key words I had tagged. The process was repeated multiple times to ensure consistency in the themes that emerged. After developing my themes, I went through the themes of my second coder and integrated her understanding and themes into my overall analysis. We discussed the themes and came to a consensus. Upon reaching a consensus, I contacted my participants to share the themes and seek feedback. Moreover, many methods were applied to strengthen the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Triangulation is a method utilized to combine multiple sources and approaches to inform the perspective of a study, and Creswell (2007) recommended that qualitative researchers engage in at least two procedures to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Journaling throughout the research process helped me remain conscious of the biases, values, and experiences I brought to the study and promoted reflexivity as I approached this research. Reflexivity involves remaining self-reflective, bracketing biases, and the recognition of a researcher's experiences separate from the participants' stories (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Member checking and peer debriefing are two additional methods I incorporated in order to strengthen the findings of the study.

Member checking is a validation strategy, considered to be the most important technique for establishing credibility, and involves checking in with participants regarding the findings and interpretations to determine if anything is missing or if alternative language should be used (Creswell, 2007). Embedded within each interview, I elicited feedback from participants about the process and data collected. At the conclusion of data collection and analysis, I shared the thematic analysis with participants and asked for their input in order to ensure that I provided an accurate representation. Based on participant feedback, I made changes accordingly. This process allowed for participants to add additional insight and perspectives that may have arisen throughout the process and after interviews had concluded.

Peer review or debriefing is an additional external check and involves consulting with colleagues and committee members about the research process in order to challenge methods, meanings, and interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Given the importance of peer review and consensus of multiple perspectives, I incorporated different levels of peer review by having a second coder review and provide feedback about coding and themes at each step in the research process; a licensed psychologist in a juvenile correctional setting reviewed the final analysis for accuracy, and my research advisor reviewed the analysis for thoroughness and integrity. I kept written accounts of these debriefing sessions and incorporated feedback into my procedures as the research process progressed. The aforementioned observation and photo-elicitation methods were also utilized to increase trustworthiness.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I explored the resilience narratives of formerly incarcerated emerging adults, their definitions of wellness, and aspects that they believe have helped them to cope with adversity. Through a postmodern, social constructionist lens, I conducted in-depth narrative interviews and utilized visual media (e.g., pictures, YouTube videos, etc.) to answer the research questions. Triangulation methods such as member checks and peer debriefing were used to ensure trustworthiness in my findings. I hope the findings of this research will empower incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth and emerging adults while providing insight to school professionals, treatment providers, policymakers, and correctional administrators about future directions in transition efforts with justice-involved individuals.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **ANALYSIS**

With the findings of this study, I hope that the resilience of formerly incarcerated emerging adults can be better understood by giving voice to a population that is typically silenced. Through understanding self-definitions, concepts that contribute to resilience, and coping aspects, my aim is to better inform transition practices for justice-involved individuals. It is my hope that policymakers, administrators, and treatment providers who are in a position to impact programming in schools, communities, and detention settings will benefit from hearing the stories of formerly incarcerated individuals, their personal definitions, and their experiences of their time in and time out of juvenile detention facilities.

#### **Portraits**

In order to better understand the themes, it is important to have a sense of the individuals who shared their experiences for this research: Cole, Tessa, Sid, Ava, Nell, and Rae. Rae's themes are presented separately as her narrative contrasted the other participants. Primarily, the presented questions did not guide her re-storying, so consequently, her narrative seemed to highlight more risk than resilience. Although even in the description of risk, she conveyed her resilience. I will begin with Rae's portrait and narrative. It exemplifies a narrative not guided by the intended methodology.

In this chapter, when I refer to all participants, it will be in reference to the other five participants (Cole, Tessa, Sid, Ava, and Nell) who completed the study. These participants created resilience narratives which will be portrayed in the form of themes and key quotes in this chapter. I developed these portraits based on interview material—what participants shared about themselves and my unique interactions with each participant. The portraits are as follows:

### **Rae**

Rae (pseudonym) was a 27-year-old African American female, mother, and wife who resided with her husband, mother, and two children in a suburban neighborhood in a southern region of the United States. She defined herself as an independent woman. She was referred to participate in the study by another participant. Rae's narrative differed from the other participants. Rae and I were in communication for about one month; however, we only ended up meeting one time for an interview. When we first met at a library near her home, Rae arrived over an hour late because Rae's mother needed her to drive her to a job interview. We attempted to schedule other interviews to follow; however, each time, Rae cancelled. We rescheduled, but then it would end in another cancellation. Rae shared her story quickly, in chronological order, moving so quickly from one life event to the next that it left little room for the interjection of a question or follow-up. It seemed once she told her story, she had nothing more to say. She seemed to highlight her risk factors in an effort to demonstrate her resilience.

Rae appeared to have a strong sense of how she would like to tell her story. With one question into the interview, she began to lay out her story beginning at the age of 12. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to ask the specific questions I

had pertaining to the research study. Regardless, I attended carefully to her narrative. Rae was dressed casually in a t-shirt, jeans, and athletic shoes when we met. Her presentation was strong-willed, confident, and jovial yet tired at the same time. Similar to Ava and Nell, Rae was abused (sexually) as a child by an uncle. At 12 years old, she was sexually assaulted, became pregnant, and gave birth to her first child. At age 14, she gave birth to her second child. Rae eventually became involved with drugs and became uncontrollable while living with her grandparents as she would stay out late and not come home.

Rae shared that she was incarcerated in a juvenile detention setting for two years from age 17 to 19 years old. At the time we met, Rae had been out of juvenile corrections for approximately nine years; however, in the context of our first interview, Rae disclosed that she had also received charges as an adult at age 21, resulting in a jail sentence for a period of about six months. Prior to being rearrested, Rae had started using drugs again, along with her mother, and they were both involved in prostitution.

Initially, when Rae first began participating in the research process, she was a stay-at-home mother to her other two children, ages 2 and 4. From the way Rae described, it seems like all of her children had been removed from her care at some point, and they were living with other family members; then, she regained custody of her two youngest children. By the end of her participation, she was providing child care to other children in her home for income.

Rae's narrative took a different form. Partially, it varied from the others, because I provided the space for the mode in which she wanted to tell the story. Partially, I believe it varied, too, because the same questions that guided the other



narratives were not present, and her social discourse was not challenged. As Rae conveyed, “I’m a Gemini. I speak my mind.” Near the end of her narrative, she described how her husband was her driving force to change:

If a man can take you back and accept you after doing that and having to face and wanting to be with a woman that smoked crack and a prostitute, then there is something there. He took me back and after that last time, I’m like, I will never do this to him again. Even if I have the urge, check myself real quick. People are like, how can you still smile after that, because I do.

I struggled to weave Rae’s narrative in with the others. I debated whether to interrupt her narrative to refocus the interview, and at that time, somehow that felt disrespectful to her discourse. I had anticipated that I would have the opportunity to ask the interview questions during a follow-up meeting, which unfortunately did not occur. Despite scheduling and rescheduling, it did not seem that Rae was interested in meeting again to talk about her resilience. As I was coding, I wondered if the other narratives would have been similar to Rae’s had I not asked resilience-focused questions.

Rae talked about not having much family support prior to having her first child at age 12. By age 14, she had her second child; her mother and grandparents seemed to have supported her at that time. The most support came from her grandmother who also served as a role model. Rae’s narrative was difficult to follow; she zoomed in so much on small details of stories that her overall message often seemed lost. At age 15, Rae began doing drugs (e.g., coke, speed, and crystal meth), and her grandmother started to turn on her. It seems like Rae was first incarcerated at age 15 briefly, and she was on probation through age 16; her grandmother called the police each time she was out past her probation curfew. Child Protective Services became involved in Rae’s life the first time she went to a detention center. As a result, her grandparents gained

custody of her first born child, and Child Protective Services granted custody of her second child to the father's mother. When Rae was released, it sounds like she took back (i.e., kidnapped) her second child, because she did not understand that she had lost custody. From that point forward, she described her grandparents as enemies. There is a betrayal factor here as seen across the other narratives.

Rae endured a long, difficult road to the independent woman and mother she now views herself. I still wonder how our conversation might have gone differently had I interrupted her process. I wonder if there was a different way for me to pull out her resilience narrative. I wonder if I should have been more assertive, if that is what the situation needed, if assertiveness to ask my questions would have been helpful or harmful. Upon reflection, I believe some of her experiences and perspectives may have aligned with the other participants; however, that content did not come through in her responses as her narrative was more self-directed.

### **Cole**

Cole (pseudonym) was a 19-year-old Latino male, fiancé, and father of a 5-year-old son. At the time he was interviewed, he resided with his father in a house located in a suburban neighborhood in the western region of the United States. Cole described where he lives:

It's not really ghetto, but it's not really nice, somewhere in between. I live in a normal house. It has three bedrooms and one bathroom. That's about it. It doesn't have a basement, but we have a big ol' shop out back. So, I mean, it's a nice house. It definitely gets the job done. A lot of Mexicans . . . a lot of Hispanics over here.

His former parole officer had referred him to the study, and he was eager to participate. When I initially screened Cole, he said he wanted to share his story if it would be helpful for others who have been in similar life situations. Cole presented as

confident, out-spoken, and opinionated. He was articulate, respectful, and engaged. Cole referenced recent news stories, political climate, and social issues as he shared his experiences and perspectives. Cole and I spoke several times over the period of four months in an effort to schedule and reschedule meeting times. Cole was my first participant.

Cole independently shared he had been incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility from ages 15 to 18 years old for approximately four years. He found out the month prior to being committed that his girlfriend at the time, who is now his fiancée, was pregnant. Cole had lived with his mother his whole life until becoming incarcerated. His father had been incarcerated for the majority of his life, and he had not really had the opportunity to know his father until more recently. Cole had been out almost a year leading up to our interviews.

After completing screening questions with Cole over the telephone, he texted me several times before our first meeting. Cole was curious about the study. He was curious about who I was, why I was interested in doing this study, and what other studies I might currently be conducting. In part, he was screening me, perhaps to ensure that I was a safe person for him to meet. He was cautious. When I first met Cole, he was working long days in construction for his father. He was also a student of auto diesel mechanics, and he took evening classes four nights a week. Cole rode public transportation to classes which meant he would get up at 5:00 a.m. for work; and on nights he had school, he might not get home until 2:00 a.m. He worked on the weekends as well and completed homework in his downtime. Cole liked to ride his bicycle motorcross (BMX) bike, longboard, and go to the mountains. He preferred

taking care of things on his own. What initially struck me about Cole was that he kept busy and stayed busy.

In between interviews, Cole texted to confirm and re-confirm meeting times. He expressed that he wanted to make sure he was available at our agreed upon times. Cole was responsive, responsible, and communicated well over the course of our interactions. Each time we met, he was dressed casually in an undershirt, t-shirt, jeans, and boots. He wore glasses that tinted in the sun. Cole shared openly about his life experiences, matter-of-fact at times, vulnerable at other times, but consistently with a strong sense of agency and perspective.

Over the course of four months meeting with Cole, he encountered many life events and changes. He became more reflective, and he seemed less focused on work. His stepmother passed away prior to the second interview, and he was in a major car accident prior to the third interview. By the third interview, Cole was no longer working construction with his father but instead providing child care for his niece. He was no longer attending classes as his perspective on auto diesel mechanics school had changed. He shared strong views about education and work inspired by a slam poet he admired, Suli Breaks. Cole aspired for a career not just a j.o.b. (just over broke), and he believed that higher education is not necessary to be successful.

### **Tessa**

Tessa (pseudonym) was an 18-year-old Latina female, role model, and community volunteer who lived in a suburban neighborhood in the western region of the United States. She described the current environment that she lived in as calm and quiet. Tessa's former parole officer had referred her to the study, and she wanted to participate as she was interested in creating a memoir. Upon our first greeting over the

telephone and screening Tessa for participation, she explained that it was important for her to participate in my research program as her former parole officer thought she would be a good candidate. Tessa presented as reserved and quiet initially; she spoke with a pronounced stutter. She seemed nervous and unsure when she first contacted me. The scheduling process with Tessa took place over the course of one month in which we scheduled to meet two afternoons, back-to-back days, as I was flying in from out of state.

Tessa dressed up for our first meeting as if arriving for a formal interview, yet she seemed more relaxed and comfortable during the second meeting as she wore athletic gear. Communication with Tessa was straightforward and to the point; she did not engage in much small talk or casual conversation. By our third interview on the second day of meeting, Tessa let down her guard a bit more, and her humor emerged; however, she still seemed hesitant to expand on many of the questions. Her responses were short. At times, she asked for definitions or clarification of questions. The interviews with Tessa were significantly shorter in length compared to other participants. Tessa was flexible on meeting times, and she arrived early at our scheduled destination, the public library, each time. She was respectful yet cautious with each interaction. She seemed guarded yet interested in engaging.

Tessa was engaged in the research process, and she provided enough information to address all of the research questions; however, the information she shared was minimal. She requested her interview transcripts for the purpose of her memoir. Otherwise, she did not share many details about her life other than the primary experiences related to answering the questions. Her interpretation of the questions was concrete and literal. Tessa shared sensitive information at times, and at

other times she seemed closed to sharing too many personal details with me. Perhaps, had I been able to interact with Tessa more over a longer period of time, we would have had the opportunity to develop more of a relationship. Given my interactions with other participants, establishing trust took the form of several text messages and phone conversations leading up to meeting for interviews. However, those interactions were participant-initiated; Tessa did not seek me out beyond scheduling interviews like other participants. I did not feel as if I got to know Tessa in the same way as I did other participants; Tessa's portrait was not as clear to me.

Tessa described a conflicted relationship with her family. Leading up to incarceration, Tessa had run away from home, and she was involved with drugs. She now viewed her family as her primary support, especially her older sister. She was incarcerated for approximately one year in a juvenile detention facility, and she has been living in the community for about eight months. Tessa has been active in the community as a volunteer, role model, and mentor. Through an outreach organization, Tessa mentored other at-risk youth and tutors younger students. She described herself as someone who likes to help others. She spent a lot of time at the public library filling out job applications in the hope of soon landing a position. She liked to read, write, draw, and cook, but mostly she enjoyed walking to parks and exploring new ground. At the time of her interviews, Tessa's goals included finishing high school, finding a job, and going to school to be a registered nurse.

### **Sid**

Sid (pseudonym) was a 26-year-old Latino male who lived in a townhouse with a roommate in a suburban neighborhood in the western region of the United States. He identified his primary roles among family and friends to be that of a

communicator, supporter, and a coordinator. In describing where he lived, Sid explained, “Organized. It’s a townhome. Definitely a safe neighborhood. It’s not sketchy at all. Wide open. There are not a lot of units. It’s a little bit out of town. . . . It’s quiet.” A psychologist at a juvenile detention center had referred Sid to participate in the study. Upon initial screening, Sid shared that he probably would not have been interested in participating if it were not for the psychologist who encouraged him. Sid presented as very outgoing, talkative, and confident. He asked many questions about the research prior to meeting for the first interview. Similar to Cole, Sid texted me several times before our first meeting and asked questions related to the study and me personally. I exercised appropriate boundaries to share enough information about myself so that he knew I could be trusted, yet I maintained professionalism as a researcher which is difficult to navigate in such a unique role with participants.

Sid shared that he was incarcerated at a juvenile detention facility for a period of two years from ages 11 to 13 years old; thus, he has been out for 13 years, the longest time period among participants. He lived in several residential treatment facilities leading up to incarceration. Sid shared openly about his life experiences, and he admitted after the first interview that it was more difficult to talk about his life than he thought. He spoke of previous diagnoses and medications; however, he described that when he was released from corrections, he quit taking all prescribed medications, and eventually he no longer met the criteria for diagnoses received when he was incarcerated.

Similar to the coordination and interview scheduling with Tessa, I flew in from out of state to meet with Sid. After communicating with him for approximately one month, I met with him three days in a row for interviews. Prior to beginning the

interviews, Sid took a major fall at work which led to time off and doctor visits. Sid initially stated our meetings would work around his schedule; I later found out that he took off from work early at least one of the days we met. For each interview, we met at a public library near his home. Sid was very relational upon meeting him; he remained present, engaged, and he asked a lot of questions about my opinions along with my inquiry about him. He was knowledgeable on many topics, and he enjoyed sharing his knowledge. He brought coffee for me to the second meeting, and I reciprocated the favor and brought coffee for him to the third meeting. Sid was neatly and casually dressed. He wore jeans, a t-shirt, athletic shoes, and a ball cap. He removed his hat during the interviews.

Sid identified with the sign that reads, “Gone Fishing.” Fishing was his escape, as he described, his therapy. It allowed a release, peace, and solitude. As much as he enjoyed being social, he savored his alone time. Sid often referenced fishing, literally and metaphorically. His demeanor was calm as he described his time in nature, and a soft smile came across his face. This was his element. Sid was a doer but also a learner. He seemed to absorb knowledge and experiences to artfully piece them together into stories that were important to share. Sid spoke with great detail about the people in his life, what was important to him, and his future goals.

Like Cole, Sid currently worked in construction. He joined the military for a short time after high school. He earned an associate degree in emergency medical services and medical assisting. After school, he worked at a fire department briefly. Sid had lived in a few states, and he prided himself on having so many different life experiences at such a young age. He had taken on various roles in the community, such as a football coach, in which he also mentored youth, attempting to discourage



the gangbanging lifestyle. Many of Sid's family members relied on him for support. His mother had been in and out of prison, and she struggled with addiction. Sid's younger brother and close cousin were also involved with the justice system. His cousin was serving a work release sentence, and his brother was facing felony charges as an adult. Sid viewed himself as different, mainly perspective-wise. His goal was to go back to school to be a physician's assistant.

### **Ava**

Ava (pseudonym) was a 26-year-old Caucasian female, partner to her girlfriend, student, and aunt who resided in a suburban neighborhood in a southern region of the United States. She lived in a house with her partner and her partner's family. Ava described where she lives:

I live in . . . a pretty quiet neighborhood. Two story brick house, pretty nice, pretty quiet. We're the noisiest people on the block. Of course, nothing ever happens [here] except for the two bank robberies we've had recently. Kind of creepy. But nothing ever happens [here] . . . I know one of my neighbors. She's a professor here at the school. She teaches math. Sometimes I go on her evening walks with her if she's looking for company.

Ava was recruited when a colleague of mine at a juvenile detention center did a broad outreach to individuals who had previously been incarcerated. Ava contacted me by e-mail and expressed that she was very interested in participating. She said that her story was different than most in that for her, incarceration was not a bad thing; it saved her life. More specifically, Ava explained:

My life story is basically a horror story gone wrong, horribly, horribly wrong. I draw strength from it. When I come up to something that goes on in my daily life now, I look at it, and I look at, "Hey, I've been through this which is a hundred-million times worse than the situation here. This isn't that bad." It'll pass. Like everything else, it'll pass. Nothing ever stays. Nothing is ever a permanent, fixed point. There's nothing in life that's a fixed point.

Since Ava was currently a student at the local community college, she suggested that we meet in the community college library. Ava presented as very articulate, bold, and confident. She seemed to openly and honestly engage in the research process without holding back much detail. She presented with a maturity and wisdom beyond her years. Ava readily had well-thought-out responses for most questions before I ever asked them.

Ava shared that she had been in the juvenile justice system for nearly seven years from age 13 to 19 years old. She had endured severe abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual) by her father and stepmother growing up, and as a result, she ran away from home several times. Specifically, Ava mentioned that Child Protective Services was contacted 150 times and that she ran away from home 362 times between the ages of 6 to 13 years old; each time, she was returned to her abusive home environment. At the time of my interviews with Ava, she had been out approximately eight years. I met with Ava four times over the course of one month for interviews. Twice, we met at her community college; once in the library, once in a vacant classroom. Twice, we met at a public library near her home. Ava was casually dressed in a t-shirt and jeans or khakis and athletic shoes when we met for interviews, usually coming from class or soon headed to class. Over the course of my interviews with Ava, she passed a kidney stone and was briefly hospitalized for medical purposes.

Ava began taking community college courses with the goal of going into the medical field. She wanted to be a nurse or a doctor, especially interested in reproductive endocrinology with a specialty in fertility. However, Ava explained that since she had congestive heart failure, she was advised against this route. She then started on a path toward social work; however, since she “loathes Child Protective

Services with every ounce of [her] being,” that route was also not a good fit for her. Ava then began taking classes related to early childhood intervention and working with children who have special needs. At the same time she started taking art classes, and she relayed, “art won out.” With her first ceramics course, she fell in love with throwing pottery on the wheel, and she had been majoring in studio art ever since; she is naturally drawn to most things artistic. As a former tattoo artist, Ava felt that an associate degree in studio art would be the best fit for her. She showed off her many tattoos on her arms, a few designed and implemented specifically for class projects.

There was an instant connection with Ava. She was very interested in the research study and passionate about her views of the system. She spoke with a great deal of insight into the different systems she had encountered, such as child welfare, the court, and correctional settings. She gave to me one of the first pieces she had ever thrown on the wheel. Respectfully, she asked if we could keep in contact even after the interviews were completed. During our last meeting, Ava brought with her journals from when she was locked up, and reluctantly, yet with urgency, shared some of her writing during and following the time of her commitment. She read with conviction, then seemed to feel slightly uncomfortable afterward; in these instances, she would lighten the mood with a humorous statement, such as, “the sky is blue.” Ava expressed that maybe she would like to work at a juvenile detention facility someday.

### **Nell**

Nell (pseudonym) was a 26-year-old African American/El Salvadorian female, wife, and self-proclaimed homebody who resided with her husband in a suburban

neighborhood in a southern region of the United States. Nell said, “I don’t define myself as a role. . . . To me, I’m just [Nell].” Nell described where she lives:

But, like I said, it’s predominately Black [referring to her neighborhood]. Noisy. Not well kept up on the outside, inside is what you make of it. Pretty good on the inside. My husband is a neat freak, so that’s a plus. Me? I’m just like, I’m an organized mess. . . . Probably one of the rougher places I’ve been in a long time, but you gotta get down there to get back up, so it’s not bad. . . . I’m very impulsive. I’ve put us into some debt, but this is going to be a way out, a small stone, but it’s going to get us there.

She was referred to participate in the study by another participant. Nell and I spoke over the course of one month to schedule meeting times at a library near where she lived. Given her work schedule, mornings worked better; however, it was often difficult for her to make it on time.

Nell spontaneously shared that she was incarcerated in a juvenile detention setting for four years from age 15 to almost 19 years old. At the time of the interviews, Nell had been out for approximately eight years. Similar to Ava, Nell endured childhood (sexual) abuse by a family friend. Nell was engaging; she was friendly, frank, and straightforward. Nell’s demeanor was kind, humorous, and laid back; although, she mentioned that others describe her as rude, blunt, and withdrawn. She arrived late occasionally for our interviews, yet followed through to the end. Contact with Nell between interviews primarily took the form of text messages. Nell dressed casually for our meetings in a t-shirt and khakis. She demonstrated a great deal of self-awareness regarding her past, how she has changed, and what she has accepted. Notably, she referenced her mental health often. She used labels, such as “borderline,” “bipolar,” and “agoraphobic,” however, not in a pejorative manner. Nell seemed to lead with these terms in an effort to better describe her experiences and the context for

her experiences. She told her story with both acceptance and ambivalence intertwined with fear and courage.

Nell presented herself as hardworking. She had a night job cleaning office buildings, and on the weekends she worked in retail. Similar to Ava, she expressed that being involved with the system, in some ways, saved her. When she was locked up, she had the opportunity to complete some courses for college credit. Nell spoke at great length about her relationship with her husband of four years, their communication patterns, what was working and not working, and how important he is in her life. Over the course of our meeting, Nell had surgery on her neck, and at times she was in severe pain and taking pain medication. Nell reflected on many previous difficulties with jobs and finances, but she believed she was currently in a good place. She described that she was content doing what she is doing for now. Ultimately, Nell portrayed that she is happy with herself and would like to keep working, improve her mental health, work on her relationship with her husband, and figure out what will work for her, health-wise.

The future for me is ten minutes from now. . . . If I had to go for the big, big picture . . . house, family . . . I have a family now, so it's not a problem. I don't want kids. No offense to anybody that has kids . . . but owning my own house. I like the job I'm doing but maybe doing it on my own and having my own part of it, the business. I don't know. I don't want the white picket fence. I've never been a fan of that.

### **Findings and Themes**

In search of a meaningful way to present the themes that emerged from this study of resilience, I was reminded of the many poems that Ava shared with me, how she read with conviction, how I could see the contrast of a life lived, a transformation, and endless possibilities for the future. One poem, in particular, could well have

reflected the thoughts and feelings of every participant. I could see all of them in this poem, “Showing You Me,” that Ava had written at age 19, shortly after her release, which sets the tone for all themes presented. Excerpts follow:

Waiting patiently for you to see me.  
 Do you see what I’m trying to show you?  
 I beg for you to understand, to accept me for me, and offer your hand.  
 I’m not a bad person though, at times, my habits worsen.  
 Please take the time to get to know me and not simply judge me by who I’m  
 meant to be.  
 So, don’t judge me by what you see; judge me by me.

There were three primary research questions I attempted to address over the course of my interviews with participants. I kept in mind Ungar’s (2011) principles for resilience research: decentrality (shifts focus from the individual to examining facilitative components within social and physical ecologies), complexity (highlights equifinality: different start points can lead to many different but equally desirable end points by many different processes relevant to different ecologies), atypicality (resilience may manifest in socially unacceptable ways based on conditions in the environment), and cultural relativity (positive growth processes that occur in the face of stress that are culturally, temporally, and historically embedded). These principles served as a lens for understanding the narratives and perspectives of my participants.

The guiding questions for this study were the following:

- Q1 How do formerly incarcerated emerging adults define themselves in relation to their unique contextual, cultural, social, physical, and developmental ecologies?
- Q2 What definitions do formerly incarcerated emerging adults provide for concepts such as resilience, mental health, well-being, and empowerment?
- Q3 What aspects of their lives do formerly incarcerated emerging adults identify that help explain how they cope with adversity?

Some themes seemed to address all research questions at the same time, and others fit distinctly underneath one overarching research question. Many themes emerged organically from the data; that is, the themes were not necessarily anticipated, rather, they were threaded throughout participants' stories begging to be recorded.

### **Recapturing Identity**

**Reciprocity of respect.** "I'll give you the outmost respect no matter who you are even if I've known you for 30 seconds or even if I don't know you at all" (Cole).

Resoundingly, respect was a primary theme that emerged consistently across each participant's narrative. It emerged as a mode of being, a value, and cultural, contextual, and social grounds for self-definition. It was a word, topic, idea, stance, and relational mode that surfaced in many ways across multiple interviews with participants. Respect was glaringly a major theme that seemed to address all foundational research questions.

Respect was a lens, a boundary, a line not to cross, a necessary means, an expected worldview, and the container for acceptable interactions. I noticed the importance of respect and the concept immediately upon interacting with participants and especially once they each began to dig deeper into what is important to them, what triggers them, and what matters. As Cole explained, "I'll give you the outmost respect. It's when someone starts disrespecting me that I become a real a-hole to some people. . . . Respect is earned. It's not . . . me just wanting the respect." Thus, respect was definitely understood to be a two-way street, give it to get it. Words hold weight. That much was clear. Of all participants, Cole spoke with the most conviction and intention related to respect:

I'm one of those guys that. . . You don't talk about my family. You don't disrespect me. I'm one of those people that if you sit there and call me . . . I'm actually going to hold my language on this. You're going to call me the b word. You're going to call me a punk. You're going to call me whatever, then you're going to prove yourself. If you do, great. But, I'm one of those people that if you're going to talk your crap, you better be able to back it up. You better be able to stand up when it comes time.

Respect matters. Cole was passionate about protection: self-protection, protecting his family, and protecting people in compromised positions. Each participant conceptualized the concept of respect, in part, from this view of protection, similar to Cole. Cole put it into explicit terms. This idea resurfaced many times when speaking with Cole. His demeanor always shifted when he began talking about respect. He exhibited visible frustration, anger, and his tone was almost threatening, not toward me specifically but toward anyone who dared to cross the respect line with him. The way Cole described his father came alive in him when he began to talk about respect and what it meant to him:

You don't mess with somebody else's family. You don't threaten someone else's family. You definitely don't mess with someone who follows that rule. . . . That's just how my dad is. . . . He's definitely one of those guys where, he's a teddy bear until you piss him off. He's a force to reckon with, and that's where I actually learned that from. I'll be the nicest guy you know, just don't piss me off.

Tessa had a softer take on respect. She calmly stated, "You know, treat people the way you want to be treated." Actually, this exact phrase was echoed across several interviews with most participants. I heard it often. It resonated with participants when asked about values, advice for others, and how they see themselves. For Tessa, respect was more so the ideal. She aspired to be ultimately respectful. She spoke of the goal to be non-judgmental toward others. This idea seemed to be connected toward her daily interactions but also her role of being a community mentor and someone who other at-



risk youth may model. It also seemed to be almost a restorative justice goal of making right her wrongs. Tessa spoke with a sense of feeling guilty about her past, yet in a mode of making amends, moving forward, and correcting her previous actions. Respect seemed to be related to her shifting identity, motivation, and context for improvement.

For Ava, respect was not only intertwined in her understood identity and as a value, but it also served as a coping skill. When discussing the importance of confidence, Ava smiled and descriptively explained:

You can attract more bees with honey than you can with vinegar. I get farther. I know how to work the charm, and I know how to work it to my benefit. I also know and understand the fact that I respect everybody regardless of whether you respect me or not. I'm going to respect just because you may be having a bad day, but I'm going to respect you anyway. I'm going to hope that you're going to see I'm not going to retaliate the same way that you're acting, and therefore, maybe your attitude changes a little.

Respect somehow encapsulates a relational understanding that may be mutual, shared, or it can also be held in one direction. For Cole, respect was conditional. Baseline, it was there until someone violated his rules for relating. For Tessa, it was more open-ended, a goal for self-definition and relating to others. For Ava, she seemed to use her awareness of respect as a way to navigate her world. In this way, respect is an identity piece for each of them as well as a mode of well-being and perhaps a skill, as in Ava's example, of coping with adversity.

Similar to Cole, Sid also felt strongly about respect. It came up in the context of talking about work. He cited many work examples where respect came into play. It was conditional and embedded within a general frustration toward people who do not reciprocate the concept.

The whole respect thing . . . I see that every day. I work with criminals and offenders, people that are in the halfway house and stuff, and I see their prison mentality and stuff like that. They feel that you have to respect them because they're these guys who have been to prison. . . . If you're going to disrespect me, I'm not going to respect you. I'm not going to disrespect you, but I'm not going to respect you. You know that whole . . . treat people the way you want to be treated. . . . That applies to the whole world, not just you. It applies to everybody. That's why I try . . . well, I don't try, I be nice to people, because they haven't done anything to me that wouldn't make me be mean to them. Usually, I'm not going to sit there and be mean to you. I'm just not going to talk to you.

It seems there are shades of respect. It is not a matter of being there or not there, but Sid raised a different point by saying that, "I'm not going to disrespect you, but I'm not going to respect you." This made me think about some sort of middle ground when it comes to respect, the in between, that perhaps it is not an all or nothing deal. This is a different stance related to the others. To narrow in further, for Cole, respect was there until it was not. For Tessa, her goal was for it to always be there on her end. For Ava, too, it was there, even if she does not receive it in return. For Sid, if he received disrespect, he did not counter it with further disrespect, but he also did not give respect in return. It is the midway point.

Tracing the concept of respect throughout each participant's interviews, it seems closely related to their individual purposes. For example, for the participants who held respect in an open-ended manner, meaning that they gave it even when it was not received, their identified purpose seemed to center around helping others and making a difference in a broad sense. For others who held it more conditionally, purpose, while still related to helping others, seemed to be related to helping specific people in their lives or another specifically identified group instead of people as a whole.

Nell first talked in-depth about respect related to her parents and interactions growing up in her household. She described that there is a respect factor that needs to be there, and she felt strongly about it.

I got beat by my mom when I was younger. I was 10, she was like, “You need to respect me. I’m your mother.” I said, “Mom . . .” right before she took the belt back, I said, “Mom, to get respect, you have to give respect.” I was sore for an hour and a half afterward. . . . I still stand behind that. I said it to her every time. She looked at me, “You’re not going to let up on it.” I’m not. I understand I’m your daughter, but there also needs to be a boundary. We’re all human.

On some level, Nell’s recollection reminded me of Cole’s stance: Respect, you have to give it to get it. Someone cannot just want it, and it is so; it must be earned and consistent in order to continue. Nell seemed to adopt this same stance with others in her life as well to some extent. This was my experience of Nell. She was respectful. I respected her, and she was respectful of me. Although, this is inconsistent with how Nell described that her friends or family members view her which is rude and too straightforward, perhaps implying a disrespectful demeanor.

Although Rae did not speak specifically to the concept of respect, the importance of respect seemed embedded in her narrative. Ultimately, this was what she found in her husband that she did not experience with others in her life, especially with other men. Respect, or the lack thereof, may have also been a factor that led to the shift in relationship with her grandparents as she viewed them as responsible for her incarceration. It is unclear how the idea of respect may have played out in other aspects of Rae’s life as the personal insights she shared were limited.

Predominantly, across participants, respect was a way that these individuals defined themselves in relation to their unique contextual, cultural, social, physical, and developmental ecologies. It was a concept that began forming early for them,

strengthened as they developed, shaped further within the justice system, and has become a template for navigating and negotiating their social world. The pretense is that the participants seemed to expect others to interact with them in a way that they would interact with others. However, for male participants, they did not take respect lightly. Crossing the respect line may trigger disrespect. For female participants, in general, if there was a line that could be crossed, it was not as clear. For Nell, she talked about a boundary, yet it did not seem as generalized to all interactions as Cole and Sid's idea of the line not to cross. Ava and Tessa seemed to hold respect more unconditionally versus the conditional respect exhibited by Cole and Sid. Bottom line, respect was monumental in how participants perceive themselves and others.

Over time, respect was something that could be lost or gained, and all participants experienced this to some degree. Given their family histories, there was a process of losing respect for family members off and on; for some participants, it has stayed off, and for others, respect has vacillated over the course of their time—before, during, and after incarceration. Some participants gained respect for and earned it back from select family members. They learned to give respect and how to better receive it. They were sensitive to their perceptions of what was respectful and disrespectful. They needed respect independent of whether it was given or not; they expected it, and they wanted to give it independent of receiving it. Participants' conceptualization of respect shifted over time as they continued to develop, integrate new experiences, and change their thinking patterns.

### **Role transformation.**

Going through life, I've been out of juvenile systems for seven years. . . . Most people that meet me can't imagine the way I used to be and who I was when I

was in there or before. Most people . . . they meet me and have no clue. . . . That's not at all who I am now, and I just refuse to let it be me. (Ava)

In their efforts to define themselves, participants tended to contrast who they used to be versus who they are now. Each of them described a process that occurred over time from the period before incarceration, during their time inside, and after they were released up to the present. The interview questions were written to tap into this internal process that happens when a crucial portion of an adolescent's identity is developed in conjunction with incarceration. What I noticed was a contrast between how they were (e.g., past actions, how others used to view them, and how they used to define themselves) versus how they are now (e.g., present actions, how others view them now, and how they define their new identity). There were similarities to this internal process across participants. Even though their life experiences differed, they each described a similar process of resistance and defiance to their environment and people in their environment, a turning point, and then a shift in working on themselves to be the individuals they are today.

One of the main threads running throughout participants' narratives was the idea of separating themselves from their previous identities and not having people continue to view them as they once were. They each fostered relationships with people who allow for their identities to be different. While they each struggled to meet the external demands of the system, over time they developed more of an internalization of personal goals. Each participant seemed to make a shift from not engaging in certain behaviors to avoiding getting into trouble to not engaging in certain behaviors because it is incongruent with their new sense of self or because it is not in line with newfound goals.

Development played a major part in the described role shifts, uniquely, development in the context of the juvenile justice system. What did it mean to be “raised by the system” or “saved by the system?” There was a pattern of participants describing themselves, prior to incarceration, using labels or negative terms; then for their present self, they tended to use more positive adjectives or qualities instead. Semantically, that stood out to me. It was almost as if, previously, participants were viewing themselves through a negative societal lens, and their present qualities seemed to take the shape of how they have learned to be in light of their life experiences. Their view of past self had mostly to do with how others viewed them related to their behavior. They took more ownership of how they view themselves now and how they are perceived. There was a sense of pride along with a testament to how far each of them has come.

As I was coding, I found myself noting reflection of past self versus view of present self. Nell described that in the past she was angry and distrusting; both then and now, she is a grudge-holder. She used to take things personally. Nell confided that as a kid, she hated herself; she was scared of herself, and she did not feel like she should be alive. She was rebellious. She fought. Her reflections went back and forth. “A lot has changed, but then it feels like nothing’s changed. I mean, I just know not to get in trouble.” Nell currently viewed herself as “way calmer, more confident, and happier.” She was aware that she still had a “rough edge,” although, she “can be nice, not always;” she can also be rude. “I kind of like people a bit now.” Nell explained how she feels freer and in a happy place. “It is not always sunshine; there are still cloudy and stormy days, too.” But, mostly, “it doesn’t feel like the end of the world anymore like it used to.” Nell spoke with vulnerability and realness. Her tone shifted

from light to heavy, sarcastic to serious, unsure to very sure. She said that her husband, especially, viewed her as hypocritical which, according to Nell, is probably due to her black and white thinking. Nell sees herself as an introvert and that she feels like she fights herself now most of the time more than everybody else. What struck me about Nell's narrative was the development piece which she pointedly conceptualized in a way that other participants did not:

I came home when I was 18, three months before my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. I didn't feel like an adult. I was on a push-out program. I came out with the mentality of being 13. I didn't understand. One, it's going to sound so weird, because I was young, but I wasn't young. Cell phones didn't exist. I'm sorry. They did not exist. I went in in 2001. I'm like . . . okay, what else did I miss?

There was an effect of arrested development, and at the same time, development had occurred from adolescence to emerging adulthood. For Nell, there was definitely an underlying self that she had identified, and it was a matter of whether it had changed over time or if she had gained more control as she had grown older.

While the feeling of arrested development seemed somewhat fitting for Nell, simultaneously, there was also a process of accelerated development, similar to other participants. Nell described having a lot of responsibility early on and referenced growing up too quickly. They were growing up quickly outside of the system, but then aspects of that development were put on hold upon entering the system, especially their social development. For Ava and Sid especially, they were both "parentified" in some ways. Both of them had long been in caretaker roles, Ava with her siblings prior to incarceration and Sid with his family members after incarceration. Although Cole reflected on all of the missed experiences while locked up, in hindsight, he also saw how he needed to "man up," "buck up," and "grow up quickly" as he described. For all participants, there was the sense that time slowed down while they were locked up,

and none of them perceived that growth was occurring necessarily while they were having the experience; however, in retrospect, each of them were able to measure their growth which is exemplified by all of the themes that emerged. While incarcerated, certain parts of themselves were encouraged to emerge through increased reflection, learning, and growing.

Ava was a thriver. Across contextual, cultural, and developmental factors, she was able to rise above her negative life circumstances. A previous counselor's description resonated with her; it had stayed with her, integrating into her current sense of self that Ava described as:

There are different stages of healing and different stages of working through issues or processing. . . . First, you have a victim, then you have a survivor, and then you have a thriver. It's getting to the point where your past does not define you. It does not impact your life, your everyday life. It doesn't impact your every thought, your every action, your every decision. It is part of who you are, and it helps shape and mold who you are, but it's not the very reason that you are. I thrive. I am who I am now because of what I've been through and what I've come from but at the same time, I'm not that person directly because of it.

Using visual imagery, and selecting a picture of a tree covered by ice and snow, Ava described that, like the tree, she used to be alone, cold, and kind of scary. She identified with other tree pictures to describe her current self: a tree growing out of a crevice with exposed roots and a small plant that is just beginning to sprout out of hard ground.

There's always more that's going on underneath the surface, and I'll consider that my past, but there's just enough to be considered alive and thriving above the surface and has so far to go still. It could be a weed or it could be the best rosebush you've ever seen in your life that is just breathtaking. It has the potential to be anything. That's me now.

Perhaps there was a common concern among participants with what was just out of reach, lying below the surface. They each described their previous tendencies and the



current strategies used to manage them, and there was definitely an acknowledgment that different qualities best describe themselves now, but the old features had not completely dissipated. They had all taken measures to decrease the likelihood that their previous selves would reappear. This is comparable to a neuroplasticity analogy that some clinicians use with at-risk youth, the analogy of going up a mountain and making a path—making connections and strengthening them. Perhaps they were in the middle of de-strengthening old habits while strengthening new ones.

Ava described her past self as “stubborn and pig-headed.” She was a “hot-headed 12-year-old” who was charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, yet she has learned that she has value. Ava spoke at length about honesty, trust, and integrity. She likened her current mode of being to a motorcycle safety course she recently completed. “Think 12 seconds ahead. . . . Anticipate any obstacles. . . . That’s kind of how I am in life.” Ava is cautious. She was contemplative. She cared about the well-being of others. She interacted with self-assurance. She was strong. When I reflected these qualities to her, she relayed, “Yeah . . . and the sky is blue.” Her description of her past self was similar to that of other participants: stubborn, defiant, and violent.

Tessa’s narrative revolved around “getting on her feet,” “hanging around people who are not criminals,” and “making right her past decisions.” She had learned her lesson by “taking accountability in the juvenile system.” At the time of interviews, Tessa had only been out for eight to nine months. She was at a different spot on the reflection continuum given that the other participants, with the exception of Cole, had been out for several years. With Tessa and Cole being the youngest participants with the least time out, their present sense of self was not as clearly formed, yet they

seemed well on their way. I noticed with Tessa's framework that her understanding of her present self almost took on a future orientation in terms of how she would like to be, what she wants in her life, and her current goals. She described her present self in relation to intentional actions, such as "hanging around with brand new people" and "staying away from all that drama and negativity" in reference to those she used to be around. Tessa reflected the contrast of how she used to be homeless and how she refused her family's supportive efforts. She viewed herself now as "being on [her] feet and everything, happy with what [she has]." Tessa often used the expression, "on my feet," and each time I had the sense that she feels grounded now in a way she had not felt before.

"I wasn't really going anywhere, but I wasn't really stopping," said Cole. He used to be "stubborn-minded . . . defiant . . . a little knuckle-head doer . . . a trouble-maker . . . and an outcast." Cole grew up in a law enforcement household, so there was particular attention paid to his behavior. Cole described that he is a "very in the moment type person." I got the impression that has always been the case. He mentioned that he was a very chill and laid back person except when it came to the respect thing. Referring to how he was now, Cole conveyed that he was "a lot more responsible," "a lot more mellowed out," "a lot more fun to be around," and "calm." In contrast, he further explained how he can become "violent when it comes to defending family." Tessa also used the word "violent" at one point to describe her past self. For Cole, he seemed to understand the characteristic is still there for him, yet it lies dormant; he is better at controlling it than when he was younger. On one hand, Cole identified with his father; on the other hand, he does not want to be like his father.

Cole strongly expressed that he wants to be there for his son in a way his father was never there for him.

For Sid, the little things used to tick him off, he did not care, and he would “just flip out.” He “used to break peoples’ stuff and hit people, but that led to destruction of property and assault charges.” He learned that he was hurting himself in the long run; so now, he breaks his own stuff and pays for it later. Sid described this cycle with humor, but also as a matter of fact and resolution to how he used to conduct himself. Presently, Sid did not even think he “can get super angry.” He saw himself now as optimistic and gregarious with people. Using visual imagery, Sid selected a picture of mountains, a sunset, and lake to describe his present view of self. He said he is a “go with the flow kind of guy” who “does not fight the current.” Sid grew up in the system. He was in and out of treatment, residential, and foster placements since age 6. At age 11, Sid was first committed at a juvenile detention facility. “Kind of wild,” “out of control,” and “uncontrollable” were words he used to describe his past self. No one was going to make him do anything he did not want to do. Sid seemed to have gone from one extreme to the other with his anger cycle. To note, there was somewhat of a discrepancy between the way he described himself and the stories he shared of his recent interactions with co-workers, friends, and family. Although Sid described himself as someone who cannot even get “super angry,” he still noted several recent instances with family, friends, and co-workers in which he became angry. Perhaps he had simply redefined what it is he does with that anger compared to how he used to react to similar situations in the past.

For Rae, her role shifts were not quite as clear. She became a mother at age 12 and then again at age 14; however, it seemed that she did not become a “parent” until

much later in her life. In some ways, perhaps the forced role shifts early in life made the later developmental shifts more difficult. Even after being released at age 19, she still reoffended and served jail time again at age 21 for prostitution. From the context Rae provided, she had learned about prostitution from her mother, and it was a resourceful means to support the lifestyle she wanted. Rae's role transformation seemed to occur after being released again as an adult and assuming a parent role for her two youngest children which she prided herself on being able to support without the use of illegal means.

For each participant, there appeared to be a transformation of self from before they entered juvenile corrections to afterward. They each had to overcome several hurdles to get to the other side. Each participant described, on some level, feeling angry when they were younger, not caring, and then taking some sort of action given their situations. For Sid, Tessa, and Ava, it took the form of running away from home. Nell and Cole, although conceptualized differently, had their own ways of running away. Nell began to dissociate from her experiences, and Cole distanced from people. What struck me the most, across participants, is that in the context of mapping out their role shifts, they each described a similar process of how their thought cycle changed.

Anger and violence were predominant across the narratives as related to past selves. Anger stemmed from their physical, social, cultural, developmental, and contextual ecologies. Out of anger came fighting and resistance. No one could tell them what to do; uncontrollable and stubborn were two words that came up often. Fighting emerged from their inhibitive environments. Many of the participants talked about physical fighting, either in general terms or about specific incidents, and the

details accompanying the physical fights that changed their life courses. However, I considered the metaphoric value of fighting. Something needed to change. These individuals were fighting for a way out of their current life situation which landed them in a completely different unique life situation of incarceration. As Garbarino (2001) puts it:

All acts of violence express a need for justice. . . . Such behaviors may be warped and distorted and difficult to fathom from the outside, but if we dig deeply enough and listen openly enough, we may hear of the need to restore justice by personally acting on the feelings of shame that come from being rejected, denied, abused, and deprived. (pp. 84-85)

The thought process that was lacking prior to incarceration but that became more internalized following incarceration and the one that has continued to be a part of their present selves, was very evident. The negative part of themselves still seemed to be there; they just have more control over it, and instead of leading with these qualities, they remain mostly under the surface.

The shift in thought was related to learning to take a step back, evaluate the situation, consider choices, and weigh the impact of choices before immediately acting on a thought or a feeling. It highlighted “a linguistic process of development of inner speech and inner self-representation” (Miller, 2011, p. 324). Each participant described in his or her own way how that looked for them. These reflections stood out to me as huge insights into what has changed about them and how they are different. Aside from qualities, it was the ability to slow down, look at the situation, and then decide versus doing what they felt like in the moment. In this way, they began to care about the consequences of their behaviors. This was the interpretation I took from the description of the thought process shift. They went from not caring to caring. They began to care about the impact their choices had on others. They began to care about

the consequences that may result from their choices. Their sense of agency seemed to become more developed and strengthened as they further progressed. They all cited strategies they use to help keep themselves in check, and each of them identified that they know it is up to themselves to make healthy choices. There was power in defining one's own health discourse (Ungar, 2004b).

As Ava mentioned,

Everything's a risk factor. It's just you have to weigh what kind of risk factor and if it's worth it. There are some things that no, nothing in the world is worth going back and being locked back up or having my freedom taken again. There's nothing in the world worth that.

Sid reflected on counseling and anger management techniques. He said these ideas were "put into [his] head so much" that, "subconsciously . . . it kind of just turns on when [he] need[s] it." Expanding beyond the moment, solitude, "that's my 1, 2, 3;" going to the mountains, going fishing, or taking off by himself on a hike. Instead of continuing to fight, he turned inward.

Nell also relayed an internal process that involves stepping back and evaluating the situation before responding or reacting:

I remind myself that who I used to be wouldn't have liked what was going on at the time, but who I am now is where I need to stay, and I need to just, what is it, water off a duck's back, something like that. There's times where within five minutes, I play out a whole scenario, and say, 'Nope, that's not a good idea. Let's go back.'

With Tessa, the description was less clear, but the theme was the same. She described a process of disengaging from "negativity and drama" and just letting people go back and forth if they are arguing, and she does not get involved. She noted this is different than how she used to engage. For Cole, he clearly pointed out the shift in his thought process several times. He actually described that his fiancée warned him two months

before he got locked up, but at the time, he said he either was not thinking or he did not care. Cole described what he has learned: “Definitely being able to step back and evaluate the situation regardless of if it’s good or bad. Being able to slow down, process, think about, these are the negative consequences, these are the positive consequences or both.” He reflected on the context of getting locked up: “I didn’t step back. I didn’t evaluate the situation. I wasn’t looking at all of the consequences. I thought everything would roll over, be all good, be able to just slip on by. That wasn’t the case.” Cole was able to specifically speak to the thought process and the questions he asked himself when faced with situations that may warrant potentially negative consequences:

Even now, some of my boys that I still hang out with, you know, they still smoke weed or whatever. They even asked me a couple times. They’ve asked me, you know, come smoke with us, blah, blah, blah, and it’s like I said, I’m still a very in the moment person, but when it comes to certain situations, I’m definitely able to step back and think about, hey, what is this going to do to my family? What is this going to do to my kid? What happens if I get locked up again, x, y, and z? Because when it comes to certain situations, whether it’s going out and partying all night, my thinking is, what happens if Social Services finds out? What happens if my family finds out? All of those factors come into play, whereas, when I was younger, and when all this stuff started happening, I didn’t really think about it. I didn’t really care at that time.

Thought shifts led to role shifts. Role shifts led to caring. Caring led to better choices. Better choices had led to sustaining their time out and preventing being locked up again. I also found it important to note that just because there was a role shift for participants, it did not mean that conflict is now easy to handle or that each participant is now consistent about stepping back from situations and evaluating decisions. As each participant described this process, there was also a sense that it is still a struggle and that they often have to remind themselves to stop, think, and then act. Even Sid, who described this thought process as “subconscious” and that he did

not even get super angry anymore, talked about breaking his own things now instead of others' things; thus, maybe the thought process had simply shifted more to the consideration of not directly and adversely impacting other people and accepting one's own personal consequences. Regardless, the role shift and the contributing thought process became a part of participants' revised self-definitions.

Even though participants never would have chosen the experience of incarceration, they all indicated to some degree that they needed it. In many ways, the juvenile detention setting was a facilitative environment for developmental processes to emerge that may not have been fostered in their home environments that they found inhibitive and invalidating. Each participant stated in his or her own way that they would not change any of their life experiences, noting that they are who they are because of their experiences. The experience of incarceration seemed to allow them the opportunity to be challenged in new ways and develop a skillset unique to one they might have had otherwise.

### **Redefining relationship with self and others.**

I think after my grandpa died, everything fell apart. I felt like I had to step up and take the initiative. I felt like that's the only time our families really somewhat got along. That's why I moved away, because I felt like everyone's problem was my problem. (Sid)

There were a series of interrelated themes that emerged. The overarching theme that best described these findings was that they all encapsulate different opportunities for participants to define themselves. I reached the idea of the "opportunity to redefine" through several conversations with my second coder. We both grappled with the concepts of connection and reconnection, tension in relationships, betrayal and loyalty, loss and gain, a desire to help others, conflict to



growth, and a unique perspective. Narrowing down these ideas, at the core these experiences seemed to relate to the opportunity for participants to redefine themselves. Perhaps this was the middle of who they were in the past and who they are now.

*Loss and gain.* For all participants, there was a loss of normalcy due to being in an artificial environment for an extended period of time. Due to natural consequences, they lost out on what early or late adolescence may have looked like for them and instead they had the unique experience of coming out as a new person in some ways. While losses were noted, participants mostly focused on what they now have instead of what they do not have; their perspectives marked a choice from which to positively view themselves and their lives.

All participants described, to some degree, missing out on experiences yet gaining others; for example, missing out on life experiences they cannot get back and, at the same time, gaining other experiences that they may not have had given their life circumstances. The losses were context and development specific. It required a great deal of vulnerability for participants to talk about their losses. Some participants entered into these descriptions lightly and casually, others did so with pause, and others seemed to re-experience the magnitude of the loss.

Nell disclosed the loss of her mother two years ago, “two years ago which is still like yesterday.” This was a defining loss for her. Her purpose in life used to be to make her mother happy, but now that has shifted to her husband. Nell described a conflicted relationship with her mother in the past; her mother agreed with the judge to “send” her. She referenced her often throughout the interviews, lessons learned, advice received, and a unique bond. Nell’s mother was HIV positive, and Nell took care of her for a whole year prior to her passing. Her reflections of her mother spanned from

childhood to the present, the shifting relationship over time, to her mother's scarf, in her possession, that still smells like her. They were living for each other. Had it not been for meeting her husband, she did not think she would have made it. Near the end of the last interview with Nell, when I asked about her personal goals for the future, she said to accept that her mother was gone and to not continue believing that she will come back.

Aside from the significant loss of her mother, Nell also reflected on missed experiences and time lost while she was incarcerated. She described it as being suspended in time while she was in; technology advanced, people moved on, and when she was released at 18 years old, she felt like she was still 13 years old. She had some catching up to do. She gained perspective, understanding why her mother made the decisions she did, and she became closer to her religion, not to be confused with "jailhouse Jesus," Nell clarified. She gained responsibility, freedom, and independence.

Cole reflected on his four years of being locked up:

I missed the birth of my child . . . missed out on three years of his life, not being there to help support my fiancé, I missed all of that. . . . That wasn't the way I wanted to live. That's how my dad lived. He missed my birth.

Thus, Cole was also making up for lost time. The biggest gain that stood out in Cole's story, other than finally being able to be a part of his son's life and support his fiancée, was his ability to evaluate situations and weigh consequences. Cole described himself as "mellowed-out" compared to how he used to be prior to incarceration. He gained coping skills to better handle life's situations.

Sid mostly focused on how much he missed his family when he was locked up and the frustration he felt when they did not come to visit. Even worse, he described the cycle that kept him there:

I would always do good, do as I was told, get to the highest level you could get, but then when it was time to go home, there was never a home to go to. It was always something, same with . . . all the places, it was like, okay, [Sid], if you get to the highest level here, you get to graduate . . . get to the highest level, and you get to go home. That's how it always is. . . . When it was time to go home, it was like, oh, you're going to have to stay there for a little longer, or oh, your family is not ready for you to come home, which was, my mom is not ready for me to come home. It was always something.

Sid's mother, as he explained, struggled with drug addiction and, she herself, had been in and out of prison throughout Sid's life. His grandmother had always been more of a mother figure for him. When he needed his family the most, he felt that no one was there for him. Sid described at that point, he began to realize that he needed to do things for himself. He gained a strong sense of agency and the ability to advocate for himself. Sid also gained the confidence to try new experiences, such as going to college, joining the military, and moving to different states.

Tessa also described missing her family while she was locked up and feeling badly that she refused their support when she was living on the streets. For Tessa, it seemed that she gained a desire to change, reconnect with her family, and set goals for herself. She, too, like Cole, had become more aware of her coping skills and knows what it takes to be "on track."

Ava's story was woven with loss. She mapped out all of her risk factors as a child, and what stood out to me was, she did not really have a childhood. She read to me a poem she wrote at age 13, titled, "Things in Life." In Ava's reflections after she read the poem, she described:

I'd already seen divorce. I'd already seen murder. I'd already seen prostitution. I'd already seen drugs. I'd already seen the effects of drugs. I'd already seen massive abuse. I'd already seen living on the streets and experienced that first-hand as well as experienced quite a bit first-hand. The experience at 7 years old of eating out of a trash can, because I had nothing else to eat, and getting food poisoning. . . . I'd already been physically and sexually and mentally abused beyond what most people have in their entire lives. . . . I'd already seen occult rituals. I'd already begun running away. . . . That was 6 years old. . . . Life happens. Crap happens. It sucks. It's horrible, but it does, so you have to learn to work through it and deal with it.

From these losses, Ava seemed to have gained everything. "I can be anything. I can do anything. Anything's possible. A lot of things I didn't think were possible, I've already achieved, so anything's possible." Ava exuded a sharp optimism, deep care for people, lots of plans for the future, and enough confidence to fill a room. She had certainly beaten all of those odds and more.

These losses and gains had become an integral part of the participants' identities. They had learned from the losses and accepted the gains. It was evident that each of them still carried the missed experiences and opportunities, but they did not dwell on them; rather, they had moved on, and even if not fully, it seems they were actively trying.

***Betrayal to giving back.*** Running alongside the idea of loss and gain, the notion of reconnecting with family seemed to play a huge part in the transition back into the community from incarceration. Each participant described a strained relationship with their family prior to incarceration, and despite the strain, they each had the desire to connect with family members and form better relationships post-incarceration. As many of the participants described in one fashion or another, they had "a lot of time to think" while locked up; while not always pleasant, this was the time that many realizations seemed to arise.

Tessa used to “hang out with the wrong crew,” and her relationship with her family was conflicted. “We would always go at it,” and then Tessa started using drugs. She described her home life as chaotic until she “learned [her] lesson inside of a youth facility for about a whole year.” Tessa depicted a shift from pushing her family away and refusing their help to depending on them and making family her first priority. Her family was now a part of her day-to-day life. The other participants, too, described conflicted relationships with family members, then a sense of longing to connect or establish a reconnection.

Ava shared with painful detail and precision what her relationships with family used to look like and what she longed for them to be:

The only relationships that I had were with my dad and my stepmom, my sister, and my two baby brothers. My dad, I was his punching bag. I got brutally beat every single day. My stepmother, right before I started running and hitchhiking out-of-state, my stepmother . . . my dad had my stepmom use a vibrator on me in front of him on the living room floor, so I never quite forgave that. My relationship toward my stepmom was pretty non-existent. Before that, it had been horrible anyway. She was very verbally demeaning, very hateful.

My relationships really sucked. At the same time, I think that’s what made it easier to cut all ties when I got out and . . . I didn’t cut ties immediately upon getting out. I had unmet needs of where I wanted my father, and I actually wanted my father . . . I didn’t want the abusive monster that he was, I wanted a dad. I wanted a father. I kept telling myself that one day, one day, he’s going to realize everything he did and apologize and go, “Oh my God, I’m so sorry, what was I thinking . . .” and be different. I finally was able to cut ties when I saw that was never, in a million years . . . going to happen.

Ava attempted to reconnect, but at this point, she had not spoken with her father in eight to nine years. The desire to connect was there, mostly to have a different relationship with her father, but once realizing that was not possible, it was necessary for her to move on and discontinue the relationship. It was clear that she severed ties with her stepmother immediately upon being released, if not prior. As for her siblings,

her sister never understood the extent of the abuse as she was always protected and sent to the other room. Ava was waiting for her baby brothers to turn 18 years old before having contact with them. She was looking forward to that day. She felt horrible for “leaving them there” in the home; she still felt responsible for their well-being, as she did when she was a child. Her process of reconnection will come later. Ava was initially only sentenced to juvenile corrections for one year; she dragged it out for several years, because she would have done anything not to get sent back into her abusive home. Currently, as an emerging adult, nothing was worth her return to the system; she appreciates her freedom.

Cole had always lived with his mother, as his father was in prison throughout his development from childhood to adolescence. There was tension in his household; his mother and stepfather both worked in law enforcement, and Cole was defiant. Cole, much like his mother, was “stubborn-minded,” so they were “always butting heads.” As much as Cole reflected that he did not want to be like his father, in some ways, Cole identified with him. He chose to live with his father instead of his mother upon release which led to a natural reconnection. His definition of family had shifted more from his parents to his fiancée and son, as Cole’s role had changed, and he was now a father and provider. In making up for lost time, in Cole’s emerging adulthood, he seemed to value the connection with his father more than with his mother; he described his relationship with his mother as “much more distant” than it was when he was younger. Cole’s father was there for him now in a way that he was not before—physically, financially, and as a role model of sorts. Cole and his father had both shifted into different roles in their lives and with each other.

Nell spent a lot of time being angry at her mother and father. After being released from incarceration, she grew much closer to her mother. Now that her mother was gone, she remained angry at her father. At the time of the interviews, Nell stated that she had not spoken with her father in seven months. This partially had to do with her father's perspective of the obligations of daughters and placing continuous demands on Nell that she did not want to fulfill. Her father was attacked around the one-year anniversary of her mother's death. At that time, he began asking a lot of Nell by way of running errands and driving him places. Nell described that she "turned a cold heart towards him." Nell and her husband then briefly lived with her father, yet her father did not want her husband around. Likewise, Nell did not approve of her father's girlfriend, an alcoholic, as he was a recovering alcoholic with cirrhosis of the liver. Nell's father became more demanding, ordering her to drive him places and take care of his needs; she had since blocked his phone number. Nell still felt a longing for her connection with her mother, and on some level she had transferred this connection onto her husband.

Sid's story also reflected a sense of longing for his mother when he was locked up; yet, she continuously let him down. For Sid, the energy he spent wishing his mother was more supportive was transformed into a reconnection with himself and his own abilities. He realized that he needed to do for himself what he was waiting for her to do for him. Sid reconnected with his grandmother upon release; although, he seemed to set boundaries with the time and support he gives to his family. While it was important for Sid to help his family members when they need it, it seemed like he also attempted to empower them to take action steps of their own. I wondered if this stance derived from the way that he had learned to take care of himself, and in this

way, he was showing others the steps to be more self-sufficient. Feelings of betrayal for Sid were evident:

I kind of had hope that I was going to get out. . . . What really hurt me is people who were supposed to be on my side, because everyone has to sign a paper to commit a kid, so my GAL [guardian ad litem], my caseworker, the ones that I thought had my back, didn't. . . . They all thought it would be a good idea to get committed. I did kind of a bad thing, so they were probably like, this is the best thing for [Sid]. It probably was, because I was still kind of out of control.

With all of the participants' narratives, there was a strong sense of betrayal either leading up to incarceration or during their time served. In some instances, they identified themselves as the one who was the betrayer. In other instances, they were reacting to betrayal by their family members. A part of what they were sorting out was the tension within their family dynamics, how to resolve what had happened in the past, and what they needed moving forward. To some degree, each participant took initiative upon release to reconnect with a family member. Outcomes varied. When it was not possible to connect with family, participants created new families (e.g., partner, husband). This was common ground in the transition process out of incarceration back into the community.

*Self-efficacy.* When looking more closely at the internal processes at play, there is a strong theme of independence and self-reliance for each participant. These elements depict their connection with and belief in themselves. While their independence and self-reliance may have formed in atypical ways early in their development (e.g., parentified), it grew into an internalized quality—one which serves them as an adult.

“We’re used to using the state provided comb,” Ava said, while reciting one of her poems. In terms of their shifting, each participant seemed to be at different stages



on the continuum from externalization to internalization; that is, participants used to need the structure and the external demands and rewards from outside of themselves. Now they were each at a point where they were setting their own structure, and they did not need as much validation from others. Confidence and skills were internalized. All of them went from having external structure to creating their own internal structure. It seemed that Sid and Ava, both at 26 years old, had progressed the farthest on this continuum. Tessa and Cole, at 18 and 19 years old, had not made the shift entirely, but they were in the process. In Cole's discourse, grappling with the struggle to become more independent was palpable. Tessa appeared to be right at the beginning of this process. Nell, at 26 years old, seemed less developed in this way than her peers. All of them learned to rely on themselves, ultimately, for what they needed; they were learning how to trust their internal resources.

Participants tended to generalize this sense of independence and project it onto others who may have been in similar situations or who they view as not progressing.

For Cole, it seemed to take the strong form of self-sufficiency:

You put on your big boy underwear and wipe your own ass. Well, like I said, you know, life is so basic that everybody makes it harder than it really is. You know, the government, as in sending the troops over when they don't need to. . . . They're taking mothers and fathers and sons and daughters from people and they give two hells less. It's like, once again, nobody is going to change your ass for you. Honestly, well, until you grow up. Yeah, put on your big boy pants, wipe your own ass, and figure out your life. It's really basic. Like I said, life is so basic that people just do not understand it. It's like . . . what the hell is wrong society? That's just my basic point of view. That's all.

There was a sense from each of them that they changed (e.g., perspective) based on their own agency (e.g., choices). Each participant acknowledged positive adults and/or encouraging words that were supportive; however, they each made it clear that they did not really need anyone. It seems like they did not want to do it on

their own but that they were capable of making it on their own. As for connection, they sought it out, yet there was a perception that they could take it or leave it.

Related to shifting from externalization to internalization, with the shift came an increased sense of personal responsibility. It had a different quality to it than the all-encompassing message from the juvenile justice system about taking accountability. It was not just that participants felt like they needed to take accountability, they wanted to, which seemed to make the concept more meaningful to them. For most of them, this strong sense of personal responsibility translated into the goals they set and the desire to help others. For example, Sid felt like his family is his responsibility. He always wanted to make sure that “everything is on the up and up, and no one is struggling, and if they are, try to help them.” Keeping his word and following through was important, similar to Cole and Ava: integrity. If they said they were going to do something, it was important for them to honor that, a quality that has emerged most likely from the many times they had been let down.

There was also a phenomenon with participants that by taking care of themselves or recognizing they had value, there was somehow a perception of feeling selfish, in which they were apologetic. In part, this increased self-awareness and self-involvement seemed to be a driving force in the desire to give back to others. For example, Ava seemed to use corrections to her favor; she used all of the resources she needed, and when it came time to transition (e.g., age out), she needed to be able to use her own resources. Sid viewed selfish almost as a developmental phase; in fact, when he compared himself to others who he felt had not yet matured, he likened them to selfish. He said he used to be selfish but that now he does what he can for others. Through transition out of incarceration, the selfish stage seemed pertinent to their

growth. They needed to focus on themselves for a while. Out of self-focus came a new appreciation for others and the motivation to help, perhaps in the same way they had been helped.

Upon reflection, participants did not view growth as occurring while incarcerated, but rather, the growth seemed to begin once they were released. Again, this understanding exemplifies the self-reliance piece. Seeds may have been planted while they were incarcerated; however, participants attributed their growth to the choices made post-incarceration. In fact, while none of them blatantly described incarceration as a positive experience, they all stated that they are who they are today because of the unique experiences they had as a result of being incarcerated. The experiences changed them for the better. While I pulled out these overarching themes, the concepts seem so intertwined not one of these factors could exist without the others.

**Culture undefined.** “Most people probably don’t know if they’re coming or if they’re going or what to even believe in sometimes” (Cole).

What does culture mean to you? Cole stated that he never really had to put culture into perspective. After talking about “tribes in Africa having their ways” and “Christians doing their thing,” I asked the question in a different form. I asked Cole how he culturally identified and how that impacts him. In relation to himself, he grappled:

Well, damn, in my opinion, culture is a group of people who have the same beliefs, same point of views and whatnot on life. . . . On my point of view, on mine, I don’t really know. I’m one of those people that don’t really pay attention to different cultures. . . . Most people probably don’t know if they’re coming or if they’re going or what to even believe in sometimes.

Cole talked about being Christian and then contrasted that viewpoint with beliefs of people in Iraq. He brought up the point that people in the United States believe so many different things. He did not have a clear idea of how he fit into that or what his culture meant to him. Throughout his interviews, Cole expressed frustration with society. He often phrased his frustration using the terminology that “99.9% of all people [do not understand or do this].” Therefore, he viewed himself as being on the outside of the majority; he was in the .01%. Cole had a tendency to set himself and his thinking apart from others; he viewed his perspectives drastically differing from the majority.

This feeling of being different from other people, having a perspective or a trait that somehow set him apart, also emerged from Sid’s narrative. Sid referred to a personality test that he took as a part of a college class that identified a trait of his that “only less than 10% of anyone who has ever taken this test has that trait.” Sid could not recall the trait; yet, he remembered that this set him apart. Sid also grappled with describing what culture meant to him. He talked about his anthropology class in college, noting that it was a tough question for him. He talked about different types and groups of people, races and indigenous people, lifestyles and rituals, American culture, western civilization, and third world countries. Ultimately, he landed at, “I don’t know if I have a culture that I’m a part of”

Sid’s co-workers gave him a hard time, perhaps for not more strongly identifying or aligning with the expectations of Latino culture. They called him “White-washed” and “coconut.” At different points throughout telling his story, Sid talked about how he was essentially raised by the system, growing up in residential treatment and foster placements since he was 6 years old and then incarcerated from

ages 11 to 13. He mentioned how different his upbringing was from his brothers and cousins. “I don’t listen to rap. I listen to country.” Sid grew up listening to the alternative music that his staff liked and exposed him to which was another aspect that set him apart from identifying with his familial culture.

One day, I was like, “Oh, that looks like a good wrap.” I was like, “What is that? Is that a . . .” What did I say. . . It was a burrito, but I was like, “Yeah, that’s a wrap. Some flat bread and some beans and rice.” I’m not very into my heritage. . . . I just feel like there’s some people that are like, “Oh, Mexico, Mexico, Mexico.”

This commonality among participants struck me. It made me wonder about the impact of institutionalism, during crucial identity formation years, on one’s sense of self, understanding of personal cultural significance, and other related developmental components. One thing was clear. All participants seemed stumped by this question, whether 18 years old or 26 years old. Tessa, at age 18, provided the most minimal response, describing culture to mean “how we’re raised and stuff” and “being with family . . . hanging out altogether.” She tapped into the developmental component of upbringing and slightly portrayed what culture means for her family. Spending time together could imply the value of being close-knit, yet due to limited information, Tessa’s depiction of culture also seemed personally distant.

Ava essentially equated culture with society and what is socially acceptable. She contrasted socially acceptable behavior for women in Middle Eastern countries versus “our culture,” implying western or American culture. She discussed taboos in relation to race and sexual orientation. At one point, Ava briefly touched on her White privilege, although it was not dominant in her narrative.

Skin color, gender, sexuality, everything plays a huge role as to what adult life they [young adults] have. The way they dress, the way they smell, the color of their eyes, it doesn’t matter. Every little thing plays a key role, and nobody has

the same one, so I think it's a generalization to say "in today's times." Well, unfortunately, today's time is truly based on circumstance, because most people see me and assume because I'm White that I have an easy adulthood. They don't see the discrimination I get because I'm gay. They don't see the fact that I get discrimination because of red hair, discrimination because of tattoos, discrimination because I bought a motorcycle. . . . I don't know if there's a generalized thing of what it's like to experience young adulthood in today's time. . . . I don't think there's a template.

As much as Ava believed that there is not a generalized experience for today's young adults, in terms of culture, she described generalized beliefs. Ava, like other participants, held culture at an arm's length, although she did indicate traits, identities, and activities which set her apart from other people.

Nell initially went the same route as Tessa in describing culture pertaining to the environment in which one is raised, and more importantly, how someone is raised. She stated, "It's not just, 'Oh, I'm Black, living here. I'm a Black woman. I live here. I do this.' It's everything of you. . . . It's the summary of everything." Nell, similar to Cole, grappled with the question of what culture meant to her. "The cultural background really doesn't mess with me that much as it used to, thankfully, but this, I guess . . . culture is everything in one, so work, and friends, and I guess lately, it's affecting me, because I avoid everybody." They did not identify with a culture of criminal thinking nor did they identify with a corrections culture. Perhaps what culture meant to them was a question that led nowhere, a puzzling idea for emerging adults, or difficult to explain given the many contexts they had each encountered.

### **Outlining Character**

**Protection of self and others.** "There's times I'm rude; if I don't want to be bothered by you, leave me alone. There's no way around that" (Nell). "I get really

protective over people that I'm close to, and I'm not going to let anyone else hurt them" Ava).

With some of my research questions, I was pulling for definitions of concepts impacting participants, such as resilience, mental health, well-being, and empowerment. These were not concepts in which I directly asked for the meaning, but rather, I wanted to gather the participants' ideas related to these areas so that I could gain a better understanding and tap into the postmodern viewpoint of formerly incarcerated emerging adults. Mental-health, well-being, and empowerment are concepts that Ungar integrates into his research studies to better understand resilience (Ungar & Teram, 2000). Searching for insight across these concepts, the notion of the protection of self and others emerged. There is power in defining one's health and wellness, especially once individuals realize how much control they have regarding different aspects of their lives, such as self-protection and advocacy for others.

Upon closer examination, I noticed a certain overlap in the identified themes of self-protection, the protection of others, and setting boundaries. Setting boundaries was empowering; it suggests that one has some control over oneself and one's situation. The simple act led to increased resilience and a greater sense of both well-being and mental health. Setting boundaries facilitated self-preservation. Self-preservation is empowering. Self-preservation involved self-protection. Self-protection easily extended to protecting others who are close. In turn, self-preservation aids improved mental health. Improved mental health leads to increased well-being. These factors feed into the resilience process. Drawing upon the perspectives of participants, I saw these concepts as interrelated and difficult to discuss independent of one another. It is difficult to determine where this process started. For example, did

self-preservation kick in first and they began to set boundaries, or was boundary setting part of their self-preservation? Did they somehow become empowered with the idea that they were allowed to set boundaries around their own lives?

***Boundaries.*** The theme of boundaries surfaced in relation to many areas across research questions. Boundaries defined the shifting sense of self. They contributed to resilience, mental health, well-being, and empowerment. Boundaries were a coping skill. They pertained to relationships, time, space, work, and other facets of life. Boundaries were something learned, practiced, applied, and utilized for both self-preservation and the protection of others. The idea of boundaries stood out as a common denominator.

Cole spent time with people who were similar to him, people who “don’t take crap from people. I mean, they’ll take it to an extent. If you’re talking crap about me, I don’t care but start messing with my family. . . . That’s how the other people I hang around with are.” Cole described that he did not really hang with the same people he was around prior to incarceration, and he engages, in part, in different activities. For example, he set a boundary around partying. Fueled by fear of consequences or a motivation to do the right thing for his family, Cole set boundaries related to choices, how he spends his time, and desired outcomes. Tessa also set these boundaries by being cognizant of who she was around and by not engaging in “drama.”

Participants realized that they had to change their own thinking and choices. While family remained a protective factor after incarceration, so did self-reliance. Each of the participants had to figure out how to navigate the system and their transition out of incarceration on their own. Through this process, they each developed their own unique mode of self-preservation (preservation of their new sense of self),



taking the form of setting boundaries, enacting coping skills, and making strides toward health. What also stood out was a commitment to protect the ones they loved. This theme existed across participants on varying levels. For example, Tessa emphasized how much her family meant to her and that they are a priority. Nell described an all or nothing effect; people are either in or they are out. If someone is in, they are all in; consequently, she is all in.

Sid and Ava, like Cole, were adamant that they would do anything to protect and defend loved ones—family and friends. With Cole, the condition seemed to be if there was a direct threat to someone close to him or even perceived disrespect toward women, he would immediately come to their defense in the form of fighting. For Sid and Ava, the context was broad. Sid, being a caretaker, had a tendency to “look after” others, meaning that he made sure loved ones had what they need, or he challenged them to live a better life and seek resources and/or opportunities that would benefit them. In this way, he was protective of others. Ava conceptualized that at this point in her life, she will defend and protect herself and the ones she loves in a way that she was unable to protect herself when she was a child. There was a strong protective element to her evidenced by her general demeanor and when talking about the important people in her life.

### **Perseverance and hope.**

I try to find something good in something that's bad. Even though something catastrophic could be going wrong in my life, I'll just try to find something that's good about this whole situation and just kind of focus on that and keep staying focused on that. (Sid)

Sid's narrative was saturated with optimism, growth, and hope. He mapped out the inconsistency and lack of responsibility on his family's part. He noted a great deal

of rejection in his life. In hindsight, he acknowledged how difficult these experiences were, and at the same time, he was able to pull out the positives. For each participant, optimism and hope for the future seemed to be tied to discovering that one had value and that other people can also be valuable to one. Sid often used analogies to make his points, such as if he has a bad day, he tries not to carry it over into the next day, because “it’s luggage that you’re dragging around with you.” He disliked stagnation in others, so he attempted to surround himself with other growth-oriented individuals. “Let’s keep trucking.”

Sometimes this theme was noticed in short phrases participants seemed to latch onto, such as Nell, and “You know the word ‘impossible’ has ‘I’m possible’ in it?” There was this idea of sticking with something even though it is difficult. Each participant seemed intentional about reflecting on and noting positive aspects of very difficult life situations. On the whole, each of their narratives depicted plights of perseverance with reflections of optimism, in hindsight, and hope looking forward. They were able to see that things would change. At times, while listening to participants’ stories, the optimism seemed to mask some of the more difficult underlying feelings or the anxiety of sharing such personal accounts. Ava touched on the idea of feeling that she had to “fake it until she made it” when she first transitioned out of incarceration, referring to the façade of confidence.

Tessa was more concrete in her understanding of resilience, describing outcomes such as having a job/career, a house, and/or going to school. Nell, in describing what it would look like for someone to beat the odds, bluntly said, “They’re a parent. They’re an actual parent.” In these descriptions, I noticed this idea again of a role shift. Participants, in part, viewed resilience as successfully shifting into a

different role, one with more responsibility, similar to how they themselves had shifted roles over time. Ava outlined that resilience is “not getting locked up again, not being addicted to drugs, not being in the same offense cycles, not doing things that will get you locked up again.” She said that these are “good indicators” that people are doing something different or overcoming odds.

As using imagery in the research process can inspire new collaboration between participants and the researcher (Liebenberg, 2009), participants who shared less detail in conversation tended to provide more insight when using visual materials to answer questions (e.g., Tessa). Participants who expounded more on details in conversation had a tendency to reflect less when using visual materials. I was struck by Tessa’s level of insight when using visual imagery to draw out what it means for someone to beat the odds. She chose an image of a child looking proud and described, “You might not make it, and you think you will and stuff. You’re so close of doing it, and you’re really proud of yourself.” She chose several images to depict this concept; the images seemed to allow her to better express her thoughts and feelings. She often came back and stopped on an image of a roller coaster: “Life is up and down like a roller coaster.” In a spiraling staircase, she pointed out, “You’re almost to your thing, to whatever you want to do.” Tessa was still in the process of developing the person she wanted to become; these statements really reflect where she was at, being recently “out” and trying to redefine herself.

Although I directly asked a question about how participants were different from others, the idea of being different was pervasive throughout the narratives. Each participant viewed themselves as different; their experiences were different than most people, their worldview was different, and overall, these were the factors that set them

apart. As I was coding, I often wrote “perspective” in the margins. Primarily, what made participants different was his or her perspective. Sid analyzed everything. He looked at all possibilities. He was self-reliant; he had learned to take care of himself, exhibiting independence, in a similar way to other participants. Rae and Nell aligned strongly with being independent women. Ava believed that her past and personality set her apart from others, yet she ultimately reached the conclusion that she was not that different. Tessa just viewed her life more “altogether different than everyone else.” For Cole, I know I have already mapped out his perspective extensively. His view was that life is really simple but that people make it difficult for themselves; he thinks that 99.99% of all people do not get it. For Nell, it was her positive spark and determination. Her perspective was that most people wallow when things get bad; she does not. Overall, most participants talked about their ability to “read” people and situations. Specifically, Ava, Nell, Sid, and Cole brought it up a few times, noting that not everyone has this ability.

### **Internalized Coping**

**Problem-solving.** “They have us learn in the thinking years. They make us memorize, and well, internalize. I basically learned to run interference with myself” (Ava).

I asked participants several questions that tapped into aspects of their lives that help explain how they cope with adversity. Coping aspects were central to each narrative. Participants’ learning process was at the forefront of their perspective, change, and growth. Each narrative was marked by struggle and resistance and a breakthrough followed by key choices and changes that have formed how their lives look today. The learning process translated into goals toward self-betterment.

Learning also served as a perspective shift. For most participants, their turning points were marked by key statements by influential people in their lives.

For example, Sid believed that his learning had ultimately shaped who he was today; without everything that he had experienced, his “life would be totally different right now.” Sid reflected that he did not believe he would be doing as well. Years of resistance leading up to his transition out of incarceration were met with a key statement from his aunt,

No one is going to do your time for you. Nobody knows what it’s like in there for you. You’ve got to do it for yourself. Don’t get out for your mom. Don’t get out for this or that. Get out for yourself.

That stuck.

Sid described his learning process further, “what I’ve learned is that everything you do, there’s the whole action and reaction, and you do something, and something’s going to happen from that.” Sid coined his identity as one of a learner. Learning anger management skills (e.g., in-the-moment techniques) while incarcerated had a lasting effect as well as other anger management techniques (e.g., sports, hiking, and fishing). College was impactful; learning from new people was an important shift. He learned to care about himself. His goal was “always just to keep bettering [himself].” Sid illustrated a 24-week counseling process in a metaphor:

First it was, when I first started [going to counseling], I told [the counselor] I was a boat in the big ol’ ocean, and the waves were just poooffsshhh. . . . I didn’t know how to deal with anything. The ocean was just beating me up. The ocean is life. And I’m this little boat, me, getting beat up. At the end of my 24 weeks, I felt smooth sailing, you know, seas were calm. I was coasting.

There were many similarities across participants. The predominant lessons seemed to relate to self-awareness, a new skillset, and making the choice to apply these changes.

Tessa was the only participant who did not explicitly verbalize her learning process. Her responses tended to be more concrete and literal. For example, she stated something to the effect that she “learned [her] lesson.” Her responses lacked insight into a deeper learning process; I had to be careful when reflecting statements back to her during our conversations. I noticed when I was coding that, at times, perhaps I reflected insights from what she said that she did not actually experience. Tessa’s learning was more so reflected in her shift in choices. The key statement for her by her probation officer was the following: “You cannot leave here until you attend all of these groups. We could add up more time on your commitment.” She had more of an external locus of control, and she was motivated by external factors in contrast to other participants who seemed to experience a shift to an internal locus of control at some point; this may be a reflection of her younger age.

Cole used learning language to describe many experiences, concepts, and ideas. He talked about “learning the hard way” and “growing up.” Part of navigating coping for Cole was knowing which role to be in at what time. As he described,

There were a few months maybe even a year that I was actually locked up when I was there that I started to just say, ‘screw it,’ I’m just going to end up here anyway. I’m going to be like my dad. What actually got it through my head, I got into a fight. Actually, I got into multiple fights.

When Cole went to court, the judge said to him, “You need to get it through your head. You’re going to eventually end up screwing yourself so bad that you’re going to be away for a long time.” Cole’s learning turned into teaching others. As he explained, he learned from his mistakes; if his brothers or little sister have the same kind of problems, he would direct them away from the mistakes he made. Cole’s learning also led to a perspective shift:

You learn something new every day. If you're driving down a road that you haven't driven down in a while or you're like, oh wait, that wasn't there last time but I only drove down this road four months ago. . . . You definitely learn something new every day regardless of where you're at.

For Nell, she learned what her mother had always tried to teach her, “to listen, or rather, receive everything with a grain of salt.” She learned that not everyone is “out to get her” and that “people care.” Nell learned acceptance—acceptance of herself, her life situation, her mother's loss, and to trust herself. She was trying to be more open to others.

Marking Nell's crucial turning point during her incarceration, Nell's mother said to her: “Look, you need to hang out, chill, but it will be okay. Until you're ready to get better, then I'm here. When you decide to get better, call me and then we'll do something together.” That statement motivated Nell to want to change. Nell had learned to appreciate life more, in general, and to take things slowly.

Ava, first and foremost, learned life skills; she was explicit about what she has learned. When I think about Ava's perspective, I am reminded of the image she chose to depict her worldview (visual: a kitten); “everything is ginormous, scary, fun, exciting. . . . In the grand scheme of things, your life is this big. That's the way I view life.” Ava learned self-control. She learned how to interview for a job, fill out an application, and write a check. She reflected that these skills went a long way when she was released and on her own. She was grateful to have learned how to navigate society before being faced with the task. In terms of jobs, she said she always gets promoted to management quickly. Ava clearly demonstrated over and over again her countless self-insights:

I really value respect. I value honesty. Above all, I really learned the value of integrity. Integrity goes hand in hand with trust, I feel. I want other people

around me to be able to trust me and know that I'm not going to do anything to violate their trust. It's making sure that I don't step out of line, regardless of whether anybody else is around or not, or whether anybody's going to find out or not. It's knowing that if I do something wrong or I do something I know is stupid and I look at it as stupid, I feel really bad about it. I feel really guilty. I can't lie. I don't even try, because at the end of the day, it's just like, 'By the way, I did this. I'm sure you're going to figure it out at some point,' but I'm the worst at tattling on myself almost immediately.

Through her fighting and resistance, Ava learned and embodied values that she continues to apply to her life. I was struck by the many stories, examples, and metaphors she shared. She used them to outline what and how she had learned. The analogy she personalized about the two dogs coming out of two different rooms cannot go without sharing:

I read the whole analogy of a woman sees two dogs come out of two different rooms. She can't figure out. . . . One dog comes out happy, mouth open, tail wagging, tongue kind of draped out the side, just happy dog. The other one comes out growling and really upset. She can't figure out what it is.

She goes and looks in the two rooms, and there are mirrors. The happy dog, of course, sees the reflection of other happy dogs. Therefore, he's in a great mood. The dog that comes out growling, all he saw was a bunch of growling dogs. How we present ourselves in the perspective that other people get and can draw off of.

If I want other people to be nice and polite and happy toward me, I can't walk around grumpy.

Ava had to learn to change. That was the point when she stopped fighting and began growing. For Ava, her locus of control seemed more internal than the other participants. She learned how to run interference with herself. There was no key statement mentioned to her by anyone that prompted her to change. Her circumstances were different. She aged out of the system, mostly to avoid being returned home permanently. She ran away from home until that was no longer effective, and she kept



getting returned. She fought fight after fight while locked up to avoid being sent back home. Her motivation to change took on a different form and meaning.

Each participant essentially described a negative starting point but now headed down a positive path, indicating what Ungar (2011) termed “complexity.” They had each learned to advocate for themselves and what they need. Tessa described the ability to be at a party without partying; she talked about having control over the situation. This control that participants described, the control to choose and then, in turn, make a different choice than they had historically made, captured the concept of empowerment. They took responsibility and assumed control over their lives.

As Ava portrayed,

I was on 17 medications when they released me. I took myself off all of them the day I got out. I’m not saying it’s been all just a complete uphill battle but . . . I can’t stand anything that makes me feel like I’m losing control of myself.

She was released on a mental health discharge with no parole which she understood as a free pass to run without the risk of being returned to her abusive home. Ava discovered that she has value. Her mind shifted; she exhibited a strong sense of agency. As Ava depicted, she has “strong values . . . mentally and emotionally strong . . . physically, mentally, emotionally aware.” Ava’s examples and understanding of herself reflected what it means to be empowered.

For Sid, using visual imagery (e.g., a small plant sprouting from hard ground), he explained a metaphor indicative of empowerment:

The ash and dirt symbolize coming from nothing. I feel like I’ve been broken down so many times that I had to start over, whether it was from [juvenile detention] or after a break up, I felt like I was a broken person, like I just had to pick myself up and keep going because, you know, no one is going to get me to where I want to be except for me. . . . That will grow into a giant tree. It will be awesome. I’m still a young tree, I’d say, but I’m sturdy. The wind can’t

break me, but I don't know, I'd just say I'm stronger . . . definitely some scars on my tree, but definitely stronger.

For Nell, it was her self-talk, the internal voice of encouragement that hinted at empowerment: “You're not that 16-, 17-, 13-year-old kid that was terrified. You can actually say something and understand what you're going through, and you're not the only one going through it.”

For all participants, learning was a primary coping aspect that facilitated their growth processes, and consequently, their path to resilience. From the platform of learning, choices, and change, followed the other coping aspects of creative expression, physical movement, self-acceptance, and community engagement.

**Creative expression.** “Drawing, writing, reading . . . anything that will take my mind off of whatever is going on” (Ava).

Engaging in the creative process came up time and time again throughout my conversations with participants. Many creative methods were cited as outlets to shift thinking or provide a release from daily stressors. All participants referenced different aspects of creativity. For example, Cole, Tessa, and Ava specifically mentioned that drawing and writing are coping skills that they use. Sid was adamant that, for him, “writing does not help.” He preferred taking pictures of wildlife in nature. Ava also enjoyed photography. Ava and Tessa both painted sometimes. Tessa, Ava, Sid, and Nell talked about cooking as an outlet, and both Tessa and Ava read to take their mind off of whatever might be going on. Sid, Ava, and Tessa, in particular, were drawn to new experiences; they had a tendency to seek them out. Music also played a role, especially for Sid, Ava, and Cole; Cole founds playing his guitar helpful in shifting his mood. Art, in general, was central for Ava: tattooing and “throwing on the wheel,”

referring to pottery (e.g., ceramics). She also liked tinkering with electronics and fixing computers. Tessa enjoyed clubbing. Nell talked about how she used to be involved in STOMP classes, a group focusing on percussion and movement.

Creativity was a powerful coping source for all participants in different ways.

All participants talked about humor to a certain degree. I would say, uniquely, each participant showed their sense of humor during our conversations. For Sid and Ava, their humor shone through immediately. With Nell, Tessa, and Cole, it took more time. It was evident that each participant integrated humor into their daily life and interactions. As Cole put it,

I'm one of those people that I like to goof around, joke around... I'm one of those people that if I joke around with you, and you joke around with me but then get all mad and upset, then there's the door, goodbye. Basically, if you can't handle the heat, then don't go in the kitchen.

When I think about participants' well-being and their health and how these elements showed up for them, I kept noticing what I would call a curious nature. All participants shared a similar way of being that involved reflection, pondering, questioning, and discovering new avenues. By engaging in learning and creative processes, they all seemed to draw from these experiences which further added to their perspective. I think about Tessa wandering to new places and exploring parks. I think about Sid hiking in the mountains. I think about Cole out on his BMX (bicycle motorcross) bike. I think about Nell walking her dogs. I think about Ava riding her motorcycle. Each of them learned to take healthy risks.

### **Physical movement.**

What I do is a lot of hard labor work and going to school and working again. . . . That's a lot of hard labor work. . . . Picking up 4,000 pound engines with cranes, not cranes but the other little thing. . . . That keeps me in shape.  
(Cole)

In addition to creativity, physical movement in its various forms was also an important coping tool. While Nell walked away from people when frustrated, Tessa went for a walk around parks, as did Sid in the mountains. Nell walked her dogs daily. Sid physically moved to various states as an older adolescent which seems important to his development. Fishing was his counseling. For Cole, physical exercise was important in his work (e.g., construction), at school (e.g., diesel mechanics), at home (e.g., yard work), and in his free time (e.g., BMX [bicycle motorcross], longboarding, paintballing, shooting, snowboarding, going to the mountains). Cole liked to go out and do things for himself. Tessa takes Zumba classes, and she was involved in a social group that goes camping and rock climbing. Ava stayed on the move, too, whether it involved volunteering, caretaking, playing with her dogs, riding her motorcycle, or going to school. For Ava,

Physically, I think I mentioned it before that I have congestive heart failure, so it's an everyday part of my life, and we spoke earlier of lovely kidney stones. If I'm not in the hospital, I'm feeling pretty freaking healthy, man.

Movement forward, propelling themselves toward goals, was the predominant form of movement all participants had in common.

In continuing to move forward, the purpose of the movement took on different forms. All participants seemed to stay busy. They became growth-oriented, moving from a place of perceived stagnation. Each participant seemed very focused on personal goals, in a broad sense, acknowledging that the manifestation of their goals was subject to change. For example, Cole shifted pretty dramatically from being in school and having the goal of being a certified mechanic to viewing that path as no longer necessary for him achieving the goal of being a successful mechanic. Definitions were malleable. Sometimes the choice for movement involved solitude.

They all indicated the need for external quiet whether that be hiking solo in the woods, wandering alone in parks, staying home alone, or riding a bike/motorcycle around; they each intentionally took opportunities to seek space of their own and reflect.

**Self-acceptance.** “I’ve learned to actually accept who I am instead of, like I said, being somebody else and trying to live up to everybody else’s standards. I’m happier. Pretty cool” (Nell).

I was continually struck by the insights that participants shared. For some participants, it seems it was maybe the first time some of these insights had been verbalized. For example, Cole said many times throughout our conversation, “I’ve never really thought about that” or “I’ve never been asked that before.” I got the sense that some participants even surprised themselves. Perhaps the insights had not really taken shape until that point, or perhaps it was that they had not been shared. Cole and Sid both talked about how they did not like talking about their feelings, so I realize that participating in the research study may not have been an easy process. There was an essence of acceptance, both stated and implied, that participants had come to while evaluating their lives. Each participant seemed to learn more about his or her self, others, and interactions with the world through self-acceptance, being more open to others, and acceptance of their life situations.

To each participant, there was a self-critical edge. I made many notes to myself after the interviews and during the coding process about a self-critical nature; yet, this did not seem to be a stand-alone theme, but rather, an element that fed into the uncomfortable process of self-acceptance and striving toward self-betterment. As Cole conceptualized,

I get mad at myself. Like, really, I know I could've done better. I'm one of those people that if I screw up, then I'm going to learn how to do it the correct way. You do it better. . . . You make sure it's done better next time.

When reflecting on his time locked up, Cole explained:

I screwed up. I had to live through the consequences, either (a) I can live through it, or (b) I can get out and do the exact same thing all over again . . . being in jail fucking sucked, excuse my language. I don't know; everything that I did and learned from consequences, I would say it came out positively instead of negatively.

While Cole is self-critical of himself for choices related to his own outcomes,

Sid is more critical when his choices let someone else down.

I feel I beat myself up when I let someone else down. Letting myself down is not that bad, because I can try harder the next day, but when I'm letting someone else down, I feel disappointed in myself.

I try to usually keep my word. I feel like someone's word is really important. When you say you're going to do something, you should do it. I think that much comes from like the whole word maybe and all that stuff. I hate the word maybe.

Cole continued by stating, "If you're going to do something, do it. I feel like . . . because my mom always said she was going to do stuff, and she never did." Sid's reflections stemmed from his own experiences of being let down and not wanting to make other people feel the same way he felt each time his mother let him down. Male participants seemed to vocalize this self-criticism in a more pronounced way than female participants. These insights were shared in response to a question about how they handle not meeting their own expectations or the expectations of others.

Ava shared a very similar response:

I'll beat myself up a little bit. I feel really bad, and so I feel really guilty. I'll beat myself up for about five minutes before I finally tell myself to snap out of it and just try and be better next time and try to fix the situation and how I really messed it up. Yeah. . . . I wouldn't say I get over it exactly. Even when I'm in problem solving mode, I still feel horrible and so I get that determination where I can't let it go. I'm the kind of person that says

something stupid and then will still be apologizing a week later, and go like, “How can I fix this?” I just feel horrible until it’s fixed.

Tessa seemed to have limited insight into this question as she responded only in the context of avoiding future trouble or incarceration. For example, she said that she might walk away if she did not meet the expectations of others, and she would get into trouble (e.g., get more charges as an adult) if she did not meet her own expectations. Her responses tended to be very literal. For both Cole and Tessa, they seemed to leave little margin for error in their current self-conceptualization.

For Nell, she repeated the exact phrase I heard from others, “I beat myself up”:

I’m an introvert, so I get really quiet. I beat myself up bad, but I smell about it on the outside. It drives [my husband] crazy, because he’s stressing hard about something. He’s digging into me because I spent money that I knew I shouldn’t have spent. I just get quieter and quieter to the point where it’s like, I’m his punching bag, but I bite back. I avoid doing that particular activity for a while.

If I know it’s going to be impulsive or when I get paid again, I’ll hand him my whole check saying, “Here. You give me an allowance, and we’ll work it out.” He understands. He knows I retreat really fast. I close up shop, and there’s no way you’re going to find me until I’m ready for you to.

In Nell’s description, I see the self-critical piece but also a self-protective component.

All participants acknowledged avoidance in certain situations, either in the form of walking away, seeking solitude, getting quiet, or engaging in other activities. These examples could also be seen as self-preservation of their energy reserve. Out of all the stories and narratives, Nell probably demonstrated the most and the least acceptance in different ways:

The past year, I’ve noticed that aside from laughing, I’ve been pushing myself harder to actually accept myself more. Although I have, I’m talking about accepting all of me, not just, I’m a female that is married now, and I’ve got this life that everybody expects, but I actually wanted it. Even though I never said it, after a while, it stops being everybody’s expectations, and I woke up; I want it.

Nell tended to mention acceptance the most, and I could see her struggle (e.g., in the way she mentioned needing to accept that her mother is gone). It is clear she has done a lot of self-work and growth. There still seemed to be a part of her that might be in disbelief about this growth.

I believe that Rae eventually learned to accept herself, although she did not describe her experiences through this lens. Rae talked to me about how proud she was that she was no longer using drugs or engaged in prostitution, and I saw self-acceptance reflected through this pride. Seemingly, she had demonstrated the ability to move on with her life and change her behavior in spite of continuing to live with her mother, with whom she had previously offended.

For participants with a history of receiving clinical diagnoses and/or medication, they seemed to lead with mentioning labels and then defining what those labels mean to them. Sid and Ava both described discontinuing all medication immediately upon release. They both talked about a dynamic of being overmedicated and a corrections culture that treated even the mildest concern with medication. They both proudly mentioned the discontinuation of medication not without the drawbacks. The choice was easy; the experience was otherwise. Sid and Ava both mentioned the difficulties involved with the medication discontinuation process; yet, in the end, they felt better than when heavily medicated. As Ava discussed:

Mentally, well, I'm not psychotic. I'm not off doing illegal and bad choices, and I'm sane, for the most part, I think, maybe. . . . Staying pretty in tune with myself is healthy for me. It's like the words mental and emotional, because those two, of course, go hand in hand. Staying in tune with myself is how I feel healthy. The key thing is to stay focused on every little detail of me.



Ava had no reservations talking about her mental health:

Apparently, I've worked through my issues enough that when going and getting an evaluation the other day, I don't fit the criteria for three-fourths of the diagnoses I was diagnosed with. PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], yeah, I'll always have that . . . then bipolar, which she said that I meet the criteria for that mainly because I was diagnosed with it previously, but I don't show signs of it, then anxiety. That goes along with my PTSD, but only three things she says that she sees. . . . Seeing that shows me just how far I've come or how much I've worked to get to where I am."

It was almost as if mental health diagnoses reflected and/or retracted, served as a measuring stick to determine progress. With the loss of diagnoses and the discontinuation of medication came increased feelings of success. Less medication and diagnoses were positive outcomes. With the positive outcomes, participants also gained feelings of progress and growth. I appreciated the vulnerability of participants in being willing and able to discuss their mental health histories, unprompted. There was a covert sense of being pathologized while incarcerated yet consciously undoing that cycle when given the opportunity (i.e., upon release).

Nell used her mental health as a lens to define her strengths and weaknesses. She led with a mental health understanding and awareness when talking about some of her life experiences. Her manner was not pejorative, but rather, matter of fact, with acceptance of how her mental health impacts her daily life. Both Nell and Ava spoke of periods of depression. Nell seemed to refer to her diagnoses more like adjectives as if they were personality traits that describe how she thinks or why she did certain things. She casually mentioned the terms, "bipolar," "borderline," "anxiety," "ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder]," and "agoraphobic." With these labels, I was reminded that sometimes self-identifications may be hidden beneath words (Ungar, 2001). Nell did not name it, but she also seemed to be experiencing a form of

complicated bereavement. Participants' depictions reminded me of Ungar's (2011) concepts of decentrality and cultural relativity.

**Community engagement.** "I'm involved with [the teen center] like rock climbing, and do help them set up for field trips out of town, and sometimes we go camping and stuff like that" (Tessa).

Another coping aspect that participants described was engagement of some sort whether with people, in an activity, or keeping busy with work/school. Each participant seemed to maintain a certain structure in his or her life which could be what fosters a distance from negative influences. Cole outlined his weekly routine, "I work full-time. I go to school full-time. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, I don't have school at night, but I still work. At least I get to come home at night and relax. I get three nights to relax." When Cole was not working or attending classes, he spent time with his fiancée and son; although, by the last interview, Cole was no longer employed in construction with his father or attending classes. Keeping busy with frequent changes seemed consistent for all participants. For example, when I started the interview process with Ava, she was attending school full-time and not working. Upon a follow-up after the interviews were completed, she was no longer attending classes but working full-time. Each participant seemed to encounter numerous changes over the course of the research study.

Nell worked two jobs: cleaning office buildings at night and retail on the weekends. She described that she worked a lot of hours over the holidays. Holidays are difficult for her, so she worked a lot to take to take her mind off of "stuff." She used to volunteer at "mom and pop shops." Mostly, though, Nell was a homebody. Her husband was her anchor. Nell seemed to pour herself into work as a way to stay

engaged and manage her life; at the same time, she described that working serves as an outlet for her to control her emotions.

Ava talked extensively about all of her extracurricular activities from volunteering to helping friends to her creative projects. In addition to rescuing animals and making art, Ava described herself as “kind of a nerd:” she likes *Dr. Who* and playing *World of Warcraft* online. She volunteers at Comic-Con. She took apart electronics and puts them back together again. Ava ran booths at music festivals for animal rescue organizations. She has looked into joining some clubs at her community college. She helps her niece with her homework. It seemed important to her to contribute where and when she is able. Ava, too, as Nell, explained that she has to keep busy during the holidays so she does not get triggered. Ava remained engaged. The social piece was also central for her. After the interviews, Ava shared that she was taking a break from classes and instead working full-time at a coffee shop. There was a sense of not quite trusting themselves if they were not busy enough and an avoidance of directly dealing with their issues. Instead, participants had a tendency to reduce their stress through activities; perhaps this is because there are many factors they cannot change.

Tessa, being out of corrections the least amount of time among participants, also stayed engaged. She was at a different point in her transition than the others. She was still in the process of settling. At one point, she stated that she was starting a brand new job, and then at a different point during the interviews, she talked about how she goes to the library daily to look for jobs and fill out applications. She volunteered at a teen center which offers programming for at-risk youth. Tessa served as a mentor, tutor, and role model. Tessa talked about helping with family events, rock

climbing, camping trips, and other out-of-town field trips through the teen center as well as being involved in a drama group.

Sid, too, had kept busy; he had been out the longest of all participants, 13 years. Sid has held lots of different types of jobs in construction, handyman work, and emergency services. Additionally, he was a student for a couple of years with the desire to return. Through some of his classes, he got involved in volunteer work. He volunteered at an adult day care program for older adults with dementia. He coached football through a local organization. Sid did all of the cooking and coordinating for his family during the holidays. He did not believe the holiday gatherings would happen in his family if it were not for him; he seemed to be the glue. Of the participants, Sid seems to be the most socially oriented; he referenced several friends and acquaintances throughout the course of our meetings. Sid was also growth-oriented; he talked about cutting off a lot of his friends, because he was “growing out of them.”

Connection with people who shared similar values and those who have helped along the way was also a theme for maintaining well-being. All participants talked about distancing themselves from people who engage in activities that may get them into trouble. Sid, Ava, Tessa, and Cole talked about Facebook as a social outlet and a means of staying connected to people. Each participant identified positive relationships with key adults along their path. For Nell, it was her mother and then her husband. Ava identified specific professionals who worked with her during her time incarcerated. Sid also identified specific staff members at the juvenile detention facility where he was committed; he spoke very highly of one professional, so much so, that he talked about integrating a “big chunk” of this person into the way he lives

his own life now. For Tessa, reconnecting with her family seemed to have the biggest positive influence. All participants explained key people, either youth service providers, counselors, family members, teachers, or other mentors who were helpful during and following incarceration. Most participants also identified at least one or two close friends who also serve as a positive influence.

Along similar lines of helping others and staying connected, the idea of taking care of something and the theme of animals, in particular, arose. Nell and Ava referenced their dogs often; each of them have two dogs, an important aspect of their lives and well-being. Nell said it helps her, “taking care of something.” They both made it a point to show me pictures of their dogs on their phones. It was clear their dogs were an integral part of their day-to-day routine. In addition to caring for two dogs, Ava talked about rescuing and fostering kittens, “bottle-feeding and all.” Both surprising and not surprising, the other participants, while they did not have any animals, mentioned wanting dogs. Sid reflected on his childhood dog, and firmly mentioned that it was a personal goal for him to have his own dog. Both Tessa and Cole also mentioned wanting a dog. In response to a query about what made them healthy, participants seemed to spontaneously talk about their animals or a desire to have an animal. For Ava, playing and wrestling with her dogs in the backyard was a primary coping skill, “really helps decompress and wind them down and wind me down.” This could be a reflection of wanting to be able to care of something and the notion of reciprocity, being accepted and loved unconditionally.

There is a growth aspect to all participants, I found, by listening to their goals, values, and perspectives. They have each learned to advocate for themselves and what they need. For each participant, I could see the influence of counseling and the

techniques they had learned being applied to their lives. The unforeseen circumstances of participants and significant life changes seemed notable as well. Separately, I have already described the changes in student and work status as well as health concerns, accidents, or unexpected events that surfaced over the course of the study.

Independent of each other, Cole's stepmother died, and he was involved in a serious car accident. Ava was hospitalized for kidney stones. Following the interviews, she was hospitalized again for pneumonia. She noted additional ongoing health issues that impact her daily life such as congestive heart failure. Following the interviews, Sid, too, thought he had congestive heart failure but later confirmed that he was diagnosed instead with migraine headaches. Sid endured a major fall at work prior to the interviews. Nell had surgery on her neck in between interviews. For participants being so young, the health concerns and unexpected events definitely seemed significant. These occurrences may be indicative of higher stress levels and health risk factors. It is not without saying that they all continue to struggle in their own ways; however, they seem to mitigate and run interference with themselves better as emerging adults than when they were younger.

### **Conclusion**

Resilience in formerly incarcerated emerging adults is multi-faceted. In the exploration of identity, definitions, and coping, several themes emerged (see Table 2). The themes that emerged provided the grounds to better understand the internal processes of formerly incarcerated emerging adults, how they have navigated various social and physical ecologies, and their transition out of youth corrections. These findings have implications for juvenile justice practices in terms of prevention, treatment, and transition efforts which will be discussed in Chapter V.

Table 2

*Overview of Categories and Themes*

Categorical themes	Themes	Subthemes
Recapturing identity	Reciprocity of respect	
	Role transformation	
	Redefining relationship with self and others	Loss and gain Betrayal to giving back Self-efficacy
	Culture undefined	
Outlining character	Protection of self and others	Boundaries
	Perseverance and hope	
Internalized coping	Problem-solving	
	Creative expression	
	Physical movement	
	Self-acceptance	
	Community engagement	

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide a summary of the study and a discussion of the research findings in relation to the resilience and developmental research literature. The prevalence of youth incarceration and its impact have long been a social concern. Many adolescents transition out of incarceration right around the brink of emerging adulthood. Research about the resilience of this population is important in an effort to better understand experiences, identity development within this context, greatest needs, complex interactions between social and physical ecologies, and perspective of emerging adults at different points in their transition out of incarceration. Limitations of the study will be presented along with implications for practice and recommendations for future research. True to qualitative research, I will also provide a brief description of my own development and how I was changed in the process of co-creating resilience narratives in formerly incarcerated emerging adults.

This study was unique in its incorporation of how theories interplayed across developmental, cultural, and resilience domains. It integrated complex ideas and challenged the stereotypes of juvenile detention settings and the individuals who encounter these contexts. The study gave voice to an otherwise silenced population in an effort to encourage more facilitative environments in homes, schools, communities,



and other contexts. Participants came to new insights about themselves, exploiting the opportunity for empowerment and redefinition.

### **Summary**

The current research was a qualitative, narrative inquiry study of formerly incarcerated emerging adults undertaken to better understand the developmental, social, and ecological processes contributing to their resilience. The sample included six participants (two male, four female) from the southern and western United States who were formerly incarcerated during adolescence. The narrative data were analyzed following Giorgi's (1975) staged process in which meaning units were derived from key statements, phrases, stories, and words. There were a few primary themes for each overarching research question. Research questions will be addressed along with a discussion of themes related to resilience and development literature.

Respect was a primary mode in which formerly incarcerated emerging adults identified themselves. There was the idea of "treat people the way you want to be treated" but also the notion that respect does not always come easily. This theme captured the interpersonal exchange between formerly incarcerated emerging adults and their social ecologies. The respect factor impacted relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and strangers. At their core, they needed respect, and they wanted to give it. It is unclear why this theme emerged so strongly, but I wonder if it emerged as a result of not having had respect in the past or something unique to incarceration.

I am reminded of Anderson's (1999) ethnographic study of street codes and the notion of negotiating for respect. He examined the idea of disadvantaged neighborhoods and social identity and the idea that respect among youth can be negotiated through violence. Each participant in the present study noted anger and

violence in their past, and at the same time, respect was a primary component of their current identity. Anderson found that a neighborhood street culture had to do with a self-presentation demanding of respect which deterred the probability of victimization and ultimately led to negotiating for respect. The internal norms for the formerly incarcerated emerging adults in this study may well have started out as a propensity toward violence; many of them touched upon fighting in their past whether with their peers or their families. This could be for many reasons—stemming from abuse, invalidating environments, and unhealthy relationships with caregivers, for example, which Ungar (2004b) would argue represents a type of resilience in and of itself (atypicality). Ava, especially, with her use of fighting while incarcerated in order to stay in the system and avoid being sent back to her abusive home, exemplifies an example of this type of atypical resilience. However, as they developed over time, participants began to negotiate respect from others in new ways instead of resorting to violence. The formation of beliefs, values, and identity is one of the major tasks of emerging adulthood; this theme captures both a shift in self-identification and reconceptualization of the value of respect for formerly incarcerated emerging adults.

Formerly incarcerated emerging adults described a transformative shift from defiance and resistance to assuming accountability as they transitioned into new roles. There were past selves and present selves with a balanced tension between arrested development and an accelerated childhood. They evolved from anger and violence to being able to step back and evaluate situations. The path to their new self was not always straightforward, and for some, it seemed that the old self was sometimes right below the surface and they needed to be vigilant should it reemerge. Juvenile

corrections seemed to have facilitated growth processes that led to formerly incarcerated emerging adults viewing themselves and their abilities differently.

Abrams and Hyun (2009) examined negotiated identity among incarcerated male juvenile offenders and discovered different patterns of identity transition shaped by treatment, challenging them to examine their previous selves and future possibilities. These patterns reflected a spectrum from wanting to change (self-synthesis) to ambivalence (situational self-transformation) to no intention of changing (self-preservation). Participants in this study all demonstrated a “self-synthesis” pattern of identity transition which already seemed to have taken place for most of them. They wanted to change and in a lot of ways they had changed, which makes sense in the context of this study as participants were in a different developmental stage (emerging adulthood) than adolescence. Tessa and Cole, the youngest participants, were right at the beginning of emerging adulthood; they spoke of change more at a surface level, perhaps reflecting ambivalence or simply wanting to stay who they were, just not get into trouble anymore.

Arnett (2001) explored conceptions of the transition to adulthood among adolescents, emerging adults, and young-to-midlife adults. Across all developmental groups, individualistic criteria were viewed to be of most importance, for example, accepting responsibility, establishing beliefs and values, and financial independence, while role transitions such as marriage and becoming a parent ranked of lowest importance (Arnett, 2001). In the present study, accepting responsibility seemed to derive from the role shifts within themselves. Formerly incarcerated emerging adults spoke to the significance of, for example, becoming a wife (i.e., Nell and Rae), a father (i.e., Cole), or a college student (i.e., Ava and Sid), and the additional

responsibility those roles entailed. This finding was consistent with Arnett's (2001) results with greater emphasis placed on role transitions. Elements of responsibility were present in the current study in terms of work, school, relationships, and even owning or aspiring to own a dog.

For most of the participants, they endured childhood trauma which may result in developmental delays (Perry, 2008), and markedly, facilitative environments can result in developmental acceleration (Ungar, 2011). As much as incarceration was undesired, for these participants, in many ways, it served as a facilitative environment, providing them with the opportunity to continue to define and redefine themselves. In their study with incarcerated youth, Todis et al. (2001) identified components of the correctional system that were positive for their participants: (a) structure, (b) classes/interventions, (c) positive adult contact, and (d) time to reflect and mature. Perhaps these are some of the facilitative elements that lead to growth and change, and in turn, developmental acceleration. For example, Sid and Ava specifically referenced individuals within the juvenile justice system who were very influential in their decision to pursue different life paths.

The unique experience of incarceration during adolescence led to the opportunity of intentional redefinition. These opportunities primarily presented themselves in participants' relationships as they lost and gained connections with others and navigated the betrayal of loved ones. The losses and hardship of betrayal seemed to then translate into formerly incarcerated emerging adults wanting to give back to others, not just people close to them, but to the community, at large. These opportunities for redefinition led to a strong sense of independence and self-reliance,

where the external demands of the world changed to an internalization of confidence, realizing their value.

There seems to be a connection with individuals who offend young and exposure to violence, as victims and witnesses, which can lead to feelings of loss and betrayal (Paton, Crouch, & Camic, 2009). Many of the participants in the current study described various forms of childhood abuse from violent physical abuse to sexual abuse to neglect. They each had endured many losses with associated feelings of loss; yet consequently, each participant mentioned several gains, such as perspective, a new way of thinking and processing, coping skills, and the desire to help others. Although participants expressed a sense of betrayal from family members, especially while incarcerated, they also seemed to be able to channel these negative feelings onto a positive avenue, one of motivation to give back to others—to the very family members by whom they felt betrayed and unknown others. They were able to move on, seek reconnection, and give people another chance, in the same way that they wanted this from others.

Positive pro-social relationships are well-documented in the resilience research literature (Masten et al. 2009). Although there were elements of important relationships and support structures for participants in the current study, the relationships fluctuated as they were lost, strained, redefined, or otherwise. Abrams (2006) found that formerly incarcerated youth have a tendency to repair relationships upon discharge even though previously strained. Each participant in this study attempted to reconnect with family members who provided little support prior to and during incarceration. Self-efficacy, strongly presented in resilience literature (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten & Reed, 2002), understood by participants as

“independence” perhaps developed, in part, through socio-ecological navigation. My findings differed slightly from the widely understood protective factors outlined in the research literature over the past 20 years. This could be due to the postmodern stance inviting individual perspectives of development, growth, and resilience; in part, this may also be related to the emerging adult narrative reflecting on their experiences during adolescence. Unruh et al. (2009) found that incarcerated youth tended to view themselves as the risk or protective factor through their positive or negative choices. Participants recognized the power of their own agency and decision-making; they tended to view themselves as their primary tool, resource, and change agent.

Cultural identity was described in a distant manner. Cole posed, “What’s wrong with society?” without viewing himself as an integral part of it. Participants had a tendency to view themselves as separate from a defined culture. Formerly incarcerated emerging adults situated themselves in the context of work and intimate relationships, yet with some uncertainty and ambivalence. Jensen and Arnett (2012) proposed that cultural identity development may look different today due to the increased exposure to many different cultures via avenues such as the Internet and social media. Adolescents and emerging adults experience many more global influences than in previous years, and this dynamic may be leading to confusion related to cultural identity. Although participants understood that “culture” included aspects of their family, their sexual orientation, and even what they called the food they ate, it was not something that they seemed to define as internal to themselves. Perhaps it is this new globalization that is making it difficult for emerging adults to clearly define a cultural identity.

According to Jensen and Arnett (2012), some of the unique developmental facets of emerging adulthood, the extension of identity crisis from adolescence, include increased well-being, anxious optimism, personal high hopes, limited hope for the world, and ambivalence about adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a very self-focused time in life which emerged in the narrative of all participants. In fact, some participants talked about feeling uncomfortable for focusing on their own needs. They each perceived that they were “being selfish” upon their transition out of incarceration. This perception may be a byproduct of enacting self-preservation and setting boundaries. Ungar (2004b) proposed that delinquent pathways can lead to powerful identities which do not necessarily align with culturally defined groups. Delinquent pathways leading to powerful identities is interesting to consider in light of emerging adulthood where there is a striving to balance autonomy and community, taking the form of self-gain and helping others (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001). For example, Sid aspired to be a physician’s assistant, Tessa a registered nurse, and Ava a ceramics instructor. These are all helping professions.

Protection of self and protection of others emerged as themes related to outlining character. Self-preservation in the context of this study took on a different meaning than put forth by the theoretical efforts and development of Abrams and Hyun (2009). I used the term related to protection of their new sense of self versus Abrams and Hyun’s interpretation of protecting the old self with no desire to change. Although, participants had core uniqueness, an understanding of the world that they absolutely did not want to change; they made room for some change without entirely changing their core selves. The association of pro-social peers and adults is a common community factor related to the resilience of youth and adults (Masten & Coatsworth,

1998). Albeit conceptualized differently, participants in the current study emphasized setting boundaries in an effort to phase out negative (anti-social) adults and peers. The angle is different; however, the idea is the same in terms of situating themselves among positive influences such as finding new friends, reconnecting with family members, or developing a new definition of family. For example, Ava moved in with her partner and her partner's parents shortly after transitioning out of incarceration.

Perseverance and hope were other themes that played a role in the character development of participants. A positive outlook on life is an individual protective factor but also the idea of post-traumatic growth, that overcoming significant adversity has led to being more skilled in handling difficult times in the future (Cooper, Feder, Southwick, & Charney, 2007; Frazier & Berman, 2008). The current study's findings closely align and support some of the well-documented resilience elements. Many participants highlighted positive insights from blatantly very difficult life situations. At the end of my interview with Ava, she told me that I should have asked "why" she is making it; when I asked this question of her, she answered, "What choice do I have?" Embedded in many of Sid's identified roles were skills that facilitated his perseverance and hope: learner, supporter, communicator, and coordinator. Resilience is multidimensional, and there can be many difficulties inherent to understanding the construct (Luthar et al., 2000). While some individuals may manifest resilience in one domain, such as positive adaptation, it does not mean that he or she will demonstrate resilience across other domains, such as social competence or excelling in academics (Luthar, 1991). According to Luthar, resilience is more of a phenomenon or process rather than a trait that someone possesses.



Problem-solving was central to coping with adversity. It provided perspective and led to setting personal goals for self-betterment. Formerly incarcerated emerging adults gained self-awareness, a new skillset for managing stressors, and enacted the choice to change how they responded to their environment. Rather than continuing to respond to the negative influences in their lives, it is as if they had come to adopt a stance of psychological mindedness (Beardslee, 1998; Nyklicek, Majoor, & Schalken, 2010). They internalized a problem-solving process—taking a step back, evaluating the situation, and weighing outcomes. Participants grew in their ability to problem-solve, self-reflect, and their capacity to learn from their experiences to guide and be well-informed in their future decision making. Todis et al. (2001) identified incarcerated youth who demonstrate the most resilience possess an internal drive and seem to have a more goal-oriented stance. Each participant in the current study identified both short- and long-term goals which seemed to play into their daily motivation even when these goals changed.

They also developed tools to help them maintain this more reflective perspective. Creative expression, whether drawing, writing, ceramics, photography, cooking, or music, was an important coping aspect for participants. Physical movement captured the many ways that participants took space, relocated, engaged in physical exercise, and continued to propel themselves forward. Ties to prosocial organizations and possessing talents that have value are evidenced community and individual resilience factors (Masten & Reed, 2002). In the context of the current study, I viewed participants' creative outlets as enjoyable activities that have the capacity to help them better manage their thoughts and emotions. I interpreted the movement components in much the same way; with both creativity and movement,

there are elements of healthy challenge and risk, the challenge to create something new and the risk to relocate (e.g., head space, physical, and looking to the future).

In order to truly move forward in their lives, formerly incarcerated emerging adults needed to accept themselves and their life situations as well as to open themselves to others. They also kept busy either with work, school, or volunteering. Community engagement in pro-social activities is one of the primary factors continuously cited in resilience research with at-risk populations (Masten et al., 2009) that helps to decrease delinquent behavior. Todis et al. (2001) found that a successful return to school and engagement in school and work activities helped some adolescents discontinue illegal activity. Sid, Ava, and Cole seemed to have been striving for this balance. The engagement piece is consistent with the findings of the present study and also a positive self-perception (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) which is similar to the identified theme of self-acceptance. While each participant was self-critical in some ways, they each believed in themselves and accepted their revised manner of engaging the world.

Certainly, Rae's narrative differed from the other narratives with some remnants that were in line with the identity formation and resilience processes of the other participants. Even though her narrative seemed to highlight more risk than resilience, Rae's resilience can still be interpreted through the resilience research framework set out by Ungar (2011) with the principles of decentrality, complexity, cultural relativity, and atypicality. Rae's resilience contrasted the social norms and conventions of Western culture, and in this way can be viewed as atypical. She learned to navigate and negotiate her world from her mother (e.g., prostitution); from the perspective of her family system, this may have also been viewed as resilience (e.g.,

cultural relativity). Rae's environment played a huge role in her development (decentrality), and ultimately, she is currently at a place in life that reflects her resilience despite the road she took to get to that point (complexity).

### **Development of Researcher**

Ungar (2003) suggested that researchers make explicit objectives that contribute to their findings in an effort to uncover biases. My primary objective was to uncover some of the internal processes that play into resilience as a whole—the socio-ecological concept of resilience. In doing so, I utilized the resilience research framework set forth by Ungar (2011) which challenges more mainstream and limited definitions of resilience. My questions aimed to tap into culture, context, and development at different points in time over the course of participants' lives—pre-incarceration, during commitment, and post-transition. I was interested in the interplay of factors, the interaction of individual traits with the environments encountered, and how participants navigated their way toward resources and negotiated their needs.

At times, I found the role of researcher to be a difficult one. Narrative inquiry, at different moments, felt like a clinical interview, a casual conversation, a series of questions, and a heartfelt connection. It was challenging to bracket the clinician in me and be true to the role of researcher. By the end of the third interview with participants, it seemed like they were really starting to open up, and the dialogue had just begun. It was beautiful to be a witness to their stories, reflections, insights, and memories. Constructing resilience narratives with formerly incarcerated emerging adults further inspired my passion to continue highlighting resilience in at-risk populations as my life's work. The research process solidified my desire to train, teach, and continue researching resilience related to youth in the juvenile justice

system. I am passionate about incorporating these findings into my work with youth and emerging adults. I am interested in facilitating movement far beyond “the use of a state provided comb,” as Ava coined in her poetry.

### **Implications**

There are many theoretical and practical implications and applications of this study’s findings. The findings make some of the dynamic processes of identity development and transition more transparent. Language stood out to me; participants in this study did not view themselves as “ex-offenders” or “juvenile delinquents.” They had not internalized negative labels attributed to previous charges. They had each learned to take accountability for their actions, and not just for the sake of others, but also for themselves. In some ways, this accountability set them apart from the narrative provided to me by Rae. Her initial account focused on what others had done; while the other five participants noted similar transgressions (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect), they also moved on quickly to their own role in their narratives. They experienced identity shifts which partially had to do with role transitions. Participants’ internalized some of the treatment discourse from when they were incarcerated, for example, stepping back from situations and evaluating before acting. Miller (2011) referred to this as an “appropriate narrative”—one which has been shaped through the contrast of the institutional goals of control and caring. Many of the participants attribute this lacking skill, along with their choices, as leading to their actions that resulted in incarceration. Participants discussed how reactive they used to be, not slowing down to think about their actions, consequences, and the impact on others. The implication of internalizing this skill emphasizes the importance

of the treatment discourse while incarcerated, knowing that it is one element that may lead to a decrease in future offending and recidivism.

Given that respect was a predominant theme for participants in terms of identity, a mode of relating, and a coping skill, the concept could be more individually integrated into juvenile rehabilitation. For example, in juvenile detention facilities, there is certainly an expectation for youth to respect others but it is generalized to “no fighting,” or “watching language.” I wonder if there is a way that the notion of respect could be woven into treatment utilizing a youth’s unique street code, cultural background, and personal definition for respect. This would entail a postmodern lens and the ability to tailor one’s own understanding of respect, translating it to apply to daily interactions and community participation. Behavioral programming and treatment modalities in juvenile corrections have a tendency to take the form of more general approaches without cultural or developmental considerations. Using a youth’s own belief system to better understand and navigate his or her world may create buy-in and lead to more successful treatment outcomes.

From a community perspective, especially when considering child development, individuals do not change as a result of what they personally do, but rather as a consequence of what their environment provides (Wyman, 2003). Ungar (2011) proposed that individual resources only go as far as the ecologies that facilitate their application to developmental tasks. With respect to the current study, participants were shaped by the contexts they encountered, but they also reflected agency in these encounters. For example, Tessa planned to walk away from drama, Sid would accept his family’s shortcomings, Ava found a new family as did Nell, and Cole continued to negotiate his role between his family of origin and his family of choice. There was a

back and forth element, not just one direction of influence, but rather, a negotiation, a tension at play. Resilience can be viewed as the complex interaction between participants' individual traits and relationships with peers and adults through different physical ecologies in the context of juvenile incarceration and the transition to emerging adulthood. In the resilience field, there has been a strong emphasis on building individual traits with less of a focus on environmental changes. The implication of shifting the focus onto social and physical ecologies challenges the assumption that the "problem" lies within the individual. The perspective shift has potential implications for prevention, treatment, and transition practices with youth involved with the justice system. Perhaps it is the influence of the social and physical ecologies that builds the character strengths and qualities contributing to resilience. Increased funding for community and school programs, especially in more at-risk areas, may help mitigate antisocial behavior, increase positive relationships and engagement, and ultimately decrease recidivism.

In school settings, community mental health, and the juvenile justice system, there is a tendency to place sole emphasis of potential problems and the source for change on the individuals themselves instead of considering other impacting factors. The framework and the findings of this study challenge the idea that change is needed only in the individual and expands the definition of resilience to prioritize facilitative components of the environment. Socio-ecological resilience takes into account social ecologies (relationships) and physical ecologies (context). Although participants had made many changes within themselves, there were external challenges (e.g., need for education, unemployment or underemployment, and access to health care) that continually threatened their ability to persevere.

This perspective shift is important when considering prevention, intervention, and transition efforts for youth and emerging adults at most risk of entering and/or reentering the juvenile justice system. It is important for lawmakers, school administrators, and youth service providers to realize how crucial facilitative environments are for the development of youth, especially since many youth entering into the justice system have trauma histories. We cannot always change the home environments youth encounter; however, we can modify the climates of schools, communities, and detention facilities. Ungar (2011) encouraged the use of meaningful resources in an effort to create opportunity structures that shape developmental pathways. Service designs can be informed through a better understanding of resilience-promoting processes (Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Ungar, 2011). Positive behavior systems are often implemented in school and detention facilities; however, at times, there is very little training for staff to understand how the positive systems work, and behavior management defaults to more of a punishment-based system which is not as effective as positive reinforcement. Increased training resources for school and detention staff are necessary to support the fidelity of positive behavior systems so that they are implemented with consistency and effectiveness.

The findings of this study may contribute to models of practice that take into account resilience processes and identity development, such as the use of the three principles, universal mind, consciousness, and thought, with justice-involved youth that helps them draw out inner-health and resilience to develop new perspectives (Banks, 1998, 2001, 2005; Kelley, Pranksy, & Sedgemen, 2014; Pranksy, 1998). Communities are in need of stronger transition programs that help youth and emerging adults maintain their new self-definitions and identities. As much as possible,

reentry/transition programs should be culturally specific, developmentally specific, and gender-specific in an effort to address the unique needs of each youth or emerging adult.

When considering recidivism, it is important to remember that with this particular group of participants, at least half of the participants described an effect of “bouncing back in and out” prior to their most recent release date, meaning that they did recidivate initially. Revisiting some of the main risk factors affecting recidivism, factors included being in contact with the justice system at a young age, mental health, and substance use (Cottle et al., 2001; McReynolds, et al., 2010; Trulson et al., 2005). These factors were consistent with the factors facing the participants who disclosed initially recidivating; in this way, perhaps at the time, they were not much different than other youth who immediately recidivated upon release. Pro-social relationships and engagement in a routine are factors that decrease criminal behavior and ultimately reduce the risk for recidivism; these are two of many influences that contributed to the social and physical ecologies of participants in addition to the presence of their individual traits, their use of coping skills, and the development of their internal resilience processes. So, what makes this group different than the many other youth who recidivate within the first few months or first year after being released? Perhaps it is the unique interaction between all of these factors and processes simultaneously; it does not appear to be one specific element, but rather, a blend of experiences, insights, environmental factors, and development, that lead to a perspective shift, resulting in the discontinuation of the behaviors they were engaged in previously.

Embedded within the current study was a methodological comparison when it came to examining Rae’s narrative versus the other narratives. The intention was to



utilize narrative inquiry as a methodology for all participants across multiple interviews. This was not the case in the one conversation with Rae which set up an interesting juxtaposition between the quality of her resilience narrative versus the depth in the other narratives. The implication for using narrative inquiry to draw out resilience themes was that questions were presented to guide the participants' reflection process in which many of them came to new insights about themselves and their life experiences. Rae was not presented with these same questions, so her reflection took on a different form. The difference in the narratives presented an argument for using a clear and consistent research methodology as it impacts the findings.

### **Limitations**

A primary limitation to this study was access to the targeted population and follow-through from the initial point of contact. The criteria narrowed in on a very specific and difficult to reach subsection of the population. I was contacted by many individuals either older than the recruitment age range, still on parole or probation, or released less than six months prior to contacting me. I found that it was unrealistic to spread the interviews out over a longer period of time as attrition was a concern. Transience is cited as a major barrier to conducting research with a formerly incarcerated population (Abrams, 2010), which I found to be an issue in the early stages of the recruitment process with unreliable telephone service (e.g., disconnected or no longer in service) and/or lapses in communication. The minimum number of participants projected for this study was six participants; a larger sample size would have strengthened the findings. Another factor impacting the study was that due to how close together the interviews were, I saved a more thorough member check until

after the completion of interviews with all participants which resulted in limited feedback from participants regarding the final themes and analysis. Lastly, my question pertaining to culture may have been a limitation in the way it was asked, leading to a seeming theme related to cultural identity confusion.

### **Future Research**

As I was conducting this research, two trends struck me which may be worth further exploration. It was difficult to capture a clear sense of cultural identity with this population. Given that youth corrections includes a diverse cultural population, conducting a study looking more closely at cultural identity formation in the context of a juvenile incarceration setting might be useful to better understand individual cultural differences and identify cultural elements that might be integrated into the treatment discourse in an effort to increase facilitative factors. Another research idea related to identity development would be to better understand how the “culture” of corrections impacts adolescent development. I would be interested in learning more about the existence and/or interplay of arrested development versus accelerated development within the context of corrections.

In the context of the current study, I noticed that most participants had negative life events occur in the short time they were involved in the study (e.g., health-related problems, death of a family member, and car accident, surgery). I found myself wondering how prevalent that might be, and with consideration of facilitative environments, I also wondered about access to health care and the relationship between post-transition resources and health. I found studies on incarceration and post-release health behavior in young adults (Porter, 2014), the health profiles of incarcerated male youth (Forrest, Tambor, Riley, Ensminger, & Starfield, 2000), and

health disparities and access to care of formerly incarcerated adults (Kulkarni, Baldwin, Lightstone, Gelberg, & Diamant, 2010); however, I did not find any studies that highlighted the course from adolescence to young adulthood in light of incarceration and health. According to Ungar (2001, 2004b), illness can be redefined by high risk youth as health, for example, a deficit as a special ability or a symptom as a functional behavior; he challenged a salutogenic discourse, that is, looking for signs of healthy functioning in different contexts. Participants in the present study seemed to define their illnesses and diagnoses as just that, illnesses and diagnoses; perhaps they viewed their mental health diagnoses as situationally functional behavior. They seemed more proud of embracing their well selves.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This study identified self-definitions of formerly incarcerated emerging adults, the character qualities that guide their lives, and how they cope with adversity. Through the lens of complexity, cultural relativity, atypicality, and decentrality, this study projected a narrative of how formerly incarcerated emerging adults have navigated toward and negotiated for resources. It is a depiction of identity and development that will hopefully provide a new way to conceptualize time in, time out, and the resilience of formerly incarcerated emerging adults.

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**APPENDIX A**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
MODIFICATION**



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: October 31, 2014

TO: Jen Buser, MA  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [465733-6] Constructing Resilience: Narrative Inquiry with Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: October 30, 2014  
EXPIRATION DATE: July 1, 2015  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 1, 2015.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.



Hello Jen,

Your request to extend the age limit by a few years seems reasonable and the modification is approved. Good luck with your study.

Sincerely,

**Nancy White, PhD, IRB Co-Chair**

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

**APPENDIX B**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
APPROVAL**



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: July 1, 2013

TO: Jen Buser, MA  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [465733-3] Constructing Resilience: Narrative Inquiry with Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: July 1, 2013  
EXPIRATION DATE: July 1, 2014  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 1, 2014.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Jen -

Thank you for addressing all of the requested revisions and additions.

Best wishes with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

**APPENDIX C**

**RECRUITMENT**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



RECRUITMENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Constructing Resilience: Narrative Inquiry with Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults

Researcher: Jen Buser, MA – Department of School Psychology  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx, E-mail: resilience.study.2013@gmail.com  
Research Advisor: Robyn Hess, PhD – robyn.hess@unco.edu

To Whom It May Concern:

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the School Psychology PhD program at the University of Northern Colorado. I have specialized in crisis prevention and intervention while at the University of Northern Colorado and have worked as an extern for the past few years at Platte Valley Youth Services Center in Greeley, CO providing mental health services to incarcerated youth including behavioral interventions in the school, individual psychotherapy, and a variety of assessments. As a requirement of my program, I am conducting a research study for my dissertation.

My research study entails the exploration of resilience in formerly incarcerated individuals in an effort to inform transition practices. I am interested in the interaction between individual, social, contextual, cultural, physical, and developmental factors that contribute to resilience.

I am recruiting individuals who meet the following criteria:

- 18-25 years old
- Formerly incarcerated for a period of at least 6 mos.
- Living in the community for a period of at least 6 mos.
- Not currently on probation or parole
- No re-offenses or re-institutionalization of any kind since most recent release from juvenile corrections\*

\*Information may be unknown yet if individuals meet other criteria, please still refer as potential participants will be screened upon initial contact.

I am asking for your help in identifying and recruiting participants for my study. I will be providing compensation to participants in the form of gift cards to a business of their choice (\$10 card at the end of the first two interviews; \$20 card at the end of the third interview; \$5 card for each participant referred). If you are in contact with any individuals who meet the criteria, please provide them with my contact information

and/or this form and have them contact me. Given HIPPA practices and the research process, I cannot contact these individuals as they would need to first make initial contact with me to express interest in participation. Participants will be assigned a numbered code, and when they share study information with others who end up participating in the study, they will be compensated for the referral. Each participant will be asked upon initial contact if they were referred by another participant. If so and when the numbered code of the referral is identified, the participant who referred will be compensated for the referral.

I appreciate your time and consideration. I am passionate about working with this population and the enhancement of prevention, treatment, and transition practices. Thank you in advance for your support, and I look forward to learning more about the resilience of formerly incarcerated individuals. Please contact me with any questions.

Regards,

Jen Buser, MA  
xxx-xxx-xxxx  
resilience.study.2013@gmail.com

**APPENDIX D**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
CONTINUING REVIEW**





*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: July 2, 2014

TO: Jen Buser, MA  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [465733-5] Constructing Resilience: Narrative Inquiry with Formerly Incarcerated Emerging Adults  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: July 1, 2014  
EXPIRATION DATE: July 1, 2015  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 1, 2015.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Hello Ms. Buser,

I have reviewed your continuation request. Thank you for indicating the changes in the consent form and the addition of the third party consent. I am approving your continuation.

Good luck with your study.

Sincerely,

Nancy White, PhD, IRB Co-Chair

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

**APPENDIX E**

**INITIAL CONTACT SCRIPT**

### Phone/E-mail Script for Initial Contact with Participants

*Hi (participant's name), my name is Jen Buser, and I'm a student at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. I'm doing a research study with individuals formerly incarcerated during adolescence to learn more about resilience defined as doing well despite the odds. You were identified as meeting the criteria for my study and provided with my contact information. Thanks for contacting me with interest in participating. Did you hear about my study from a professional or another participant? (Referrals will be assigned a code. Each participant will be numbered. For example, the first participant will be #1. At first contact, when describing the snowball sampling method, participants will be instructed that if they are referring others, tell them to say, "I was referred by #1." This way, no names or personal information will be exchanged between participants and the researcher with respect to referrals. The codes will then correspond to referrals, and when the number of a participant is identified, that participant will receive additional compensation for recruitment.) Let me tell you a little bit about my study but before I do that, I want to run through the criteria to make sure you're eligible.*

*Are you between the ages of 18-25 years old? Were you incarcerated for at least a period of 6 months? Have you been living in the community for a period of at least 6 months? Are you currently on probation or parole? Have you re-offended or been re-institutionalized in any way since your most recent release from juvenile corrections? (If individuals answer "yes" to the first three questions and "no" to the last two questions, they meet criteria for the study and more description will be given. If they answer "no" to any of the first three questions and "yes" to either of the last two questions, they do not meet criteria, and they will be thanked for inquiry.)*

*The study involves meeting three different times for interviews in the span of the next month for approximately an hour and a half each time. We would meet in a public location with minimal distractions close to where you live. I have some questions I want to ask you, but the interviews will be casual and conversational.*

*I will compensate you for your time and participation at the end of each interview with gift cards to a business of your choice. At the end of the first two interviews, I will give you a \$10 gift card. At the end of the third interview, I will give you a \$20 gift card. If you refer others to participate in the study who meet the criteria, I will give you a \$5 gift card for each individual you recruit. What I mean by referral is if you share my contact information with someone else who ends up participating in my study. If you refer others, please let me know, but do not share full names or how you know the individuals you recruit. I will give you a number. You will be #\_\_. If you share my contact information with others, please tell them to say they were referred by #\_\_ instead of using your name. This ensures confidentiality and protects the personal information of participants. I will ask each potential participant when they first contact me if they were referred by another participant just as I have asked you. If another participant identifies that they were referred by you (using your assigned number), you will receive the additional \$5 gift card for recruitment.*

*We will be talking about things in your past, present, and future such as values, beliefs, relationships, and experiences that shape who you are and how you live. I'm interested in learning more about you in an effort to better help others who have been in similar situations.*

*Does this sound like something you would be interested in doing? (If "yes," the first meeting time will be scheduled, potential location will be suggested, and they will be asked what type of gift cards they prefer – from which business. If "no," they will be thanked for their time.)*

**APPENDIX F**

**THIRD PARTY CONSENT**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



THIRD PARTY CONSENT FORM TO CONTACT  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title:           Constructing Resilience: Narrative Inquiry with Formerly  
                                  Incarcerated Emerging Adults  
Researcher:             Jen Buser, MA – Department of School Psychology  
Phone:                   xxx-xxx-xxxx, E-mail: resilience.study.2013@gmail.com  
Research Advisor:     Robyn Hess, PhD – robyn.hess@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The primary purpose of this study is to explore resilience narratives in formerly incarcerated emerging adults. Over the span of three interviews, the researcher will engage participants in conversations about past, present, and future contextual, social, cultural, and individual elements that construct resilience during transition from incarceration. Visual materials will be incorporated into each conversation to help resilience narratives emerge.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I am allowing the researcher to contact me. I have provided the third party who shared this form my contact information including a phone number and e-mail address where I can be reached, if applicable. I am giving permission for the third party to provide my contact information to the researcher. (Contact information will only be used for the purpose of the research study and will not be shared with any other sources.) Confidentiality will be maintained between all parties signing this form. After the third party provides the researcher with contact information, no additional information will be shared between the third party and the researcher.

I hereby authorize permission for a third party to share my contact information with the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date  
Third Party's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date  
Researcher's Signature

**APPENDIX G**

**INFORMED CONSENT**





CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title:           Constructing Resilience: Narrative Inquiry with Formerly  
Incarcerated Emerging Adults

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**Purpose and Description:** The primary purpose of this study is to explore resilience narratives in formerly incarcerated emerging adults. Over the span of three interviews, the researcher will engage participants in conversations about past, present, and future contextual, social, cultural, and individual elements that construct resilience during transition from incarceration. Visual materials will be incorporated into each conversation to help resilience narratives emerge.

Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes. The first conversation will focus on the past with questions related to identity, development, values, beliefs, and relationships. An online photo gallery will be used during the first interview to help identify aspects that relate to resilience. The second conversation will focus on the present with questions related to purpose, environment, control, culture, and motivation. Themes will be presented from the first round of interviews with all participants, and participants will be able to give feedback about the themes. I will ask you to bring your own visual materials to the second and third interviews which may include items such as photographs, drawings, artwork, pictures from books, magazines, and/or newspapers, or other visual pieces you find relevant and significant in demonstrating what has helped you cope. The third conversation will focus on the future and include questions related to resources, goals, inspiration, and coping skills.

At the conclusion of the study, I would be happy to share data with participants upon request. Your personal information will be kept as confidential as possible. You will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used instead of your actual name. I will be the only person with access to your name along with my research advisor. Each conversation will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I will write field notes to help me remember other details about our interactions. The transcribed interviews, audio recordings, and field notes will be kept password-protected on a computer and/or in a locked filing cabinet. Transcriptions will reflect pseudonyms instead of the actual names of participants. Every measure will be ensured to protect participants' information; however, there are instances when there is a legal obligation to report such as suspected child abuse and threats of harm to self and others.

The risks inherent in this study are no greater than those normally encountered during typical interview sessions that deal with identity construction or normal class settings. You may experience discomfort in sharing your story or talking about the past. To mitigate these risks, I am a trained counselor and well-prepared to identify and support individuals who appear to be having a difficult time. I also have significant experience working with a similar population. If discomfort appears to be pronounced, I will provide information for community mental health professionals as needed.

It is likely that you will benefit from participating in this study by learning about your own resilience and feeling empowered by telling your story through this lens. By providing a platform to tell your story from a strengths-based perspective and portray images of resilience, form is given to the complexity of identity formation, personal understanding of mental health, means of empowerment, and aspects of resilience for individuals incarcerated during adolescence.

Time requirements of the individual interviews and the transportation expenses to and from the data collection site are the only costs that you might incur. You will be compensated following the completion of each interview. Compensation will include a \$10 gift card to a chosen business after the first two interviews and a \$20 gift card after the third interview. You will also be compensated a \$5 gift card to the business of your choice for each participant you recruit. This means that if you share the study contact information with others who end up participating in the study, you will be given a \$5 gift card per referral. You will be assigned a number so that names and personal information will not be exchanged in the referral process which will ensure confidentiality between participants. Upon initial contact, I will be asking each potential participant if they were referred by another participant. When someone identifies the number assigned to you, that would be considered a referral.

Participation is voluntary. You may take breaks during interviews and/or interviews may be discontinued at any time. I will respect, support, and honor your requests and decisions regarding the study. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about the way you have been selected or treated in the research process, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Before signing this form, please ask any questions you might have at this time.  
Thanks.

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 Participant's Signature

Date

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 Researcher's Signature

Date

**APPENDIX H**

**INTERVIEW SCRIPT**

## Sample Interview Questions and Scripts

*Script for first interview: Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in this study. I am excited to learn more about you. The focus of my research is on the resilience of individuals who have been incarcerated and how meaning has formed from that experience. Resilience means that someone is doing well despite the odds. I want to be transparent with you. I do not want to be just another person asking you about mistakes you have made or what went wrong. I asked you to be a part of this study, because research suggests that most people reoffend within the first few months after being released. You have made it to 6 months, and that makes you different. This is why I want to hear your story. I want to hear about your resilience, because you are different, and you are making it. My goal is that we want more youth and young adults to be like you and get to the 6 month mark. Your story could help with that. We will meet three times to talk about your story. The focus will be to understand more about how you see yourself in relation to your past, present, and future. Your participation is voluntary, so please only share information that you feel comfortable sharing. I plan to incorporate visual materials, yours and/or mine, to help with this process. For the next two interviews, I would like you to bring any visual things you might have that would help you tell your story such as photographs, drawings, artwork, pictures in books, magazines, and/or newspapers, or anything else that might help me understand you better. I will not be keeping any of your materials nor will any images you share be copied or printed in my research. We will just be talking about the pictures. Any information you share that would reveal your personal identity will be removed from the study in an effort to ensure confidentiality. Each interview will last no longer than an hour and a half. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

### Interview One: Past

How do you define/see yourself?

How has your past shaped you?

What experiences have helped you grow the most?

What kind of relationships did you used to have with family and friends?

What are some things you have learned leading up to this point in life?

What were some programs you found to be helpful while locked up/committed?

What impact has being locked up/committed had on your life?

What are some values and beliefs that have formed for you over time?

Using visual material (photographs, drawings, artwork, pictures from books, magazines, newspapers, and/or online photo gallery):

What image represents who you used to be?

How are you different now?

How did you view yourself before being committed, during commitment, and now?

What aspects of your life have helped you cope in the past?

*Script for second interview: This interview will be similar to the first interview in that I will be asking you several questions again and using some visual materials. I have developed some themes across all participants from the first interviews that I would also like to share with you to see if they make sense and if you feel like anything is missing. I am also curious if anything else came up for you related to our conversation last time that you would like to add.*

#### Interview Two: Present

How do you think other people see you now?

What is your purpose in life?

Tell me about some activities you are involved in or groups in which you belong.

What roles define you the most?

Tell me about some of your talents.

Tell me about your relationships with family and friends now.

Describe where you live – your place, neighborhood, and community.

Where do you spend most of your time?

How is most of your time spent?

What makes you different from other people?

What are some of your responsibilities?

How do you handle when you do not meet your own expectations or the expectations of others?

How can you tell someone is doing well despite the odds?

Tell me about parts of your life where you feel you have control.

Where and when do you not have control?

Tell me about some things you do every day.

What have you learned from being locked up/committed that is positive?

What have you learned from being locked up/committed that is negative?

What motivates you?

What skills have you developed that you believe keep you from reoffending or being locked up/committed again?

What is like being an adolescent or young adult today?

What kinds of things help you feel healthy? Physically? Mentally? Socially?

Using visual material (photographs, drawings, artwork, pictures from books, magazines, newspapers, and/or online photo gallery):

What image represents who you are now?

What image represents qualities that describe you?

What image reflects how you view the world?

*Script for third interview: This is our last interview. I have enjoyed the opportunity to meet with you and learn more about your experiences. I would like to present everything that we have talked about to make sure it is accurate and see if there is anything you would like to add or change. I will also ask a few more questions and incorporate visual materials as I did in the other interviews.*

### Interview Three: Future

What does culture mean to you?

What helps you cope when things are difficult?

How do you feel you will deal with difficult times in the future?

Tell me about the people, places, and things that help you when times are tough.

What resources will you need to be successful in the future?

What will inspire you to keep making it?

What do you think is possible for your future?

What do you need to be successful moving forward?

How do you want your relationships to look in the future?

What advice might you have for others?

Using visual material (photographs, drawings, artwork, pictures from books, magazines, newspapers, and/or online photo gallery):

What image represents someone beating the odds?

Where do you see yourself in the future?

Who do you want to be?

Where do you want to be?

What are your personal goals for the future?