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Narratives of Women Who Suffered Social Exclusion in Elementary School

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Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

Social aggression among children in schools is an old problem that has received some attention in recent years. The long-term influence of early experiences of social exclusion for women is underrepresented in the literature. In this qualitative study, a narrative, autobiographical approach is used to explore the life narratives of five adult women who experienced peer rejection, social exclusion, and/or harassment during elementary school. Literature related to social exclusion and narrative identity is reviewed. Autobiographical narratives were collected using life history interviews with a narrative methodology. The women interviewed self-identified as having experienced social exclusion in childhood and provided accounts of their life stories through in-person interviews. The process of interpretation in this inquiry rests on a narrative, social constructivist foundation that guides and informs methodology and analysis. When adults tell of their childhood experiences, emergent events and themes are influenced by how and with whom the stories are told. Interpretations of past experiences exist in light of their subsequent experiences. The story of the investigator is relevant to provide context and transparency to the interpretive process. Among these five diverse stories, wanting to belong, internal repercussions of victimization such as shame, adults failing to protect, and identifying and utilizing internal resources for progress emerge as common themes among the narratives. Findings suggest that these painful early experiences contribute to long-term vulnerability for the reemergence of low self-esteem during sufficiently stressful episodes in life. These results are discussed.

Keywords: narrative, life story interviews, gender, social exclusion, peer relationships, elementary school, social rejection, social aggression, bullying, women.

Narratives of Women Who Suffered Social Exclusion in Elementary School

In this dissertation, I present a qualitative research study examining the narratives of five adult women who experienced rejection, exclusion, and/or harassment by their peers in elementary school, or middle childhood (6-11 yrs.; Berk, 2007). I explore the literature pertaining to narrative theory and to the various experiences that I will generally call *social exclusion*. A narrative methodology informed the collection and analysis of these retrospective stories. Through this process, I identify common and distinct themes, structure, and content among the stories, as well as consider how these women integrate memories of their social difficulties in elementary school into their life stories and their notions of who they are.

This study is motivated by my curiosity about how women understand their experiences of childhood social adversity, and how these narratives of social exclusion affect their sense of themselves as adult women. I hope to gain better understanding of the meaning that these women assign to their early peer experiences and how they understand relationships throughout their lives in light of these experiences. To this end, I collected the life stories of five women who self-identified as having experienced significant social exclusion in childhood, with their early social experiences serving as a frame and starting point for each narrative. Elements of the narratives that are important include not only those early experiences, but also their home life, personal development, and significant relationships at other ages as well. Ultimately, I hope to be able to say something about how or whether these women understand their early experiences as having had an effect on how they experience and understand themselves today.

Although my personal memoir is not the primary focus here, this writing is in effect a construction of my own narrative. My experiences as a student, woman, researcher, and socially excluded child are implicit in the origination and development of this project. Furthermore, my

perspective is reflected in how I interpret and draw conclusions from the data. As such, I will detail the process by which this project evolved, including providing pertinent background information about my own narrative.

It is important to point out that although the narratives of these women are central to my study, there is not an inherent *truth* to these stories. These are descriptions given by women about their own lives as they have seen and experienced them. This is an account of how each woman described her memories and opinions at the particular moment in her life at which I interviewed her (Cooley, 1996).

Literature Review

Bullying in schools has received increasing attention in recent years and is highlighted in multiple arenas of discourse, including media coverage, public forums, and empirical literature. Although social aggression among schoolchildren may be an old phenomenon, its study only began in the 1970s (Staubli & Killias, 2011). Recent developments in technology create a new digital era of social aggression, what is termed *cyberbullying* (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). This new phenomenon has led to several high-profile cases (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2009; Stanglin & Welch, 2013), national media attention, and a proliferation of resources for parents, children, and schools to help address the problem (e.g., Bazelon, 2013; Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013; "Cyberbullying Research Center," 2014; Smith et al., 2008). The energy around this topic has generated interest in bullying in both the national public discourse (Harshman, 2013; Paul, 2010) and in the psychological literature (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2010; Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010; De Bolle & Tackett, 2013; Hilton, Anngela-Cole, & Wakita, 2010; Lereya et al., 2013; Ramya & Kulkarni, 2011; Sourander et al., 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, & Losel, 2012; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011).

Bullying and social aggression behaviors manifest differently according to gender (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Sourander et al., 2009). Aggression is defined as behavior that is motivated by the intention to harm others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although boys tend to perpetrate and be victims of overt forms of aggression, such as threats of or actual physical violence, girls tend to experience indirect forms, such as spreading rumors and withdrawing friendship (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although evidence indicates that boys and girls may exhibit an equivalent level of aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005), overt acts of physical violence have typically been central in the empirical literature while more subtle forms of aggression have either received cursory attention or been studied as a series of fundamentally similar phenomena (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010). Cyberbullying has drawn more attention to the effects of covert aggression, which is more typical among girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Simmons, 2003).

Social exclusion is a difficult and painful experience that has both short-term and long-term detrimental psychosocial effects (O'Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997) and is similarly experienced by children across cultures (Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004; Oshio, Umeda, & Kawakami, 2013). The phenomenon of peer rejection in middle childhood has been investigated in depth by quantitative and mixed methods inquiries aimed at ameliorating the difficulties that rejected children experience (Asher & Dodge, 1986; Boivin & Begin, 1989; Cappella & Weinstein, 2006; Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991; Guthrie, 1999; Harrist & Bradley, 2003). Social exclusion in childhood is associated with long-term and concurrent psychosocial and achievement maladjustment (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004; O'Neil et al., 1997; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005). There is ample social exclusion literature based on impulsive aggressive behavior typical of boys in kindergarten through

elementary school (Cillessen, van IJzendoorn, & van Lieshout, 1992; Cole & Carpentieri, 1990; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Olson, 1992). There have also been several longitudinal studies related to social exclusion (Elias et al., 1991; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Ladd, 2006; Lereya et al., 2013; O'Neil et al., 1997; Sourander et al., 2010; Zwierzynska, Wolke, & Lereya, 2013). The majority of these studies investigate how children perform academically early and later in primary or secondary school. What this literature does not address is how the phenomenological experience of girls rejected, excluded, or harassed by their peers during elementary school influences their narrative identity in adulthood. Therefore, the research questions are:

1. What structure, content, plot, and themes exist in each participant's narrative?

2. Do these stories have common structures, contents, themes, and/or plots?

3. How do these women integrate the experience of childhood peer rejection, social exclusion, and/or harassment in their stories of themselves?

4. Do the narratives suggest any future research pathways?

Profile of the Study

In order to discover constructs that may be relevant to the field I used a qualitative research approach that aims to understand how these women currently make meaning out of their experiences. This effort to understand is an act of interpretation, or a *hermeneutic* approach (Robson, 2002). Hekman (1983) defines hermeneutics as "the study of the universal phenomenon of human understanding" (p. 206). I must consider the influence that my own perspective has on how I engage in this hermeneutic effort, because I cannot interpret another person's communication without engaging my own history of experience, cultural context, and worldview. This notion of dialogical intersubjectivity illustrates my phenomenological stance.

In phenomenology, experiential phenomena, as opposed to external, objective reality, determines human behavior (Robson, 2002). Phenomenological hermeneutics contends that humans are meaning making beings, and that it is through language that being is realized (Hekman, 1983). Furthermore, the interpretive effort is dialectic. That is, it is through discussion and dialogue that meaning is negotiated and communication is possible (Hekman, 1983). Intersubjectivity is a necessary component of this meaning making process, as subjective experience is expressed linguistically and another subject interprets the language (Smaling, 1992). Thus, phenomenological hermeneutic research strives to gain understanding of subjective experience in context through dialectic interpretation.

The term *epistemology* refers to how we know what we know, and *ontology* defines assumptions regarding the nature of reality (Carter & Little, 2007). In this type of inquiry, it is important to make these philosophical building blocks clear because basic assumptions about reality and knowledge are at the core of the phenomenological hermeneutic endeavor. To the extent that I can be transparent about where I am located contextually and conceptually as I interpret these encounters, the potential for meaningful discovery increases.

According to Carter and Little (2007), epistemology is an "axiological" (p. 1322) theory of knowledge. This means that epistemology has to do with values and carries ethical weight. The epistemological frame contains a set of values, and it exists within a larger cultural context of values. Thus, the epistemological frame clarifies the set of assumptions necessary to make reliable value judgments about the nature of the research, to assess accuracy and admissibility of various components of knowledge. Methodology is the theory, set within an epistemological frame, which justifies the methods used in research. Methods are the specific tools that are used in the service of research, what Carter and Little call "research action" (p. 1317).

The current inquiry has a narrative epistemological stance. Sandelowski (1991) states, narrative research involves the "distinctively historic and hermeneutic activity of storytelling" (p. 161). The process of sharing and interpreting language in the form of stories that have temporal and thematic structure creates the phenomenological experience of reality. This social act is constructive; meaning is built through collaborative storytelling. In other words, it is by socially constructing narratives that we make meaning (J. Smith, 2008).

A narrative methodology indicates the use of narrative methods (Carter & Little, 2007). Accordingly, I collected autobiographical narratives using life history interviews (J. Smith, 2008). Mishler (1986) describes the stories as a "joint production" (p. 82) of the interaction between the interviewer and the participant. After I transcribed the interviews, I consulted the participants to verify the validity of my interpretation of their narratives. Each story was thus coauthored. In the analysis, I looked for similarities or substantial differences in the narratives and consider what meaning, if any, was made of the influence that social exclusion during middle childhood may have had on the women's narratives.

I present the theoretical, experiential, and methodological process through which this project was developed. The core of this work is comprised of the women's narratives. The telling of each narrative is necessarily partial and constructed in response to a particular situation in which she volunteered to be interviewed and I asked her questions. The final section of the dissertation begins with my summation of the issues that arose through the women's narratives. I then explore how specific stories, opinions, and statements relate to current literature. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for further research that arise from this study, as well as personal reflection.

Conceptual Framework

The focus question of this study is how early social exclusion influences a given woman's life narrative. The conceptual framework mirrors the process by which we construct the narratives in our lives: I bring my own narrative to this work, which influences how I interpret what I encounter (Robson, 2002). Furthermore, I bring the stories I have come across in the past including the literature that I read in preparation for this inquiry. My stories affected how I engaged with the stories of participants, and my interpretation of the literature is in turn influenced by the encounter with participants. The process changes the narratives of all participants, myself included (Gergen, 1999). Additionally, each coauthored story is produced in the interaction, to become a thread of life that may or may not have been previously elaborated (White, 2007; See Figure 1 for a graphic illustration of this conceptual framework).

In the following section, I explore various constructs in the literature pertaining to social exclusion and social aggression research with attention to the relevance of gender. I then introduce the concept of narrative identity and self. Finally, I discuss how a singular period in a person's life can have its own narrative thread in her narrative identity.

Figure 1. The Narrative of Coauthorship
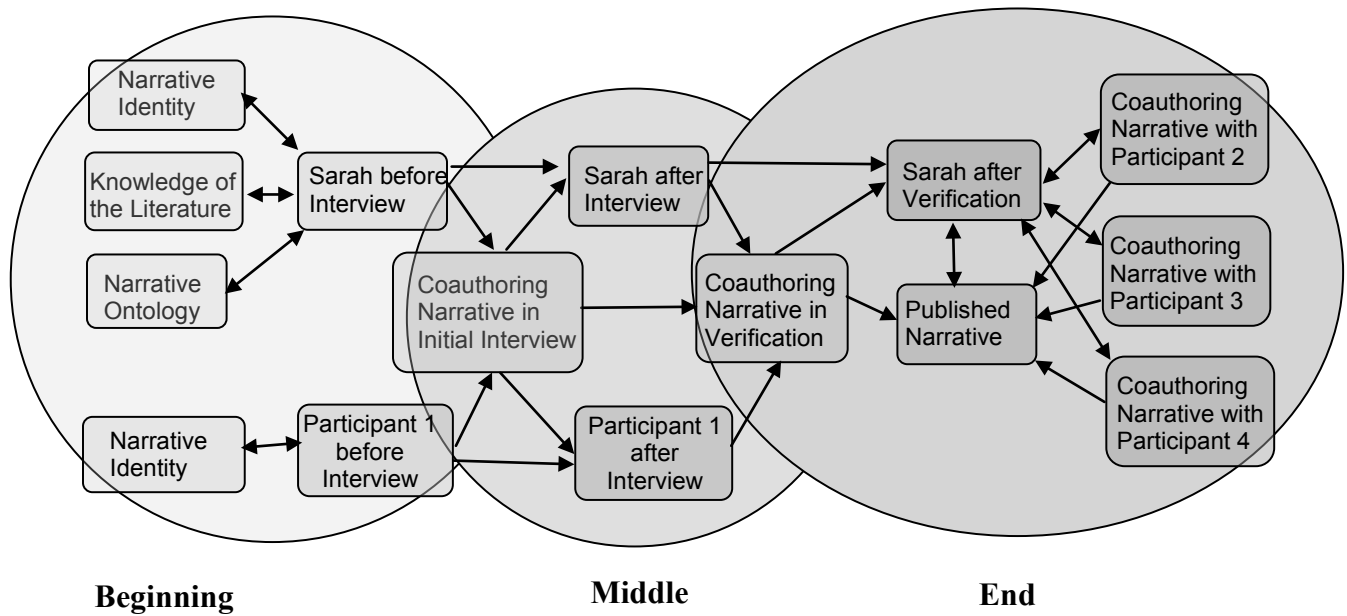
Figure 1. The interviewer enters the beginning stage of the intersubjective encounter carrying her own narrative identity, knowledge of the literature, and a narrative ontology as a framework for the project. Each participant also enters the interview with her own narrative identity. The interview occurs in the middle stage. The interview process changes both the interviewer and the participant. Next, the interviewer interprets the data to create a summary narrative. In the end stage of the encounter, the participant verifies the summary narrative so that it is a valid coauthorship, which influences both the participant and the author. Each participant affects the author in this way, culminating in a published narrative that is a product of these encounters, which have influenced all participants.

Bullying, Social Aggression, Social Exclusion, and Gender

Multiple relevant constructs exist in the literature devoted to the phenomenon of social exclusion. Numerous and overlapping terminologies have been utilized by researchers to attempt to define, operationalize, measure, and assess phenomena associated with social aggression, social exclusion, and bullying. According to Underwood, Galenand, and Paquette (2001), over 200 terms have been proposed to describe aggressive behavior. In recent years, several constructs have emerged as broadly accepted in this area; namely social exclusion, social aggression, and bullying.

Studies examining social withdrawal, isolation, and aggression support Piaget's (1926) hypothesis that peer interaction is necessary for social development (Feltham, Doyle, Schwartzman, Serbin, & Ledingham, 1985). Olweus (1991) defines bullying as occurring when one person is the victim of ongoing negative actions from one or more others. Clarifying what he means by negative actions, Olweus states, "when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another" (p. 413). Furthermore, there is a power differential: the victim is less powerful than the bully is and thus any defense is very difficult. This definition of bullying is subcategorized as direct or overt bullying, involving open attacks, and indirect or covert bullying, involving exclusion from a group and social isolation (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Olweus, 1991; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). Veenstra et al. (2005) distinguished between physical, verbal, and psychological bullying, where psychological bullying is characterized by exclusion, isolation, and gossip. The internet provides a new forum for bullying behaviors, increasing the visibility of covert bullying as the prevalence of this problem grows dramatically (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wang et al., 2011; Williams & Guerra, 2007).

The socially excluded child. Social exclusion and peer rejection overlap as co-occurring phenomena, and the terms may be interchangeable. The social exclusion and peer rejection literature is primarily oriented toward the experience of the victims of aggression. According to Harrist and Bradley (2003), social exclusion or peer rejection occurs when a child's peers actively dislike her, frequently evidenced by deliberate harm done to the child by her peers, such as physical and/or social aggression. Crick and Bigbee (1998) elaborate a distinction between overt victimization and relational victimization, which refer to the experiences of children who are targets of physical aggression (overt bullying) versus relational aggression (indirect/covert bullying). They found that boys tend to be overtly victimized, while girls are relationally victimized, and both forms of victimization were associated with concurrent psychosocial adjustment problems such as peer rejection and loneliness. Furthermore, van der Wal, de Wit, and Hirasing (2003) found that depression and suicidal ideation were more associated with relational victimization and that the association was stronger among girls than it was among boys.

Several subcategories of socially excluded children are identified in the literature. For instance, Hymel, Bowker, and Woody (1993) identified three types of peer-rejected children: aggressive, withdrawn, and aggressive/withdrawn. Additionally, Dodge, Coie, and Brakke (1982) found two types of exclusion: (a) some children are actively rejected by their peers and (b) others are simply neglected. Gazelle and Ladd (2003) use the term "anxious solitude" (p. 257) to characterize withdrawn neglected children.

Children who are aggressive and actively rejected are at a higher risk for long-term psychosocial deficits and conduct disorder (Olson, 1992). Asher and Dodge (1986) suggest that rejected children are at a higher risk for "serious adjustment problems in later life" (p. 444), and

the trajectories for neglected children are less clear. Due to these long-term consequences, Lansford et al. (2010) suggest that peer rejection be conceptualized "as a major life stressor that can have long-term negative implications for children's adjustment, much as other life stressors such as exposure to harsh or abusive parenting do (e.g., Lansford et al., 2007)" (p. 594). Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that peer victimization is closely associated with depression. There was no significant difference found between the effects of peer victimization on social versus psychological maladjustment.

Peer rejection assessed in kindergarten is associated with long-term work habit, achievement, and social deficits (O'Neil et al., 1997). Furthermore, peer rejection is associated with depressive symptomatology both concurrent to rejection and long-term (Cole & Carpentieri, 1990; Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; van der Wal et al., 2003). Egan and Perry (1998) explored how self-concept related to peer victimization and found that low self-regard is both associated with peer victimization and is exacerbated by the experience over time. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) found that children rejected by their peers in kindergarten are at increased risk for long-term maladjustment; older children who were victimized by their peers early on report higher levels of loneliness long-term, even in cases where they are no longer being victimized. Frizzo, Bisol, and Lara (2013) did a web-survey using self-report measures to assess how emotional traits and affective temperaments relate to exposure to bullying. They found that adults who experienced longer exposure to bullying had lower volition, coping, and control, as well as higher emotional sensitivity, anger, and fear.

The role that peer relationships play in human psychological development has received considerable attention; there is near consensus that peer relationships in childhood are a necessary and fundamental aspect to social and cognitive development (Brown, Odom, &

Conroy, 2001). Moreover, the quality of those relationships has been shown to have long-term psychosocial consequences (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; O'Neil et al., 1997). Ronka, Kinnunen, and Pulkkinen (2000) compared the long-term accumulation of social functioning problems in women and men from childhood through adulthood in Finland. They found a direct relationship between risk factors in childhood and adult social functioning difficulties for men; however, this was less clear for women because other factors mediated the relationship between childhood risk factors and adult social functioning, such as young motherhood and a sense of failure in early adulthood. Ronka et al. point out that low self-esteem and hopelessness relate to increased antisocial behavior among adolescent girls (Bender & Lösel, 1997), which may indicate a potential inner vulnerability among girls. As such, it is plausible that social functional difficulties may be perpetuated to the extent that early social exclusion negatively influences girls' identities.

Context and etiology. Reavis, Keane, and Calkins (2010) explored the relational etiology of peer victimization, and found that the mother-child relationship predicted peer victimization in kindergarten. Beran and Violato (2004) found that maternal warmth was negatively associated with peer harassment, whereas peer victimized children tended to have mothers who themselves experienced depression and evidenced high levels of control. Thus, social exclusion and victimization does not occur in isolation from their prior experiences with relationships and their familial and cultural contexts. Environmental and genetic factors manifest vulnerabilities that serve as risk factors for the development of social aggressiveness or victimization (Ball et al., 2008; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). These factors and their effects are not likely to disappear throughout a child's time in school; however, the experiences that occur with their peers also generate profound effects.

Much of the early social exclusion literature is concerned with characteristics and behavioral problems of the excluded child, such as shyness and aggression, as causal of social exclusion (Asher & Dodge, 1986; Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1988; Cillessen et al., 1992; Cole & Carpentieri, 1990; Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Olson, 1992). Because of this hypothesized relationship, early models developed to account for long-term maladjustment emphasized traits and behaviors of victimized children. For example, Caspi et al. (1988) found that shy and ill-tempered children tend to interact with their peers in a way that evokes maintenance of responses from others in reciprocal interactions across the lifespan. However, Crick and Bigbee (1998) contend that victimized children might develop internalizing problems as a result of their peer interactions, such that they may draw negative conclusions about themselves, believe that they deserve the victimization, and become depressed and passive.

This appears to have led to a reconceptualization of the relationships among the characteristics and behaviors of victimized children, their context and peer treatment, and the psychosocial and academic sequelae. New models were developed and tested to account for the effect of peer rejection on the previously established relationship between children's traits and behaviors and their maladjustment with a continued emphasis on academic performance. For example, Ladd and Burgess (2001) hypothesized that relational stressors and supports mediate the effect of aggressiveness risk factors on social and academic adjustment, Buhs (2005) found that victimization predicted academic self-competence, and Ladd, Herald-Brown, and Reiser (2008) found that peer rejection leads to decreased participation in the elementary school classroom.

As more studies explore social exclusion and psychosocial maladjustment, these

phenomena and their interdependence become clearer. Gazelle and Ladd (2003) examined how social exclusion and withdrawn behavior, as separate factors, interact to predict the manifestation and maintenance of depression. They propose a diathesis-stress model for the relationship between individual vulnerability and peer exclusion on internalization trajectories. Results indicate that among girls and boys with individual vulnerability, increased levels of social exclusion leads to increased depressive symptoms over time. Similarly, Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2005) found that over time, the relationship between negative self-perceptions and peer victimization may contribute to anxiety and depression among elementary school children. Murray-Close, Ostrov, and Crick (2007) also found that the extent that girls are the victims of relational aggression over time corresponds to their level of internalization and maladjustment.

Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (2010) use a developmental cascade model to illustrate the relationship between peer rejection, aggression, and social information processing. Social information processing is the way that children interpret an event that determines how they then respond (Dodge & Crick, 1990). The cascade model accounts for the developmental interrelation of these constructs over time, by mapping "the mechanisms through which early risk factors affect subsequent outcomes over the course of development" (Lansford et al., 2010, p. 593). Lansford et al. found that early peer rejection directly influenced subsequent social information processing and aggression, and aggression directly affected subsequent peer rejection among children between kindergarten and third grade.

Gender. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that boys tend to be physically aggressive and girls tend to be relationally aggressive. It appears that the majority of the references to aggressive behavior in the early literature address physical aggression and behavior more typical of boys than of girls (Newcomb et al., 1993). According to Carbone-Lopez et al. (2010),

"research on school-based violence and bullying suggests that males are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of bullying" (p. 332). This may be because physical aggression is more disruptive in the school environment and is more easily identifiable than relational aggression is; however, prevalence rates for indirect victimization are higher than those of physical violence in schools are (Robers, Kemp, Truman, & Snyder, 2013). Moreover, research shows that relational aggression produces as much, if not more, psychological damage as physical aggression does (Cappella & Weinstein, 2006; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997).

The distinction between overt and covert bullying tends to differentiate between the aggressive behaviors typical of boys versus girls (Galen & Underwood, 1997). That aggression among females is more than a nominal occurrence and worth research attention is a relatively new concept. Buss (1961) suggested that aggression is a male phenomenon, and women are not sufficiently aggressive to warrant study. There was broad acceptance of this position throughout the next two plus decades (Björkqvist, 1994). Interpersonal aggression occurs most often among same-sex peers (as opposed to across gender), and incidences of covert forms of aggression occur more frequently among girls than acts of overt aggression among boys do (Björkqvist, 1994; Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010). However, covert forms of aggression remain less focal in the literature. For example, there is scant investigation of bullying phenomena prior to preadolescence. In their effort to address this gap in the literature, Perren and Alsaker (2006) examined bullying in kindergarten in Switzerland, and found that girls were typically "non-involved in bully/victim problems" (p. 49). This lack of recognition of how aggression manifests among girls implies that girls do not experience victimization.

Aggression among girls tends to be less overt than physical violence, involving behaviors that aim to hurt the victim by manipulating social relationships, such as exclusion, teasing, and

spreading rumors, and more subtle acts like eye rolling and back turning (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Björkqvist, 1994; Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). French, Jansen, and Pidada (2002) found this gender difference existed across cultures. They surveyed children and adolescents in the United States and in Indonesia. The girls in both countries spontaneously reported high levels of relationship manipulation, social ostracism, and malicious rumors. Kistner et al. (2010) found that girls in elementary school become increasingly aggressive from third to fifth grade, while boys remain more physically aggressive but do not have an increase in aggressive behaviors over time.

Aggression that takes place among girls is labeled social aggression, indirect aggression, or relational aggression in different studies (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Harrist & Bradley, 2003; Murray-Close et al., 2007; Watling Neal, 2010). Moreover, their various definitions do not operationally differ from the indirect, covert, or psychological bullying outlined above. Several authors (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Cappella & Weinstein, 2006; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Watling Neal, 2010) have argued that these terms are describing essentially the same construct and have chosen to use social aggression as an umbrella term to include all the forms of aggression that tend to occur among girls in elementary school.

The literature regarding girls rejected by their peers in elementary school is thinner than that focusing on boys (Cappella & Weinstein, 2006; Simmons, 2003; Underwood, 2003). Although there is ample evidence that girls are victimized by their peers, and that those experiences relate to psychosocial difficulties in the short term, it remains unclear how the experience of childhood social exclusion influences the life-long trajectory of women. I hope to learn more about these areas of ambiguity by inquiring about how the experience of social exclusion affects the narrative identities of adult women.

Narrative Identity

According to narrative theory, there is no internal, substantive self or identity. Instead, identity is practiced and recreated in different contexts (Bruner, 1990). Thus, narrative identity is dynamically constructed and performed. From this view, "identities are treated as something people create, do and perform in relation to a particular audience and in different contexts" (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 180). Riessman (1993) elaborates emphasizing the drama of narrative:

> Identities are situated and accomplished with audience in mind. To put it simply, one can't [sic] be a "self" by oneself; rather, identities are constructed in "shows" that persuade. Performances are expressive, they are performances *for* others. Hence the response of the listener (and ultimately the reader) is implicated in the art of storytelling. (p. 106)

The narrative that is created is negotiated between teller and listener, within the specific local context in which it takes place (Mishler, 1986).

Gergen (1991) suggests that people use identity to make the fragmented experiences from one moment to the next into a coherent story. The narrative of self is in a constant state of change; what appears to be the same story will be different as temporal, social, and cultural contexts shift. From this view, narrative identity is a story of self that contains enough sameness from one moment to the next that the illusion of stability and continuity is maintained (Gergen, 1999).

White (2007) articulates that self is comprised of multiple of narratives, each of which has more or less salience for a person depending on how it is shared. This theoretical position draws from the French philosopher Foucault's (1965) work. Foucault asserts that when society

promotes a necessarily narrow definition of what is sane and rational, it automatically suppresses

all things that do not fit into the static definition. White suggests that societal standards create

stories about the way one should be or the ways one is not what one should be. These stories are

"dominant narratives" (White, 2007, p. 107), or the narratives that privilege social norms and

neglect unique and contradictory stories. These become the primary stories that people tell about

themselves. In this way, "people are unconsciously recruited into the subjugation of their own

lives by power practices that involve continual isolation, evaluation, and comparison" (Carr,

1998, p. 489). According to White, the telling of any story will inevitably omit countless

moments in a life that are not described, so it follows that there are many moments in life that are

exceptions to these dominant narratives. By having conversations about these exceptions, it is

possible to create new stories of the self. Each telling of a story is different depending on the

context of the telling, and all of these different stories are woven together to create the fabric of

people's lives (White, 2007). Thus, by describing elements of a life story in detail, the salience

of these elements in the storyteller's identity increases.

Teichert (2004) describes narrative identity according to the philosophy of Paul Ricœur

(1984). Ricœur articulates a hermeneutic phenomenology that identifies the relationship

between narrative and time. Narrative makes representational meaning of the disorganized

phenomenological experience of time, which provides a sense of continuity inside the process of

entanglement in untold and unfolding stories (Ricœur, 1984). In other words, narrative has an

explanatory function that permits storytellers to make sense of the past, present, and future

(Teichert, 2004). Teichert suggests that narrative identity has temporality, ethical responsibility,

and agency within the "social nexus" (p. 182) that gives it meaning. By temporality, it is

intended that narrative identity exists within a historical context and maintains chronological

elements.

These characteristics of narrative identity indicate that the process of interviewing and interpreting the life stories of the participants in the current inquiry will result in a set of new, unique threads from these women's stories. These threads emphasize moments in the lives of the women as understood in the context of the interview, moments that may have previously been marginalized by dominant narratives. The narrative we create is located specifically between the participant and me, within the social, temporal, and cultural context in which the interview took place. The narrative identity of these women and my own are changed by our mutual encounter, and what is constructed through their creation and my interpretation is different from what would be produced with another interviewer or at a different time (Gergen, 1999).

Method

Narrative knowing is the method humans use to make sense of the world and give meaning to experience, as opposed to scientific knowing, which is concerned with knowing things outside of the realm of meaning (Rossiter, 1999). The social sciences, according to this postmodern school of thought, are concerned with human meaning making, and therefore should be a form of narrative knowing (Rossiter, 1999). Carr (1998) states that "the narrative approach rests on the assumption that narratives are not representations of reflections of identities, lives, and problems. Rather narratives constitute identities, lives, and problems" (p. 486). Thus, "it is the process of developing a story about one's life that becomes the basis of all identity" (McNamee & Gergen, 1992, p. 71). Furthermore, "form and meaning emerge *between people* in social and historical particularity, in a dialogic environment" (Riessman, 1993, p. 107).

The ontological position of this project sets the stage for its epistemology; ontology defines what it is, and epistemology clarifies how it can be seen (Robson, 2002). Smith and

Sparkes (2006) eloquently state that "for narrative psychologists, the stories that people tell and hear from others form the warp and weft of who they are and what they do" (p. 169). As such, the ontological basis for this inquiry is the narrative stance that reality is constructed through social processes of storytelling. According to Bruner (2002), "through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, and in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow" (p. 93). The epistemological position that I take in this inquiry is a relativistic social constructivist narrative stance. That is, knowledge cannot be separate from the knower, and knowers exist in a social, cultural, and temporal context that provides them with a shared linguistic set of tools to use to create the story of what is known (Gergen, 1999). Accordingly, "there is no theory-free knowledge: there are multiple ways of knowing" (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 178).

This inquiry utilizes a narrative, social constructivist epistemology whereby meaning is coconstructed between the storyteller and the listener (Bruner, 1990). The listener influences the story; how I responded to and prompted the storyteller shaped how the story was told (J. Smith, 2008). In this way, it is impossible for the investigator to be separate from the narratives produced in the process of the inquiry. The meanings that the participants attribute to the events in their life stories are a valid reflection of the encounter in the process of authoring in the temporal context of the interviews. Moreover, the hermeneutic process of interpretation involves reflexivity on my part, and an acknowledgement of my own role in each narrative, as well as in the structure, tone and content of each transcript (J. Smith, 2008). The reader is also involved in the process of meaning making. According to Riessman (1993), "intersubjectivity and reflexivity come to the fore as there is a dialogue between researcher and researched, text and reader, knower and known. The research report becomes 'a story' with readers the audience, shaping meaning by their interpretations" (p. 137). It follows that I use a narrative methodology,

which involves the collection and analysis of narratives in an effort to gain phenomenological

and hermeneutic understanding of human experience (Robson, 2002).

Participants

J. Smith (2008) suggests that a homogeneous sample be used for idiographic data

collection, because the object is not to discover findings that can be generalized to a larger

population. Rather, the object is to be able to say something specific about these women.

Increased homogeneity strengthens the case that can be made about the common themes in these

stories. Smith points out that breadth sacrifices depth; therefore, a smaller sample is appropriate

here. I sought women between ages 27 and 50 years who experienced significant social

exclusion, peer rejection, harassment, and/or bullying between ages six and 11 years.

Developmental norms in the United States indicate that the frontal lobes do not finish developing

until around age 27 years (Lebel, Walker, Leemans, Phillips, & Beaulieu, 2008) and that the

average age of onset for menopause is 50 years (Berk, 2007).

I distributed research invitations by email and bulletin postings in the academic

community and in my professional settings, as well as posting the invitation to Facebook and in a

local newspaper. I also requested that anyone who knew of someone who may have met the

criteria for the study to pass the invitation along. Postings about the study included information

regarding the nature of the research, how it would be conducted, and how long it would take, as

well as the potential risks and benefits of participation (Appendix A). In-depth informed consent

was secured before the interview. It was made clear that participation was voluntary, and each

woman was free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Childhood exclusion is a difficult and painful experience. Participants remembered

painful events from their lives during the interview and may have experienced difficult or intense

emotions. The effect of the interview was closely monitored, and I either utilized prompts or backed away from material that may have caused the participant obvious distress. Participants were encouraged to skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering, and it was clear that they could stop at any time. Time at the end of each interview was used to process the experience. Referrals to mental health services were offered to participants who evidenced such need. Six participants, between the ages of 29 and 41 years volunteered to participate. They were all White, cisgender, American females. One participant withdrew from the study following the interview, and procedures according to the informed consent were applied.

Data Collection

When a participant agreed to participate, we arranged a time and place for the interview that was convenient and comfortable for her. When we met, we discussed informed consent and she signed a consent form (Appendix A). I recorded each interview with a digital audio recorder and a digital video recorder. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, in English. The design of the interview was intended to provide ample flexibility for the participant to create a focused narrative. The initial interview question was:

> I am speaking to women who were rejected, excluded, or harassed by their peers
>
> in elementary school. I am interested in learning about how you became the
>
> person you are today. You can start with your memories of being rejected,
>
> excluded, or harassed by your peers, or any point that seems best to you, and then
>
> tell me your story.

In the process of interviewing, I used active listening by reflecting her story, as I understood it, and inviting her to participate in how I understood what she was telling me. J. Smith (2008) recommends that the interviewer use context and intention-specific prompts to

facilitate the creation of a narrative rather than merely a factual account. Therefore, I asked

occasional questions like: "What was that like for you?," "Why do you think that happened?,"

and "Can you tell me more about that?." I also asked clarifying questions, such as, "And how

old were you at that point?" and "How did you get from there to here?" Toward the end of the

interview, I asked each participant if we had omitted any aspects of her life that significantly

contributed to the person who she is today. I also collected demographic information from each

participant, such as her ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, level of education, and employment.

After each interview, I noted observations I made during the interview, as well as the time and

place of the interview (J. Smith, 2008). The collected data include the recordings of interviews

and my notes.

Data Analysis

After the interviews took place, I transcribed the interviews, including elements such as

silences, laughter, and tone of voice. I removed all identifying information and replaced names

with pseudonyms. To represent the collaborative and dynamic co-construction of the narrative, I

used Riessman's (1993) transcription format, which includes "nonlexical expressions (Mmm, uh

huh), the break-offs (marked '—', when one of us begins to articulate an idea and stops

midstream), and even long pauses (marked 'p' on the transcript). This transcript reveals how a

'personal' narrative is social at many levels" (p. 31). I then used what Lieblich, Rivka, and

Zilber (1998) call a "holistic-content" (p. 15) approach to examine the interviews, along with my

notes, and create a summary of each narrative by interpreting the narrative content of the

interview as a whole. This product is an in-depth story that is shorter than the transcript, without

the details about pauses and laughter. I considered those nuances in the process of creating the

summary. All of the information that was available to me was used to create an interpretation

that is as true to the intention of the participants as possible.

When the summaries were complete, I used what Robson (2002) calls "member checking" (p. 174) to reduce misinterpretation. I contacted each participant and shared the summary with her to receive her feedback about its accuracy and relevance in her opinion. In this way, I hoped to maximize the participants' power and voice in the construction of these stories, while maintaining awareness that I am actively transforming the narratives. Robson cautions that participants may wish to suppress material or back out of participating during this phase, and indeed, one participant did withdraw at that time. Although I did attempt to resolve her concerns, I honored her right to discontinue participation. Ultimately, she was uncomfortable with the story that she had shared and did not want it published. The process of coming together and coauthoring these narratives affected the narrative identity of these women and me. It is necessary that I respect and understand the impact of this process (Mertens, 2005).

Structural analysis. After the summaries were completed and verified, I used what Lieblich et al. (1998) call a "holistic analysis of form" (p. 88) to identify the narrative structure of each interview. This involved considering the narrative as a whole and identifying its structural elements. According to Riessman (1993),

a "fully formed" narrative includes six elements: an abstract (summary and/or "point" of the story); orientation (to time place, characters, situation); complicating action (the event sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis or turning point); evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotions—the "soul" of the narrative); resolution (the outcome of the plot); and a coda (ending the story and bringing action back to the present). Not all stories contain all elements, and they occur in varying

sequences. (p. 84)

I examined the narratives to identify these elements in each story.

I also reviewed the narrative summaries to determine the temporal arc of each story, assigning distinctions between regressive, progressive, and stable trajectories within the plot (J. Smith, 2008). I considered whether the overall tone of each narrative was optimistic or pessimistic. These distinctions helped me identify whether each story was tragedy or comedy. According to J. Smith (2008),

> the tragic narrative begins with a progressive structure, but then, despite struggle,
>
> the central character is overcome and the narrative becomes regressive.…
>
> Conversely, a comedy is when [sic] a regressive narrative is transformed into a
>
> progressive narrative, as narrators redefine their values and realize the positive
>
> features of the changed life. (p. 121)

Thematic analysis. To identify themes in each narrative, I used what McAdams (2011) calls "context of discovery" (p. 16) by examining each narrative in depth to discover emergent themes. As I read each narrative multiple times and listened to the audio recordings, I noted topics within the content that seemed to hold particular salience, either in terms of function, such as expository or conclusive statements, or in terms of implied emotional relevance as indicated by explicit emphasis or frequency of reference. After identifying broad themes within each narrative, I compared themes among the narratives.

Standpoint of the Researcher

It is of paramount importance that I am aware of how my own narrative identity and perspective influences the data. The way I responded to each participant during the interview, both verbally and nonverbally, shaped the narrative that she created with me (J. Smith, 2008). I

am an active participant in this construction, and if I were to ignore my influence and power in this encounter, it would be impossible to interpret the narratives of these women in a useful way. As such, I used a reflexive approach to the interviews, attending not only to the narrative and empathic engagement, but also to my own reactions and thoughts that originated from my personal history and expectations (Robson, 2002).

My experience as a psychotherapist undoubtedly affected how I interacted with the participants, thus it is relevant to include my theoretical orientation as a practicing clinician. The narrative epistemological stance of this project is not inconsistent with my professional work; however, I work from other theoretical bases as well. I think of myself as an integrative psychotherapist. In particular, I draw from narrative psychology, feminist theory, relational psychodynamic theory, and cognitive psychology in my professional work with psychotherapy clients.

Finally, it is perhaps not surprising that I have my own experience of social exclusion and peer rejection in childhood that has inspired my interest in this work. This thread of my narrative holds both explanatory utility and a plot of overcoming adversity. With this in mind, I attempted to maintain vigilant attention to how my own narrative led me to identify with or to experience difference from each participant.

Quality Control

According to Robson (2002), there are three primary types of understanding in qualitative research: "*description, interpretation,* and *theory*" (p. 171). Robson states that the threat to validity that can take place in a descriptive understanding is that the data are inaccurate. The process of recording the interviews with two different high-quality recording devices addresses this threat. Robson asserts that the threat to validity that exists in the realm of interpretive

understanding is the imposition of a preconceived structure, rather than what is emerging from the data, as a means to understand and interpret the data. I was careful to attend to any expectations I may have had as I planned this project, and purposefully avoided presupposing what I might discover. For example, when discussing the proposal for this project, a question was raised as to why I did not review literature pertaining to resilience. Although it made sense that resilience would likely be a factor in these stories, I did not want to begin the interviews with that assumption. Instead, I did my best to remain curious about what might emerge. Nevertheless, throughout each stage of this project I found myself looking for resilience, which was not a theme that emerged from the data. I will address this interesting question in the discussion section. By considering the potential explanatory power of resilience prior to conducting the research, it became a part of the narrative of this project and demands attention.

The third way of understanding data (theory) presents three threats to validity that Robson (2002) calls "*reactivity, respondent biases* and *researcher biases*" (p. 172). Reactivity is the way that the researcher influences the setting. I addressed this not by attempting to remove my influence, but by attending to it at a fundamental level. The social constructivist, narrative epistemology provides that the researcher is a coauthor of the narratives that are created. It is, however, important that the researcher not become complacent about her influence; rather, it is necessary to remain as conscientious as possible regarding the self-in-role aspects of the interviewing and interpreting process. I kept a journal to record and reflect upon thoughts, reactions, feelings, ideas, and anything else that came up for me, with a particular focus on this task. Writing my own account of the experience facilitated rigor in my attention to my own role in the interviewing process.

The second threat to validity within theoretical understanding is respondent biases

(Robson, 2002). This refers to the ways in which the participants may wish to tell me what I want to hear, rather than what they might otherwise say. Respondent bias is a significant concern for this project. I examined a particular aspect of the life narratives, and thus my question refers to that thread. There was some risk that I was asking a participant to create a narrative that would be inconsistent with her narrative identity if she interpreted my question as laden with particular expectations. For this reason, I was careful only to suggest social exclusion in the initial question and to avoid further prompting. The direction of the narrative from that starting point should optimally be determined by the storyteller, not the listener.

The third threat to validity in the theoretical understanding of data is researcher bias (Robson, 2002). Mertens (2005) points out that all research is "representative of the position or standpoint of the author" (p. 258). Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to disclose information about herself to provide a context for the readers to use to frame the language used in the research. Accordingly, I provide a narrative about my experiences of social exclusion, how this project came about, and what my experience in carrying it out evoked in me, as well as demographic information about myself in this project. This reduces the threat to validity that would be there if I were to omit that information and ask my readers merely to trust that I have sufficiently attended to how my narrative identity has influenced my work.

Results

From Childhood to This Research Project: My Personal Narrative

The question of how adversity in childhood peer relationships affects a woman's ideas about herself holds personal significance for me and, in a way, is a question I have been asking myself throughout my own life. I was born to young Caucasian countercultural parents who struggled to make ends meet. We lived in an impoverished Hispanic neighborhood in the

Southwestern United States. From an early age, I was acutely aware that my family was

different. Neighbors had negative attitudes about our presence and I often heard slurs hollered at

me when I played outside our small house. When I entered school at the age of five, I had

difficulty fitting in with my peers. Anything that I perceived to disrupt my social status was

upsetting, so the fact that my home lifestyle was different from the other children in my

community was distressing.

      I was a sensitive child who enjoyed being the center of attention. In first grade, I had a

teacher who targeted me in the classroom by humiliating me in front of the other students. She

told me that I was a "stupid, ugly little girl that no one would ever like." My confidence and

limelight seeking was quashed as I internalized that message. My parents discovered my

maltreatment and put me into a different school. At the end of that year, we moved across the

country and I began second grade in a new school. I made one friend in my class, whom I

idealized. The rest of the students in the class often mocked me for looking different.

      I attended 11 different schools between ages five and 17 due to several major

geographical relocations and similar parental intervention. Some of the schools were noticeably

more difficult for me socially, and this often seemed to correlate with how adults responded to

the taunts and social ostracization from my peers that I reliably experienced. Throughout, I spent

a great deal of energy trying to identify and fix what I was doing wrong to deserve such

treatment. Ultimately, I decided that my family's lifestyle was largely to blame for my peer

victimization and I made great efforts to conform to mainstream social norms.

      There was a turning point in eighth grade, when I attended a small private school. The

alternative nature of the school and small class size provided a supportive environment. I

developed mutually respectful relationships with peers for the first time and my self-esteem

improved. I embraced my weirdness and decided that I would no longer try to change myself to fit social norms. From that point, I had better social experiences and my self-confidence was on an upward trajectory.

As I matured, I became increasingly fascinated by how and why people become who they are. I took a psychology course in high school and thus began a merger of personal reflection with academic inquiry. In my exploration of ideas about identity development, I was surprised that immediate family and home living conditions were the environmental factors implicated as relevant, while peer relationships went largely unmentioned. Peer relationships were a significant influence on my own identity development and sense of self. Whether or not I had friends directly affected my self-concept, self-esteem, and mood. My experience of myself as reflected by others profoundly changed when I entered school as a child.

In my undergraduate studies, I pursued these interests by studying the idea of the self, both as an abstract concept and as a social function. In graduate school, I co-led a friendship skills building workshop in a local elementary school. While discussing this project with my supervisor, I disclosed my history of social exclusion in schools and began to consider how the culture of a school influences the peer relationships within that system. I read about school interventions that aimed to increase inclusion among elementary school children and explored the social exclusion literature. As my inquiry evolved, I became more interested in the retrospective experiences of women. Rather than exploring how to develop preventative interventions in schools, I sought to understand the subjective significance of the effect of those experiences. I found that stories like my own were not well represented, and thus this project took shape. I am currently 36 years old.

Collecting Stories

Jean, age 32. I met Jean several years before our interview because she and I went to undergraduate school together. Coincidentally, we also attended the same graduate school. Prior to the interview, we were acquaintances. Jean responded to the research invitation I posted on Facebook and we arranged to meet in her home. There was some familiarity between us, but I had no previous knowledge of her story aside from our common undergraduate background and mutual interest in clinical psychology. The interview took one hour. My digital audio recorder malfunctioned, but the video recording functioned properly.

Summary. As a child, Jean was exceptionally shy and spoke with a stutter. Her parents dressed her prissily and encouraged her to spend her time engaged in activities that were indoor, quiet things, like playing piano and reading. In first and second grade, Jean's friends were cruel and demeaning. During lunch at school, they would throw food on the floor and tell her to eat it. Kids mocked her stutter and laughed at her while she was trying to speak. She would often do what the other children would tell her to do, and felt desperate for friends. On one occasion, her best friend enjoyed spitting on Jean for the duration of a 40-minute car ride. Jean felt as though it was her fault that her peers treated her poorly, because she was smart, dressed prissily, and had a stutter.

In middle school, Jean went to a new school in a large Northeastern US city. The school had a supportive environment, and a group of students took her under their wing and helped her improve her social skills. Around that time, she also began taking martial arts and her stutter resolved. She began feeling more adapted and able to make friends on her own. After middle school, Jean returned to the local public school system and was able to make friends. At age 16, Jean's family moved to a rural, wealthy town. She was unable to find a peer group to join, and the other students identified her as a "slut," presumably because of her personal style. Jean

became angry because the taunt was so far off base, and decided to defy the social pressure to conform and embrace the things that set her apart. She then attended a private college and had a positive social experience.

During a year abroad, Jean met her future husband and subsequently moved out of the country to be with him. After several years of marriage, he had a nervous breakdown and Jean cared for him. When he began to emerge from his depression, she found that she had depleted her emotional resources and became depressed and anxious herself. This experience inspired her to go to graduate school in clinical psychology. She returned to the US for graduate school, leaving her husband behind. In graduate school, she experienced a reemergence of insecurities that reminded her of her childhood, such as feeling uncomfortable speaking up in class. She learned that she has a tendency to care for others at her own expense, and that her low self-esteem reemerges in times of stress.

Journal entry. My impression of Jean when we met was that she was friendly but slightly guarded. While she was telling her story, I noticed how I resonated with some aspects and not others. There was a moment when she seemed to realize a pattern in her life that she had not previously identified. Because it was not a positive pattern, she sounded disappointed and said that it was sad that she had experienced social exclusion in different settings throughout her life. However, after we completed the interview, she indicated that it was good to develop a more cohesive narrative even if it meant looking at the ways that she struggled throughout her formative years. This reframe might be an example of her coping style.

I enjoyed the process of our conversation. We ended up touching on most aspects of her life including family background, significant other history, and current experiences in school. Every element seemed relevant to her narrative identity today, which she identified as twofold.

Part of her still sees herself as the ashamed, stuttering little girl whose friends taunted and spit on her in first grade, and who believes that these mistreatments are well deserved. Then there is the strong, spitfire part of her that arrived in high school and flourished in college. She was able to identify the relative strength of her negative self-image in terms of the amount of stressors she contends with; her strained relationship with her husband has increased her vulnerability to insecurity during graduate school.

I found myself restraining from saying, "Me too!" at various points where I particularly identified with her story, like going to many schools and finding real friends at last in middle school. Furthermore, I found that graduate school also mobilized insecurities and fears for me that I related back to my struggles to fit in when I was a child, whereas my entry into other environments had not raised those feelings. I wonder what it is about the school environment that makes one so afraid.

Mary, age 41. Mary responded via email to the research invitation that I posted on a digital community bulletin board. She indicated her interest in participation and we arranged to meet in her home. While we were meeting, her dog occasionally interrupted by approaching me with a toy, indicating that she wanted to play. The interview took one hour. The audio and video recording equipment worked properly.

Summary. Mary's childhood was good until she invited a black girl to her birthday party in third grade. Her family lived in a rural town in the Midwestern USA and her parents were active in the community. When she decided to invite Kim to her birthday party, she thought nothing of it. Her mother received pressure from the administrators in the school and other parents to exclude Kim from Mary's birthday party, but she refused. After the party, Mary was ostracized at school and she did not understand why. She became convinced that there was

something fundamentally wrong with her, that she was broken. For the next two years, her

mother was her only friend. Her parents lost their jobs, which Mary believes is related to their

rebuff of the social norms in the town, and the resultant financial stress and social isolation led to

a strained home life. Her parents separated and they moved to a new town. It took Mary about

two more years to make friends, and she was able to do so by finding other kids who also seemed

broken. She made good friends in high school, and discovered that she had a talent for public

speaking, which provided confidence.

Mary did well in college until her pledge daughter suddenly died. Feelings of guilt

overwhelmed her and her superficial friendships in her sorority dissolved. She was able to lean

on her high school friends and her future husband through that rough time. She and her husband

married and had children. When she was around 30 years old, Mary experienced an emotional

breakdown that led her to seek therapy, where she realized that this one birthday party was at the

root of her life-long feeling of brokenness. She has had personal and professional success, but

when she is feeling tired or stressed, she finds that those feelings of inadequacy reemerge.

Journal entry. Mary struck me as a competent, organized, and concise woman. She had

already elaborated this story at length with her therapist and family, and so her telling was more

polished and less dialogic than the previous interview. She tied her experiences in elementary

school to one specific event that caused significant damage to her self-image, and it was through

seeking the source of this damage that she was able to piece the story together as an adult. The

interview felt like a presentation, particularly for the first half hour. In the second half, I asked

some questions to explore previously mentioned details. We discussed aspects of her experience

in more detail and as we unpacked the story, our meeting developed a more dynamic feel.

Unlike the first interview, the meeting with Mary did not lead me to reflect on my own

history or compare our stories. Perhaps it is because our stories are very dissimilar, and our personalities and coping strategies are very different as well. There was not a sense of musing or exploration as much as a reporting of events. I noticed that both narratives so far indicate a tendency for low self-esteem to reemerge at times of stress, and in a way that echoed feelings that were rooted in these painful childhood experiences. This may be the moral of the story.

Rosanne, age 33. One of my student peers in graduate school passed along my research invitation to Rosanne after a chance conversation indicated her good fit for the project, and Rosanne contacted me via email to indicate her desire to participate. We arranged to meet outside for the interview. We sat at a picnic table near a bike path. In addition to the noises of the outdoors, people occasionally walked by on the path, sometimes talking loudly. This was distracting, but never enough to interrupt her train of thought. The interview lasted for just under three hours. The video recording equipment failed partway through our meeting, but the audio recorder captured the entire interview.

Summary. Rosanne believes that, like her father, she has autistic traits. As a child, she experienced herself as asocial. She had very advanced and specific interests in ecology and biology, but was unable to intuit how to navigate social interactions or recognize how others perceived her. Rosanne's social exclusion began when she started school. By the time she was six years old, she expected other kids to avoid interacting with her. Instead of seeking the attention of other children, she developed attachments to her teachers, believing them to be her friends and craving their approval.

Rosanne switched to a new school in second grade, which had a more positive social environment. She had friends there, and developed one close friendship with a girl in her class. She spent third grade primarily involved in that friendship, and then her friend left the school.

After losing her singular friendship, Rosanne was unable to make new friends. Beginning when she was ten years old, Rosanne developed depression, as well as learning and speech difficulties, apparently the result of some underlying neurological problem that was never conclusively identified. Her parents divorced when she was around age 12, and she coped by withdrawing into fantasy.

When Rosanne was 15 years old, she went to a therapeutic boarding school. Her mood, handwriting, academics, and social skills improved, but she was unable to graduate. During her time there, she experienced scapegoating and bullying. She decided that she did want friends, and she developed a friendship with one boy. She began to explore romantic relationships after leaving school, and had an abusive relationship when she was 23 years old. Eventually, she stood up to him and he was arrested. In her late 20s, she met and married her husband, with whom she has a healthy relationship.

Rosanne spent several years struggling to support herself before she decided to pursue graduate school in ecobiology. As a graduate student, Rosanne has experienced social acceptance and positive feedback from her peers. She developed several rewarding friendships in her cohort. She feels like the parts of herself that made life difficult began to loosen when she was 15 and have continued to loosen progressively ever since and, as a result, she is more able to join with others.

Journal entry. The third interview was elaborate and long. To me, Rosanne seemed to be fastidious and detail oriented, while interpersonally disconnected. She portrayed a unique relationship with the world. She described being relatively oblivious to what was going on around her or why people were interacting with her the way they were. This interview led me to think about friends that I have had who are on the spectrum. I was not reminded of aspects of

my own narrative. Rosanne was telling her story almost in isolation, like a process that she was privately experiencing. She stated toward the end that she had largely forgotten I was there while she was speaking. I did not experience her immersion as exclusionary; instead, I was a captivated audience. It felt like more of an organic storytelling than the previous interview did.

I really liked Rosanne. While I sat with her, I imagined being her friend and hearing more about how she thinks. I found her to be fascinating. Her storytelling evoked in me clear mental images. For example, when she described how she did not understand how to wash her hair, I could clearly envision how she washed her hair before, a friend in high school showing her how to do it correctly, and the way she washes it now. She used descriptive language, setting a scene for each aspect of her story. There was a sense of humor about how she described herself, without minimizing the extent to which she had suffered. I felt like I was really looking through a window into another person's experience. What a privilege.

Margaret, age 35. Margaret volunteered to participate in this study after I distributed the research invitation in a professional setting. She received the invitation from her therapist. We arranged the meeting over the phone and she provided directions to the public housing in which she lived. When I arrived, I sat on her couch while she sat in a chair by her computer. She had vision impairment that was evident by the back-and-forth movement of her eyes. Her cat snuggled with me while we talked, and the phone rang several times, interrupting our conversation. The interview lasted two hours and 20 minutes. Once again, the video equipment failed to record the entire meeting, but the audio recorder functioned properly.

Summary. Margaret was born with vision impairment, likely caused by her birth mother's irresponsible behaviors during pregnancy. She was adopted into a large, blended family and her adoptive mother consistently pushed her to be independent and to self-advocate.

Margaret was excluded and picked on by her peers throughout school. Boys often chased her during recess. Kids teased her about her thick glasses and snickered when she had to use her monocular in the classroom.

In high school, Margaret became part of the movement to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act, and she gained confidence with her advocacy work. She began attending a camp for the visually impaired and met her future husband there. She completed school, pursued a degree in travel and tourism management, and began working in a large city in the Northeastern US. She married and anticipated a normal life. Then her husband became abusive and they divorced, she lost her job, and then broke her ankle in a fall.

Since that time, Margaret has struggled to get back on her feet. She lives alone in public housing and takes care of her ailing mother. She felt unprepared for failure. Her life had been full of cheerleaders saying that she would succeed, but no one considered what would happen if she did not. She had a serious suicide attempt when she was 29 years old. She has relied on her strong faith and mental health services to help her emerge from her depression. She went to graduate school for teaching children with visual impairment, but was unable to pass the reading portion of the licensure exam due to inadequate accommodations. She feels hopeless and alone, and is increasingly isolated.

Journal entry. This interview had a different feel from the others. Margaret struck me as both assertive and lonely; the uncomfortable tension between independence and need was evident in her interpersonal style as well as her narrative, which was remarkably negative. I felt acutely aware of my boundaries. Here I am, in an apartment with a desperately isolated woman who takes advantage of whatever opportunities arise. What if she wants more from me? My fear in this area was perhaps unfounded, as she did not suggest any other type of social

relationship. I feel guilt about having had this response to her, but I believe that the dynamic illustrates a central aspect of her story. If I am not alone in responding to her by pulling back, this could be part of why she is having difficulty making social connections.

Margaret's story was one of overcoming obstacles and triumphing against all odds, until she could no longer do so. There is aggression in her approach that I imagine would be useful in some situations and a liability in others. Her social exclusion experiences sounded both inevitable, given her vision impairment, and like a challenge that did not defeat her or significantly affect her sense of self. The most salient point, which she reiterated several times, was that she felt unprepared for failure because she had so much support and encouragement from her mother growing up. When her marriage failed, her career foundered. She found herself alone and dependent upon public assistance and she did not know how to cope. She felt betrayed by the confidence everyone had had in her capabilities. What if there is a limit to what one is capable of? What does one do then? These questions had not occurred to her prior to finding herself confronting them.

While with her, I felt mixed responses to her story. On one hand, I found myself feeling pity for her. On the other, she surprised me with her audacity and, while she had experienced defeat, she also had a determination and anger about her. I did not get the impression that her self-esteem had ever been fragile, only that her expectations had been dashed and she did not know where to go from there. My thought after speaking with her was, "Man, life can really screw people over."

Rebecca, age 29. Rebecca responded via email to the invitation distributed in a professional setting. We arranged to meet in my office. Our meeting lasted one hour and 15 minutes, and the audio and video recording equipment successfully recorded the interview.

Summary. Rebecca grew up in an affluent town, but lived in an apartment complex. When she went to private Catholic school, she was acutely aware of the wealth disparity between herself and the other students. The other girls in school teased, pushed, and stomped on her at recess. She had two friends in the school who were also misfits. In fourth grade, Rebecca went to public school where the other kids in the apartment complex went, but by that time groups of friends had already formed and it was difficult for her to find friends. She did not feel like she fit in until she went to college.

Rebecca's father was an alcoholic and she had to help at home and be responsible. There was a teacher in her high school to whom she disclosed her home life, which Rebecca experienced as a huge relief. The teacher was supportive and stated that she was doing remarkably well, given her circumstances, which helped Rebecca feel better about herself. When she left for college, Rebecca felt freed from her family's unhealthy dynamics.

Rebecca finished her master's degree in elementary education when she was 25 years old, and had a difficult time transitioning away from school. She taught at an elementary school in a disadvantaged area for one year, which was extremely stressful. She became anxious and depressed and she started therapy. In therapy she found it difficult to open up, and began to recognize how private she tends to be and how uncomfortable vulnerability is for her. She did not begin dating until she was 26 and has difficulty asserting her own needs. She went back to school and became a family therapist. She has had some difficulty feeling comfortable with her female peers in the workplace and has noticed how much easier it is to maintain boundaries in her professional relationships than in her personal life.

Journal entry. Rebecca was friendly. I found that she would reflect the words that I would use to clarify, so I tried to stop actively listening so much as it seemed like I was putting

words in her mouth. She was forthcoming, despite stating that she is a very private person. I

ended up feeling the inclination to protect some of the information she disclosed, as it was very

private and not necessarily relevant. Her resilience and stable self-esteem were impressive. Her

story was one of actively working to overcome obstacles and while struggling in various

situations throughout her life, remaining optimistic and functional. Her difficulties seemed to

originate more from her home environment than from her social exclusion experiences, although

interpersonal relationships with women have been challenging at times for her throughout her

life.

Structural Analysis

The structures of these narratives can be examined in several ways. For example, the

temporal arc, plot, and tone of the overall life story of each participant, as summarized by me,

can be identified. Also, the stories as they were told can be examined in terms of the way that

each participant organized its telling. Because each interview contains an entire life story with a

multitude of elaborations about significant events, I could identify the structure of the text

anywhere from the level of the story as a whole to the structure of each clause. In order to focus

these results on the initial research questions, I decided to explore in-depth the segments of each

interview in which the participant responded to the initial question. Broadly, this is the story she

tells of how her childhood experiences influence her ideas about herself today. Within those

segments of the transcript, I indentify elements of the story, such as abstract, orientation, plot,

evaluation, resolution, and coda. There are also vignettes of specific episodes of social

exclusion, which contain their own narrative elements; stories within the story. I include

excerpts from the interview transcripts to demonstrate these elements. For the sake of clarity, I

omit nonlexical expressions.

Jean. Jean's narrative has a progressive temporal structure. It begins with injurious challenges both at home and with peers. This improves over time as she goes to different schools, makes friends, begins taking martial arts, and gains self-confidence. The story becomes regressive when Jean's husband has a nervous breakdown and her coping resources are depleted. However, she is able to redefine her goals and the story takes another turn toward progression. She seeks therapy and pursues her career goals. The setback is painful; she experiences a crisis of confidence and the outcome is uncertain, but she perseveres. Overall, the tone of the narrative is optimistic. Her ability to transform challenging events into opportunities for growth indicates that this narrative has a comedic structure.

Structural elements in the text. At the start of the interview, I stated that I was interviewing women who experienced social exclusion, harassment, or peer rejection, and that she could begin her story wherever she liked. She began with orientation: "As a child I was exceptionally shy and I stuttered terribly badly, awfully. And my mother dressed me really prissily." The next statement was evaluation: "And those three factors combined were like a death sentence. It was, it was, it was just a really bad combination of factors." And then, back to orientation: "I had a group of friends that I used to sit with at lunch." She then provided abstract: "So there was more exclusion than an actual active bullying, which I think is more common among girls." Next, she described the complicating action: "I can remember pretty vividly that on more than one occasion they would throw food on the floor and ask me to get it and eat it. Like, fruit roll ups or granola bars, they would be like, 'Get that. Eat that.'" Followed by evaluation:

> I can remember not feeling like I had any backbone or any, or any active way of
>
> being and I would, I would do a lot of the things that they would ask me to do and

I was desperate for approval, for friends, really, really desperate.

Finally, she provided the coda:

That has definitely shaped me in a pretty significant way. The stuttering and the

having people laughing while I was speaking or making fun of me before, during,

after, has, even though I no longer stutter stutter, and I haven't stuttered badly

since about middle school, I have a hard time speaking up in class still, even at

[name of graduate school]. Though I mean I couldn't imagine being, you know,

among people who would be more understanding if that occurred. And it won't

occur, and it doesn't occur. But in my mind there's, there's, there's this block

that I can't, that I can't speak because I'm going to mess it up and they'll laugh at

me and then I won't have friends and they'll throw fruit rollups on the floor and,

you know? So unfortunately it's had a pretty significant effect.

In her orientation, Jean introduced who the story was about, what the situation was to

start with, and where the complicating action took place. She did not state when it occurred, and

I asked her to clarify when this happened. She responded, "First, second grade? And it kind of

continued I think up until the end of elementary school but I think the years that were worst were

pretty much first to third, and then it got a little better." I asked how it got better, and she

responded with the resolution:

It got a little better and I'm not even entirely sure why, I think they lost interest

with the game more than I actually stood up for myself. I don't think, I can't

remember any specific instance of me ever being like, no this isn't cool guys.

Jean then added the following vignette:

[Orientation:] In fact, I can most remember driving back with a friend of mine, it

was my best friend at the time, I don't remember what kind of car it was but they had like seats like facing backwards so we were like in the trunk part. It was the cool part. I don't know where we were driving. [Complicating action:] It was like a 40-minute drive and she spent the entire time spitting on me. She spat on me for the entire time and all I did was like, "Stop it, stop it, stop it." But like I didn't do anything, I didn't say—I didn't know what her parents thought or didn't think, or maybe they didn't care. [Evaluation:] It was completely degrading. Completely, completely degrading. And the funny thing is there actually wasn't a lot of anger even at them, it was more anger at me, like why didn't you do something, why didn't you stand up for yourself? Which is a little bit twisted. You, I should be angry at the people who make you feel awful and not at yourself. But it's, you know, it's complicated. Like, I should have known better, or I should have done something, or I should have prevented it. My fault. Or my fault for you know, kind of calling the attention because you know I was, I was geeky and I was smarter than a lot of other kids and I stuttered and I dressed prissy and so it was my fault, you know? [Coda:] I think that's still there. Unfortunately.

Mary. The overall temporal structure of Mary's narrative is progressive. She sets the scene by describing a happy childhood in a family involved in their small community and doing well. This state is disrupted by the complicating event of Mary's birthday party in third grade. From that turning point in the story, there is a regression as Mary loses friends at school and her parents lose their jobs and their place in the community as a punishment for not complying with local social norms. Things continue to fall apart as her parents separate. The story takes a turn

and becomes progressive after she moves to a new town and, over time, makes friends, identifies her talents, and gains confidence.

Two major setbacks that occur in the story lead to temporary regression, but in both cases Mary was ultimately able to work toward a better version of herself, thus maintaining the overall progressive temporal arc. The first setback occurs when her pledge daughter dies while she is in college. She uses that challenge to identify true friendships and discontinue investment in shallow and unfulfilling social relationships. In the second instance, she has a nervous breakdown around age 30. She sought therapy to identify her stressors and move toward increased personal strength. The story is an optimistic comedy with an objective tone.

Structural elements in the text. From the beginning of the interview, Mary provided a clear story. I identify the structural elements as follows:

[Orientation:] I grew up in the Midwest. My dad was a football coach and a high school teacher, and my mom was, well you know it was the 70s so she was one of those early feminists, first generation of women who really try to do the stuff that we do now. So, raise a family and work full time. And she worked for the government and did block grants housing and urban development stuff, [Evaluation:] which in small rural towns does not necessarily make you popular. Because a lot of the housing you're providing, a lot of the services she was working for were for people that were poor, people of color, people that were marginalized in [that area] in the 70s. [Orientation:] So before I was in about third grade, everything was good. Second or third grade. Everything was good. Because my dad was the football coach and it was rural, I mean it was a certain degree of status that went with that, you know, the football coach's kid, and that,

that counted for something. And my parents ran, all the football coaches ran in the same social circle as, you know the banker, and you know, the more affluent, the country club set. Which, you know, the country club in a small Midwestern town isn't large, but it's something.

[Complicating action:] So then in about second grade, second or third grade, I don't remember exactly when, it must have been third grade, cause that's the last year I remember feeling really happy and safe. I had a birthday party. I sat down with my mom and made this long list of kids that I wanted to invite and I remember her with her notepad and writing down the names as I was saying them. So I was rattling off lists of names, and I said, I remember clearly saying, "Jenny," and I said, "Oh, and her friend Kim." And my mom just wrote the names down. And we took the invitations to school and dropped them off. Kim happened to be the only black girl in my class. She lived with her grandparents, and you know, my parents raised us in this whole "free to be you and me" you know, Sesame Street, I really didn't know what the world was. And my mom took a lot of flak that we invited this little black girl to my birthday party in second grade, to the point that the superintendant, school principal, called her and said "You really can't do this." But, my mom being who she was, it was like, "No! This little girl was invited, Mary wants her here, we're gonna have her!" And she came.

Later I found out that her grandmother said it was a huge event in her life. She'd never been invited to a slumber party, never been invited to a birthday party, they went out and bought her new pajamas, they bought her a new sleeping

bag, all these things that she hadn't had. Like, it was a big deal. And I didn't

know that. She was just one of the girls in my class. After that, I didn't put it all

together until I was much older, but I remember sort of starting fourth grade, the

following year, and there was a very clear sense that nobody wanted to play with

me. I stopped getting invited to parties, I stopped, you know, kids stopped just

wanting to be around me. There was just this sort of sense that there was

something wrong with me. [Evaluation:] And I didn't know what it was at the

time and I remember really getting this very strong message that I was

fundamentally broken. Like there was something just wrong with me.

[Complicating action:] At the same time, my dad's football team stopped

winning, and my mom lost her job because there were budget cuts and their block

grant wasn't renewed. So there was a lot of other stuff going on in my family at

that same time and I had a couple of really miserable years where I just couldn't

get anybody to be a friend. And it sometimes it was probably what we would call

bullying now, but not to the same degree. I was never threatened really, but

people would say, I didn't know what the N word was, I'd never really heard it, I

mean I'd heard it in passing, but I didn't realize that it was a derogatory word, but

I also knew it wasn't a word that we used. I didn't really know it. It wasn't a part

of my language, but started hearing it more, in relation to me. And I didn't

understand that. [Evaluation:] For some reason it didn't ever occur to me to ask

about it, like I just sort of took it in and thought, well, this must be what it is.

[Complicating action:] And then we moved. My dad got a new job, my mom got

a new job, they separated, we moved to a new town and I went into this new

school sort of, with this belief that of course, I was fundamentally broken and no one would want to be with me.

It took a couple of years at a new school before I sort of started to get the sense that maybe that wasn't necessarily the case for everybody. I fell in with a group of kids that were very creative and funny, it was a lab school at a college, and really smart, free-thinking, creative kids, a lot of university professor's [kids]. I was in fifth grade at that point. [Abstract:] So, this all sort of happened in second grade, I had two really hellish years. And then we moved and it probably took another two years for me to sort of regain a sense that somebody at least, wanted to be with me. [Evaluation:] But still with this sense that, it wasn't that I wasn't fundamentally broken, it was a sense that these were other people who were just as broken as I was. So, it was sort of like the island of misfit toys. Like, we're all broken together.

[Complicating action:] In, you know, middle school and the hell that that is, and then during middle school, as all of those kids tried to find a place, that group rejected me as well. [Evaluation:] I think partially because I really still felt very broken, and so I was very needy. And they didn't have time for it, they didn't want to deal. And I was sort of a liability because I wasn't very confident. And, you know, in middle school you don't have the luxury of being seen as less than completely together. Even though no one is completely together.

[Resolution:] And again it took a couple of years in high school before, three years in high school before that group sort of reformed and I found enough of myself to be able to be like, yeah, now I'm not so sure that I'm fundamentally

broken anymore. I was an adult, really, and having conversations with my mom about this whole, you know this whole Kim thing, and it was a whole, like, random set of things that came up in conversation that I never really, you know I had to piece it together. It never occurred to me that all this, you know, this 20 years of feeling like there was just something really wrong with me, and probably seven years of therapy as an adult, to really get that all of that traces back to this one party. This one very racist set of adults who wouldn't allow their kids to play with me anymore. [Evaluation:] And the way that the kids responded with that, which was pretty hateful.

I think that it, at that time, if it'd occurred to somebody to say, "Look, here's what's happening, here's why it's happening, here's why you did the right thing, and here's why you should feel proud of that, instead of feeling like there's something wrong with you," it probably would have been a whole different story all the way through. But my parents I think were too tied up in their own stuff and they didn't, we didn't know then what we know now about how much kids can take in about what's going on around them and how much they're capable of understanding, so at that time I'm sure they thought, "Well, if we don't talk about it, then it'll go away!" You know, it'll all be fine. [Coda:] And so I don't, I don't begrudge them, you know, they did the best that they could, but listening to them talk about it now, it was obviously something that they had a lot of energy and frustration around and they didn't know how to manage it. [Evaluation:] It has a lot to do, I think, with my dad ended up being fired as the football coach. I think it has something to do with why my mom's grant wasn't funded again,

because that required a lot of community buy-in, and a lot of support from public

officials. And I think that, you know, at that time the fact that I invited a little

black girl to my birthday party was enough to sort of take it all down. I don't

think we realized at the time the repercussions that would have. [Coda:] I'm

grateful that we didn't know, because I am afraid to think about how we might've

made the decision differently had we known. [Evaluation:] I don't know that as a

family we were strong enough to have made the decision to invite her had we

known what all the repercussions might have been. And it was so important for

her that, you know, it, yeah. [Coda:] I'm glad that we didn't know. I'm glad that

we didn't have the foresight.

Rosanne. Rosanne's narrative begins with a regressive temporal structure, then switches

to a progressive temporal structure, which indicates that it is a comedy. Her initial social

difficulties are exacerbated by depression and learning disability. The narrative reaches a turning

point when she is around 15 years old and begins attending a therapeutic boarding school. At the

school, she has both negative and positive social experiences and she begins to learn how to

navigate social relationships with more success. After high school, Rosanne experienced an

abusive relationship, but instead of being overwhelmed by this challenge she was able to

advocate for herself. The story culminates with a happy marriage and a successful academic

experience. The overall tone of the narrative is optimistic.

Structural elements in the text. Rosanne's interview was particularly elaborate. Instead

of providing an initial summary of her narrative, she began at the beginning and supplied

vignettes to illustrate the nature of her experiences over time. For this section, I had a choice. I

could include bits of the text from different parts of the interview to demonstrate how she used

structural elements throughout the entire narrative, or I could identify one section of text that

contains those elements. Although it is less clearly related to the initial interview question than

the previous interviews, I opted for the latter. The text is organized as follows:

> [Orientation:] I have certain gifts, and I think of them as gifts. [Evaluation:] I'm
>
> pleased about them, I'm very pleased about them. And I'd be upset if I lost one
>
> of them. But in a certain sense I don't think of them as mine, I don't take credit
>
> for them. You know, like if somebody gives you something and you receive a
>
> compliment on it, you say, you know, "Thanks! My aunt Helga gave this to me,"
>
> or whatever. You don't, it's not the same thing as, "Thanks, I made this myself."
>
> It's a different thing. Anyway, so with that being—so what I'm about to say I'm
>
> not—I'm not being egotistical I'm just being descriptive. [Orientation:] I'm
>
> really smart. I'm really smart about—in certain ways not in others. And I'm
>
> really knowledgeable in certain ways and not in others. And I grew up watching
>
> nature documentaries. And by the time I was, you know, seven, eight years old, I
>
> could have probably talked intelligently with actual biologists. You know, actual
>
> ecologists about—not across the board, but certainly aspects of animal behavior
>
> and things like that. I knew the language that they—not all of it, but I knew, I had
>
> the beginnings of the ability to talk like a naturalist or like an ecologist.
>
> I think I was nine when I noticed that different, that different tree species
>
> grow in different areas even though those areas are relatively close to each other
>
> and it occurred to me to wonder why. Nobody told me that that was significant.
>
> [Complicating action:] But anyway, so I, during the years that I was in [name of
>
> school], I was rarely overtly teased except by Jimmy. And occasionally some of

his friends. And occasionally I would tease back. But, while I had—I eventually

made some friends later on in that period. [Evaluation:] I had very few friends,

because I hadn't made any friends. I was already an outsider. I guess it took me,

I guess when [my one friend] had first left I was more into experiencing her

absence than in doing anything about it. [Complicating action:] So I spent a lot

of time alone, and that sort of morphed into me just spending time alone.

When I was 10 I started having some kind of neurological issue.

[Evaluation:] No one's ever explained what it is. [Complicating action:] But I

started getting depressed, my handwriting went to hell, and my spoken English

deteriorated. I never noticed that change; my dad's told me about it. But

apparently I developed a speech impediment that I had from when I was 10 to

when I was 15. And then it went away. [Evaluation:] It's very interesting. But

anyway, so something was going on with me neurologically during those years as

well. So there was all these reasons why I was being—and those things might

have affected my ability to reach out to other people, in a way that has nothing to

do with how I was treated.

[Complicating action:] My dad told me about a certain incident that I

didn't remember clearly. That happened I think I was probably 12, I think, when

this happened, but I was walking home from school with him and my sister, and

some of the other kids called out to me, like they were being friendly. And I

completely ignored them. And my dad apparently said, "Why are you ignoring

them? They want to be friends. They're trying to be friendly." And he says that

I didn't answer him but my eyes filled up with tears. And he thought, okay we're

in trouble. [Evaluation:] So I don't know what was going on with that. But

again, so with all of this back drop, I think that a lot of the kids who I was in

school with at that time were at least ambivalent about being my friend to begin

with, because I was so much smarter.

[Complicating action:] I remember one evening we were, you know,

going as a group somewhere, and there was a bee on the ground. It was having

problems, you know, it couldn't fly, and a cluster of kids, you know, clustered

around and they were obviously concerned about this bee and they wanted to

know what was wrong with it. And I walked up to it, to the group, and you know

I was thinking about those nature documentaries I'd seen and I said, "It's

probably just at the end of its life cycle." Okay, so they were like, "It's just at the

end of its life cycle?! Oh my god!" And just going on and on and on and it was

obviously a very uncool thing to say. [Coda:] And I always remember that one

incident, but I think it happened, that sort of thing happened a lot.

[Complicating action:] Roughly during the same time period, at one point

I suggested we have a drawing contest. [Evaluation:] I can draw very well.

[Orientation:] And the reason I suggested we have a drawing contest, and I knew

better than to say that this was the reason, was because I'd seen on Mr. Rogers,

which I was still watching at that point, even though I was eight. I'd seen on Mr.

Rogers that, you know, in the neighborhood of make believe, you know, they had

a drawing contest. And it wasn't about, you know, whose skill was better. It was

a celebration of art, and the assignment within this was that they were all

supposed to do drawings of the neighborhood of make believe. And Daniel

striped tiger won because he drew the neighborhood with people in it. And it was

this lovely little thing of celebrating art and celebrating the neighborhood as a

group and celebrating its members and nobody, it wasn't like anybody lost. It

wasn't like, oh you're not a good enough artist, it was, Daniel won because he

included the people. [Complicating action:] I thought, isn't that lovely, I want to

do something like that. So I was like, "We should have a drawing contest!" And

somebody was like, "Yeah, you'd win." [Evaluation:] Which was not what I

meant at all! So that kind of comment, like "You'd win." It's not bullying, but it

is rejection. We don't want to engage with you because you're separate from us.

[Resolution:] And that became very internalized as well, to the point where when

I started [name of graduate school], I was initially reluctant to speak up in class,

because I was concerned I might get rejected for it. And it—I talk to the teacher

about it, because that's what I do, and he said, "No you're fine; you could even

talk up a little bit more." [Coda:] And you know, this is [name of graduate

school] and it's different. And it's okay here. And for once in my life I'm not the

smartest person around! It's amazing! It's wonderful! I love it! You know?

[Evaluation:] And this is another thing where, where I can kind of—by

noticing a shadow in my experience I can kind of, something must've cast the

shadow. It's not that I think that I'm missing memories, it's just that, you know,

every day incidents aren't, in and of themselves are, most of them are not

important. But they add up. And so all these everyday incidents added up to—by

the time I became an adult, you know, [Abstract:] I've always loved telling

people things that I know. And by the time I was an adult, I simply thought of

that as me compulsively showing off, like it was a bad thing. And it was

something that I had to suppress because it wasn't good. [Complicating action:]

And you know, I eventually got a job where doing that was part of my job.

[Evaluation:] And just having people who liked me telling them things, it was

this revelation. I've never been a showoff, I like talking about myself, but I've

never been a showoff. I don't like being better than somebody else. I'm really

uncomfortable being better than somebody else. I really, I hate, by the way, if

somebody says, you know, "You have such a unique talent." Okay, that's code

for weird. I don't want anybody to tell me I'm unique. Don't like that.

[Resolution:] Anyway, how revelatory it was to finally meet people who

liked the fact that I'm smart and knowledgeable. And to realize that there's

nothing wrong with me, all I was trying to do was share. And sharing is a good

thing. It's this amazing thing, and the strength of that realization, you know, that

shadow must've been cast by something. You know, by I don't know, maybe

dozens or even hundreds of little incidents similar to "The end of its life cycle?!"

Margaret. Margaret's narrative begins with a progressive temporal arc. Growing up,

her visual impairment presents many obstacles, including social exclusion throughout school,

and she is able to persevere and become increasingly confident over time. This trajectory

continues into adulthood and she graduates from college and gets married. Then there is a

turning point and the story becomes regressive as Margaret's husband becomes abusive and she

struggles to succeed in her workplace without adequate accommodations. She loses her job and

gets divorced, breaks her ankle, and becomes increasingly fearful. Ultimately, these stressors

overwhelm Margaret and she becomes depressed and attempts suicide. Although she goes on to

receive psychiatric treatment and works to develop a new plan for her life, she remains

discouraged. This story is a tragedy with a pessimistic tone.

    Structural elements in the text. Margaret's story was relatively disorganized. The

narrative content shifted frequently from the past tense to the present. The following excerpt

illustrates how Margaret's storytelling style emerged:

[Orientation:] I've been diagnosed with vision impairment that has made me

legally blind ever since I was three years old. It was diagnosed at [name of

hospital], when I was three in 1979, with epilepsy and optic nerve atrophy. And

nystagmus. Nystagmus is what my makes my eyes go back and forth, and optic

nerve atrophy basically decreases my vision in my right eye, in the peripheral

vision and also in distance vision in both eyes. [Coda:] So I don't drive.

[Orientation:] It was a birth defect. I'm adopted so I didn't find my birth mother

'til 2003. And in [name of state] it was a closed adoption so I didn't actually get

the record or the report from the adoption agency until 2003. And to find out that

it was a complication of poor choices that my birth mother made while I was in

the womb. Certain things she did, medication that she was on, alcohol that she

drank, things that she chose to do, that caused both those conditions. So it's not

something that would be able to pass on if I should have kids. [Evaluation:] So

you know, growing up I had enough vision to get around, I kind of live like one

foot in the sighted world, one foot in the, the visually impaired world because I

have just enough vision that I can get around and I can be independent and I can

do things. [Orientation:] And my parents especially mother pushed me from a

very young age to be, independent, in the respect of, you know, just advocating

for me and me advocating for myself and getting what I need whether it be in

school services or out in the community, medical care, things like that. I was

having a lot of seizures. [Coda:] I haven't had a seizure since 2006, thankfully. I

have migraines now, what they call a visual aura, but not a full epileptic seizure.

[Abstract:] So the, the social exclusion came out of that, or the teasing the

bullying whatever, you know, whatever you want to label it as, came through

early elementary, elementary, middle, even into high school. But it, it came in

different forms.

[Orientation:] It started in early elementary—I didn't necessarily use a

cane, as most visually impaired and blind people do, they use the standard white

cane. Because I had enough vision I didn't have that common identifier, you

know, that you see. So—but I was always getting pulled out of class to get

special services. You know, resource room time, and had things in large print or

had to sit close to the board or extra help from the teacher or from the resource

room people or things like that. I spent many, many a recess alone. I grew up in

[name of town], which is the next town over, and I—I went to the same school for

grades first through eight. [Name of school] is huge now, but back then it was a

little stone school with a brick addition on the back for the middle school portion

of it, and the library and a few administrative offices and your gym. But way

back when in its founding it was just the stone, stone school building.

[Complicating action] But you know I spent many a recess on the

playground running from the boys who were in my class, or other boys either

higher or lower grade from me. They would chase me, [Evaluation:] and it wasn't

because they wanted to kiss me. You know. They would chase me because I would be—I was, I was different. [Complicating action:] I was called things like "four eyes," because my glasses were, you know, as thick as a bottle cap. [Orientation:] Back then in the 80s, you know, they didn't make them as well as they do now, you know, they're still thick but they're hard to tell. I mean, but back then I had the plastic frames and they were like a half inch, you know, quarter inch thick and they were heavy lenses and, nowadays, these are magnified but you'd never, you never really know that they were any different compared to a typical lens. [Complicating action:] So, and you know they would chase me they'd call me "four eyes," you know, they'd call me different names, I can't remember them all, it's been so long.

[Orientation:] But you know, we used to have a wooden play set on the, on the playground with like a wooden suspension bridge and then part of it would be an upper deck and then a lower deck. [Complicating action:] And I remember sitting up on the upper deck, platform many times while everybody was running around swinging doing whatever, and I would just be staring off into the distance because—or I would go and I would hide in the, the triangle of tires that was being used, made around a pole and you could get, crawl through a tire and like sit in the center if you wanted. [Evaluation:] And that was my escape, you know, until I learned to deal with it. [Complicating action:] Or I would spend my recesses in, inside in the resource room or in the library or, you know, with, you know, the guidance counselor, depending on the weather. Because ice and I don't get along, so if it was winter I didn't go out much. I hadn't [broken my ankle] 'til

eight years ago, but I sprained it a lot when I was a kid. [Evaluation:] So you know, not using a cane may have been a detriment to me.

[Orientation:] I always had sure footing, you know, except if or unless it was uneven ground, but once I was like on the school property and I knew where I was going, you know, you're fine. But when you're on black ice or whatever, your feet get unsteady and you know, a cane kind of lets you know when that's coming up or, and whatever. [Evaluation:] But a cane, any kind of physical marker, you know, makes you stand out of a crowd. And I already stood out of a crowd anyway, and when you're in a school, small school like that—[Orientation:] I was in a class of 28 that graduated in eighth grade, and roughly the same 28, 25 to 30 kids came and went with you from first to eighth grade, you know. Now the numbers are much higher, you know, because population has increased, but back then, it was like everybody knew everybody. [Evaluation:] You know, I mean, it was tough because you know, it was like I had to defend myself and [Complicating action:] every year it was, it was the same. We might change grades but the only difference was when we got to like grade five, you rotated. So, you were, you know, you were in reading one period math another period you know and that was my first chance at rotating so you didn't, every year you weren't stuck with the same set of kids every single period. Because you all had your own schedule. [Evaluation:] And that was kind of like a preview as to what I would deal with in high school. So I was glad that, you know, I wouldn't have the same set of boys sitting in the back of the room chuckling when I had to have my nose to the, to the board to read something that

the teacher wrote, or I would use a, a handheld monocular. You know telescope.

[Orientation:] I've had one of these off and on throughout my life, you know,

short of a cane this is probably the closest marker that I've had. You know used

for distance work. For board work. This compensates for the distance vision so I

can look through this and I can read, you know things far away that aren't large

print. You know, or I'd have different colored worksheets or you know things

like that.

[Complicating action:] But you know, you try in class and you do your

work and you're up and down, up and down. It wasn't every day. I think after a

while, some years, some kids just got used to it, but it was—you know, when it

came around to special functions like the junior high school dances, you know,

[Orientation:] I was always the one helping out in the cafeteria at the, you know,

at the at the break when you had refreshments or whatever, or helping to set up.

Or because I went, you know, I didn't dress in the latest of fashions. I dressed to

be comfortable or what I, you know, what I wore, but it wasn't the latest fashions.

[Complicating action:] And I often had to ask, you know, push my way through

to one or two of the more popular boys to get a slow dance to one of the dances.

You know, otherwise I sat on the sidelines in a chair with, by myself or with one

other person, you know, until I was about in seventh or eighth grade and I went to

summer camp.

I went away to summer camp for the first time, but it was a camp for the

blind. [Orientation:] You know, I'd been a girl scout and I'd gone to girl scout

camp, and I'd gone overseas that—I did a domestic and an international camping

trip with the girl scouts. But until I went to a camp that my mom found that was

sponsored by an organization for the blind, and I was able to actually go away for

a week during the summer, when I went up to [name of state], to the camp in

[name of state], when I was maybe 12, 13. [Complicating action:] I was

introduced to a boy who was a mutual friend of a girlfriend of mine. And we

would start a relationship. And you know, ten years later we would end up

getting married. In 1999. [Evaluation:] But it was not until then that I found

acceptance. [Orientation:] You know, but he was visually impaired himself. He

had a prosthetic in one eye and his good vision was his right eye so it balanced

out my left so we always laughed and said that, you know, two, two, two—you

know my left side being good and his right eye being good, we kind of made an

equal, you know, good, good whole. You know? [Evaluation:] And that was,

that was the ongoing joke. But I, if it wasn't for the relationship that I had with

him I don't think I ever would have married to this day. Because I have never

really had a social relationship short of the one that I had with my ex-husband.

I've never, you know, dated. I was never asked out.

[Complicating action:] You know, I went all through high school, you

know, with a few select friends. My classmates were more acquaintances than

they were friends. They were, you know, I hung around with the youth from the

special ed. class. Or, you know, the, one of the classes that I was in where I had a

couple of friends that came over from [name of town] with me that I would keep

in touch with, you know, but I just, I never really meshed with a lot of the people

when I came to the high school. [Evaluation:] Because I still didn't use a cane

but I was just different. [Complicating action:] You know, you—I went through

the name calling and—in high school and I would brush it off or you know, there

were a couple times when I would have a seizure in class and it's always

embarrassing to, you know, have the school nurse come running with the Walkie

Talkie and the guidance counselor or the principal, and then if it's really bad they

call EMS, [Evaluation:] and you know it's very embarrassing. [Resolution:] I

mean I went through the same thing in undergrad when I had my, did my

bachelor's degree in the 90s. You know, but it, it's—you don't make friends

easily that way, and the friends that you end up making are somewhat—at least I

ended up making, are somewhat, flawed in their own way. [Coda:] I don't really

have, even to this day, a whole lot of healthy relationships with people my age.

So to say that the social exclusion kind of still exists, I would say yeah. You

know.

Rebecca. Rebecca's narrative has a progressive temporal structure. Much like Jean's

narrative structure, Rebecca's narrative begins with challenges at home and at school. There is a

climax when she stands up for herself when she is in seventh grade. Over time, she gains

support outside her home and ultimately finds a teacher to whom she can open up. As a result,

she gains appreciation for her own strengths and she flourishes as she leaves home for college

and then goes to graduate school. The narrative becomes regressive when she begins working

and is not able to cope with the stressors of her job and the transition out of school. Ultimately,

she is able to engage in psychotherapy and refine her goals, returning to school and beginning a

new career. The overall tone of the narrative is optimistic.

Structural elements in the text. From the beginning of the interview, Rebecca provided

a clear story. I identify the structural elements as follows:

[Orientation:] I grew up in a really affluent town. But I grew up in a, in the apartment complex in the very affluent town. My mom sent me to Catholic school. I was the only kid in the school that lived in an apartment. [Evaluation:] And it was like a set up. It was, it was like a set up. Even though everyone was wearing uniforms, everyone looks the same, somehow we weren't all the same. I mean it was, it would be, you know, you couldn't have a play date, like you go to someone's house for a play date and they live in this huge, like, mega mansion, and then you know, I had no motivation to have someone over to my apartment—my parents' apartment for a play date. Yeah, here's, like, the bedroom I share with my little brother. And then kids picked up on that, and I think they saw me as vulnerable. I feel like in this way, maybe I was targeted a little bit. They, they—I felt like I didn't fit in and they sensed that I knew or felt like I didn't fit in. [Orientation:] And I was a smart kid, [Complicating action:] I mean they would be sitting next to me and they would, like, want to copy my answers and like, you're a little kid, you're just going to, okay! You want the answer to A, here you go! But you know, it went way beyond that, it would be at like the lunch table, "Oh, what do you have for snacks today? Oh, I like your snack better, let's trade."

[Evaluation:] You know, recess was, at that particular school was a nightmare. Because I definitely didn't fit in, I had like two other girls I would play with and we were all the misfits of the class. [Complicating action:] I remember, like, getting pushed by some of the other kids in the class and no one

would do anything about it, [Evaluation:] and at the time I really thought it was

because one of the girls that was bothering me, her dad was like, like on the board

or something at the school. And it could have been. But I felt like none of the

teachers would take me seriously. And this is from the viewpoint of, like, a little

kid. You know, it was just, it, it, it, it wasn't fun.

[Complicating action:] I definitely had my two other friends in the class

besides that, but it, you know, it, it, that was it. I and it was tit for tat, like I had a

hard time learning how to tie my shoes, so it was, you, you give me the answer

and I tie your shoes. [Orientation:] You know, Velcro wasn't a thing back then,

you know, you can't tie your shoes your parents just buy you Velcro.

[Evaluation:] I feel like I got used for being smart. I feel like I wanted to be

accepted and liked by them. What kid doesn't want to be accepted and liked? I

really feel like they somehow knew that my parents weren't necessarily affluent

like theirs were and somehow then my parents weren't—they didn't have the

same power to advocate for me. And therefore I, I feel like I, I was like a sitting

duck for the kids.

[Complicating action:] I remember times on the playground, they had

like— I'd get pushed and stomped on and yeah. No one would care.

Then—that—it just kind of, it was what it was. You know, I remember, like, the

teachers trying to tell my mother, well, you know, you need to get Rebecca more

social with her classmates. [Evaluation:] And the truth was, outside of school I

didn't want to be more social with them because they were mean to me! They

made me feel like crud at school. And I didn't really—like, when you're a little

kid you think there's something wrong if you don't have what everyone else has.

[Complicating action:] Then I—my parents really couldn't afford the Catholic school, so in fourth grade I went to the public school, [Orientation:] and the way the schools were broken up, were like, there was a K to four school, then a five to eight, and then a high school. [Complicating action:] And so I got, like plopped down in this K to four school and everyone had already made their friends. Like, all the, like, little groups had already formed. [Evaluation:] So it was very hard to kind of break in there. And it was difficult because the Catholic school was ahead of the public school system. So if I was smart in the Catholic school, I was like a friggen genius in the public school system. So it just, it, it made things difficult to kind of get myself adjusted to being in the public school system. I had a hard time there. I don't think I would have had a hard time there had I started off there with everyone else. Because all of a sudden, like, [Complicating action:] the kids next door were going to school with me. But it was, oh, the kids next door are going to school, they're, they're looking at me like, yo, where have you been? You know, where have you been for the past four years? [Evaluation:] You know, and so breaking into that wasn't necessarily the easiest thing. [Complicating action:] And it took me—it really took me a few years to kind of find my clique. Well I shouldn't say clique, I should say group. And the irony was in like sixth or seventh grade, the people that I didn't get along with in the Catholic school system ended up in the public school system. And it, the whole thing, that I, I had much more of a peer group then. But I still remember them getting under my skin. They were still mean to me, it was like

nothing had changed. Like, I remember overalls being big at one point, and I wore a pair of—they were green corduroy overalls, and I remember sitting in class and one of them, like, calling me a pickle, all through class. And it's really hard to learn when you have someone, like, teasing you. I remember my first and only detention in my entire life was one of them pushed me in gym class, and I was in seventh grade, and I, something just happened, where I had just had enough. And so she pushed me and I pushed her right back and I pushed her hard enough that she fell on the floor. The problem kind of went away after that. [Evaluation:] The issue that I had with her, once I had pushed her down on the floor, it was worth the detention. And it—the teacher I think, when she called, because at first they call your mom if you get a detention, the teacher, on some level she understood why I did what I did. But then, because I put my hands on someone else I had to, there had to be a consequence for it. And as a kid I was devastated that I had gotten this detention, but looking back it was, the detention was totally worth it. She really deserved a lot, you know, a lot more than what I gave her. I think that the, all the ignoring that people tell you to do, you know, in some ways they're looking for the attention but then, in some ways—and I don't advocate—I work with little kids. I work with kids on the autism spectrum. I don't advocate, like, aggression or anything like that. But for me in my particular case, I think someone just needed to—I needed to stand up for myself and she needed to know that I could stand up for myself. And that I wasn't afraid to get in a little bit of trouble to do it.

[Resolution:] I feel like high school, elementary school, middle—the end

of middle school, and high school, yeah, I had my group of friends and they—but there were still people who kind of picked on me, but then at the same time, I also think I was at a point where I was just like, yeah screw you. Like, I don't, I really don't care. [Coda:] And it's really ironic, 'cause now we have facebook, so, like I looked up the people that had picked on me. And I think mean breeds more mean. It's just one endless cycle. But I also look at them and, like, oh, like, that's where you ended up? I don't know, like, there's some vindication. You know, 15 years later, who—which life would you rather have?

While the majority of these narratives have primarily progressive temporal arcs with comedic structure and optimistic tone, there are unique aspects to each story. Mary's narrative has an objective tone. Margaret's narrative stands apart from the rest as a pessimistic tragedy. These distinct structural characteristics were noticeable to me during the interviews. My interpersonal response to each participant, described in my journal entries above, reflects the tone of each story. In the next section, I explore the various themes that emerge in each narrative.

Thematic Analysis

Through careful attention while listening to audio recordings, transcribing, and multiple readings, I identified emergent themes in each narrative. Broad themes were often dichotomous, presenting as either the presence or absence of a phenomenon. I found it useful to use labels that identify the presence of the thing, or its positive state, and then to explore how its presence or negation was expressed, frequently through sub-themes. In the following section, I examine this thematic analysis in each narrative.

Jean. Thematic analysis of Jean's narrative produced several broad themes including

agency, shame, adults failing, and progress. Within those broad themes, I noted several

subthemes, such as speaking up, anxiety, self-attributions, taking responsibility, and regression

under stress. I include examples of these themes here.

    Agency. Agency is prevalent theme throughout Jean's narrative. The Merriam-Webster

Dictionary defines agency as "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power"

("agency," 2014). The way that agency was expressed changed over time in the narrative, from

a pervasive lack of agency to increased agency. In the coda of the narrative, both agency and

lack of agency became part of Jean's narrative identity. She described having two stories about

herself, one that has agency and one that does not. For example, first she stated:

> In my mind there's, there's, there's this block that I can't, that I can't speak
>
> because I'm going to mess it up and they'll laugh at me and then I won't have
>
> friends and they'll throw fruit rollups on the floor.

And then, describing the other:

> [In college,] I let my stuff loose for I think the first time ever. Especially
>
> freshman year. And it was a lot of fun, and it was really liberating to learn that,
>
> guess what? You're a fun person. You're a fun person and you have lots of
>
> friends! Look at that! Which was in total contrast to the rest of my life
>
> experience.

Depending on how vulnerable she is, she experiences herself as one or the other of these versions

of herself:

> I feel sometimes, in certain situations I'm better able to act as I did in [name of
>
> college], which I think is probably actually closer to who I am, it's just, it got
>
> squashed and kicked for a number of years. And in other situations when I'm

tired or I'm scared or I'm threatened in some way I revert, I revert back and it's,

it's tiring.

A subtheme of agency, *speaking up*, emerged as a means through which agency was or

was not expressed. Jean summarized this as follows:

I'm going to keep my mouth shut now. And then of course the more, the more

that you, you know, the more that you keep your mouth shut the more that you

don't say something because you're afraid you're going say the wrong thing

or—then the more that ties into older stuff about not speaking up, and the more

you get into the habit of not speaking up, and then all of a sudden you're quiet for

weeks and weeks and weeks and you don't talk to people. And that ties

dramatically back into reverting back into you're not talking to people because

they don't like you.

Another subtheme of agency is *confidence*, which often emerged in the context of

whether or not Jean was able to stand up for herself. The following passages illustrate how

distinctly this was expressed by the two versions of herself. Describing herself as a child, she

said,

I can remember not feeling like I had any backbone or any, or any active way of

being and I would, I would do a lot of the things that they would ask me to do and

I was desperate for approval, for friends, really, really desperate.…

And the funny thing is there actually wasn't a lot of anger even at them, it was

more anger at me, like why didn't you do something why didn't you stand up for

yourself.

And later referring to high school,

There is some confidence in there. I think part of the issue part of the reason that

I was able to that particular time in my life that I was able to kind of stand up for

myself, if you will. One is that at that point I had done a lot of martial arts and I

was comfortable in myself and with myself.

Paradoxically, another subtheme here is *taking responsibility*. Jean describes feeling

responsible for the feelings and behaviors of others throughout the narrative, and while she

seemed helpless to act on her own behalf, she was consistently concerned about how her actions

and needs might affect others. She said, "That shapes me I think in all my relationships, I'm

excessively careful to the point of being mostly neurotic about trying not to hurt other people."

Jean described her mother as "intense." She said,

I think that set me up as a kid, I'm the first to be really attuned to how other

people were doing and okay what mood is she in? Now I'm going to regulate

myself accordingly, which then of course ties into feeling responsible for other

people. How my behavior is going to set them off even if it doesn't.

This came up again in the context of her husband's breakdown:

I think it's made me realize how strong I am. Which is, which is good for me to

realize. And then also how much of an issue it is for me to give to the point

where I don't have anything left. And I have to be real careful about that.

Because that tendency is definitely there and it's a very fine line between being

supportive and giving everything you have. It's like, if I loaned him my own

skin, I'm like, ah, that was a bad idea!

Shame. Defined as "a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or

impropriety" ("shame," 2014), shame is a central theme throughout Jean's narrative. At the

conclusion of our conversation, she summarized shame's role in her story by stating,

> There's a lot of contempt for the little girl with the knee socks and the prissy
>
> skirts and the braids who won't get herself dirty and won't stand up for herself.
>
> And once again it goes back to it's my fault. 'Cause I wore knee socks, I was
>
> prissy so it's my fault.

The shame that Jean associates with her childhood experiences of social exclusion is also an obstacle throughout her life story. As she put it, "I've had to work a lot on that too, and not apologize for taking up my own space." Referring to embarrassing experiences in her life, she said,

> There is still a lot of shame around that. Which is also, I mean once again, like,
>
> you think it would go away and then it's just, it's crap that happened a long time
>
> ago. It ties into the whole kind of shame or not, not fitting in, or the not being as
>
> good as or as confident as or as sure.

The subtheme *taking responsibility*, outlined above, also falls under the shame theme. Jean describes events as her "fault." When she responds to other people's actions and feelings with guilt, she is taking responsibility. For example, she says,

> I should have known better or I should have done something or I should have
>
> prevented it. My fault. Or my fault for you know, kind of calling the attention
>
> because you know I was, I was geeky and I was smarter than a lot of other kids
>
> and I stuttered and I dressed prissy and so it was my fault.

Furthermore, she states,

> I think because there was a lot of shame because I had a lot of shame around it
>
> and because I felt like I drew it or pulled it in or caused it or something. And

because I probably didn't want to lose my friends.

Another subtheme is *self-attributions*. This refers to the places in the narrative where Jean identifies aspects of herself that she believes caused her social exclusion. She describes her childhood self as "prissy," "geeky," "smart," "sensitive," and she refers frequently to her stutter. As the above quote illustrates, Jean implicated these characteristics and experienced shame because of them. She also related this to her sense of self-worth and her self-esteem. She stated,

It took me years and years and years and years and years to I think get up to even

a moderately normal level of low self-esteem, and that's something I still struggle

with, I have a really hard time with positive feedback. Even if I cognitively know

that something has gone well or something looks good or something is great or I

did, like I'm a good person. I have a hard time accepting that a hundred percent.

Anxiety is a subtheme that came up in Jean's narrative particularly in the context of anticipating social interactions. Jean described herself as worrying about what will happen and fearing various interpersonal scenarios. This subtheme coincides with speaking up and taking responsibility, subthemes outlined above. Describing her fear, she said, "people aren't going to like me, they're going to find that I'm boring, they're gonna, they're gonna abandon me. That is the very first, like gut, visceral reaction that I have."

Adults failing. Although Jean held herself and her characteristics responsible for her interpersonal difficulties, she also refers to several instances where the adults in her life failed her. She said that she felt "set up" by her parents, presumably for social failure once she entered school. Her parents were the ones who dressed her "prissily." Her mother was emotionally volatile, which made Jean feel anxious about trusting people. When she was being spit on in the car, she "didn't know what her parents thought or didn't think, or maybe they didn't care."

Describing the role of adults in her experience, she said,

> I think I kept a lot of it to myself. I don't know how much anybody really knew
>
> that how bad it was. I think they were like, oh yeah she's having a hard time, but
>
> not, I mean I don't think they actually knew what "hard time" translated into.… I
>
> had support in that I knew that my family cared for me, but I don't think that there
>
> was any specific support about, okay here's what you do when this happens.

> ***Progress.*** Jean's narrative includes many references to changes over time. She learned

social skills, made friends, and developed a new narrative identity over time. For example, she

said,

> The fact that it was a Quaker school kind of made it like this softer, like kind of
>
> happy-go-lucky touchy feely kind of place. And I think the students in general
>
> were more patient and kind of nurturing with me. There was a group that kind of
>
> adopted me, kind of like as a, like a lost cause type thing. "We're going to teach
>
> her how to, how to do this right." And there were some embarrassing and
>
> humiliating experiences because I was still learning, but by the time I left that
>
> school I was more or less adapted. I was more supported there, definitely. So it's
>
> probably not a coincidence actually, and this hadn't occurred to me until right
>
> now, that my stuttering stopped.

 There were also parts of the narrative where she regresses, and *regression under stress* is a

subtheme here. Referring to developing increased self-worth, she said,

> It's all too easy for that to kind of just float away if something else happens, I'm
>
> like, oh see look, that was crappy, look at that. Yeah, that's had a really profound
>
> effect on confidence and self-esteem. And I'm continually working on that.

Reflecting on her story, Jean stated, "You'd think you'd get over it, and, and you do! But it's here [points to abdomen]. It's really here, it, it stays there." This well illustrates the oscillation of progress in Jean's narrative.

Mary. The broad thematic categories that emerged in Mary's narrative are status, internalization, clarity, and security. Subthemes include confusion, external validation, brokenness, isolation, support, winning, and money.

Status. A strong theme throughout Mary's narrative is status, defined as "the position or rank of someone or something when compared to others in a society, organization, group, etc." ("status," 2014). I am using the word status here to refer to both Mary's understanding of social organization and the ways that she described her identity in orientation to other people. Mary consistently referenced status when describing her family. She began her narrative by stating that prior to the beginning of this story, "everything was good." She elaborated with:

> Because my dad was the football coach and it was rural, I mean it was a certain
>
> degree of status that went with that, you know, the football coach's kid and that,
>
> that counted for something. My parents ran, all the football coaches ran in the
>
> same social circle as, you know the banker, and you know, the more affluent, the
>
> country club set. Which, you know, the country club in a small Midwestern town
>
> isn't much, but it's something.

Often used to illustrate status, *money* emerged as a subtheme. Mary's parents lost their jobs in their small town and their change in income affected both their social status and Mary's range of possible opportunities. She identifies this as one possible explanation for her social difficulties. Regarding her family's role in her experiences, she said,

> We didn't, we really didn't have any money for things like clubs and sports

teams, and you know, and even if we'd had the money for it, there was nobody to

take me to that stuff. So I didn't do a lot of the stuff that I think other kids may

have done to have a social life, you know, in the summer, in the after school

hours. Like, I just rode the bus home. I didn't stay after for anything.

She went on to say,

I had friends who, you know a lot of the social stuff went on around concerts and

going to things and doing things, going to roller skating rink, whatever, and that

wasn't so much on the table 'cause we didn't have the money for it. So, things

that probably would have given me normal social interaction and probably could

have brought me back to the sort of normal understanding of who I was, I

couldn't get to that stuff, that wasn't available to me.

Status also emerged in reference to Mary's sense of herself in comparison to other

people. For example, regarding her older sister, she said,

It was just hard to be her little sister… she was very successful. She was a 4.0

student, she understood the social stuff, which I never got, she was very

mainstream, very conformist, which part of me hated. I didn't want to be. But it

sure makes things easier. And so it was coming up through, especially high

school it was hard because she was everything, I mean she was class president,

she was student body president, she was president and chair of this and captain of

that.

This statement illustrates Mary's sense of herself as inferior in status at that time. Her evaluation

of herself in relation to other people changed over time in the narrative. Toward the end of high

school, Mary discovered that she was good at public speaking and began to compete in debate

competitions. She enjoyed *winning*, which is another subtheme of status. When she went to college, Mary decided to use her older sister's successful reputation as a means to obtain status. She described,

> When I went to college, I did a lot of trying to sort of do the sort of external
>
> approval thing. So I was in a sorority and I was a resume jock, I was on all the
>
> committees and you know, organized homecoming and Greek weeks, then was an
>
> RA, you know I just, I did a lot of stuff. Because you get a lot of external
>
> approval when you do that stuff. You win awards and you know, people are like,
>
> they recognize you, and that was, in some ways very reinforcing and it was a way
>
> that I got a lot of acceptance when I was in college. But it was very artificial.

Another subtheme illustrated here is *external validation*. Mary's self-worth is located in relation to other people. She reflected, "I still have this crazy need for external validation that I struggle against. Nothing wrong with applying for a reward now and again, especially if you know you're going to win it."

Isolation is also a subtheme related to status. Mary frequently described herself as alone and rejected by her peers. For example, she said, "There was a very clear sense that nobody wanted to play with me. I stopped getting invited to parties, I stopped, you know, kids stopped, just wanting to be around me."

Internalization. Mary's internalization of this social message is a strong theme throughout her narrative. She stated,

> There was just this sort of sense that there was something wrong with me. And I
>
> didn't know what it was at the time and I remember really getting this very strong
>
> message that I was fundamentally broken. Like there was something just wrong

with me.

Mary describes thinking of herself as *broken* throughout her life, and she attributes this internalized message to her social experiences during elementary school. She said she felt that

> I was fundamentally broken and no one would want to be with me. And it took a
> couple of years at a new school before I sort of started to get the sense that maybe
> that wasn't necessarily the case for everybody…. Then during middle school, as
> all of those kids tried to find a place, that group rejected me as well. I think
> partially because I really still felt very broken, and so I was very needy. And they
> didn't have time for it, they didn't want to deal. And I was sort of a liability
> 'cause I wasn't very confident.

Mary summarized this theme by saying,

> You know things that we just believe about ourselves because they've always
> been a part of how we saw ourself [sic]. From who I really am now and the way
> that other people perceive me. But there's still a lot of old stuff in my head about
> being, when I get tired or I get discouraged I can feel, you know, that
> fundamentally broken stuff pops back in. So it's an ongoing thing. Yeah. So I
> wouldn't say that I've completely worked it out.

Clarity. As a theme, clarity most often presents itself as its opposite: *confusion*. Mary described her childhood self as confused. Confusion evolves into clarity over time as she has discoveries about herself and the world around her. She states,

> I would go stand in line at the four-square court, or whatever, and I would get up
> to the front of the line, and I could even sometimes, you know, I would play, but
> no one would look at me. No one would talk to me. There were a lot of sort of,

> now I know they were sort of thinly veiled comments. Then I just didn't
>
> understand them.

Other characters in Mary's story were also unknowing, and Mary attributes their ignorance to her social difficulties. She explains that in retrospect,

> I think that it, at that time, if it'd occurred to somebody to say, "Look, here's
>
> what's happening, here's why it's happening, here's why you did the right thing,
>
> and here's why you should feel proud of that, instead of feeling like there's
>
> something wrong with you," it probably would have been a whole different story
>
> all the way through. But my parents I think were too tied up in their own stuff
>
> and they didn't, we didn't know then what we know now.

> In high school, Mary discovered that she was good at public speaking, and in college she

realized how to distinguish good friends from superficial relationships. Her friends in high school helped her realize that she may have been wrong about being "fundamentally broken." As an adult, she continued to gain clarity: "I feel like the fact that my work is so focused on equity and social justice and education and, you know that, that, that, that really helps me to see that whole experience in a different light."

> Ultimately, Mary had an epiphany that provided the clarity with which she shared her

story.

> I was an adult, really, and having conversations with my mom about this whole,
>
> you know this whole Kim thing, and, and it was a whole, like, random set of
>
> things that came up in conversation that I never really, you know, I had to piece it
>
> together. It never occurred to me that all this, you know, this 20 years of feeling
>
> like there was just something really wrong with me, and probably seven years of

therapy as an adult, to really get that all of that traces back to this one party. This

one very racist set of adults who wouldn't allow their kids to play with me

anymore. And the way that the kids responded with that, which was pretty

hateful.

Security. Defined as "the state of being protected or safe from harm," ("security," 2014)

security appears as a theme in Mary's narrative. This theme is often expressed as a sense of

safety or discomfort in various environments or interpersonal situations. The nature of her

security changed over time throughout her narrative, corresponding with the plot of the story.

Orienting her story to her timeline, she said, "I don't remember exactly when, it must have been

third grade, 'cause that's the last year I remember feeling really happy and safe." That was

followed by a long period of difficulty in her life in which she felt confused and uncomfortable.

Her family culture was invalidating and demanding. Although she was close with her mother,

she was not able to obtain support for her social difficulties in that relationship. As she entered

adulthood and gained clarity, she identified *support* as a means through which to obtain security

and began seeking environments and communities that were supportive.

Mary's sense of security is dependent upon other people, whether through external

validation or social support. For example, referring to the progress she has made toward

becoming more secure, she reflects that sometimes she has to remind herself,

Okay, well these are people that I, that I respect, they're good people. If there

was something so wrong with me, they wouldn't want to be with me. And that

still puts a lot on them, as opposed to, you know, being totally secure, but it's

better than nothing. So, you know, someday I hope to be, yeah.

Rosanne. Thematic analysis generated several broad themes in Rosanne's narrative,

including awareness, rigidity, authority, and relatedness. Subthemes that emerged within these

categories include intelligence, loosening, adults failing, isolation, ignorance, and gender.

    Awareness. Rosanne's level of insight into what was going on in her life is a central

theme in her narrative. She explores the extent to which she understood her circumstances, often

contrasted with greater insight gained in retrospect. The narrative starts in *ignorance* and moves

toward increased revelation and insight. She begins her narrative by saying, "I remember less

about what they did and more about the texture of consciousness at the time, where expecting

people to be mean and expecting people to not want to interact was just normal." She went on to

say, "I didn't really realize what was happening and I didn't recognize that I was being bullied."

Describing her experience in a new school, she said, "They were mean but they weren't

pointedly mean. You know, I wouldn't, you know, just part of the social system that people

were just—well, I was oblivious." This lack of awareness was reiterated throughout the

narrative. For example, when talking about an interaction with a peer, she said, "He was clearly

making fun of me. And it took me a little while to realize that that's what he was doing."

Rosanne's relationship with another peer was confused as well:

    I was occasionally mean to him back, and it felt like being mean to each other was

    sort of this game we were playing with each other. And I didn't realize that he

    might take it seriously, or that it might be more serious or that his feelings might

    get hurt by anything I was doing. I didn't, it didn't occur to me to think about

    whether or not it was friendly.

Rosanne made sense of her ignorance through normalization.

    I thought it was normal. And I thought I didn't care. By the time I was 11 or 12,

    I thought I was essentially asocial. I used that word. I admired cats because they

seemed to be asocial and I liked that aloofness. I admired the other loners. I

would use the word weird about myself and other people as a compliment. You

know, I didn't think there was a problem.

Rosanne's lack of awareness also affected her ability to function in other areas of her life.

Looking back, she said, "There's basic things that I didn't understand and nobody thought to

explain them to me. Like, did you know that in order to do your homework you have to do it? I

didn't know!" Another example is when she described learning how to wash her hair properly:

Things had to be explained to me that didn't have to be explained to most people.

I remember this one girl who is a Facebook friend of mine now, taught me to

wash my hair. I think I was 19. I didn't know. You know, I had, I'd gotten the

part where you know, you sort of pour shampoo on your head and sort of do like

this for a while [rubbing top of head] and you rinse. I knew that part. You know,

I'd seen it done, and that part had been explained to, okay, but I guess she noticed

that I wasn't doing it right or whatever, and you know she looked at me and she

realized it after I had washed my hair that parts of it weren't even wet and you

know, she taught me. You know, here's how you get it all wet and you stand

under the water like this, and this is what you do. And when you're done washing

use a conditioner, and you comb it out in the shower when you've got the

conditioner in and then you rinse it out. And you never comb your hair wet when

there's not conditioner in it, and you do this, and the soap, and you pat yourself

dry with a towel. You know and I said okay! Now I know how to do, now I

know how to wash myself, this is great!

Lack of awareness interfered with Rosanne's ability to hold down jobs. She said,

A big thing is not being able to figure out how I fit in a certain circumstance, like, if a group of people are all doing something together I will typically be unable to figure out how I can help. And I've learned to—with physical projects I've learned to get around that by asking…. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do or how it's supposed to work or what's going on. I spend a lot of time not knowing what's going on actually. Until, unless somebody actually sits down and tells me, which most people won't do, in part because they don't know I need to know, and in part because they're busy doing something else and they'd rather hire somebody who doesn't need to be talked to in that way. In certain ways I'm very slow on the uptake.

Rosanne gained insight as she got older. She said,

I think that there are two components to figuring out how to fit in, how to function socially, and one is being able to imagine other people as subjective entities. I know you have a mind. So I keep that—that's one of the things that I think about if I interact with you. The other thing is being able to think of ourselves as objective entities. Like, not only do I know that you have a mind, and you have thoughts and feelings that aren't necessarily mine, or aren't necessarily the same as mine, but I also know that you have thoughts and feelings about me. You see me from the outside. I didn't realize that until I came to [graduate school]. And I didn't know that I didn't know it, you know, intellectually I was aware that other people could see me, but—I don't know how it happened, it's just suddenly I realize that I'm visible. You know, that other people can see me even when I'm not thinking about how I look.

Regarding her experiences in high school, she said, "It took me years before I had enough distance from that place to realize that I hadn't been at fault. And during that time I couldn't explain to anybody what I'd done wrong."

Intelligence is a subtheme of awareness. Rosanne characterized her intelligence as a "gift." However, it was unfortunately paired with social ignorance. She said,

I'm really smart about—in certain ways not in others. And I'm really

knowledgeable in certain ways and not in others.… Categorically, I find the

abstract easy and the concrete difficult. So in almost any endeavor I can get the

concept quickly but I can't apply it. I can understand what's going on socially in

the abstract, even if I can't interact effectively.

Authority. Rosanne's relationship with authority is another major theme that appears throughout the narrative. She said, "By the time I was six, I was conscious of having bonded with the teachers because the other students were mean…I have never chosen bonding with a peer over pleasing a teacher." However, as she tells the story in retrospect, *adults failing* emerges as a subtheme, and it becomes clear that the authority figures did not necessarily deserve her adulation. She said,

I was so attached to those teachers. And I don't know that they were even really

that good…. I don't know why they never intervened. Maybe they thought we

should just work it out or whatever, but they gave us no assistance whatever.

They didn't teach us that being mean to somebody is wrong. And being bullied

isn't a normal thing you should just get used to. They didn't teach us any of that.

Adults failed to act on her behalf, despite her loyalty. In school, "I was becoming a problem child, but nobody did anything. Nobody did anything effective."

In retrospect, I'm angry at those teachers for not doing anything about the

learning disability stuff. And I'm angry at the whole, that whole educational

paradigm, because there are schools that are not based on standardized curricula,

and if I'd been going to one of those the whole learning disability thing would

never have happened! I might have been an unusual kid who, you know, knew

more, knew all the stuff about biology but couldn't write legibly, but whatever!

You know and it was just a lot of pointless pain at the hands of adults who

ostensibly meant the best for me.

Authority figures in the narrative contributed to the scapegoating that Rosanne was experiencing by her peers. It "wasn't treated as a problem by anybody and of course I felt—I thought I was totally in the wrong so I didn't say anything." She illustrates this failure in her boarding school here:

Nobody ever called anybody on scapegoating me the whole time I was there. Not

even faculty members who I was close to. You know, this is just, it's the

therapeutic process, it's what we do with this, and the fact that other people may

have been completely full of shit or doing whatever else, it was just, let's talk

about what's wrong with Rosanne.

Rigidity. Rosanne describes herself throughout her narrative in terms of rigidity, from cognitive inflexibility in childhood to increased flexibility in adulthood. Early in the narrative, rigidity interacted with authority, effectively marrying her identity and institutional affiliation. She conformed to institutional doctrine, often at her own expense. For example, she said,

I was on the side of the teachers. And I, you know, I couldn't break the rules.

And if I did make a minor infraction it was usually by accident or something like

that and I would feel horribly guilty about it and all this stuff. And so I didn't, I

was taking everything at face value, I was acting in absolute good faith, and I

didn't realize until years later that I was one of the only, maybe I was the only one

who was.

The subtheme *loosening* emerged as Rosanne's rigidity relaxed:

I don't know why, I don't know if it's triggered by something environmental, or if

it's some sort of delayed brain maturation or a miracle, or—I have no idea what,

but I'm loosening. And one of the things that's loosened is that I no longer define

myself by the institution I'm part of. You know, like how I thought that

graduating grade school was like death…. I'm much more defining myself by my

center rather than my container. And it was just—it's a feeling of relaxing.

The significance of this development is emphasized when she says, "I don't always eat the same

things at restaurants anymore. This is huge."

  Relatedness. How Rosanne experienced the presence or absence of relatedness was a

central theme in her narrative. Dilemmas around relatedness formed the central question of the

narrative, around which the other themes emerged. Whether she felt connected, disconnected,

isolated, withdrawn, socially ignorant, rigid, or loose, these phenomena were interpersonally

oriented. In this way, relatedness was integrated into the other themes outlined above.

  Rosanne emphasizes how her increased flexibility has expanded her relatedness. For

example, she said, "I now have the freedom to seek out what I guess is a small minority of

people in the population with whom I can really connect. And I do, and they like me. And it

still surprises me." This sense of surprise highlights how relatedness is embedded in Rosanne's

sense of awareness as well.

The subtheme *intelligence* served as a metric by which Rosanne compared herself to others and determined her social standing. Often there was an inverse relationship between intelligence and relatedness; that is, the higher her intelligence compared to those around her, the more difficult it was for her to relate to others. For example, she said, "I think that a lot of the kids who I was in school with at that time were at least ambivalent about being my friend to begin with, because I was so much smarter." The friends that she did have were often identified as highly intelligent as well, so this was a characteristic that facilitated connection when it was present. For example, she said, "He and I were the brains of the class."

Later in the narrative, intelligence continued to influence Rosanne's relatedness. She said, "when I started graduate school I was initially reluctant to speak up in class, because I was concerned I might get rejected for it." However, in this new environment, Rosanne discovered new possibilities. She described,

> Having people who liked me telling them things, it was this revelation. I've never
> been a showoff, I like talking about myself, but I've never been a showoff. I
> don't like being better than somebody else…. How revelatory it was to finally
> meet people who liked the fact that I'm smart and knowledgeable. And to realize
> that there's nothing wrong with me, all I was trying to do was share. And sharing
> is a good thing…. For once in my life I'm not the smartest person around! It's
> amazing! It's wonderful! I love it!

Authority ties in to relatedness through adults failing to step in and help Rosanne connect with other students. She said,

> In retrospect, I can see that I didn't believe there was any place in the adult world
> for me. For various reasons, you know fundamentally, I didn't know any adults

who I could really identify with. So, where do I—so and, you know I mean

people tell children all the time things that you should never tell children. That is,

that childhood is the happiest time in your life, and you're carefree and wonderful

and when you grow up it just all sucks. And, like, you know how many

children's books are about how much it sucks to be anything other than a child.

It's abusive. So I didn't want to grow up ever, so I was doing my best not to!

And so I had, I had no future plans. I had no future daydreams except for, you

know, to like run away and live in the woods by myself forever or something like

that, and I ended up being really disconnected from the world. You know, I

didn't—I lived in my fantasy world and my books, and so—and in my memories.

In conclusion, Rosanne reflects,

I wish that somebody had been able to tell me, "You're not the only one interested

in these things. And you're not, you're not wrong for being interested in them.

There are hundreds, probably thousands of other people in the world who speak

English just like you do, who you can be friends with and sit up all night talking

about philosophy and biology and animal behavior and, you know, novels, and

whatever else it is! They're out there, you just have to find them and they'll be

happy to see you." I wish somebody had told me that…. You don't know what

you don't know. If something's been true your whole life you don't know that

there's anything else.

Isolation is a subtheme of relatedness. Rosanne described herself as isolated and rejected

as a child, and stated that although she was often unaware of how she was perceived by others,

she "retreated into a fantasy world." She characterizes how other people regarded her thus: "We

don't want to engage with you because you're separate from us." Furthermore, the isolation she experienced may have contributed her sense of self:

> I often think of myself, you know for much of my life I thought of myself as kind
>
> of shy and introspective and so forth, and I've often wondered if that is a result of
>
> having been treated poorly.
>
> Referring to her time in boarding school, she said,
>
> At least during those years I realized that I didn't like being weird and I actually
>
> wanted to be friends with people, which was a major thing for me. But I thought I
>
> was a problem. And it didn't occur to—you know, that I was the only one or
>
> something like that, and it didn't occur to me until I left the school and started
>
> being able to choose my own friends and my own activities, and only then did it
>
> occur to me that I may be a member of a minority. I'm not the only one.

Gender is also a subtheme of relatedness. Throughout the narrative, Rosanne explored how gender affected social interaction and described her own struggle with relating to girls and boys. She said,

> My relationships with women are relatively simple, and, you know
>
> psychologically. You know, you know it's just, well there's me and there's you
>
> and we hang out sometimes and either we're really close friends or we're not or
>
> whatever, there's very little psychodrama going on in there. With men it's all sort
>
> of interesting and complex.

Gender was an organizing factor in Rosanne's school experiences. For example, she said, "the boys [in elementary school] made their own little male clique, and no girls were allowed and I don't think any girls wanted to be allowed because those people were gross."

Rosanne's dubious understanding of gender relations affected her relationship with one boy in

elementary school. She said, "He was a boy so the way you connect with boys is you hate them,

or something."

In boarding school, Rosanne's rigid observance of institutional rules affected how she

related to others:

> You were supposed to primarily bond with the members of your own dorm and
>
> the members of your own sex. You know, only people who didn't really want to
>
> work on their issues would hang out with boys or something.

Rosanne did her best to navigate this social landscape, perhaps against her best interests:

> I wasn't the only girl who wouldn't hang out with the boys and vice versa, you
>
> know there's the social Berlin wall that develops very quickly. And I wasn't
>
> really friends with any of the girls, later I kind of became friends with some of
>
> them. But not really that close. I didn't have a lot of friends. But part of the
>
> reason why I didn't have a lot of friends among the girls was because I didn't
>
> have a lot of, I didn't have much in common with them. There weren't, you
>
> know, they were interested in, I don't know, I guess, gossip and horses and art,
>
> and I was interested in art too, but not so much the gossip and the horses. I'm not
>
> even sure what they were interested in because I didn't spend time with them.
>
> And they would—but I was often interested in what the boys were doing…. I
>
> think that I could have been friends with the boys. Maybe. At least we'd have
>
> had something to do together and something to talk about together. Except that I
>
> was trying to maintain social solidarity with the girls. Which was stupid of me.
>
> As she aged, Rosanne's progress toward loosening affected how she related to boys. She

said,

> A big part of not being interested in boys as a policy was not wanting to grow up.
> And when I was 17 I decided that that was kind of stupid and I didn't need that
> anymore. And it was okay to grow up. And it was okay to have—and as part of
> that it was okay to admit having crushes.

Ultimately, she was able to engage in meaningful relationships with men, most notably her
husband.

Rosanne became a part of a clique of men in her cohort in graduate school, and noted
how she related to them in light of her childhood experiences:

> At first it felt really intimidating because I was like, you know I was the only girl
> and not just the only female, but you know the only female with the boys. You
> know, they were—and you know they were sort of alien for me in a certain sense.
> They weren't mean to me at all, they were just the boys. So, but, I just kind of let
> whatever happen, happen. And when they were—you know I sort of adopted
> what they did a little bit and kind of rolled with it. And that impressed them….
> They're the grown up versions of the boys sitting at that table making farting
> noises. You know? There's something—I'm not exactly sure how to explain it
> but there's a very similar energy there. It's not that they're particularly immature.
> But they're boys. And, you know, they're not male teachers who I simply happen
> to be in the same age group with now. They're boys. And somehow I've become
> friends with them. And it, it continually surprises me.

Rosanne compares the difference in her relatedness here:

My response when I was younger sort of on a cognitive level, you know those

boys sitting around making farting noises, that was wrong. And I don't mean like

morally wrong, but I experienced a difference between myself and them as being

their problem. So why should I make any effort to bridge the gap or to

understand who they are or where they're coming from or how it is that they can

bond with each other by doing this disgusting thing, how that works. But, being

an adult this time I can see that in some sense these four men are using a different

social language than the one I'm really comfortable with. They are playfully

adversarial with each other in a way that I'm usually not. They're often crude.

And, I mean I can make off-color jokes with the best of them, but not generally in

mixed company. And, you know, so there's a lot of things that they do that my

first reaction is sort of like, "Whoa, what's going on there?" But as an adult

who's made a study of other people, I can see that they are, they're using a

different language.… And so, I can kind of look through my initial reaction, it's

like, what is going on here, what are they trying to do, how does this work?

Yeah, okay, I know that that joke was, you know, just actually kind of gross, but

it was also funny. So I'm going to let myself laugh at it, you know?

Margaret. Broad themes in Margaret's narrative include belonging, agency, visibility,

and progress. Subthemes include advocacy, disillusionment, independence, safety, isolation,

shame, performance, adults failing, and faith.

Belonging. Whether or not Margaret "fit in" with the people she encountered in her life

is a central theme in her narrative. She introduces herself and her narrative with reference to

ambivalent belongingness: "Growing up I had enough vision to get around. I kind of live like

one foot in the sighted world, one foot in the, the visually impaired world." This sentiment is

also reflected as she discusses whether or not she belonged in her family. She said,

> I was seven when I was told that I was adopted. And, you know, I mean I, I, I'm
>
> brown haired and brown eyed, so, so is dad. My sister is dark haired and blue
>
> eyed.… I kind of look like my adoptive family.… I blended well. So I think I fit
>
> in, except for mom who was blonde hair blue eyed, you know, and short, but … I
>
> kind of figured something was up. Or always wondered because I felt different.

Margaret experienced a sense of belonging when she went to a summer camp for the

blind. She said,

> When you're in the blind community, you know, everybody is—and anybody, all
>
> different levels, from visual impairment to totally blind, you know, we're all one
>
> and the same. And you know, especially at summer camp, you know it's who
>
> bumps into the guide rope or who misses the step or you know, we don't just sit
>
> and joke and have a grand time, but you know. When you get into the sighted
>
> world, you know, … it's almost like they pity me…. [At camp] I was introduced
>
> to a boy who was a mutual friend of a girlfriend of mine. And we would start a
>
> relationship. And you know, ten years later we would end up getting married. In
>
> 1999. But I—it was not until then that I found acceptance.

Margaret had difficulty fitting in with her peers, and describes having an easier time with

people who were older than her. She said,

> I've always mixed better with people older than me. I never—I have a very few
>
> select friends that are in my age category. I mix better with people who are in
>
> their 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s than I do with people in their thirties. But that's how
>
> it's been all my life. You know, when I was a teenager I mixed better with an

older adult, forties, fifties. You know, my grandparents' age when I was a kid.

And I think that socially isolated me in the sense that I didn't know how to relate

to my peers. I didn't like their music, I didn't dance, I never went to the disco, I

didn't drink, I didn't get the rites of passage. You know, I didn't get my driver's

license at 16, I didn't go to driver's ed. class, I didn't drink at 21; (a) because I

was having seizures, and (b) because I have no interest. You know, so all those

things that a normal teenager or young adult does, I didn't do. So it just, it just

kind of, you know, it removed me from the regular social circle as it were.

She reiterates this by saying,

I mix better with people that are much older than me, because I feel comfortable, I

can talk and I can share things with them. And it's, it's unfortunate though

because it does socially isolate me. You know, it doesn't allow me to, to get

down to the level of my peers and yes it limits me a little because no, I don't

listen to a lot of worldly music, I do mostly classical and Christian, but that's my

own personal choice. That's not so much because of my faith. I mean, I didn't

really do that growing up, I never went to a heavy metal concert, I never, you

know, yes I liked Michael Jackson and I listened to his music, you know,

whatever but, I never—you know, it wasn't the latest—I never fit in with the

latest and greatest fashion. So I always was kind of just the odd man out.

Isolation is a subtheme of belonging. Margaret describes experiencing loneliness and

isolation throughout her life. For example, regarding her elementary school experience, she said,

"I spent many, many a recesses alone." Later, "I never really meshed with a lot of the people

when I came to the high school." She said,

> I was always the one helping out in the cafeteria at the, you know, at the at the
>
> break you know when you had refreshments or whatever, or helping to set up, or
>
> because I went, you know—I didn't dress in the latest of fashions. I dressed to be
>
> comfortable or what I, you know, what I wore, but it wasn't the latest fashions.
>
> And I often had to ask, you know, push my way through to one or two of the more
>
> popular boys to get a, a slow dance to one of the dances. You know, otherwise I
>
> sat on the sidelines in a chair with, by myself or with one other person.

About her current life, she said, "Short of the political calls, you know, the, there are days that I go without the phone ringing." She elaborates,

> I have never really had a social relationship short of the relationship that I had
>
> with my ex-husband…. A ten-year courtship, a three and a half year marriage
>
> turned emotionally and physically abusive. Now being eight years single… It's
>
> like where do I fit in? You know, I don't really. You know, I'm 35 and I haven't
>
> had a child. I'm not married. I'm not dating.… I've, I've never, you know,
>
> dated. I was never asked out…. I'm not, I'm not so much craving the sexual
>
> intimacy as I am just the ability to come home to somebody, to say hello to them,
>
> to have dinner with them. To be able to make dinner for them, to know that
>
> somebody's going to be there when I get home, … it's very lonely…. I want to
>
> come home to somebody, and have love, and the companionship.

Visibility. Visibility is a potent theme in Margaret's narrative; not only is she visually impaired, but a central question in her narrative is, how do others see me? Visibility thus refers literally to what can or cannot be seen, in terms of both Margaret's vision and how she is visible to others. Margaret's narrative includes several references to the presence or absence of visible

markers that identified her to others as different or impaired. For example, she describes being

teased in school, "Back then I had the plastic frames and they were like a half inch, you know,

quarter inch thick and they were heavy lenses … and you know they would chase me they'd call

me 'four eyes.'" She also said that in school there were "boys sitting in the back of the room

chuckling when I had to have my nose to the, to the board to read something that the teacher

wrote, or I would use a, a handheld monocular." This ridicule contributed to Margaret's decision

not to use a cane. She said,

> I didn't necessarily use a cane, as most visually impaired and blind people do,
>
> they use the standard white cane. Because I had enough vision, I didn't have that
>
> common identifier, you know, that you see. So—but … a cane, any kind of
>
> physical marker, you know, makes you stand out of a crowd. And I already stood
>
> out of a crowd anyway, and when you're in a school, small school like that.

However, the absence of a cane did not necessarily protect Margaret, since her impairment was

also identifiable through activities that made her stand out. For example, she said,

> I was always getting pulled out of class to get special services. You know,
>
> resource room time, and had things in large print or had to sit close to the board or
>
> extra help from the teacher or from the resource room people.

Margaret's relationship with physical identifiers is complicated. Because she is not

completely blind, she did not always have objects to identify her as visually impaired. At times,

this affected her sense of *safety*, which is a subtheme. Margaret's impairment was a source of

shame, but passing could be dangerous due to the real limitations of her ability to protect herself

by seeing her surroundings. She would have difficulty detecting slippery conditions and had

frequent falls because, as she said, "ice and I don't get along." At times, other people's

ignorance of her impairment has made it dangerous. For example, she said,

> When I first broke my ankle I was using a, you know, a wooden cane, you know,
> it was with the regular like umbrella handle. And to cross the street, cars don't
> stop. They don't recognize it; they don't care. So when I got the support cane it's
> like, oh well, yeah, that's a universal symbol. They see that and they, they think,
> oh maybe I need to pay attention. There's still some people that try and cut me
> off, but you know, they they'll stop for that faster than they will just a wooden
> cane, or a regular cane without the universal colors on it.

On the other hand, having this physical identifier increases her vulnerability. She said,

> I'm hesitant now that I use the cane… we're trying to work on how do I go and
> how do I sit downtown and not feel like all eyes are on Margaret… I'm very
> self-conscious because, I found myself sitting there going, who, who's noticing
> that my eyes are moving back and forth, and who is noticing and thinking that I'm
> looking at them when I'm really not…. there is an increased anxiety there because
> I don't do well…. It also puts a sense of fear in me, and like Monday night when
> I walked home from dinner, it was 6:30 at night but it's this time of year, it's dark
> early. And with a cane, being a, a woman with a disability, granted there's no ice
> or snow on the ground, and it being dark and you're alone, you're vulnerable! So,
> I would shut myself in early at night.

> Margaret's experiences of being targeted affects her sense of safety, in terms of both

anticipatory fear and real inability to detect danger.

> [In my building] everybody kind of fends for themselves and some people talk to
> other people but, you know, I keep to myself because I watch my back. You

know, I have to be careful. It's hard with being visually impaired. If you come

up on my right side, unless I know you're there, … if I ever have somebody come

up on my right, I'm very, you know. I turn my head a lot, you know, I end up

doing a lot of this [turning head]. But yeah I'm very, very, I guess hypersensitive

or hypervigilant in that respect because of I guess the history of nightmarish the

physical abuse that I went through, the trauma that I went through and, and I, I

just, my startle response kicks in…. When I was doing my bachelor's degree I

lived, there was, the college was in [name of city] and I lived off-campus two

towns away in an apartment in a private complex, and… I was fine. But now

I'm, like I'm there's a different hesitation there. I remember Monday night when

I was walking home from getting dinner and having pizza and whatever, it's like I

was constantly turning my head or I had my hands on my purse, it was, it's just a

protective, you know, barrier I think that I've put up… I mix better with people

that are 30, 40, 50 years older than I am, because I don't have to worry about

them coming at me. You know, and I, I, you know, I don't have to be fearful

about that.

Shame is another subtheme of visibility. Margaret experienced shame when she became

aware of how she was seen by others. For example, she said,

There were a couple times when I would have a seizure in class and it's always

embarrassing to, you know, have the school nurse come running with the Walkie

Talkie and the guidance counselor or the principal, and then if it's really bad they

call EMS, and you know it's very embarrassing.

Margaret describes being concerned about what other people are seeing when she is in a

performance role, and awareness of visual evidence of her impairment is a source of shame.

This is illustrated in the following statement:

> When you had to get up and you had to recite a report or whatever, and you talk
>
> about an academic subject or whatever, I would stumble and I would, you know,
>
> I, I might—if I was writing on epilepsy or a subject that I wanted to write about, I
>
> was okay. But if it was just rote, you know, what you had to do in order to pass
>
> the assignment, it just really didn't interest me and I stumbled because I either
>
> didn't see the words, or, you know, I get very self-conscious about what people
>
> were thinking and if they were looking at my eyes.

And again here:

> They were doing a promotional video, and because I was in graduate school and I
>
> was going through the supportive employment program, and I was excelling and I
>
> was getting this close to finishing … I was able to speak to the person who did the
>
> editing, … I said, "You were sitting in the room across from me, why didn't you
>
> tell me it looked like I had my eyes closed? … Why didn't you tell me my head
>
> was tilted down and I looked like I'm, I'm asleep or I look like I'm totally blind?"
>
> You know, because I don't—I normally pick my head up and I'm very, you
>
> know, conscious of those things and the body posture because people who are
>
> blind tend to curl, you know, we do a lot of this because we do a lot of bending
>
> over to read or if you're totally blind you're reading Braille or whatever, but they
>
> tend to carry themselves differently. And I looked at it and I was like, "aghh." I
>
> just wanted to throw up, you know. It was just so, so sickening to see my body
>
> posture so, you know, I was relaxed but I was so relaxed that I looked like I was

asleep, and, or, or like I was totally blind because I was not focused in on the

camera. I didn't have my eyes wide enough to look like I was awake. I don't

think that the eyelids hold open as much as they should. I just don't have the

muscle control. And I think that's from having the seizures all my life. Because

they were left temporal lobe and right side convulsions. So, you know, yeah.

When you're kidded about that kind of stuff, or, it's just, it's very demeaning and

I had more troubles with my self-esteem when I was a kid than I would like to

recount. It was, it was just, it was real, a real crush.

Agency. Another broad theme in Margaret's narrative is agency. This refers to both

Margaret's sense of what she is capable of and the ways in which she experienced the

expectations of others and how she encountered her own limitations. Major subthemes of

agency include both *advocacy* and *independence*. Margaret's mother advocated for her needs,

and encouraged Margaret to be an advocate for herself and others. She said,

My parents, especially mother, pushed me from a very young age to be

independent in the respect of the—you know, just advocating for me and me

advocating for myself and getting what I need whether it be in school services or

out in the community, medical care, things like that….I have just enough vision

that I can get around and I can be independent and I can do things.

Margaret had many agency building experiences early in the narrative. For example, she

engaged in advocacy efforts through a teen support group, including advocating for the

Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and she went to a hospital and "did Grand Rounds and

spoke to the doctors about, you know, if you have a patient with a disability don't talk to the

parent, or talk to them in third person." She said,

>We would work on this take-charge project, and it was all about advocating for
>
>yourself and, you know, self-worth and things like that. But I had, I mean, I have
>
>the binders to this day of, you know, what the different models were, and there's a
>
>parent manual that goes with it and, you know, so I've been through a multitude
>
>of activities to kind of help increase that… It helped increase my own, you know,
>
>I can do it; Margaret can do it.

There is a conflict between the expectation, held by both Margaret and those around her, that she would be independent and successful, and the reality of the dependency needs that arise from her visual impairment. Linking a sense of success with independence necessarily creates the inverse; experiences of dependence correspond with a sense of *failure* for Margaret. She said,

>They just thought, Margaret can do it. Margaret can, you know, it's like now, you
>
>know, I, they never thought that I would bump up against the school situation
>
>where I would run into a problem where I can't succeed. They just figure, oh
>
>you're going to be one who's gonna go to college, get a degree, get a job, exceed
>
>and do everything in life, despite the fact that you can't drive a car, and, and
>
>you'll live life. Nobody ever thought that, what if Margaret can't make it…. My
>
>mother was a good advocate for that. And my social worker slash therapist
>
>person that I had at the time, you know, was a very good advocate for that too.
>
>And then along with all of the teachers of the visually impaired that I have that
>
>they called the resource tech people that you worked with, or O&M, which was
>
>orientation mobility specialists, that would teach me how to use the cane or go out
>
>and teach me road skills, how to cross the street, how to take the bus, you know,

we did those things, you know, I took the basic bicycle test and stuff like that. But, you know, there was never a point where—maybe in my IEP meetings when I wasn't there they might've questioned it. You know, and said well what if Margaret doesn't fail but it was brushed aside and everybody said, "No, she won't fail." You know, because I did succeed. I went to high school, I went to college, I got my bachelor's degree and I got a job on my own merits three months out of college!… But what nobody prepared me for was because of my eye condition…I didn't have the help to transition to a comfortable setting in the workplace where I had the accommodations that I needed…. I dealt with a lot of written and verbal warnings from my supervisors because I couldn't, I was in a call center. I couldn't take calls as fast as my peers…. Nobody ever projected that Margaret would go through that and how that would affect me socially because I'm not going on, like my peers, I'm not starting a family, you know, and at the same time I don't have the career track record. And here I am, now, at 35 with an equal amount, almost 35 thousand in student loans for two attempts at college, with nothing to pay it back with except my social security and disability that I live on, until the government decides to pull that out from underneath us. You know, if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be sustaining myself. I'd be, you know, on the streets.… My dad, my mom, never ever stopped to say, well, what happens in her young adult life if Margaret doesn't succeed? What do we do, do we shelter her?… Nobody ever thought, what if Margaret can't sustain herself? You know, I sustain myself barely enough to keep my head above water.

This excerpt illustrates another subtheme of the narrative as well, *adults failing*.

Ultimately, Margaret finds herself in a situation where she is increasingly dependent. This is

experienced as failure and interferes with her relationships. She said,

> I always have to reach out. I'm the one to reach out. And it's always, what does
>
> Margaret need? So like, every time I pick up the phone call, whether it's to get a
>
> ride to church or to go somewhere, like, "Oh, hi Margaret." It's like all this, it's
>
> this hesitation. Anticipatory, you know, hesitation, avoids like, what does she
>
> need now? You know, I can't have a quality social relationship without going,
>
> can you meet me here, can you pick me up here, can you, you know, it's always
>
> dependent on what does Margaret need to make her life work…. It's hard when
>
> people see you excel and be able to do so much, but yet you're not able to pick up
>
> the keys and drive yourself home. And you're dependent on their time, you
>
> know…. It also limits my ability to be spontaneous, get out and mingle with
>
> people, and just be human.

At the end of the narrative, Margaret is still invested in advocacy and working to function

with as much independence as possible. She said, "I go occasionally to the city council meeting

and try to advocate, I sit on the regional transportation committee as, as an, a voice from the

[name of state] association for the blind." She said,

> The expectations all were set so high because Margaret lived so far in the sighted
>
> world that she could do it all. That it was never assumed that when I failed, you
>
> know, that, the when I failed was never in the equation, for if I failed…. There
>
> was no, oh if I go to [name of school] and I don't get my degree, well, then what?
>
> You know, I excelled. It was great…. And it fell apart. But it was like, this
>
> is—where's the American dream?… When I lived on my own was, do you take

the grocery cart, you know, out of the closet and walk to the grocery store or do

you take a cab? Do you schedule a ride? Do you skip work a day a week and do,

you know, how do you manage doctor appointments? How do you manage your

life? Nobody taught me that…. How do I… find a way to [become] legitimately

employed, not just sitting at home collecting a check? I don't want to be doing

that. You know, I do it because I have to, because I wouldn't have a livelihood if

I didn't.

Progress. The theme progress took shape in Margaret's narrative as she talked about movement versus being "stuck" in her life. Progress took place in the narrative early on as discussed above, and after she arrived at her goal of career and marriage, things fell apart and she regressed. She said,

I've kind of now lived up to the expectations of my mother and my former social

work advocate person, you know, where Margaret can do anything, she will never

fail. And then I've hit a wall. And now, now, now I'm 35 and now it's like,

what, now what do I do? I'm stuck because I have no career. I can't go back to

travel because I'm eight years out of the field.… The statistic is 90% of the blind

and visually impaired population is underemployed or unemployed. And I'm one

of the few who lived in the state … when I was working … who is bright enough

to be able to be working. And I want nothing more than to get off the system.

And they're keeping me from doing it.… I'm in a—caught between a rock and a

hard place.

She uses a subtheme, *faith*, to cope with difficult circumstances and get her moving when she

becomes stuck. She said,

I'm very strong in my faith now, and that's what—spiritual release is what carries me…. Now my faith is a daily thing. You know, it's, it's what brings me through. It hasn't cured my depression, but I'm on a much lower dose of my meds. You know I'm, it is what brought me through six years ago, seven years ago, a serious suicide attempt. Because it was two years post my ankle and I had no direction in life. I had no job, no future and I just, you know, it was my faith that pulled me through…. All my growing up years I learned to be self-sufficient. Now within the last three to five years especially, I've—I'm learning, and still learning, to become God-sufficient.

Margaret describes needing progress to survive:

I have to have some sort of direction in life because if I don't have direction you get into such a, you know, abyss of depression that, it's like, what is the purpose of living. You know, and it's a very scary place to be. And I have no intentions of ever going back there, but I realize that it's the inactivity, because I've trained myself to always be pushing forward, that causes the depression to spiral. That I have to have a plan.

Like my mom, she's getting left behind because all her friends went on and was married and they had kids and they, they have their social circle, they involve her in their church stuff, their women's bible group, but because of her personality and her choices that she's making in her life, she has her own social withdrawal. Because she's choosing to stay stuck in a rut. And I see that and I'm like, no thanks, you know, I don't want to go there. But in my own way, I'm struggling to not go there.

Rebecca. The broad themes that thematic analysis produced in Rebecca's narrative include power, belonging, agency, vulnerability, and privacy. Subthemes include disparity, adults failing, and taking responsibility.

Power. In Rebecca's narrative, power emerges as a theme that broadly refers to social systems and wealth. Rebecca describes her experience at a private Catholic elementary school in terms of wealth and power, with *disparity* as a strong subtheme. For example, she said, "I grew up in a really affluent town… I was the only kid in the school that lived in an apartment." Rebecca identified the disparity between her family's resources and those of her classmates as "a set up" for social failure, and the reason she was "targeted," and like a "sitting duck." She said, "Even though everyone was wearing uniforms, everyone looks the same, somehow we weren't all the same." The disparity also led Rebecca to feel ashamed. She said, "When you're a little kid you think there's something wrong if you don't have what everyone else has." This interfered with her ability to engage socially:

> You go to someone's house for a play date and they live in this huge, like, mega
>
> mansion, and then you know, I had no motivation to have someone over to my
>
> apartment—my parents' apartment for a play date. Yeah, here's, like, the
>
> bedroom I share with my little brother.

The adults in Rebecca's childhood failed to protect her from mistreatment by her peers. This forms a subtheme of *adults failing*, which refers to a corruption of power that she perceived in the school authorities, and to parental powerlessness, ostensibly borne of economic disparity. She said that "no one cared" when she was targeted.

> I remember, like, getting pushed by some of the other kids in the class and no one
>
> would do anything about it…. I really thought it was because one of the girls that

was bothering me, her dad was like, like on the board or something at the

school…. None of the teachers would take me seriously…. They somehow knew

that my parents weren't necessarily affluent like theirs were and somehow then

my parents weren't—they didn't have the same power to advocate for me.

An exception took place in high school, when one teacher was available and responsive

to Rebecca's needs. Rebecca was able to disclose her home situation, and the teacher responded

with validation. As a result of this adult not failing, Rebecca gained perspective and motivation

to push through difficult times.

Agency. Related to the theme power, outlined above, the theme agency refers to

Rebecca's sense of personal power. The failure of adults to advocate for her or respond to her

distress led to a sense of powerlessness. For example, she said,

It's so hard to understand as a little kid, you have all these kids picking on you.

And no one's doing anything about it. And you're telling the teacher and no

one's doing anything about it, and you're like, doing anything you can, and then

somehow it always ends up being, like, a—well, the teacher saying, "oh well I'll

talk to the person after class," and nothing happens…. That made me feel

invisible.

Rebecca did not remain powerless. She began to stand up for herself and gain agency:

One of them pushed me in gym class, and I was in seventh grade, and I,

something just happened, where I had just had enough. And so she pushed me

and I pushed her right back and I pushed her hard enough that she fell on the

floor….I needed to stand up for myself and she needed to know that I could stand

up for myself. And that I wasn't afraid to get in a little bit of trouble to do it…. I

was at a point where I was just like, yeah screw you. Like, I, I don't, I really

don't care.

She engaged in activities that interested her and concluded, "You work your tail off for what you

want and eventually you get it and it pays off. And that you don't settle for anything. You, you

know, you go after what you want." However, this attitude falters at times. Rebecca said,

"There's still times in groups where like, I feel kind of invisible."

A subtheme of agency is *taking responsibility*. Because of her home life, she had to take

responsibility for family tasks, such as driving her father to work, and she was concerned about

her mother's wellbeing from an early age. She said,

I had my own home situation that required that I be a lot older than I was…. I had

to be a lot more responsible, like, from the time where I was little…. My dad

had—when I was like a freshman or sophomore in high school, he ended up

having his license taken away from him for ten years. So, when I turned 16, I

turned into the person who got him to and from work every day…. That whole

other responsibility piece there that if you have two parents that can drive

themselves to work you don't have that issue.

This relates to Rebecca's identity as an "independent" person and leads to a complicated

relationship with intimacy and dependency. She avoided dating until she was age 26, which she

describes as "late," and struggles against her tendency to take responsibility for the feelings of

others. She said,

I recently gained access to a social worker's notes about me from when I was,

like, in first or second grade. And in the social worker's notes it basically said

that I was very concerned for my mom's wellbeing. And I had known that

her—my dad's drinking was bad and that her situation was not good. So, I

don't—I, I think I knew from—I, I knew from the time where I was really little,

that this was not, this is not a good thing. This is not how things are supposed to

be…. As a kid I would feel horrible saying anything mean about anyone. I would

feel horrible hurting anyone's feelings. To this day I won't say anything mean

about anyone because I, I don't like the idea that I might hurt someone. Like, I

need to break up with a boyfriend right now and I'm having such a hard time

because I don't want hurt his feelings…. I don't want to hurt anyone and so I, I

have a really hard time with that. And I think people do pick up on that and it is

like this vulnerability…. I never want to marry someone where it's looked at that

I'm the one taking care of them. Taking care of him. I want it, I want it to be

more of an equal relationship, where I'm not the one that always has to be the

strong one, always has to be the supportive one, always has to be the one that

works harder. That's not gonna be me. And it might mean that I'm single

forever. It might mean that. But that's okay. If that's how it's supposed to be.

In her adult life, Rebecca finds herself to be a person upon whom others rely:

I'm the one in that office that, if there's a crisis, I'm the one that—"Hey

Rebecca!" You know, "Can you come here? Can I talk to you? What do you

think I should do about this?" And I think that's just a role I took on as a kid,

and—not a kid in school but a kid in other situations.

Belonging. Throughout the narrative, Rebecca refers to how she did or did not fit in with

her peers. She said, "For my whole K to 12 experience I don't think I ever really—well I had a

few experiences, but they, with the exception of a few times I don't feel like I ever truly fit into

school." Furthermore, she said, "I wanted to be accepted and liked by them. What kid doesn't want to be accepted and liked?" This affected her self-esteem. She said, "It's really hard to feel good about yourself as a little kid if you have someone that's const—if you have a group of girls that are constantly at you." Referring to her time in Catholic school, she said, "I didn't fit in and they sensed that I knew or felt like I didn't fit in…. I had like two other girls I would play with and we were all the misfits of the class." When she went to public school, "everyone had already made their friends. Like, all the, like, little groups had already formed. So it was very hard to kind of break in there…. it really took me a few years to kind of find my clique."

In addition to needing to break in to already formed social groups, Rebecca described disinterest in popular culture:

> I think just having different interests, I think, you know, I did really well in
> school. I studied hard, but as far as having like the interest, you know, the interest
> in all the celebrities, when you're in high school, I don't—I couldn't care less
> about that. Interests about all the video games, about all the different TV shows,
> the—it, it didn't do anything for me. I was totally a bookworm.

Furthermore, her home life set her apart. She said,

> I was a goodie two-shoes. I didn't have the time for like the partying or the
> drinking or anything like that when I was in high school. And looking at middle
> school, the partying and the drinking was in middle school too. And because of
> my situation at home—my dad was an alcoholic. I didn't have the time for that. I
> was like yeah, sorry, not going there. It changed my perspective on things.

> When Rebecca left home and went to college, she had a better time fitting in and

concluded, "I kind of have the theory that I just fit in better up here." However, she still had

difficulty feeling like she belonged in various settings after she got out of school, often having

the same feeling of initial exclusion that she did when she went to public school, having to

"break in." For example, referring to her current workplace, she said, "I'll have been here… it'll

have been four years in march, and during the first two years I felt like I didn't fit in with my

coworkers."

Vulnerability. Rebecca's narrative emphasizes her feeling of vulnerability that

corresponded with the powerlessness and difficulty fitting in, outlined above. She said, "Kids

picked up on that, and I think they saw me as vulnerable." Furthermore, she said, "People have

told me before that I'm a really old soul. And that I'm too nice. And I think people prey on my

niceness. Like, it—in the school setting people preyed on that." Rebecca described herself as

having difficulty with transitions, from school to school, from school to work, and from one

workplace to another. For example, when she began her first job, "I guess I felt like I wasn't as

good as, as them at my job. Feeling insecure. Really vulnerable. That vulnerability feeling

again."

This feeling contradicts Rebecca's sense of agency and independence, and makes her

uncomfortable:

> There's this piece of me that still hates to feel vulnerable. And it's interesting,
>
> I've done a lot of work on it. I'm a yoga teacher. So I feel like over like the past
>
> two and a half years I've been able to live a lot less in my head and had much
>
> more of a mind body connection, which I think is important, as far as your
>
> feelings of safety and vulnerability and all that sort of thing. But you know, I, I
>
> still hate feeling vulnerable.

Privacy. Rebecca emphasizes issues of privacy throughout the narrative. She said, "I'm

incredibly private. So, I don't necessarily like, the—my coworkers know minimal about me. But to me that just feels normal." The shame she felt about economic disparity, combined with her father's alcoholism, disinclined her from sharing personal information. Furthermore, her mother modeled maintaining privacy. She said, "If you look at how private I am, my mom's more private than I am. So I just kind of had that, I just had that modeling growing up."

When Rebecca was able to disclose her home situation to others, a shift in her experience occurred. She said, "I get that out of the way, it's almost like some of the differences between me and the other people, like kind of went away." Here is how she described the experience of opening up:

> All up until high school I kept completely quiet about my home life in school, and
>
> then in high school I started to let, like, little bits out to my friends. And then I
>
> started to—there was one particular, one particular teacher who I just, like, told….
>
> As soon as I kind of like, went "blah," and disclosed everything to her, well, not
>
> everything but a lot, the world just felt lighter. And I guess I just kind of—yeah,
>
> I, I was getting some kind of support for—just validation that okay, yes, what
>
> you're going through is hard, you're going to go to college, it's going to get
>
> better, everyone has these issues in their families.

Although she learned the liberation of disclosure, Rebecca remained cognizant of its risks:

> If you say something you're not supposed to say, how are you impacting someone
>
> else. So if I go and I say something I'm not supposed to say about my parents,
>
> how is that going to impact how they feel about me? But also impact them
>
> together and impact my brother.

She began psychotherapy in adulthood, and experienced difficulty establishing trust and disclosing. She said,

> As I got to therapy, you know, it really took me—in my head I thought, and I'm sure people think this, oh I'm going to go to therapy I'll be there for three, three months or whatever, and I'll talk about everything and it'll make me better. It took me a whole year before I started to talk to the therapist…. it took me a solid year in therapy before I even began to like, disclose everything. But I also think that part of that was, the job piece wasn't letting me feel completely safe enough to do it, maybe. There was so much going on with my job and once, it's interesting. Once I was done teaching at that particular school and things settled down it didn't take long before I really started to talk with her. But it—that's—I also think part of that was just the privacy piece of me.

The process of categorizing salient segments of text in each narrative enables a deeper appreciation for the meaning that is made through the telling of these stories. Although themes that emerged were evident in the coauthored summaries, there is a richness gained in this exploration of how these elements interrelate. The language used by each participant clarifies and elaborates the material.

Comparing themes across narratives. Although each narrative has distinct themes that emerged in the analysis, there are common themes among the narratives. Moreover, although some themes that have the same name are qualitatively different, other themes with different labels are similar in their content. It is therefore useful to consider which themes emerged across narratives and how they relate to one another.

Besides the issue of victimization, which was a parameter for participation, these

narratives have four elements in common: (a) wanting to belong; (b) internal repercussions of victimization, such as shame; (c) adults failing to protect; and (d) identifying and utilizing internal resources for progress.

Each narrative included vignettes of social exclusion that caused distress. These experiences were similarly painful for all participants, while the degree to which this affected identity was variable. Jean felt helpless and desperate for friends. Her degrading social experiences caused profound shame. She developed a narrative identity that lacked worth and agency and placed the needs of others ahead of her own, feeling as though she had to "apologize for taking up my own space." Rebecca similarly felt "invisible" and powerless. She described wanting to be accepted and liked, having difficulty feeling good about herself, and being concerned about other people's feelings. Mary internalized her experiences of social exclusion and concluded that she was "broken" because she could not figure out why the other children did not want to be friends with her. She said that she felt "invisible" and "needy." Margaret wanted to be accepted for who she was. She felt embarrassed about the visible signs of her visual impairment and feared ridicule. She said that her self-esteem was crushed. Rosanne described feeling as though she was a "problem," and becoming hesitant to speak up for fear of rejection. She also talked about visibility, but unlike the other narratives, there was no social worth associated with this concept; she just did not realize other people could see her. Rosanne's obliviousness seems to have provided some emotional protection.

Adults failing is a common theme across narratives. Jean experienced her parents and the parents of her friends as ignorant of the struggles she was going through. This issue did not come up frequently enough in Mary's narrative to constitute a theme, but Mary did describe the adults in her childhood as ignorant of her struggle and generally unhelpful in resolving her social

dilemmas. Furthermore, adults set the stage for her initial social rejection by holding racist views and expressing them to their children, Mary's peers. Rebecca and Jean both felt like they were "set up" to be picked on by their peers, but for Jean the set up was orchestrated by her parents dolling her up, whereas for Rebecca the set up originated through structural inequity and corruption. In Rosanne's narrative, adults failed to both prepare her for social interaction and protect her once she was in school environments. Margaret's narrative described adults as failing to foresee the long-term struggles that she would experience and thus failing to prepare her for life in a realistic way.

The failure of authorities in childhood relates to the development of independence, agency, and clarity among the narratives. That is, as the people who were supposed to help failed, the protagonists had to learn their own way to navigate the social world, to varying success. This happened in different ways in each narrative; in some instances this process involved increased insight, development, and learning, and for others it was a matter of finding internal strength and self-confidence. In several narratives both or all of the above were true, working together toward increased wellbeing and adjustment. Mary, Rebecca, and Jean found increased confidence when they received social support, which in turn helped them identify personal strengths that enabled success.

Clarity in Mary's narrative and Awareness in Rosanne's narrative are similar in that they were both positions of not knowing that were resolved through revelations and discovery. However, an important distinction between the two led me to choose different labels. Mary characterizes her not knowing as a state of "confusion," whereas Rosanne describes herself as "oblivious." Mary knew that something was wrong, and she identified herself as at fault to resolve this confusion. Rosanne had no idea that anything was wrong. Their significantly

different orientation to others could account for this difference in their experiences of ignorance. Mary was very concerned with what others thought of her and looked to the external world for her sense of self, whereas Rosanne was unaware of how others perceived her.

The analysis of themes within and among the narratives has facilitated a greater understanding of how these women made meaning of their experiences, and the ways in which their stories converge and diverge. I now turn toward summarizing this project and drawing conclusions.

Discussion

The stories provided by these women present distinct, in-depth individual experiences that contain rich meaning in and of themselves. The degree to which their meaning can be connected and used to draw any broad conclusions is limited. However, it is useful to examine conceptual questions raised by these narratives to indicate useful directions of further research. Throughout this project, I found myself thinking about not just narrative identity and social exclusion, but the processes by which these two constructs interrelate. Exploring the stories of how these experiences were significant for these women led me to think about how people cope with adverse circumstances and how those circumstances relate to self-esteem. I will briefly introduce resilience and self-esteem research here in order to discuss how these concepts facilitate a more nuanced understanding of this process.

Resilience

Resilience has broadly been defined as "positive adaptation despite adversity" (Leipold & Greve, 2009, p. 40). This definition seems to indicate a clear concept, but proves elusive upon further exploration. As Campbell-Sills, Cohan, and Stein (2006) put it,

Though the first wave of resilience research focused on characteristics of resilient

individuals, a second wave of research in this area has focused more on

understanding the process through which individuals are able to successfully

adapt, or ''bounce back'' from stress or trauma. Resilience is seen as more than

simple recovery from insult (Bonanno, 2004), rather it can be defined as positive

growth or adaptation following periods of homeostatic disruption (Richardson,

2002). Although positive adaptation in response to extreme adversity was

originally thought to characterize extraordinary individuals, more recent research

suggests that resilience is relatively common among children and adolescents

exposed to disadvantage, trauma, and adversity. (p. 586)

Initially, resilience was conceptualized as a personality trait, but it came to be redefined as a

dynamic process (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). Bonanno (2012) argues that researchers have

mistakenly identified resilience as a personality variable, average adjustment, or the absence of

psychopathology. Instead, he proposes that resilience should be considered to be "a stable

trajectory of healthy functioning" (p. 755). Furthermore, resilience can refer to people actually

thriving in the face of adversity, as though resilience is a quality enables them to take advantage

of a problem to their own benefit (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013).

Leipold and Greve (2009) argue that these definitions of resilience become circular;

resilience is both the indicator and the outcome of a phenomenon, we know it when we see it.

"If we then use resilience as a concept with explanatory power ('Why did he overcome this

adverse situation?' 'Well, because of his resiliency'), a logical full circle is drawn: The

explanation then becomes tautological" (p. 40). They suggest that it is more useful to consider

resilience as an outcome:

This entails viewing resilience neither as a trait nor as a process explaining a

phenomenon, but rather as a phenomenon needing to be explained. It can be

explained, we argue, by referring to coping processes that resemble, in structural

aspects, processes of developmental regulation. (p. 40)

They go on to say, "'resilience' simply denotes the mere fact of an individual's stability or quick

recovery (or even growth) under significant adverse conditions. This phenomenon of resilience,

in turn, needs to be explained by coping processes, which lead to certain developmental

trajectories" (p. 41).

This conceptualization of resilience as a bridge between coping and development fits well

with the narratives I collected. Early definitions of resilience would not have been a good fit,

because the fact that the girls in these stories struggled indicates that they were not resilient.

This is initially how I perceived the relationship between these stories and resilience, and taken

this way, resilience seemed only minimally applicable as a concept. I found it to be more fruitful

to examine how each protagonist coped with various stressors. However, simply considering

various coping strategies and their sequelae does not capture the complex way that coping relates

to development. All five narratives contained changes in coping over time. Using Leipold and

Greve's (2009) definition of resilience helps to explain these changes by framing them in the

context of not only situational stressors and individual capacities, but also developmental

progress.

Self-esteem

According to Leary's (1999) sociometer theory, self-esteem serves as an internal measure

of the quality of interpersonal relationships. Leary uses an evolutionary perspective to frame his

theory as follows:

The theory is based on the assumption that human beings possess a pervasive

drive to maintain significant interpersonal relationships…. Given the disastrous

implications of being ostracized in the ancestral environment in which human

evolution occurred, early human beings may have developed a mechanism for

monitoring the degree to which other people valued and accepted them. This

psychological mechanism—the sociometer—continuously monitors the social

environment for cues regarding the degree to which the individual is being

accepted versus rejected by other people.

     The sociometer appears to be particularly sensitive to changes in relational

evaluation —the degree to which others regard their relationship with the

individual as valuable, important, or close. When evidence of low relational

evaluation (particularly, a decrement in relational evaluation) is detected, the

sociometer attracts the person's conscious attention to the potential threat to social

acceptance and motivates him or her to deal with it. The affectively laden

self-appraisals that constitute the "output" of the sociometer are what we typically

call self-esteem (p. 33).

Supporting sociometer theory, Gailliot and Baumeister (2007) found that belongingness

was associated with self-esteem, even more so among people with social anxiety. Sommer and

Baumeister (2002) found that "people with low self-esteem automatically respond to

interpersonal rejection with self-deprecation and withdrawal, whereas those with high

self-esteem tend to react with affirmation and perseverance. People with low self-esteem appear

to possess few resources for defending against rejection threat" (p. 926). A meta-analysis found

that research results in various studies have been consistent with sociometer theory (Okada,

2010).

Over a seven year period, Andrews and Brown (1995) collected information about self-esteem, depressive symptomatology, and psychosocial factors with 102 women to establish the long-term stability of self-esteem and the correlations between these variables. They found that about half of the women who began the study with negative self-evaluations experienced an increase in self-esteem over time. These differences were associated with improvement in the quality of close relationships or an increase in work status. Women who did not have negative self-evaluations at the beginning of the study did not have significant change in self-esteem over time.

Sociometer theory explains the relationship between the social exclusion experiences and self-evaluations that occurred in the narratives I collected. Although self-esteem was not necessarily an explicit theme, self-worth permeated these narratives as though it was part and parcel with social exclusion, which, according to sociometer theory, it is.

Reflections

As I noted in the journal entries above, throughout this project I worked to remain aware of how my own experiences might be influencing how I encountered and examined the narratives. While I was conducting the interviews and then listening to the audio recordings of each interview, I found myself relating to each participant. However, the process of analysis involved such dissection of each narrative that this empathic attitude receded. It is as though I stopped encountering the whole experience of interacting with another person and began shuffling puzzle pieces, trying to match the right categorical words with various phrases of text.

As the categorization fell into place, I was surprised to find that there were common themes among the narratives. Initially, I noticed cursory similarities between one story and another, but saw no grand pattern. It was striking how distinct each story was, despite various

occasional points of similarity. In social settings, when I was asked how the project was coming

along and what had I found, I had no answers. And yet, upon completion of the analysis, I found

broad similarities among all of the narratives. I believe that it is appropriate to look at the

narrative that I supplied of my own experience to discover if the common elements are in my

story as well.

The four broad findings, wanting to belong, internal repercussions of victimization, adults

failing to protect, and identifying and utilizing internal resources for progress are identifiable in

my narrative as well. I certainly prioritized fitting in during my early school years, and my

inability to do so caused a great deal of distress. The adults in my life who might have

intervened on my behalf often exacerbated the problem instead, leaving me to feel unsupported

and isolated. Ultimately, I found a supportive setting and began to develop a new narrative

identity that involved greater agency.

Throughout my life, when I have experienced interpersonal losses or large transitions, I

have often experienced a reemergence of the insecurities that I developed during those years. At

times of great stress, I tend to withdraw. When I feel insecure or experience shame in a group of

people, I have a sensation of shrinking or disappearing, as though I do not deserve a presence

and want to hide. I saw these elements of experience in the other narratives and, anecdotally,

they fit well with my findings.

One element of some of the narratives that I find to have particular salience is regression

under stress. I think that this is the reemergence of an old narrative identity. New dominant

narratives can be created and developed, but narrative identity is multifaceted and contextually

performed. It makes sense that various cues that are emotionally similar to old experiences could

trigger a story of self that had not been encountered for years. In that story, all the intervening

progress vanishes and the woman is an unhappy girl once again, as a prior sense of self regains power in an instant. The concept of resilience plays a role in this moment. A person's ability to cope changes over time and in different contexts and it is when coping fails that the dominant narrative identity developed in childhood emerges: other people don't like me, I don't fit in, I'm not valuable.

The role of power dynamics in these narratives is particularly thought provoking. Being socially targeted or neglected served as a form of oppression. As long as the setting incurred a sense of powerlessness and the protagonist did not have agency, her narrative identity was vulnerable to lowered self-esteem and self-blame. The subordination of a girl by her peers thus then becomes something for which she takes responsibility, somehow. These dynamics are also associated with increased concern for others' wellbeing over one's own. I can imagine how this dynamic could lead to increased subjugation and abuse if a person does not learn how to stand up for herself.

I found another aspect of this project surprising. Although I knew these stories began with painful experiences, I did not consider the extent to which this might elaborate a negative aspect of identity. I hope that sharing these stories did not strengthen memories that contribute to low self-esteem and depression. For some, it seemed an opportunity to appreciate resilience, whereas for others, it seemed to emphasize a problem that was more pervasive in their lives than it was previously known to be. Before I gathered the stories, had I imagined that the process might have been an unburdening for these women. In retrospect, I am not sure why I did not fully appreciate and anticipate the negative nature of these narratives.

During several of the interviews, participants commented that they had never before put together the narrative thread of having difficulty fitting in with their peers throughout their lives

beyond childhood. They remarked on how depressing it was to realize that these problems had not entirely gone away. I am concerned that, rather than helping these women appreciate their strength and resilience, exploring this narrative may have emphasized a part of narrative identity that should not necessarily be strengthened. Our focus on negative sequelae highlighted challenges in life, rather than successes (it is worth noting here that I did offer referrals to mental health services when appropriate). This seemed to be the reason that one participant withdrew from the study. However, when this issue arose with the women that remained in the study, I expressed my concern and was reassured that it was helpful to notice a pattern because it could help to be more cognizant of how early social experiences affect social interactions moving forward. I certainly hope that the effect of this coauthorship is a reduction in the likelihood of ongoing social difficulty, rather than a sense of hopelessness.

Limitations of Study

The biggest limitations of this study arise from its very nature. This inquiry was qualitative and the object was to examine narratives in-depth; therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Because this project is inherently subjective and socially constructed, the only truths it can claim are about the specific encounters between these particular women and me.

The issue of homogeneity presents a dilemma; increased homogeneity renders results more robust in ideographic data collection, but necessarily omits the experiences of women with different backgrounds and characteristics. When I was recruiting participants, I attempted to cast the invitation widely so that people with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds could participate. This was only minimally successful; I did not receive any responses from the newspaper invitation I published or from public message boards. Ultimately, the participants were a convenience sample of women who had some affiliation with institutions with which I was

directly involved. All five participants were Caucasian, cisgender women with at least some graduate education. They all grew up in the United States in middle-class families.

The selection criteria for this study depended upon women self-identifying as having had "significant social difficulty in elementary school." When considering what types of experiences would meet criteria for inclusion, I decided that if an adult woman decides that her early experiences were significant enough to volunteer to participate, then they must have been more than nominal. Nevertheless, this is a very vague inclusion criterion. Although I could have designed some sort of screening tool to be more specific, the narrative and inductive nature of this project required me to prioritize and honor the meaning that each participant makes of her own experiences.

Future Directions

This research explores the stories of five adult women who experienced social exclusion in elementary school. The broad patterns that emerged were, (a) wanting to belong, (b) internal repercussions of victimization, (c) adults failing to protect, and (d) identifying and utilizing internal resources for progress. That these women wanted to belong is not a surprise, and the demoralizing effects of social exclusion are well represented in the literature. Areas for possible further inquiry include exploring the systemic problems that perpetuate mistreatment, such as oblivious or malevolent adults, and examining how these women moved forward and beyond these experiences. In particular, it seems that as different, supportive relationships or social environments became available, self-worth increased. The isolation that these women experienced as children was profound, and several of them voiced a wish that "if only" an adult had taken notice and helped them figure out what was going on, they might not have suffered so.

It may be fruitful to design a study determining the efficacy of school interventions with

these results in mind. For example, training teachers and school administrators to identify

children who are chronically socially excluded by their peers may provide an opportunity to

connect those students with activities or alternative environments in which each child is able to

find support or identify and develop personal strengths.

Conclusion

This study involved the collection, analysis, and coauthorship of five life story narratives

of adult women who experienced social exclusion during childhood. Each story presented a

unique set of experiences and each life had its own trajectory. The meaning made of these

experiences reflects the diversity of five different lives, as well as similarities and conclusions

drawn among the stories by me. The perspective I brought to this project necessarily influenced

every aspect of its production. Ultimately, the reader engages with this work and thus brings her

or his own contextual variables to create unique meaning in each encounter with this text. I hope

that what I have presented here proves to be useful and meaningful for the reader.

In my final consideration of this project as a whole, I am inclined to think about the

lonely experience of the socially isolated girl. There seems to be something natural about groups

forming hierarchies. It is unlikely that any intervention will stop this activity, and it may be

developmentally necessary. As children learn to interact and relate to one another, they create

stratified social relationships. However, the same cannot be said about adults' attitudes that

condone or perpetuate abuse among children. It is possible to train authorities to watch for the

girl who has no friends and is frequently targeted, and then to take action. Perhaps that child

needs to be connected with resources that may help her find a supportive social experience. Just

because she is a girl and she is not starting physical fights does not mean she does not need help.

Each woman who participated in this study is the protagonist of her own life story. She

had painful early experiences and looks back on those experiences through the lens of

subsequent lived experiences, making perpetual meaning of the story unique to the context of her

life in each moment. I was fortunate to have had this time with each woman and to be given the

opportunity to explore her story.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Documents

Research Invitation

Are you a woman between the ages of 27 and 50 years who experienced significant social difficulty in elementary school?

I am a graduate student at Antioch University New England completing my doctorate in clinical psychology and working on my dissertation titled "Narratives of Women Who Suffered Social Exclusion in Elementary School."

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to investigate the role that childhood social exclusion plays in the stories of women's lives. I intend to listen to the life stories of women who experienced social exclusion, peer rejection, harassment, and/or bullying in elementary school. My hope is to honor and illustrate the ways in which women include these stories in their current and ongoing narratives about themselves. There is potential to discover commonalities in the stories that may shed new light on the influence or nature of these experiences, and also indicate directions for future research.

Method
You will be interviewed at a time that is convenient for you, and in a location where you would feel most comfortable, which could be in your home, in my office, or somewhere in the community. The interview will not be time-bound; that is, we will meet for as long as is necessary, convenient, and comfortable for you to share your story. We will take breaks whenever you need to. All interviews will be video and audio taped to aid in data collection. During the interview, I will ask you to tell me your life story. I will be actively listening, and may ask questions to clarify or learn more about your story. I will also ask you some basic demographic information. It is my hope that the flexibility of the interview will allow you to direct the conversation to areas you feel most relevant to your experience in this context.

Participants
Participants should be women between the ages of 27 and 50 who experienced significant social exclusion, peer rejection, harassment, and/or bullying between the ages of six and 11 years.

Compensation
Participation in this study will not be monetarily compensated. However, you may find that telling your story provides intrinsic satisfaction and new perspective on how you became who you are today.

More information
Please contact me if you would like to participate in this study or if you would like to ask me questions. I can be reached at sallen1@antioch.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I am happy to discuss the study in further detail, determine if you are qualified to participate, and send you the informed consent forms. I look forward to hearing from you.

Introduction to Study

My name is Sarah Allen, and I am a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Antioch University New England. I am inviting you to participate in a research project that I am doing as part of my doctoral training. In this study, I will investigate the role that childhood social exclusion plays in the story of women's lives.

This project will include an interview that will not be time-bound. We will take breaks whenever you need to. The interview will take place at a time that is convenient for you, and in a location where you would feel most comfortable, which could be in your home, at my school, or somewhere in the community. All interviews will be video and audio taped.

During the interview, I will ask you to tell me your life story, in the context of your early social experiences. I will be actively listening, and may ask questions to clarify or learn more about your story. I will also ask you some basic demographic information.

After all of the interviews have been completed and I have worked to understand the stories from various women, I will contact you by phone to share my results with you and get your feedback regarding its accuracy and what is most important about your story.

If you agree to participate in this study, parts of what you said may be printed in my doctoral dissertation, which will be available to the public. However, all identifying information about you, the people you talk about, and locations will be changed so that the readers of the document will not be able to identify you. As the primary investigator of this study, I am making every effort to keep the information you provide me anonymous to minimize any risk that you may be identified as a participant. Your name will not be included in any part of the final document or any of the draft versions, and you will be known only by pseudonyms. You will have the opportunity to review my summary so you may identify any portions of concern.

There are benefits to participation. By sharing your story, you will add your voice to a new area of inquiry where women's voices have not yet been heard. You may find that telling your story provides you an opportunity to discover new ways to understand how your past informs your current life.

You may experience difficult or intense emotions when you recall your experiences throughout your life. Childhood exclusion is a difficult and painful experience, therefore it is likely that you will remember painful events from your life during the interview. I will listen to your story with respect and empathy, but if at any time your story becomes too painful to continue, we will stop the interview. Referral services will be provided if necessary.

You have rights as a voluntary participant. You can decide at any point before or during the study that you do not wish to participate. You may also decline to respond to any part of the inquiry. There will be no consequences to you in any way if you decline to participate at any time.

Participant Informed Consent

I understand that Sarah Allen, a doctoral candidate at Antioch University New England, is requesting my participation in a study for her doctoral research. I have read the attached description of this research project, and I chose to participate under the conditions described there.

I understand that the following actions will be performed to maintain confidentiality:
- All data will be locked in a file maintained by the researcher who will have sole access to the files.
- When published, all identifying information will be removed and managed in such a way that identities cannot be discovered.
- Audio and video files will not carry identifiable names of participants.
- When research is completed, all confidential materials will be destroyed.

I understand that the researcher is lawfully required to report to authorities any reasonable suspicion of child, elder, or dependant abuse or injury of a participant. Thus, I understand that confidentiality may be broken if I disclose abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult or if I am a danger to myself or others.

I understand that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I may decline to answer any questions--or discontinue my participation entirely--at any time with no penalty. If I wish to withdraw from this study, I understand that all I will need to do is contact Sarah Allen at sallen1@antioch.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. All data will be erased at the time of my withdrawal from the study. If I have any concerns regarding breach of confidentiality, ethics, or any other matter that I feel uncomfortable contacting the primary researcher, I agree to contact the chair of the study, Victor Pantesco, Ed.D at vpantesco@antioch.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Kevin P. Lyness, Chair of the Antioch University New England Human Research Committee, 603-283-2149, or Dr. Katherine Clarke, ANE Vice President for Academic Affairs, 603-283-2450.

I have had this document explained to me and understand its contents. I have a copy of this document.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____