

RESILIENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN:  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF  
SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

A Dissertation  
by  
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## **Abstract**

### **RESILIENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY**

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The question of risk and resilience has been widely debated in the psychology and sociology fields with scholars such as Garmezy, Rutter, Werner, and Masten examining hypotheses and correlations between several risk and protective factors related to resilience. The literature shows that the mother is a significant promotive factor for resilience outcomes for children. However, these perspectives have not sufficiently addressed the risks among the African-American population to adequately illuminate the problems and effectively plan interventions to mitigate the effects of adverse childhood experiences, particularly maltreatment and neglect.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to inquire into the narratives of African-American women to explore how they negotiate subjectivity and access agency in the absence of their single-mother's support. This study is an autoethnographic and narrative inquiry, utilizing one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as data collection methods.

Specifically, the research examines two participants' stories and the story of her lived experiences for the subjectivities, identities derived from childhood maltreatment and neglect. The researcher applies black feminism and poststructural theory to analyze the participants' subjectivities and their agency and discusses ways they demonstrate resilience to achieve academically and to access agency, despite their circumstances. The researcher also employs autoethnography to include personal experiences with childhood maltreatment to support the participants' stories for a greater understanding of risk, resilience, subjectivity, and agency among African-American women.

*Keywords: resilience, subjectivity, agency, maltreatment, maternal neglect, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), black feminism, autoethnography, narrative inquiry*

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First and foremost, I acknowledge God, who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. I thank Him for my life—all of it. He has shown me peace during troubling times, joy amidst sadness, love when I felt unlovable, and hope when I was convinced I could not face another day. In addition, He placed two angels along my path, Meta Adam and Mary Tillery, my grade school teachers, who fostered my love of words and introduced me to the power of the pen. I am overwhelmed by His everlasting grace that inspires my hope and fuels my resilience. According to statistics, I am supposed to be addicted to drugs or alcohol to cope. I am supposed to be promiscuous, looking for love in all the wrong places. Due to that promiscuity, at this age, I should have half-grown children, maybe grandchildren, and because of my anger and attitude, I should have been incarcerated as a juvenile delinquent. If none of those fates found me, surely, I should be crazy, but I am not. Instead, I choose life when death stares me in the face. Amidst hopelessness, time and time again, I demonstrate resilience, embody agency, and choose life. Thus, I am able to comfort others by sharing my story. For it is written,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (II Corinthians 1:4, The New King James Version).

I am obliged for this space and time to speak my truth.

I am thankful for my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Audrey Dentith, who devoted her time and theoretical expertise to bring this project to full fruition. Her personalized attention,

timely feedback, inquisitive questioning, and persistent encouragement motivated me to continue. I appreciate my committee members, Dr. Nickolas Jordan and Dr. Fran Bates Oates, whose conceptual and methodological insights and feedback further polished and enhanced my work. Dr. Fran Bates Oates has encouraged me from the first time she heard my story of trauma and triumphs and witnessed my passion and concern for women and their success. She insisted that I speak; thus, quitting was not an option. Each committee member was integral in the completion of this study, and I am thankful for them.

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In addition to professional colleagues, my family and friends inspired me to pursue and complete this project as well. Although they are no longer here, my parents, Mr. Larry Rogers Broome (October 16, 1945-February 3, 2013) and Mrs. Lucy Loretta Hairston

(December 3, 1940-January 24, 2011), were the catalyst for this work. I thank them for my life. I navigate my subjectivities and pursue a positive identity to honor them. There are so many others I could name, but I must acknowledge my first cousin, Dr. Edward Hairston for establishing a high standard as the eldest of 28 maternal first cousins and the first and only one to earn a doctoral degree until now. I am the youngest cousin. I am also indebted to my brother, Anthony Broome, who supported me during my challenging childhood and adolescent years. I must also recognize my best friends from grade school and college: Alicia Hash and Brandi Holland; and my cousins: Sandra Hairston, Melody Hairston, and Charlene Smith; all the women in The Birthday Club; Yolanda Lesane and the community mothers who have shown me care. Each of these ladies listen, and they hear me. Their unwavering support and prayers are matchless.

Last, but certainly not least, I am forever grateful to my husband, Mr. Norlonn Anthony Sturdivant, who found me during this doctoral process. Ironically, we met in Boone, NC where Appalachian State University is located. He knows and loves all of me, and he has encouraged me every step of the way. He is amazing, and I am overwhelmed by his kindness. Because of him, I know true beauty. He is my hopes manifested.

## Dedication

This project is dedicated to the neglected ones,  
forced to become caregivers when in need of care,  
those in pursuit of peace,  
who feel unlovable,  
the perfectly imperfect.  
I see you, I hear you, I believe in you, and I love you.

### *Fly, Fly Away*

(Original Poem by Brooksie B. Sturdivant, written July 24, 2010)

*Caterpillars hide  
Cocoons conceal  
Stagnant  
Sluggish  
Time will reveal*

*Oh, but a butterfly  
Beautiful  
Spry  
Flee your cocoon  
Those wings were made to fly!*

*Black pearl, precious little girl  
Let me put you up where you belong  
Black pearl, pretty little girl  
You've been in the background much too long*

~Songwriters: Irwin Levine, Toni Wine, & Phillip Spector

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*You've got the words to change a nation,  
But you're biting your tongue.  
You've spent a lifetime stuck in silence  
Afraid you'll say something wrong.  
If no one every hears it,  
How we gonna learn your song?  
So come on, come on! Come on, come on!*

*You've got a heart as loud as lions,  
So why let your voice be tamed.  
Maybe we're a little different  
There's no need to be ashamed.  
You've got the light to fight the shadows,  
So stop hiding it away!  
Come on, come on!*

~Excerpt from "Read All About It Pt. III", song by Emile Sandé

The lyrics in the excerpt above explain my hesitation and meticulousness as I pursued this research study. I was particularly interested in this study because of my experience as an African-American girl who was exposed to childhood neglect due to a sick mother and an absent father. When I was approximately two-years-old, my mother experienced her first schizophrenic episode. She and my father divorced about a year later. I noticed signs of physical and emotional neglect as early as age six after my maternal grandmother passed away. By age eight, I concluded and internally professed, "No one is in charge of me!" I developed a complicated identity and a series of responses in relationship to my circumstances. I made sense of my life by making decisions without the guidance of a stable figure in my life. I was determined to rise above my circumstances and ensure my adulthood was better than my childhood. Schooling was a place of agency and resilience, and I believed from an early age that education was the key to my very existence. Consequently, I was academically resilient and excelled in grade school and

undergraduate college. Nevertheless, the social and emotional effects of this degree of neglect and extreme pressure to perform were often overwhelming. I was often fearful, anxious, and full of shame. Considering my introverted tendencies, consequently, I internalized those negative affective responses (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). The internalization affected my self-perception, esteem, and confidence, and thus my interpersonal relationships. I struggled in silence while screaming on the inside. Over the years, I have reflected on my own identities and subjectivities in order to better understand who I am and who I might become. The negotiation of opposing identities has also been challenging. Within this work, I desire to dig deeper into the stories of other young women like myself to reveal the nature of our resilience, identities, and subjectivities.

In this introduction chapter, I begin with a presentation of background information on the risks African-American females face resulting from exposure to trauma and stress. I then highlight the need for parent support, thus presenting maternal maltreatment as a problem. Next, I outline the purpose and significance of this study. I end this chapter noting the research questions, acknowledging the limitations and delimitations, and an outlining the research plan.

## **Background**

The literature on risk and resilience among African-American youth relies largely on quantitative inquiries that examine hypotheses and correlations between several risk and protective factors related to resilience. Data shows that young African-American females, who experience emotional trauma, resulting in stress, are at risk of substance abuse (Fagan & Wright, 2011; Gray & Montgomery, 2012; Wilson, Samuelson, Staudenmeyer, & Widom, 2015; Wilson & Widom, 2010), sexual risk behaviors (Hahm, Lee, Ozonoff, & Wert, 2010;

Wilson et al., 2015), psychosocial disorders (Widom, Czaka, Wilson, Allwood, & Chauhan, 2013; Almeida, Neupert, Banks & Serido, 2005; Afifi, Enns, Cox, Asmundson, Stein, & Sareen, 2008), poor health (Davis, et al., 2014; Min, Minnes, Kim, & Singer, 2013; DeNisco, 2011; Boynton-Jarrett, Rosenberg, Palmer; Boggs, & Wise, 2012), and an early death due to illness (Lekan, 2009), or even suicide (Afifi et al., 2008; Gillespie et al., 2009; Miller, Adams Esposito-Smythers, Thompson, & Proctor, 2014; Wang, Lightsey, Richard, & Tran, 2013). According to research, parental and community supports (Masten, 2014; Singh, Garnett, Williams, 2012), intrinsic skills (Masten, 2014), and academic development (Benard, 2004) help to mitigate negative environmental effects. Considering the child development domains, the Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents confirmed that identity, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical health development are each essential to the personal and collective well-being of African-American youth (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008).

### **Problem Statement**

Parental support, usually maternal, has been found to foster resilience and promote academic achievement in adolescents. Conversely, research has noted maternal neglect as a source of trauma and adversity. The research also shows that African-American youth are exposed to childhood maltreatment at an alarming rate, oftentimes in the form of neglect from a single mother. Moreover, intrinsic skills such as self-efficacy and optimism (Todd, 2000; Delorme, 2004), which also positively contribute to resilience outcomes, are limited in the presence of chronic stress, and therefore, can further impede resilience outcomes (Afifi et al., 2008).

## **Purpose Statement**

*Educational resilience* is the ability of children to succeed academically despite risk factors that make it difficult for them to succeed (Benard, 1991). The purpose of this study is to inquire into the narrative and related identities and subjectivities of young African-American females who have demonstrated educational resilience in the absence of their mother's support.

## **Significance of the Study**

Evans-Winters (2005) noted that very few studies have focused on African-American female students, identities related to educational resilience, and support systems that foster school resiliency. Others have indicated that studies need to provide more information about what Black females experience, how it affects them, and what they do to cope. (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011, p. 76).

## **Research Questions**

The following question guides this study: What are the narratives of African-American women who have experienced maternal neglect while demonstrating academic resilience? Sub-questions are as follows: 1) What stories do participants' recall from their memories of adverse childhood experiences? 2) What do the participants' stories reveal about their complex identities and subjectivities as these are derived from experiences with childhood adversity? 3) What do the participants' stories reveal about the nature of their academic resilience and agency despite childhood adversity?

## **Key Terms**

The following four concepts are pertinent to this study:

- *Neglect* is the failure to provide the basics needs: physical, emotional, educational,

medical, dental, and safety (CDC, 2014). I report the findings related to neglect with Research Question 1.

- *Subjectivity* is the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions and our sense of self and ways we relate to the world (Weedon, 1997); it is one's outlook shaped by experiences (Kim, 2016). I present the finding related to subjectivity with Research Question 2.
- *Resilience*, in the context of exposure to significant adversity, is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for their resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008). I share the demonstration of resilience to counter subjectivity and access agency with Research Question 3.
- *Agency* includes three intersecting markers:
  - 1) having the ability to choose to do or not to do something,
  - 2) rationality to guide those choices to one's own advantage, and
  - 3) having one's agency recognized by others as a sacrifice for humanity (Davidson, 2017).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

**Limitations.** The researcher interviewed African-American females who no longer live in the location where they experienced trauma, maltreatment, and neglect as they were away from home, living on a college campus. Therefore, the researcher relied on reflective, self-reporting of emotions from the past, experienced during the encounters.

**Delimitations.** The researcher narrowed the study to include African-American females who are college sophomores or upper classman. Graduates from four-year institutions age 25 and under were considered for this study. Sophomore status indicates academic resilience in that the student completed freshman year and opted to return for another year versus withdrawing from college. Each participant experienced an absent father and limited support from her mother yet remained under the care of the mother during their childhood and adolescent years.

### **Research Plan**

The study is a qualitative study based on a methodology of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. According to Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin (2013), as we consider our research puzzles, we draw upon our own experiences, which orient us to the inquiry. Autoethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture (Mendez, 2013). Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as ". . . an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). I experienced maternal neglect during my childhood and adolescent years due to my mother's mental illness. Consequently, I know firsthand the effects that exposure to trauma and adversity can have on children. Despite academic success, I have had to overcome a number of emotional obstacles. Therefore, I use autoethnography during this inquiry to analyze my personal experience with educational resilience while exposed to childhood trauma and neglect and the subjectivities that occur as a result of those experiences.

In addition, narrative inquiry arises from puzzles around people's experience (Caine et al., 2013). Narrative inquiry is rooted in John Dewey's belief that experience is knowledge for living (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Furthermore, it is through story, that people can

understand, make meaning of, and relate experience, because story is how people make sense of their existence (Clandinin, Huber, & Murphy, 2011). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) view narrative inquiry as both research methodology and a view of phenomena; they define narrative inquiry as the intimate study of an individual's experience over time and in context(s) attending to the three-dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality. In this study, I inquire into the narratives of African-American females to explore their experiences with academic resilience amidst maternal neglect, reflecting upon their experiences as with my own.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This literature review consists of two parts: a review of literature related to resilience theory and emotional development and a theoretical and conceptual framework of poststructural and feminist theories. Resilience theory, which is a psychosocial developmental theory rooted in social ecology and constructivism, analyzes positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity. This study will inquire into the narrative of African-American females to explore their experiences with academic resilience amidst childhood maltreatment in the form of maternal neglect. I will use the theoretical framework of feminism and poststructuralism to describe the complexities of identity formation in the presence of resiliency among these females.

For the theoretical and conceptual framework, I begin with the definitions of resilience from a psychology perspective and the history of resilience theory. Next, I provide the key principles, assumptions, limitations, and debates the establishment of resilience science as a phenomenon. I also present qualitative and ecological perspectives on resilience theory. I note that these definitions, principles, and assumptions, although a useful starting point to our understanding of resilience, fall short of explaining the elaborate identities and subjectivities of African-American females who persist despite great odds. I take issue with the definitive nature of these essentializing notions as my use of poststructural theory later implies. Finally, I apply a black feminist perspective to explain the poststructural concept of subjectivity and present the complex nature of identify formation including the demonstration of resilience as a means to fostering agency in the lived experiences of African-American women.

When reviewing the literature, I note the propensity for caregivers as mediators for

resilience among Black females. Next, I cite literature related to adverse childhood experiences, specifically childhood maltreatment. Finally, I highlight known risks that affect and protective factors that foster resilience among African-American women.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

**Defining resilience.** The word resilience stems from the Latin verb *resilire*, which means to rebound, combining *re-* meaning “back” and *salire* meaning “to jump, leap” as with the adjective *salient*. It originated in the 1620s but has evolved in pronunciation and meaning over the years, depending on the context and field of study (Merriam-Webster, 2018). For instance, in conversational English, the derivative *resiliency* refers to the property of elasticity or springing back as is the case when a rubber band is stretched and then released. Masten (2014, p. 9) notes that in engineering science, *resilient* is an adjective used to describe materials that “resist cracking or breaking under stress or return to original form after distortion by stress or load.” Similarly, in ecology, *resilience* refers to “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize and yet persist in a similar state” (Gunderson, Folke, & Janssen, 2006, no page).

In the behavioral sciences of psychology, psychiatry, and related fields that examine individuals, scholars conceptualize *resilience* as positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity. Masten (2014) explains:

“It is a broad term that encompasses a range of phenomena, including the capacity for doing well under adversity, the processes of coping with challenges, recovery from catastrophe, posttraumatic growth, and the achievement of good outcomes among people of high risk for failure or maladaptation” (p. 9).

According to Masten (2014), the conceptual similarities across fields can be attributed to shared origins in systems theory, which uses the term *resilience* to refer to

“the adaptation and survival of a system after perturbation, often referring to the process of restoring functional equilibrium, and sometimes referring to the process of successful transformation to a stable new functional state. Therefore, humans as living systems “could be described as *resilient* when showing a pattern of adaptation or recovery in the context of potentially destabilizing threats” (Masten, 2014, p. 9).

Consequently, she, along with other developmental theorists, initially defined resilience in terms of processes or systems, which can be applied across disciplines or to any dynamic system including an individual, a family, a school, a community, an organization, an economy, or an ecosystem (Masten, 2014, p. 9). Masten (2011) later defined *resilience* as the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development. More recently, she defined *resilience* as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the system’s function, viability, or development (Masten, 2014, p. 10). The evolution of pronunciation and meaning mirrors the development of the theory as investigators have and continue to explore resilience as a phenomenon.

In the behavioral sciences, particularly in the fields of psychology and sociology, the term resilience is used to describe positive adaptation, the state of doing well, the achievement of good outcomes, the ability to withstand and recover, and the capacity to adapt successfully. The behavioral science researchers assume an essentialist view as if resilience is monolithic with set attributes. Although the process of coping is of interest, the primary focus is on the outcome and if the result is positive, well, good, and successful. Yet, a child’s resilience is very dependent upon other people and other systems of influences because adaptation is embedded within a context of multiple systems of interactions, including the family, school, neighborhood, community, and culture; therefore, it is damaging to view resilience as an innate

trait (Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). Resilience is a phenomenon that is complex and multifaceted. Consequently, I am most interested in the process one experiences to demonstrate resilience.

**History of resilience theory.** Research on resilience in children has always had a pragmatic mission: to learn better ways of preventing psychopathology and promoting healthy development among those at risk for problems (Masten, 2007). The first wave of resilience research was descriptive in nature. Researchers sought to define and measure positive adaptation amidst adversity as a means of predicting resilience. They characterized Wave 1 by the following types of questions: What is resilience? How do we measure it? What makes a difference? (Masten, 2014, p. 6). They recognized resilience as an inferential concept (based on inferences and causal analysis) that involved two distinct judgments: 1) that there has been a significant threat to the development or adaptation of the individual or system of interest and 2) that despite this threat or risk exposure, the current or eventual adaptation of the individual or system is satisfactory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The threat to good adaptation, or the elevated probability of an undesirable outcome, was conceptualized in terms such as adversity, negative life, or risk, which can be biological or environmental.

In addition to evaluating risks, the second judgement when applying the resilience theory involves a decision about how well a person is doing in life despite adversity. In developmental literature, researchers have defined positive outcomes based on observed competence in age-appropriate, developmental tasks across a variety of domains, such as physical, emotional, cognitive, moral, behavioral, and social areas of achievement (McCormick, Kuo, & Masten, 2011). Consequently, the first wave investigators embraced

quantitative approaches, studying large, heterogeneous samples using multivariate statistics with both person-focused and variable-focused methods (Wright et. al, 2013). Those researchers were interested in assessing individual or situational differences that might account for differential outcomes among children sharing similar adversities or risk factors in order to predict positive adaptation amidst adversity (Wright et. al, 2013). Masten (2014, p. 148) began referring to these correlates as “the short list” (see Table 1.1), which has remained consistent over the last 20 years.

**Table 1.1. The “Short List” of Resilience Correlates**

<b>Resilience Factors</b>	<b>Adaptive Systems</b>
Effective caregiving and parenting quality	Attachment; family
Close relationships with other capable adults	Attachment; social networks
Close friends and romantic partners	Attachment; peer and family systems
Intelligence and problem-solving skills	Learning and thinking systems of the CNS
Self-control; emotion regulation; planfulness	Self-regulation systems of the CNS
Motivation to succeed	Mastery motivation and related rewards systems
Self-efficacy	Mastery motivation
Faith, hope, belief life has meaning	Spiritual and cultural belief systems
Effective schools	Education systems
Effective neighborhoods; collective efficacy	Communities

Note. CNS, central nervous systems.

The first wave researchers—social scientists interested in development—successfully defined and established a common language to describe resilience as a theoretical phenomenon. The “short list” identifies effective caregiving and parenting qualities as a correlate for resilience. To elaborate on the short list, Bonnie Benard (2004, p. 14) outlined personal strengths, or internal assets, associated resilience (Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2. Personal Strengths: What Resilience Looks Like**

<b>Social Competence</b>	<b>Problem Solving</b>	<b>Autonomy</b>	<b>Sense of Purpose</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsiveness</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Empathy &amp; Caring</li> <li>• Compassion, Altruism, and Forgiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Resourcefulness</li> <li>• Critical Thinking &amp; Insight</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive Identity</li> <li>• Internal Locus of Control Initiative</li> <li>• Self-Efficacy &amp; Mastery</li> <li>• Adaptive Distancing &amp; Resistance</li> <li>• Self-Awareness &amp; Mindfulness</li> <li>• Humor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal Direction, Achievement Motivation, &amp; Educational Aspiration</li> <li>• Special Interest, Creativity, Imagination</li> <li>• Optimism &amp; Hope</li> <li>• Faith, Spirituality, &amp; Sense of Meaning</li> </ul>

The second wave of resilience inquiry shifted “from the ‘what’ of describing resilience to the ‘how’ questions regarding the processes that influence adaptation” (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990, p. 439). Investigators began to ask: “What are the processes that lead to resilience? How do protective, promotive, or preventive influences work? How is positive development promoted in the context of risk?” (Masten, 2014, p. 6). These researchers considered and integrated biological, social, and cultural processes into models and studies of resilience to examine how individuals interacted with many systems throughout life from one context to another or one period of development to another (Wright et. al, 2013).

Due to their inquiries, investigators realized that resilience is not an innate trait, considering “some of the protective processes involved in resilience are not in the individual at all, but in their relationships and connections to external resources” (Masten, 2014, p. 167). Second wave investigators unveiled three important factors regarding resilience: 1) observing the ways specific groups facing diverse risk factors adapted differently, protective processes could be contextually specific; 2) the most complex models of resilience focus on healthy vs.

maladaptive pathways of development, highlighting turning points in individual's lives; and 3) cultural evolution has produced a host of protective systems including traditions, religious rituals and ceremonies along with community support services (Wright et. al, 2013). Therefore, instead, study examines the stories participants' recall from their memories of adverse childhood experiences to examine the complex identities and subjectivities derived from those experiences.

**Debates and limitations in resilience science.** As resilience theory evolves, there have been several enduring controversies related to the theory. Debates include concerns related to terminology, criteria, and variance which I examine below.

*Resilience as a trait or a process.* While resilience involves some internal function, including self-efficacy, competence, and coping skills, it should not be mistaken for a static trait that is always present within an adolescent (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Rather, resilience is defined by context, population, risk, protective factors, and outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Consequently, there was debate among researchers over whether or not internal function in the evaluation of resilience should be included. Fraser, Richman, and Galinsky (1999) explain, "Although resilience is a result of an individual's response, it is not a trait. It is conditioned on both individual and environmental factors. It should not be viewed as one person's heroic or tenacious efforts to overcome disadvantage; rather, it must be viewed ecologically." For example, if a child is neglected, abused, or otherwise traumatized, a negative outcome is not related to some failure or resilience in the child. According to Masten & Obradović (2008), adaptation is embedded within a context of multiple systems of interactions, including the family, school, neighborhood, community, and culture. Therefore, a negative

outcome indicates a failure of systems ranging across family, nutritional supplies, law enforcement, social service agencies, schools, religious groups, and all other systems/organizations that are available to buffer the impact of potentially damaging events (Hanson & Gottesman, 2012). To resolve the debate, Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker (2000) recommend that when referring to the process of competence despite hardship, always use the term *resilience*, which indicates ‘what one demonstrates’ as opposed to *resiliency*, which indicates ‘what one possesses’ as in a trait.

***Criteria for resilience.*** In the early 2000s, resilience researchers debated over the criteria for adaptation. One area of debate was about the number of criteria to include when judging adaptation (Wright et. al, 2013). When researching individuals, groups, or variables to understand positive outcomes amidst adversity, they had to outline criteria for defining the aspects of positive adjustment, adaptation, or development of interest in their studies (Masten, 2014, p. 298). One concern was over whether or not to include internal well-being in the definition of “doing well” or to just focus on domains of external competence such as academic success. They questioned if happiness should be a criterion for resilience or if avoiding psychopathology was sufficient (Masten, 2014). In addition to internal-external criteria issues, there was a question of cultural issues as well. Ultimately, the concerns focused on debates around who should determine resilience and whether that criteria would be limited to a reflection of the majority culture. Such discussion led to the unanimous realization that resilience may vary from person to person depending upon content and context. Few studies reveal the complexity of resilience in the lives of African-American females exposed to childhood maltreatment.

*Variance with resilience.* Over the years, researchers have noted inconsistencies regarding the content, context, timing, range, and response to adversity in resilience research. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) note that an adolescent may demonstrate resilience when exposed to one type of risk but that same individual may not be able to overcome other types of risk. The resilience process may also vary for different groups of adolescents (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002), depending upon the resources available and protective factors in play and the methods of use, all of which may vary from person to person. Therefore, one can consider resilience to be content- and context-specific in that resilience is not guaranteed, but rather contingent upon timing and the range of adversities youth face—from long-term stressors to short-term stressors, or to traumatic stressful events (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Due to variations in experience and context the experience of the same traumatic event may differ from adolescent to adolescent. Therefore, they warn that researchers may not want to assume that because an event is typically considered negative (or positive) it is experienced as negative (or positive) by all youth. Qualitative researchers have been intrigued with the heterogeneity of outcomes.

Due to the debates over the limitations in resilience science, resilience is established as content- and context-specific. Resilience is not a trait one possesses, but it is what one demonstrates when faced with adversity. According to Masten (2001), if adverse socioeconomic context is considered, then relatively small steps towards living an ordinary life will be recognized as resilient outcomes and resilience will be recognized as a common phenomenon: “ordinary magic”. Hence, it is desired that victims of adversity recognize their capacity to demonstrate resilience; however, according to Cicchetti (2011), there are limits to

any adaptive system. Both frequent, repeat stressors without intervening pauses and acute, yet severely powerful stressors will overwhelm resilience systems. In engineering terms and in the biological sciences, the phrase *allostatic load* captures this concept. The criteria for resilience are unclear, since what one demonstrates with exposure to stressors may vary depending upon the context. Therefore, a post-structural and ecological perspective is necessary to examine the complexity of the processes and the subjectivities that derive from exposure to the stressors and adversity.

**Poststructuralism, subjectivity, and ecological perspectives on resilience theory.**

Michael Ungar (2011) notes that Masten (2014) and her predecessors in the field of psychology - Werner and Smith (1982), Garmezy & Rutter (1983), and Rutter (1987) - published research on protective mechanisms and processes that help to foster resilience using a child-focused theory of development, which has accounted for less than half of the variance in studies of positive outcomes. In contrast, he believes that positive development is not just the everyday miracle (Masten, 2001) of the invulnerable child. Therefore, Ungar (2011) argues that resilience is more a quality of the child's social and physical ecology. To account fully for the processes associated with resilience, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the role social and physical ecologies play in positive developmental outcomes when individuals encounter significant amounts of stress.

As a result, Ungar (2011) presents an ecological interpretation of the resilience construct, which includes four principals to help better define and operationalize resilience: decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity. The principle of decentrality suggests that in higher risk environments, resilience is more dependent on the availability and

accessibility of culturally relevant resources than individual factors; therefore, rather than to center inquiries on outcomes at the individual level, the child should be decentralized to focus on making social and physical ecologies facilitative (Ungar, 2011). The principle of complexity suggests that researchers analyze the quality of a child's environment and recognize the complexity introduced while focusing less on the characteristics of the child if resilience is to be nurtured (Ungar, 2004). The principle of atypicality encourages researchers to consider the perspective of the participant and recognize that in resource poor environments, atypical use of developmental resources may be adaptive and positive (Ungar, 2004). Lastly, the principle of cultural relativity recognizes that processes of positive growth under stress are both culturally and temporally (and therefore, historically) embedded (Ungar, 2011).

Admittedly, few studies of resilience emerge with the coping patterns of minority populations in mind and evaluate dominant ethno-racial group's behavior by the standards of the minorities (Ungar, 2011). Instead, researchers assess resilience from the perspective of the dominant cultural group (Ungar, 2011). Although they are useful, psychological and sociological theories of resilience do not go far enough in helping us understand the complexities of processes of resilience in the lives of African-American females who have achieved academically despite adversity. Based on the four principles of the social ecological perspective, resilience should be defined as follows:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for their resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008, p. 225).

Due to these cultural processes of resilience, I also employ a post-structural lens to

explore identities and subjectivities derived when adversity and maltreatment subjugate African-American females. There is a need to recognize the importance of experience when exploring the lives of individuals, since experience affects how individuals think. These ways of thinking constitute our consciousness, and the positions with which we identify and structure our sense of ourselves, our subjectivities (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Weedon (1997) defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). According to Kim (2016), subjectivity means giving personal meaning to a phenomenon, acknowledging that each human individual has his or her own outlook on reality shaped by his or her own experience (p. 55). Subjectivity is directly related to meaning-making as one attempts to understand and navigate social structures. Weedon (1997) explains that liberal-humanist assume “that subjectivity is the coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of ‘reality’” (p. 8). Experience then becomes reality, which is considered truth, yet truth is everchanging.

Jackson & Mazzei (2012) explain that in poststructuralism, “theories of subjectivity posit a “notion of the self as a site of disunity and conflict that is always in process and produced within power relations” (p. 52). Considering the number of interactions and encounters one experiences with various social institutions such as family, school, pop culture, religious organizations, work, etc., subjectivity is not static, but fluid. According to Jackson & Mazzei (2012),

“Her self, then, is never stable but is constantly shifting in response to particular situations and conditions, and notions of subjectivity capture this active process of taking up certain subject positions in an ongoing process of “becoming” – rather than merely

“being” – in the world” (p. 53).

The shifting describes the act of navigating identities and subjectivity. Based on experience and exposure, one might feel bound, as though she is simply *being*. Thus, she strives to demonstrate resilience as a means to access agency and *become*.

**Black feminism, subjectivity, and agency.** Feminism as a social movement that highlights the ways that women are subjugated in our society is also useful in our thinking about identities and resilience. Being a woman is central to the forging of identities and subjectivities in society. Adversity exacerbates the process and can interfere with agency. According to Davidson (2017), there are three principal intersecting markers of agency: 1) having the ability to choose to do or not to do something, 2) rationality to guide those choices to one’s own advantage, and 3) having one’s agency recognized by others as a sacrifice for humanity. Agency is directly related to subjectivity. According to Davidson (2017), feminists are not merely interested in critiquing the transcendental nature of subjectivity; they are also analyzing the subject’s ability/inability to realize its agency and how women come to be recognized agents (p. 15). She continues to explain, “. . . feminists have figured the agent (those having the ability to act) as male, and they have depicted the category of female in opposition to male agency,” thus limited or deprived of agency (p. 17).

Traditional black feminists argue that agency is not only gendered but also raced (Davidson, 2017). Davidson (2017) explains, “To the white feminists’ figuring of the agent as male, traditional black feminists will add that: the agent is not only male but that the agent is also raced, that is, the agent is a white male (p. 17). Bell Hooks (1984) challenged the notion that gender was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) describes

an interlocking system of oppression—race, class, and gender that she calls ‘intersectionality’—which works to limit or deny black women’s agency. Crenshaw (1989) argues that black women’s position as blacks and as women and many times as poor gives black women a unique history and socio-historical viewpoint that white women and black men do not have. Ann duCille (1997) concurs in her explanation: By virtue of race and gender, black women are not only the “second sex”—*the Other*, but “we are also the last race, the most oppressed, the most marginalized, the most deviant, the quintessential site of difference.” Davidson (2017) explains, “White women’s whiteness and black men’s maleness provide them with the ability—even if it is limited—to enact agency and be perceived as agents in ways that black women simply cannot” (p. 27). Consequently, black women have to choose to align with black men and address racial oppression or unite with white feminists and address sexism while their own interests and agency remain denied. Therefore, black feminist women of the Combahee River Collective (2009) declare that no one else’s struggle should supersede that of their own and that all they demand is for black women to be seen as levelly human. According to Davidson (2017), traditional black feminists noted their lived personal experiences, or agency, as the site of power necessary to resist or change the system. To be without agency is to embody a subhuman state without choice, rationality, and recognition. This subhuman state is the essence of negative subjectivity and identity formation for African-American females exposed to childhood adversity, which necessitates the urgency for agency. In the next section, I further solidify the connection between subjectivity, resilience and agency in the lives of contemporary black females.

**Subjectivity, agency, resilience and the new black feminism.** As mentioned, traditional black feminists saw agency as liberating and necessary for equality. However, young black

women view the traditional feminists' articulation of agency as constraining. Davidson (2017) explains that young black women see the historical views of agency as "beholden to a politics of respectability that limits their ways of being a black woman in the world" (p. 87). For over two decades, black feminists have noted the struggle for subjectivity, yet emphasize the need for subjectivity no less. Experiencing negative subjectivity can be emotionally draining. According to Weedon (1997), "[a]s the subject of a range of conflicting discourses, [a woman] is subjected to their contradictions at a great emotional cost" (p. 33). duCille (2010) describes the nature of this struggle in terms of the struggle by black women to become the authors of their own text and to establish a space of their own as something rather than the other, opposite white women and black men.

As noted, subjectivity and voice have been consistent themes of black feminist thought. Davidson (2010) notes that this struggle suggests that access to positive subjectivity also requires a creative force, a resistance to existing systems of power to promote change. Davidson later notes the realization of resistance among young black women among the millennials. According to Davidson (2017), the second sex and the second race no longer hinder young black women whose mission is to defy all significance, as those labels are "no longer large enough to contain the fluid and multitudinous nature of black women's identity" (p. 87). Nevertheless, Davidson (2017) questions their sense of agency: is the present generation of young black women experiencing the realization of black feminist efforts from the past, or is it deceived about its own agency, considering women of all hues still face unparalleled and unchecked discrimination? I wonder to what extent, if at all, do maltreated and neglected black female millennials experience agency.

The demonstration of resilience as an act of resistance for Black females is a key consideration for this study. Therefore, I apply a black feminist perspective. Black feminist epistemology is useful to this research study as the literature provides an interpretive framework including terminology and valid examples and references to support the findings during data analysis. Black feminism values lived experiences and expressions of emotions thus justifying a need for studies that present messages from the margins to evoke empathy through sharing (Collins, 2000). This research examines the African-American female as subject to socioecological adversity. In a quest to navigate subjectivity and negotiate identities, the subject must demonstrate resilience to access agency as an adolescent female and as a woman to resist a subhuman state. In this study, I examine the complex process the participants engage to demonstrate academic resilience and access agency amidst adversity, thus adding to our understanding of the black female perspective.

## **Review of the Literature**

**Caregivers as mediators for resilience among African American girls.** Literature specific to this research highlights the important role of caregivers to provide social supports as a resource for resilience among adolescents. According to Cohen & Wills (1985), social support can be emotional, demonstrating that one values and accepts another person through trustworthiness, empathy, and love. Social supports can also be instrumental, providing tangible aid, such as financial support, material goods, and/or assistance in problem solving (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Parental support fosters healthy emotional development and provide stability and security for physiological needs, which aid in supporting academic achievement.

Psychologists believe that beginning at birth, the parent-child attachment mediates the

quality of future relationships with teachers and peers (Szewczyk-Sokolowski, Bost, & Wainwright, 2005; Masten, 2014; Benard 2004), and plays a leading role in the development of curiosity, arousal, emotional regulation, independence, and social competence (Sroufe, 2005). Several recent quantitative research studies in psychology and human development have examined the impact of parental support to deter various risk factors and promote academic success among African-American youth (Bynum & Kotchick, 2006; Chesmore, Winston, & Brady, 2016; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). Trask-Tate & Cunningham (2010) examined 206 African-American students and found that high levels of parental involvement coupled with high levels of school support facilitated the development of high academic expectations. Likewise, in a sample of forty-six African-American children ages 8-12 in Minnesota, findings demonstrated that greater perceived support from caregivers and behavioral coping by the child were associated with less school misbehavior and greater reading performance based on the teacher evaluation (Chesmore, Winston, & Brady, 2016). These studies found that parental support positively impacts positive behavior, yields fewer depressive symptoms (Bynum & Kotchick, 2006), supports academic efforts in reading and math (Chesmore, Winston, & Brady, 2016), and impacts future academic expectations (Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010) for Black girls. Thus, parental support fosters academic success and achievement.

Research has also revealed the positive effects parental supports can have on African-American children's emotional development despite the presence of risk factors. Among 824 urban youth in Flint, Michigan, consisting of 50% female, 83% African-American, and 17% White, the mothers' support reduced the risk of depressive symptoms even when youth are exposed to violence (Eisman, Stoddard, Heinze, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2015). With regard to

psychological distress, though support from fathers appeared to be an important protective factor for African-American girls with low levels of ego-resiliency (adaptability), social support from mothers was highest of all domains of support among 137 Black high school females (Trask-Tate, Cunningham, & Lang-Degrance, 2010). Parental monitoring also buffered the effect of sexual and physical maltreatment on emotional distress among females when examining 637 youth in the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) (Oberlander et al., 2011). When examining a subset from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Add Health) of 434 impoverished, urban, African-American female youth ages 11-15, Aronowitz & Morrison-Beedy (2004) found that females with greater sense of connectedness to their mothers were more likely to have both an extended time perspective (positive future outlook) and fewer risk behaviors. Therefore, parental support, especially maternal, aids in mitigating risks of exposure to adversity.

A caregiver can serve as a mediator for resilience among African-American youth. A number of studies have noted the effect of social support and connectedness from a mother on promoting resilience and academic achievement among Black females in particular. Nevertheless, despite the propensity of a caregiver's role in fostering resilience, a caregiver can also demonstrate neglect and maltreatment towards youth, which can affect the child's capacity to demonstrate resilience and promote negative subjectivity.

**Childhood maltreatment.** Child maltreatment is one of ten adverse childhood experiences classified as abuse or neglect. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2016) defines child maltreatment as any act or series of commission or omission by a parent or caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child. Acts of

commission, or child abuse, include physical, sexual, or psychological abuse; though the acts are intentional, the outcomes may not be deliberate (Leeb, 2008). Acts of omission, or child neglect, are defined as the failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, or educational needs or to protect a child from harm or potential harm, including physical, emotional, medical, and dental, or educational neglect, inadequate supervision or exposure to violent environments.

In 2012, U.S. state and local child protective services (CPS) received an estimated 3.4 million referrals of children being abused or neglected (CDC, 2014). Of the child victims, 78% were victims of neglect; 18% of physical abuse; 9% of sexual abuse; and 11% were victims of other types of maltreatment, including emotional and threatened abuse, parent's drug/alcohol abuse, or lack of supervision. The rate of victimization was higher for females with 9.5% per 1,000 children compared to 8.7% per 1,000 children for males. The rates of victimization disaggregated by race per 1,000 children was highest for African-Americans at 14.2% compared to 12.4% for American Indian/Alaska Natives, 10.3% for Multiracial, 8.7% for Pacific Islanders, 8.4% for Hispanics, 8.0% for non-Hispanic Whites, and 1.7% for Asians (CDC, 2014).

Professionals in the medical field collaborated with the CDC to examine the relationship of health risk behavior and disease in adulthood to the extensiveness of exposure to childhood maltreatment, which highlighted the prevalence (Bynum et al., 2010) and effects of adverse childhood experiences (Felitti et al., 1998) as outlined in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Childhood maltreatment is prevalent among African-Americans and females.

Maltreatment and abuse can lead to severe health and psychosocial risks and thus disrupt one's capacity for healthy identities and resilience. In the next section, I will review risk factors that affect African-American females exposed to adverse childhood experiences.

**Risk factors affecting African American females.** Within the literature reviewed, researchers note substance abuse, sexual risk behaviors, physical health risks and suicide as risk factors affecting African-American females. For the scope of this study, I will only note literature pertaining to emotional development, highlighting psychosocial symptoms associated with maltreatment among African-American females. Child maltreatment negatively affects one's psychosocial and emotional wellbeing, which increases stress levels. Acute stress refers to severe stress from exposure to such trauma as abuse or violence, whereas chronic stress refers to high stress sustained over time. Children from a low-socioeconomic status are more prone to both types of stress than are their more affluent peers, particularly chronic stress (Almeida, Neupert, Banks & Serido, 2005). Each of the participants in this study are from low- to lower

middle-class households. Psychosocial development can affect subjectivity formation, identity development, and how one exemplifies resilience in pursuit of agency; therefore, attention to known risk factors of exposure to maltreatment is relevant.

Researchers have cited several psychosocial symptoms among those exposed to stress due to maltreatment and neglect. For example, among middle age adults, child maltreatment is cited as a predictor of psychiatric disorders ranging from 22% to 32 % among females, a higher rate than males (20% to 24%) (Afifi et al., 2008) and posttraumatic stress disorder PTSD as a risk factor (Gillespie et al., 2009). Likewise, another study, consisting of 1,093 high school seniors over a two- year period, cites antisocial behavior (Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007). Additionally, a study of 225 adolescents (55% African-American; 59% female) notes hopelessness (Hamilton et al., 2013). Numerous studies cite depression (Gillespie et al., 2009; Hamilton et al., 2013; Oshri, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2013; Schillings et al., 2007) and social anxiety (Hamilton et al., 2013; Oshri, et al., 2013; Widom et al., 2013) as emotional risk factors, all of which can impede the demonstration of resilience.

Additional investigations examine psychopathology among African-Americans who have experienced forms of childhood abuse and neglect. Widom et al. (2013) found that Black children between ages 0-11 showed more anxiety and dysthymia (severe, chronic depression) than White and Hispanic participants. Regarding Black females in particular, child abuse and neglect were associated with internalizing and externalizing symptoms among 177 Chicagoans, which decreased over a three-year period with mental health treatment (Wilson, et al., 2015) and greater durations of sexual abuse predicted lower levels of self-esteem and high levels of depression in a sample of 249 Black females (Cecil & Matson, 2001). In addition, PTSD is

common among African-American females with histories of child abuse and neglect (Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005; Schumm, Stines, Hobfoll, & Jackson, 2005; Stevens et al., 2013; Sullivan, Meese, & Swam, 2005). For example, data revealed that of 139 socioeconomically disadvantaged women (85% Black), 44% of the total study group experienced childhood maltreatment and 12% demonstrated signs of posttraumatic stress disorder along with low emotion regulation (Stevens et al., 2013). Each of these psychological symptoms can disempower one and interfere with the quest for agency.

Maltreated youth, particularly African-Americans, face several social and psychological risk factors. However, research notes protective factors that promote positive identity formation and resilience among African-American youth despite the many risks.

**Supports that promote resilience among African American girls.** Measurements of symptoms, problems, risk factors, and deficits have been more plentiful and advanced than the measures of strengths, assets, positive physical or mental health, and other constructive aspects of prosocial development (Masten, 2014, p. 267; APA, 2008). Nevertheless, a few studies have examined positive identities and resilience among African-American women specifically. Researchers have identified religion and spirituality as supportive measures among African-American female survivors of child sexual abuse (Singh et al., 2012) and suicidal participants (O'Donnell, O'Donnell, Wardlaw, & Stueve, 2004). In addition, community supports (Singh et al., 2012) have also promoted positive results among Black girls.

Intrinsic personal strengths such as purpose in life (Alim, et al., 2008), identity, racial socialization, self-determination (Thomas & Rodgers, 2009), and self-efficacy (Todd & Worell, 2000) have also been identified as supports that mitigate negative development of Black females.

Additionally, in an analysis of 97 Black and White disadvantaged females, optimism and perceived control were associated with less severe depression (Grote, Bledsoe, & Larkin, 2007). In a study with one African-American female who lacked parental attachment and experienced teen pregnancy, the investigator identified signs of adaptation such as graduating high school, goal setting, and commitment to her children as well as protective processes, including personal strengths, natural mentors, and extended family support (Schilling, 2008) as effective supports leading to resilience.

In another study, Todd & Worell (2000) interviewed 50 low-income, urban, African-American mothers to understand the factors that enable some poor females to demonstrate resilience in the face of a lifetime of adversity, stress, and poverty. In an examination of problematic social ties, downward social comparison, and self-efficacy, findings show that problematic social ties and downward social comparison together predicted 48% of the variance in resilience. Therefore, social exposure can impede or influence resilience among Black females. Two additional studies examined educational success among African-American females. Clarke (2006), surveyed 56 and then interviewed 6 urban, middle schoolers and found that pride and racial identity were associated with their academic success. Lastly, in the landmark book entitled *Teaching Black Girls*, Evans-Winters (2005) reveals the findings from a 3-year longitudinal ethnographic study. She followed four Black teenaged girls from eighth through tenth grade and applied unstructured interviews, self-reports, field notes, and observation methods. Of the four girls, three demonstrated academic resilience through parental, school, and community support, while the one remaining participant withdrew from school to support her family and her child.

## Summary

The primary focus of this literature review has been an examination of literature that defines resilience and explains the history of resilience theory. I also outlined the risks of child maltreatment on psychosocial development, and the significance of maternal support in promoting resilience that fosters academic achievement among African-American youth. The literature reveals that African-American youth are exposed to childhood maltreatment at an alarming rate, considering the number of children living in homes with a single-mother and the emotional challenges many of those mothers face. Yet, resilience literature notes parental support as a key protective factor that promotes resilience in youth. Considering their environments and experiences, which shape subjectivities, how then do many African-American women demonstrate academic resilience and access agency with exposure to maternal neglect, and how does that process evolve? These questions, concepts, and theories are important considerations for this inquiry.

Like Davidson (2017), I question the legitimacy of the new black feminists who claim to have accessed agency. I recall reading a book titled *The Sisters are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America* by Tamara Winfrey Harris (2015), and while I appreciate her optimism and capacity to see the glass half full, I could not help but question the validity of her claim. Maybe it is due to my experiences and observations over the last 18 years mostly in K-12, public, Title I schools. Maybe it is my own subjectivity due to my personal past with childhood trauma and challenges that limits my perception about agency in the lives of women, particularly women of color. Understanding the importance of experience in the lives of subjugated human beings, I apply a socioecological and black feminist lens to inquire into the

narratives to examine subjectivity development. I also explore the demonstration of resilience in the pursuit to access agency amidst exposure to maternal maltreatment as revealed through the participants' narratives and my own.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to inquire into the narratives of African-American women to explore their experiences with academic resilience in the absence of their single-mother's support. Prior to collecting research data, Appalachian State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study on March 27, 2017 after reviewing the research proposal. In this chapter, I identify the research design, sampling, and data-collection methods. I present a qualitative research design using both autoethnography and narrative inquiry methodologies as the strategies to answer the following question: What are the narratives of African-American women who have experienced maternal neglect while demonstrating academic resilience? Sub-questions are as follows: 1) What stories do participants' recall from their memories of adverse childhood experiences? 2) What do the participants' stories reveal about their subjectivity derived from experiences with childhood adversity? 3) How have these young women negotiated complex relations of identity, resilience and agency? In addition, I address my role as researcher and the trustworthiness of the methodology for this research study. Finally, I explain the methods employed for data analysis.

### **Research Design**

For this study, I applied a qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2009), "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). Qualitative research is useful in this study because the topic has not been addressed with the selected sample, existing theories have not been applied to the group under study, and the important variables to examine are unclear

(Creswell, 2009).

I hold a poststructural philosophical world view, which believes there are multiple truths. Therefore, I cast doubt on classical notions of truth, reality, meaning, and knowledge (Kim, 2016). According to Kim (2016, p. 61), the general characteristics of poststructuralism are as follows:

- It attends to questions of language, power, and desire in ways that emphasize the context in which meaning is produced while challenging all universal truth.
- It challenges the assumptions that give rise to binary thinking.
- It acknowledges differences, particularities, fragmentation, instead of claiming universality and unity.
- It questions the humanist notion of subject, which assumes autonomy and transparent self-consciousness.
- It situates the subject in a complex intersection of social forces and practices present in a discourse.
- It uses forms of discourse analysis and deconstruction as a new means of analysis.

In this study, I seek to interrogate power relations that appear in narratives and stories (Kim, 2016).

**Autoethnography methodology.** For this study, I used autoethnography as an approach to inquiry. Autoethnography is a form of personal or self-narrative that “transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang, 2008, p. 43). With autoethnography, the researcher seeks to systematically analyze the researcher’s personal experience embedded in a larger social and cultural context (Kim, 2016). The researcher engages in critical reflections and interpretations of his or her personal experience. (Kim, 2016, p. 123). The goal of autoethnography is cultural understanding underlying autobiographical experiences; therefore, autoethnographers use the research process of ethnography to share a story of self in order to understand others (Chang, 2008). The aim is to problematize social and cultural norms

and practices in light of personal experiences (Kim, 2016, p. 124). According to Chang (2008), an individual who can actively interpret his or her surroundings becomes a basic unit of culture; therefore, self is the starting point for cultural acquisition and transmission. Consequently, “self is a subject to look into and a lens to look through to gain an understanding of a societal culture” (Chang, 2008, p. 49). In this study, I entered the research field with a familiar topic—self. Using a more evocative approach (Ellis, 2009), I revealed personal and intimate information regarding my childhood, adolescent, and young adult experiences with maternal neglect and maltreatment, which is fitting for this inquiry (Chang, 2008).

**Narrative inquiry methodology.** To contextualize my experiences in the sociocultural environment, analyze culture, and understand others (Chang, 2008), I used narrative inquiry as a strategy of inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand the human phenomena and human existence (Kim, 2016, p. 190). Using narrative inquiry, I studied the lives of individuals and asking one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). According to Bochner, (2005), in narrative inquiry, the focus on inquiry shifts from objects to meanings, inviting a corresponding shift from theories to stories. According to Creswell (2009), the researcher uses this information to retell the story in a narrative chronology, combining views of the participants’ views with those of the researcher’s life (p. 13). Narrative inquiry allowed me as the researcher to access the participants’ stories of subjectivity, identity, academic resilience and agency amidst maternal neglect. According to Chang (2008), “When applied to autoethnography, interviews with others fulfill a different purpose: they provide external data that give contextual information to confirm, complement, or reject introspectively generated data” (p. 104). Therefore, I was able

to compare the participants' stories with my own for a deeper understanding of socioemotional development and subjectivities and academic resilience as agency among Black girls with minimal parental support.

## **Participants**

The population studied is African-American women who experienced childhood trauma, maltreatment, and neglect during their PK-12 school years due to an absent father and a strained relationship with their mothers. In this study, I investigated myself and “include others as co-participants or co-informants” (Chang, 2008, p. 65). This study examined the story of my childhood experience with maternal neglect due to her suffering from schizophrenia and the social and emotional effects that this strained relationship caused for me as an adolescent and young adult. Despite my academic success, the stressors presented challenges that are worthy of discussion and analysis as many other students face similar encounters and seek resilience. Too many do not overcome them. Therefore, I not only studied myself, but I also included others with similar experiences as co-participants with equal emphasis to broaden the database (Chang, 2008). I compared their experiences with those of my own to gain a greater understanding of risk and resilience in the lives of African-American females who have experienced maternal neglect.

I am an African-American woman who studied middle grades education at a predominately White university. I graduated with degrees and certificates, including a Master's in School administration, a Specialist of Education certificate, and a Nonprofit Management certificate. I was raised in a small, rural town in the southeastern region of the United States. I attended public schools during grade school; due to transiency, I attended three different high schools between ninth through twelfth grade. I have an older brother who is six years and nine

months older than I am. We share the same father and mother. Once my father remarried, I acquired six step siblings, two sisters and four brothers, all of who are older than my brother and I. As a child, I was exposed to four of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) based on household occurrences. After completing the ACE Questionnaire, I noted that during the first 18 years of my life I had a parent who experienced a mental illness, specifically schizophrenia, became divorced, and demonstrated physical and emotional neglect. Our household income was between \$25k and \$35k, including my mother's disability income, stipends for my brother and me, and monthly child support contributions from my father, which he paid consistently.

In addition to myself, I selected two African-American women as co-participants for this study by using purposeful selection. Purposeful selection is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information relevant to the research question that cannot be accessed as well from other approaches (Maxwell, 2005). I used the network sampling or snowball technique (Glesne, 2011) by soliciting the assistance of personnel from area colleges and universities via an emailed letter in Appendix A to identify potential participants. The assisting personnel used Appendix B as an electronic recruitment option to send to potential participants via email or social media, Appendix H as a flyer to print and distribute, send via email, or post on social media and other forums for communication, and Appendix I as a flyer to hang on campus to help recruit participants. I selected the final two participants based on their alignment with the following criteria and their willingness to share their stories.

The co-participants met the following criteria:

- a) Participants identified as African-American and as women.

- b) Participants completed the questionnaire in Appendix D as a screening tool, which included demographic information and a revised version of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) inventory in Appendix E to verify household dynamics. I revised the inventory to specify the challenges the mother experienced, as the original inventory reads, “Did you live with anyone who . . .”, etc. The results of the ACEs inventory had to reflect an absent father and a mother with challenges such as drug or alcohol abuse or depression or mental illness, resulting in maltreatment and a strained relationship between the mother and daughter relationship.
- c) Participants exemplified academic resilience based on their sophomore or higher status in a four-year college or university. Considering college dropout rates, freshman have not yet demonstrated academic resilience, which is more apparent when one returns to college as a sophomore versus simply being accepted to college as a freshman.

**Co-participant 1-Tasha.** Tasha is a 19-year-old, African-American woman. She is a junior, majoring in elementary education at a public Historically Black College/University (HBCU). She was born and raised in the fifth largest, urban city in the state, based on population, where she also attended public schools. She has three siblings: one older brother who has a different father, a younger brother who is two years younger than she, and a younger sister who is the youngest—two years younger than the youngest brother. She shares a father with the two younger siblings. Her parents married on the day her younger sister was born. Living in a two-parent household, one might think Tasha would have been safe and secure. Nevertheless, Tasha

was exposed to eight of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) based on household occurrences. On the ACE Questionnaire she indicated that during the first 18 years of her life a parent or other adult verbally, physically, and [attempted to] sexually abuse her and emotionally neglected her. She also witnessed her mother's abuse and divorce. In addition, she witnessed substance abuse and mental illness. After her parents divorced, her mother's annual income was less than \$25,000. Thus, she grew up in dysfunction and poverty.

**Co-participant 2-Claire.** Claire is a 21-year-old, African-American woman. She is a senior, majoring in public health at a public, predominately White university. She was born and raised in a suburb of the third largest, urban city in the state, based on population, where she also attended public schools. She is her mother's only child; however, she shares a father with a set of twin boys who are younger than she. Her parents met in undergraduate college, but they never married although they have dated on and off her entire life. Throughout her childhood, Claire lived with her maternal grandmother and her mother whose income was between \$25k and \$35k per year. Although her grandmother attempted, she was not able to shield her from adversity. Claire was exposed to seven of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) based on household occurrences. On the ACE Questionnaire she indicated that during the first 18 years of her life a parent or other adult verbally, physically, and sexually abused her. In addition, she witnessed physical abuse, substance abuse and mental illness. She also experienced physical neglect.

### **Setting**

I selected participants from public, four-year colleges and universities in an urban area in southeastern United States. The area has twenty-one institutions of higher education, including

three public, state universities from which I recruited. I targeted these sites due to proximity and the high probability of accessing young women who meet the criteria for this study.

## **Data Collection**

**Autoethnographic data collection.** To extract my personal narrative for analysis, I collected personal memory, self-reflective, and external data.

**Personal memory data.** In autoethnography, the researcher can openly acknowledge personal memory as a primary source of information (Chang, 2008, p. 71). To collect personal memory data, I chronicled the past by compiling an autobiographical timeline (Chang, 2008, p. 73) of traumatic events and emotional responses to help facilitate the narrative of my experiences with maltreatment due to my mother's illness.

**Self-reflective data.** I collected self-reflective data to preserve vivid details and fresh perspectives regarding my thoughts and emotions as they occurred (Chang, 2008, p. 89) in the field while interacting with participants. Self-reflective data is the results of introspection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation of who you are and what you are (Chang, 2008 p. 95). As I gained new insights and perspectives from the research participants, I reflected and processed my perspective of my experience with maltreatment and academic resilience anew during analysis. I recorded self-reflective data as private and personal thoughts and feelings pertaining to the research findings and process (Chang, 2008, p. 95).

**External data.** According to Chang (2008), data from external sources provide additional perspectives and contextual information to help researchers investigate and examine subjectivity (p. 103). Textual artifacts can include newspaper articles, poems, school related documents, i.e. report cards and certificates, journal entries, and letters. In this study, I used meaningful text-

based artifacts in the form of previously written poems as data to enhance my understanding of self and the context of my lived experience with maltreatment and academic resilience (Chang, 2008, p. 107). The poems provide a good source of pre-transcribed text, reflecting the authentic language and words, highlighting my lived experience, subjectivities, and agency in context. (Creswell, 2002, p. 219)

**Narrative inquiry data collection.** Data collection tools for the narrative inquiry portion of this study included a questionnaire and a semi-structured, in-depth interview.

*Questionnaire.* Predetermined, close-ended questions can net useful information to support theories and concepts in literature (Creswell, 2002, p. 217). Therefore, I administered the questionnaire in Appendix D to each participant to access demographic information regarding the context of their lived experience and insight into the adverse childhood experiences each participant encountered during their childhood and adolescent years.

*Semi-structured, in-depth interviews.* Furthermore, I conducted one in-depth, one-on-one interview with each participant to illicit her views and opinions regarding the topic of study (Creswell, 2009, p. 181). The one-on-one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time (Creswell, 2002, p. 214). Due to the personal nature of the topic, I believed this personalized approach to be most feasible to access detailed accounts of each participant's experience (Creswell, 2002, p. 215). The interview encompassed the personal narrative form, which is an individual perspective and expression of an event, experience, or point of view (Madison, 2012, p. 28). The interview was semi-structured in that questions emerged during the interview and added to and replaced some pre-established questions (Glesne, 2011, p. 102).

During the interview, I used the interview protocol in Appendix F (Creswell, 2009, p. 183) to ask open-ended questions. This helped me avoid digression from the data collection plan (Chang, 2011, p. 104), because I realized the way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds in an interview could shape the relationship and participants' responses (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 110). Consequently, the participants could best voice their experiences unconstrained by my perspective or past research findings, which allowed the participant to create the options for responding (Creswell, 2002, p. 215). I took notes during the interview (Creswell, 2009, p. 183) and audio recorded the conversations and transcribed the recordings into words for analysis (Creswell, 2002, p. 215).

### **Potential Risks**

Considering the sensitive nature of traumatic experiences, this study presents the potential for minimal psychological risks to the participants as they share their stories of neglect and resilience. Therefore, each participant received a list of local, mental health resources (Appendix G) to access assistance in the event she became emotionally triggered during or after an interview.

### **Researcher's Role and Subjectivity**

As a researcher, I embrace subjectivity, emotionality, and my influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters assuming they do not exist (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). "The subjective position allows researchers to insert their personal and subjective interpretation into the research process" (Chang, 2008, p. 45). According to Maxwell (2005), "Separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks" (p. 38). Nevertheless, I understand the importance of

critical subjectivity to avoid researcher bias in that, I could not allow myself to be swept away and overwhelmed by my own experiences (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore, despite my personal experiences with the research topic, I approached this study as a learner (Glesne, 2011). I wanted to hear how other Black females felt having not experienced nurturing and possibly even feelings of love from their mother. I was interested in the stories and instances of neglect they encountered. I was concerned about their emotional responses and the effects of that neglect. I was interested to see if they, too, struggle or have struggled with confidence and esteem issues. I was curious to know if they practice positive or negative coping in an effort to become. Lastly, their tenacity to excel academically intrigued me; I wanted to know the secrets to their success. I intended to listen and take thorough notes to enhance my capacity to reflect and analyze aspects of my own story to add more understanding of risks, resilience subjectivity, and agency to the literature.

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

As a researcher, I am aware of subjectivity and reactivity and of the potential for my influence as a researcher on the setting or participants in the study (Maxwell, 2005). To improve the validity of my findings, I checked for the accuracy of the findings by employing ongoing reflexivity checks through self-reflective narrative to examine biases and discrepant information (Creswell 2009).

Maxwell (2005) notes that intensive interviews with participants provides more direct data and less reliance on inference. Intensive interviews also enable the researcher to collect “rich” data that can be transcribed verbatim, thus providing enough details to create vivid illustration of what is occurring, regarding the topic of study (Maxwell, 2005). Creswell (2009)

explains that when qualitative researchers provide many perspectives about a theme, the results become realistic and richer, adding validity to the findings (p. 192).

In addition, I clarified any biases through self-reflection throughout data collection and analysis. Creswell (2009) explains, “Self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers” (p. 192). According to Glesne (2011), keeping track of one’s own subjective selves and then inquiring into another’s origins can make she aware of her own perspectives and how those perspectives might affect his questioning and interpretations of interactions within the research setting. Therefore, I included comments and reflections about my interpretations of the findings and how those are shaped by my experiences and identity to add to the integrity of my product.

### **Data Analysis**

Narrative data analysis and interpretation is a meaning-finding act through which we attempt to elicit implications for a better understanding of human existence (Kim, 2016, p. 190). I avoided involving subjective interpretations of the data, also known as narrative smoothing, “which can be used to mask our subjective interpretation as explanation, and as to present a good story that is not necessarily a faithful account” (Kim, 2016, p. 192). I approached the narrative data at face value, using what Kim (2016, p. 193) calls an interpretation of faith, which is the “belief that what participants are telling us is a story that is true and meaningful to their sense of their subjective experience.” I also employed the interpretation of suspicion, which helped me to go deeper with my analysis and interpretation to find hidden narrative meanings. (Kim, 2016, p. 194).

According to Mishler (1995), there are two kinds of temporal order: the order of the *told*

and the order of the *telling*. The former refers to the order of the narratives of events and actions that are told by our participants, and the latter refers to the order of the narratives of events and actions that we will represent in our research text. Because participants share what is important for the moment, often digressing from a storyline or making general comments that lack focus, the researcher may have to reassemble the told from interviews to extract sense-making stories, arranging them into chronological or thematically coherent stories (Kim, 2016, p. 203). I decided to reconstruct the *told* from the *telling*. Using this method allowed me to synthesize the participants' stories to examine evidence of subjectivities and resilience towards agency in the lives of college-age African-American women from a poststructural Black feminist perspective. The manifestation of theories and concepts become the focus by which I organize and analyze each narrative. The focus is on the telling—the participants told a story, but what are they really telling/teaching us about the concepts and theories of subjectivity, resilience, and agency?

I apply autoethnography as additional data to add validity to the findings. I follow Kim's (2016) guidelines for ways autoethnographers can distinguish their approach from simply reflective storytelling. In doing so, I compare, contrast, and analyze my personal experiences against existing research related to subjectivity, resilience, and agency. In addition, I present ways others may experience similar situations by including data from two additional participants. I also include examples from literature to illustrate facets of cultural experience for African-American women and cultivate narrative imagination that enhances empathetic understanding (Kim, 2016).

## Chapter 4: Negotiating Subjectivities

### Introduction

I present the findings from this research study in this chapter and in Chapter 5. This chapter consists of two parts: 1) The Facts and 2) The Findings. In Part I—The Facts—I address the first Research Question: What stories do participants’ recall from their memories of adverse childhood experiences? In this section, I share my story in first person. I then narrate the two participants’ stories in third person. I include a few extended quotes in each of their stories to display their recollections and responses to their circumstances verbatim. The aim is for readers to better understand and respect the perspectives and experiences as expressed.

In Part II—The Findings—I address the second Research Question: What do the participants’ stories reveal about their complex identities and subjectivities as these are derived from experiences with childhood adversity? Each human individual has his or her own outlook on reality that is shaped by his or her own experience (Kim, 2016, p. 55). Thus, subjectivity is “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Subjectivity and identity evolve based on that to which one is subjected or exposed. I examined the data for commonalities in our subjectivities and identities as revealed in the stories we told. In Part II, I present the research findings based on four themes extracted during the data analysis. The four themes are as follows: 1) Caregivers in Need of Care; 2) The Pursuit of Peace has a Price; 3) Perfectly Imperfect; 4) and The Unlovables. In addition, I include original poems that I wrote during times of struggle, which further illustrate the struggle to navigate identities and negotiate for agency.

## Part I: The Facts

### *Normalcy*

(Original Poem by Brooksie Broome Sturdivant, written December 26, 2009, age 31)

*A constant craving, for this I seek,  
one simple taste of normalcy.*

*Will desires ever become reality?  
Will true love yet find me?*

*Will family sit at my table to dine?  
Will peace ever consume my mind?*

*Will arms soothe my weary soul?  
Will I ever be made whole?*

*Will my head ever rest upon a lap?  
Will I view catastrophes as mere mishaps?*

*Will thoughts cease to produce tears?  
Will God restore the years?*

*Will my sulk become a smile?  
Will I endure the green mile?*

*Will I resist fleeing the fight?  
Will the darkness transition to light?*

*A constant craving, for this I seek,  
I must have a taste of normalcy.*

This reflective poem, written in my early thirties, captures my exasperation with the abnormality of my lived experiences. I wrote the poem during a time when my hope was fading, a time when that which I imagined for my life had not manifested and my zeal to persist was waning. How does one find herself amidst various ways of being? What follows is a short story from my childhood and stories from the lives of the two participants in this research study, which reveals the findings from Research Question. The stories provide a glimpse into the

circumstances that left us subjugated to navigate and negotiate for agency. The stories presented, despite their concerning commonality, are far from normal.

## **My Story**

Normalcy. Yes, I experienced it during my infant and toddler years. I was born into what by many accounts would be considered a ‘normal’ family. I lived in a small, rural town in the Southeastern United States. My family included a father, a mother, and a brother who is seven years older than I am. We lived together in a small, brick, three-bedroom house, and we even had a pet German Shepherd dog. In my early childhood, my paternal grandfather was still living, and my maternal grandmother was also present. Nevertheless, when I was two years old, things took a turn when my mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Some family members and adults in our town say it was because of me. They said that age 37 was “too old to be having a baby” and that maybe postpartum depression drove her crazy. There is no reason a child should have ever heard these different viewpoints, but I heard them, and I believed them.

My father could not take it, the schizophrenia, and the changes in my mom’s behavior, so he left. I do not recall him living with us. He left when I was three years old. Given the unstable conditions, my mother, brother, and I then moved in with my grandmother who was 83 years old at the time. I remember vaguely a few scenarios with my grandmother. I recall her warm beds and how everything was clean at her house, and the delicious meals. My favorite in particular was fried chicken livers smothered in brown gravy. I remember how my aunts and uncles would come over. I wonder now how we all fit in the house. I recollect her taking me to church where they sang hymns, washed feet, and distributed fruit and nuts in brown bags for Christmas. I remember her washing me from a tin pan to get me ready for Head Start, as I’m sure she knew I

would need a head start.

This semblance of normalcy was brief as she passed away a year and a half later when I was about to turn six years old. She and I went into the hospital at the same time; we both had pneumonia due to coal ash toxins emanating from the local energy plant. I remember, I came home, but she did not. I recollect crying and wishing they had let me stay in the hospital too. Instead, I had to spend a month or so with my father's aunt, another elderly lady, since my mother was hospitalized in the psychiatric wing of the local hospital. I recall the anger I felt wondering why she did not stay with me in the hospital, and I also felt unwanted when she wasn't there to receive me upon my release. Since then, I longed to experience normalcy, which I finally articulated in the introductory poem twenty-five years later. Nothing about my childhood was normal; yet, it is the norm for many children who are subjected to household dysfunction.

### **Tasha's Story**

Although Tasha expressed interest in the study when she initially heard about the opportunity, she did not schedule the actual interview until five months later. She entered the interview session with some hesitation. Nevertheless, when I started the interview with a broad question, "Tell me about your childhood, one thing that stands out or a few things that you remember," she began to share:

*Growing up, everything was normal. The most vivid memory I remember is when my dad left. Because I was the oldest, I remember my dad. I remember growing up with him, and I remember when he left. My younger siblings, they don't remember much. It's kind of like they don't really know him as much as I do because I was the oldest. When he left, I remember, me and my siblings were upstairs, and I guess my mom had called him on the phone and was like, "Get the kids ready; we're going out." But he didn't get us ready. We were upstairs, and he was just sitting on the couch. And I remember my mom, she*

*came in and she was yelling; she was like, "Why haven't you got the kids ready? I called you; I told you to get the kids ready!" and I remember, he just left. He just took the keys, he got into the car, and he just left. I came outside, and my mother was like "Go outside." I came outside, and he gave me my mom's purse because her purse was in the car. He was like, "Here, give this to your mom." Then he just left. I was eight years old; I was in third grade.*

Tasha's subjection to her father's abandonment with no explanation for his departure resulted in several adverse circumstances.

When Tasha's father left, it negatively affected her mother's mental health. Her mother did not expect him to leave, so she took it hard. Even to this day, she becomes extremely sad sometimes to the point of depression. In addition, she experiences anxiety for which she takes medication. Tasha explains that her mother just cannot seem to get it right. During those times, she experiments with various mechanisms to cope. Tasha explains,

*She went through this thing, she calls it the blues, where she gets really sad and really depressed for a period of time. It was one time where she started dating a female and was like a lesbian I guess. My family is kind of like old school, so everybody was like, "[Mother's Name] is dating a lesbian." Yeah, she just can't get it right, and to this day sometimes, she'll do good for a couple of years, and she'll be like on her feet. But then she'll slip up and then she'll be kind of off and then she'll be back on and then she'll get back off.*

Dating seems to be Tasha's mother's primary coping mechanism. Although she experimented with lesbianism, she is primarily heterosexual. Tasha described a few of her mother's mates. She once dated a white man who was the breadwinner. Tasha recalls that life was good during that time, as he helped with the bills. Tasha remembers everyone loving him except her mother. One was a stalker. He would come to the house and call her all the time after they broke up. She had to get a restraining order against him. Currently, her mom is dating a very nice Black guy who is not the breadwinner. In fact, he his only income is a social security check

because he does not work. He also has an unhealthy drinking habit. Tasha describes him as a bum. Tasha explains,

*They have arguments and they have problems because he's not there financially. Like, he don't do things that a man is supposed to do, so it's kind of like she's dating below her standards and below what she actually wants.*

Nevertheless, Tasha admits that her mother functions better when she has a mate in her life.

### **Claire's Story**

Considering her understanding of public health issues, Claire was less hesitant to tell me her story and was quite reflective in her explanation.

Claire's mother was the fifth child born of six children, and for the most part, she always had a job. However, there were times when she was laid off from work and therefore unemployed. Claire describes her as a strong woman. Nevertheless, she abuses alcohol excessively, sometimes daily, and she smokes cigarettes. She attended college, but she did not graduate. Despite returning to college a few times for various programs, she has never completed one. According to Claire, her mother became stuck in a negative cycle of living pay check to pay check. Claire cites her father as the source of her mother's lack of persistence due to his 25 years of inconsistency and random acts of infidelity. As mentioned, he has a set of twin boys who are currently only eight years old, and he did not marry their mother either. However, she has never known her mother to date other people.

Ironically, Claire experienced her most negative encounters when her father lived in the home with her and her mother, especially once the twins came to reside with them during her high school years. Her parents always argued and physically fought, sometimes violently. However, the frequency increased with the arrival of the boys. The tension was so extreme

Claire recently felt forced to interject. She recalls the encounter:

*I was frustrated with her, so I told her that even though that's my biological father, and I have love for him, I think she would have been better off with a different person. I really think he, in some ways, kind of held her back. He's been there, but that relationship, I do not think was the best.*

Claire's subjection to her father's inconsistencies and anger and her mother's alcoholism presented numerous experiences that continue to affect her as she strives to complete her senior year in college.

Considering the conflict with Claire's father coupled with the violence and alcoholism, Claire's mother demonstrated several mental health concerns. Growing up, Claire recalls that her mother was very stressed, and she often misdirected her anger towards her, especially when things were tough financially. She recounts a time when her father brought her home late to her mother from a visit to his place. She was in middle school, and it was almost midnight on a school night. Considering her parents' routine fights, she was certain this incident would cause her mother to physically attack her father. Claire decided to enter the house and walk straight to her room to avoid the inevitable altercation. Nevertheless, the scenario took an unexpected turn.

Claire explains:

*As soon as I got in the house, I remember she just punched me in the face and took out her anger on me. I just remember just crying. If it wasn't for my grandma I probably wouldn't be here. I went to school the next day like nothing happened because I was just taught you just don't tell what happens at home. I didn't even tell my dad. The next time I was with my dad, I just remember being a little scared to go home to my mom's, so I just told my dad, "I don't want to go home." I was worried that the same situation was gonna happen, but I didn't tell him the full story. I remember saying "I just don't want to go home."*

The stories presented in Part I offer vivid access into the experiences and interactions within the households of each participant. They reveal evidence of physical and emotional

neglect and maltreatment, which incited a ripple effect of subjectivities and identities, which each participant negotiates. The participants and I were subjected to neglect due to an incapacitated mother. To better understand the situation with our mothers, I use a Black feminist lens for analysis.

To outline ways that Black women react to adversity and oppression, Black feminist, Patricia Hill Collins (2000), refers to Alice Walker's historical perspective, which views Black women's experiences as a series of movements from victimization to consciousness. According to Mary Helen Washington (1982), Walker's evolution process is both historical and psychological, consisting of three interrelated cycles: suspension, assimilation, and emergence. Although in historical terms, the women in the suspended cycle existed during the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, each of our mothers personify what Black feminist authors fictionalize as the 'suspended woman'. Pain, violence, death, and other circumstances, such as, a quest for love to conquer loneliness (as in Tasha and Claire's mother's case) consume the life of the suspended woman. Consequently, they become suspended in time and place, which limits their life choices and ultimately destroys them (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) also notes strategies that Black women employ to escape from a world predicated upon negative images and experiences that produce painful realities. Tasha's mother resorted to multiple sex partners and religion, Claire's mother relied upon alcohol consumption, and my mother sought comfort in religion also. Each of our mothers retreated into madness, attempting to create other worlds apart from the ones that caused them agony (Collins, 2000).

In a society wrought with intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class, Black mothers in the U.S. must teach their daughters to navigate the politics of being Black and

woman. In this context, the focus is physical survival, which requires education, employment, and emotional strength (Collins, 2000). The daughter of a ‘suspended woman’ lacks that foundation, which offers stability. Maternal deprivation coupled with the lack of security fathering provides is the environment that shaped our experiences and formed our subjectivities. I wrote this reflection to further explain,

### *Two Truths and a Lie*

*There is a well-known icebreaker or ‘get-to-know-you’ game called “Two Truths and a Lie”. The activity can be conducted whole group, in small groups, or in partner pairs (with multiple rounds), which allows numerous people to learn about others. During the game, each person must consider two facts that are true about him or herself and one ‘fact’ that is false, a lie that seems true. The object of the game is for the others who are present to guess which statement the lie is. Thus, the speaker must choose his or her two truths wisely, as they should not be too obvious. In revealing the lie, participants learn more truths about one another.*

*My lived experience has been a life-long game of Two Truths and a Lie. Repeatedly I have negotiated between the lies about who, what, and how my experiences tell me I should be and that which I desire and see as the truth about myself. To negotiate means to 1) obtain or bring about a discussion to try and reach an agreement or compromise or 2) to find a way over or through an obstacle or difficult path. I would rather it be a debate – present your case, state the facts, disprove the opposing view, and win. Nevertheless, it is not a debate. There are no facts to disprove the lie, only truths - truths about how I am and what I have become because of the obstacles and difficult paths to which I have been subjected. Therefore, I attempt to negotiate. No matter how much I think or speak the truth I believe and perceive, the lie, that is also true, presents a rebuttal. There is no winning, only compromising, as I masquerade between two ways of being - that which I wish and that which is. It is a daily struggle, a never-ending game of Two Truths and a Lie.*

## **Part II: The Findings**

Beyond the stories told, I opt to reconstruct the told from the telling, and synthesize the participants’ stories to examine evidence of subjectivity and identities as noted in Research Question 2) What do the participants’ stories reveal about their complex identities and subjectivities as these are derived from experiences with childhood adversity? Our subjectivities are our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions which form our sense of self and how

we relate to the world (Weedon, 1997). “If our identity exists anywhere, it exists in the stories we tell collectively about ourselves.” (Ungar, 2004, p. 201). As I inquire into Tasha and Claire’s narratives of maternal maltreatment, it is apparent that they are attempting to interpret and negotiate their identities as Black women who are college students and soon to be graduates with their past identities derived from adverse childhood experiences. When I reflect on my experience with navigating subjectivities, I find the participants’ stories resonate with my own. The findings reveal negotiations with the following subjectivities which I present in this section: 1) Caregivers in Need of Care; 2) The Pursuit of Peace has a Price; 3) Perfectly Imperfect; 4) and The Unlovables.

### **Caregivers in Need of Care**

Tasha experienced the role of caregiver in her preteen years due to her mother experiencing bouts of depression. When her mother is depressed, Tasha describes her as “just crazy.” Her episodes involve excessive screaming and yelling. In addition, she would sometimes become disoriented and lethargic, which would hinder her from maintaining a stable home. Tasha recalls times when her mother’s bedroom would be dirty. She not only neglected to maintain the house, but she would also discontinue working during those times. Consequently, she would struggle to pay the household bills, which resulted in evictions or disconnected electricity. Tasha remembers a time when they went the entire winter with no heat since her mother did not pay the gas bill. Instead, they used kerosene and space heaters to heat the home. When her mother is experiencing the ‘blues,’ the burden of supporting her siblings and maintaining the household falls on Tasha since she is the eldest. She describes her role as caregiver in the quote that follows:

*Me being the oldest, I would have to step in. She'll [mom] kind of be lacking in like the things that moms do, like making sure my siblings go to school or making sure she cooks. Sometimes she'll not cook, and I'll have to cook. I have to wake everybody up early in the morning, make sure they all get on their bus, make sure they go to school, and make sure she goes to work.*

While sharing, Tasha shifts her focus from the negative to the positive, reminding herself and reassuring me that when her mother is on track emotionally, things in the household are good.

She recalls,

*"When she's good, I don't have to worry about anything; she goes to work, the bills are paid, she cooks. She's happier; she cleans - better mood. She still yells and stuff, but not as much."*

This shifting approach is Tasha's attempts to negotiate the negative feelings for her role as caregiver. Flashing back allows her to counter the disdain she feels for the burden of responsibility with the other truth she desires to believe about her mother.

Claire also assumed the role of caretaker, not for her siblings but, for her parents during their times of financial struggle. She recalls the time she received her first pay check, and her father stole most of it from her. If he is not stealing money from her, they are begging her to pay a bill for them when they get behind. The dishonesty and irresponsibility affect her ability to trust them and fosters some resentment. She describes the frustration and anger she feels when they call her to give them money.

*That's where the frustration comes in because I'm sitting there, I'm like, I'm in college and I don't know how many college students receive phone calls from their parents that they need help with, and like, I've pulled my own weight like throughout my whole college experience, I've paid for everything, even starting with the deposit for college up to the gas and everything. So, I get really frustrated at times because, it's like, there's no support system from them.*

Claire describes a negotiation between her desire to be responsible, independent, and focused on

her role as a college student pursuing success and her sense of responsibility as caregiver and provider for her parents during times of need. Although Claire receives some financial support from her aunts and, in the past, from her grandmother who has recently been diagnosed with dementia and placed in a facility, their support does not mitigate the emotions from the lack of security and support she feels her parents should provide.

Despite her frustration, mistrust, and personal need for assistance, she still worries about her parents' wellbeing and oftentimes succumbs to their pleas and assists them when they mention an unpaid bill. She explains the sense of obligation she feels to help them in times of need:

*I remember just continuously helping with bills. So even when college started, I would still call and make the payment or something like that. I think, to not be there, I just worried they wouldn't be okay. I don't think parents that do that, they don't realize the stress that it can cause, because it's one thing already when you're in college to be worried about yourself, and it's another thing when you go to sleep, and you don't know how your family is doing back at home. Now, it's like I am still concerned, but you need to go make it or not. That may sound so insensitive.*

Claire struggles to negotiate her role as caretaker of her parents to mitigate their financial struggles, which she describes as essential, and the need to take care of herself and be a thriving, productive college student.

Not only does Claire attend to her parent's financial needs, at times, she must provide wisdom and advise to her mother. For example, Claire advises her mother about relationships with men and the need to find someone other than Claire's biological father as previously noted. Again, Claire assumes the role of caregiver to her mother, demonstrating concern for her decision-making and wellbeing. When sharing this scenario, Claire again described herself as *frustrated*, which is the same word choice used to describe her feelings towards the financial

support she often renders as caretaker.

Due to my mother's condition, I too assumed the role of caregiver at an early age. While my older brother assumed the responsibility of caring for my mother, I was relegated to care for myself. After my mother was released from the mental institution, she, my brother and I moved back to the small, brick, three-bedroom house. From age six to thirteen is a blur, yet every memory about my home life evokes negative emotions from fear, anxiety, anger, shame, and frustration due to the number of inconsistencies encountered. It was at age six that I recall thinking, "Something is wrong with my mother." I remember deliberately engaging in certain acts to see how she would respond. I even went as far as saying a curse word to which she simply replied, "Brooksie, don't say that." Although cursing and her disregard for the act do not seem major in isolation, I then became conscious of the security she could not provide. Based on lack of intervention and other pieces of data, by age eight, I had fully resolved that no one was going to guide or take care of me, and that was frightening. This was the onset of my awareness of my subjectivity. I recognized my need for care and her inability to provide.

I remember my brother styling my hair for my third-grade yearbook picture; I chose a braided ponytail to the side. He brushed the bushy tresses over and held them while I wrapped the hair knocker around and strained as my bony fingers flipped one end over the other to secure it. I also recall picking out my clothes, which sometimes didn't match. In addition, I routinely ironed and washed them. It was also in third grade that I began forging her name on all my school papers because I realized there was no need in showing her anything from school. I remember times when my mom sat on the couch for days in a row without even moving to use the restroom.

These moments are juxtaposed to other times when in the middle of the night, my mother would decide to wash all the clothes she could get her hands on, even the ones I had laid out for school. Or she would awaken my brother and me, insisting someone was outside of the house. She'd yell, "Don't you all hear that?" or "Get away from the windows!" This caused me to yell back due to the frustration her disruptions caused, even though she was only trying to help with the chores and protect us from the imaginary intruders. I can remember going to bed hungry since, like Tasha's mother, she rarely thought to cook; then there were the times we would have to evacuate as the house filled with smoke from her failed attempt to prepare a meal. She also demonstrated bouts with rage. At times she would be so sweet and caring, laughing for no reason. She would welcome my friends when they dared to visit, and even ask about their moms and siblings by name and how they were doing. However, most times, she was uncompromisingly mean. She would curse out my friends, shouting, "Why the hell are you here?" or "What did you want from my damn daughter?" Needless to say, those visits were short. These extremes caused me intense levels of anxiety. My initial response was sadness from the insecurity and fear I felt. It soon evolved into anger once I realized the one truth I wished to be a lie - my mother's condition was uncontrollable, and the burden I felt from attending to my personal needs as caregiver were never-ending.

Despite my pretty face, 'good' hair, decent clothes, and outstanding grades in school, I was filled with shame on the inside. I was ashamed when making efforts to explain my mother's condition to my friends who could not understand why she would go from kind to inconsiderate from one day to the next. I was even more ashamed when I had to convince those same friends to ask their moms if I could eat dinner with them on days my mom did not attempt to cook. Then

there was the shame and anxiety I experienced each day when the bus approached my street. I never knew what to expect. Would the police be at my house . . . the ambulance? Would my uncle be there to announce that my mom had been sent off again, so I'd need to pack a bag and decide where I would like to stay this time? Or would my mom be standing in the front lawn in all her nakedness since there were times when she'd left the house walking the neighborhood unclothed?

It is this type of extrinsically induced shame that breeds an indescribable, internal anger that emits in various forms on any given day. It's reflected as sadness, fear, anxiety, moodiness, codependency, overcompensation, strength, and at times depression—that's when you cannot hide the shame, fear, and anger, so you choose to hide yourself instead, for fear of someone hurting you or you hurting someone. The encounters caused me to become angry and defensive after realizing no one was taking care of me. I was angry that I had to carry the burden of responsibility like a grown woman as a child. I began to despise adults because, to me, they were all irresponsible and selfish. I captured these sentiments in a poem later during my teenage years:

*Blood is Thicker Than Water*  
(Original Poem by Brooksie A. Broome April 6, 1995)

*They say blood is thicker than water,  
like the tears when I cry.  
Tears from my blood's wound to my back.  
I cry and I wonder, "Why?"*

*They say blood is thicker than water.  
Your blood stands by your side.  
Yet, when needed, they are gone,  
because of their selfish pride.*

*I think my blood has run dry,  
after all the pain.  
They say blood is thicker than water.  
I say it's as thin as rain!*

## **The Pursuit of Peace Has a Price**

Living as the daughter to a “suspended woman” can be trying (Collins, 2000). No matter the effort to embody happiness and optimism, the sporadic episodes can rob you of your joy. Daily there is a negotiation between pessimism and positivity in the context of forging one’s identity.

Tasha’s subjection to her father’s abandonment, her mother’s depression, her excessive household responsibilities, and her exposure to her mother’s inconsistent mates affected Tasha emotionally. Tasha remembers feeling afraid, scared, sad, and angry, particularly when her mother was dating the stalker. She recalled frequent arguments between him and her mother. She described feelings of anxiety when having to answer what she called a million questions and then waiting for the police to arrive after she and her brother would call for help. She even mentioned regret, wishing she and her brother would have done something even if it involved violence. She pondered some advice she received from her aunt.

*She told me that she had to deal with the same things with her mom, my grandmother, and that her and my uncle used to go in there, like they would get a bat or something and hit the man who was threatening my grandmother, so I kind of feel like it would have been nice if me and my brother could have did that.*

In pursuit of peace, Tasha considers violence as she negotiates who she is as she is and what it says about her relationship with her mother.

As I retell Tasha’s confession of regret, I am disturbed by what could have been. Instead of interviewing her in a public library across from the college campus where she attends, we might have met behind prison walls. All too often, people dismiss acts of violence, labeling the perpetrator as crazy, which is an oversimplification of the complexity and validity of emotions.

Considering the negative judgments and oftentimes hypocrisy between generations, reports of what appears to be unruliness among youth jade us. Yet, I know firsthand how essential the pursuit for normalcy can be for many. I am reminded of a news story that brought me to tears. It was the story of sexually abused brother and sister Catherine and Curtis Jones who were charged as adults for committing murder in 1999. Catherine, age 13, plotted with her 12-year-old brother, Curtis, to kill their abuser as well as their father and his girlfriend, for presumably allowing the abuse. Facing the prospect of life in prison for first-degree murder, they plead guilty to second-degree murder and were sentenced to 18 years in prison followed by probation for life. There was no trial, testimony, or opportunity to present the documentation from the welfare investigator that showed evidence of abuse towards the siblings by a family member with a prior sexual assault conviction. Agency officials never had to explain how they could have so utterly failed a pair of young children who felt so trapped, so alone and so victimized that they thought their only way out was through blood. Catherine said that while she regretted taking a life, prison was better than the hell into which she was born. (Torres, 2015).

Eventually, the burden of subjection was too much to bare for Tasha. While in high school, Tasha attempted suicide and was hospitalized for approximately one week in a behavioral facility. She cited her mother as the reason for her not wanting to live anymore.

*My mom was just stressing me out and making me feel overwhelmed and sad and depressed, and I didn't want to be here anymore because of her. I didn't want to be here if I have to deal with her and all her drama. When people ask me why I did it, I'm just like I don't know, but at the time I was just so angry and so sad because of my mom, like her just fighting and arguing with me all the time, not really fighting, but just arguing and just getting on my nerves. It just drove me crazy kind of.*

Although Tasha did not demonstrate violence towards her mother's partner, she eventually

harm herself. Suicide ideations, attempts, and acts are another means by which many who face adversity navigate their subjectivities.

Claire's mother's alcohol addiction and anger subjected Claire to verbal and physical abuse. Coupled with the demand for silence, she suffered emotionally. Ironically, it is not the abuse that acts as a trigger for Claire but the financial struggles she witnessed that propelled her to pursue normalcy. Once, when she was in fourth or fifth grade, she recalls having to stay in a hotel for two weeks with her grandmother and mom. She was not afraid, as she did not fully grasp what was happening. Nevertheless, with each encounter, her awareness became keener and anxiety over finances consumed her. She recounts occasions when the car dealers would repossess her mother's car. Then while in high school, they were evicted again; this time, her father was living in the home as well. At that time, her grandmother lived across the street from them, so they moved in with her. Despite the security her grandmother was able to provide, the encounters have affected Claire's by subjecting her to a life of worry, disrupting her peace. She describes her current fear of losing things and becoming displaced:

*It's definitely impacting me now. I guess you could say I have PTSD. That's definitely been one of my fears. I have my own car now, well, I don't own it, but I'm paying it, and my best friends, they definitely know anything relating to money or getting to being broke, it is like a trigger spot for me, something that can stress me out. I could be failing all my classes, but if you say I'm going to experience any of those situations again, it is going to hit me hard and has hit me hard. If I get maybe a bill behind, it's something serious. It's like a daily or an immense fear that I'm gonna lose maybe a house or lose a car or something like that. I never want to go back to that situation, like never, definitely, and I think that's one reason why I said I want a stable household before I have kids, because I want to make sure it's stable, and I need to be secure, you know.*

Claire constantly negotiates her identity as a person who manages her money responsibly due to her past experiences with eviction and loss. She imagines her potential role as mother and frames

stability as a prerequisite for assuming an identity of a responsible debt-free woman. Like Tasha, at times the need for stability and normalcy is overwhelming for Claire.

In addition to physical abuse, Claire endured instances of verbal abuse. Her mother often expressed dissatisfaction with Claire's appearance and abilities. She recalls her mother oftentimes comparing her to her cousins and pressuring her to be more like them:

*I have a female cousin on my mother's side who was born five days after me, and she's always been athletic, and I've been book smart. Then on my father's side, I have two female cousins who are about four to six months younger, right; so we're all like kind of grouped together. So, I've always been the heavyset one out of all four. Everybody else is like athletic, or they're just now gaining weight since we've been in college. But growing up, I definitely know she compared me to them, and it was just like, you know, like I can't change it, like I'm not gonna be them. My cousin on my mom's side, she was a cheerleader in high school, but my arts school, we didn't have any sports, and I might have participated in sports but my mom wanted me to do this and she wanted me to do that and she wanted me to do this, and I just, I genuinely did not have a passion, like I didn't even care.*

Rather than encouraging Claire to become more active, the pressure to perform became a hindrance, discouraging Claire from pursuing sports completely. The pressure and, what Claire calls, 'nagging', have persisted throughout college regarding her career choice. Her mother recommends fields of study for which Claire has no passion, which causes Claire to further negotiate her role as the typical daughter who should listen to a mother's advice while yet recalling her mother's abusive nature and limited experiences with pursuing goals herself. Claire chooses to pursue her passion. For that, she pays the price of criticism, which disrupts her peace.

When reflecting on a recent tough time with her grandmother's hospitalization, her parents requesting financial assistance, and some friendship rifts experienced on campus, like Tasha, Claire considered death in her pursuit of peace. She explains:

*I think about like everything I've been through, it's just like, damn, do you really want to*

*live another day. I just remember crying, went through everything, and I just remember like praying but it was just getting to the point where I couldn't even cry anymore and just thinking like I've been through a lot but I'm really, I just didn't feel the urge to live.*

Like Tasha and Claire, I have experienced frustrations and anxiety that is so overwhelming at times, it is almost unbearable to imagine facing another day. The uncertainty of what is to come coupled with the need to be strong in times of weakness can be paralyzing and binding. Although I have never attempted suicide, I considered death a positive, the epitome of peace. I captured the bondage I often negotiated in the poem that follows, which was written six days before my high school graduation:

*Trapped*

(Original Poem by Brooksie A. Broome June 2, 1996)

*Throughout the years, I've figured it out,  
this world is a trap that I'm caught in.  
A world that's full of HATE: NO LOVE,  
these demons are full of sin.  
Sex, Drugs, and Violence: these are the three main things.  
I almost forgot, diseases like AIDS  
come from whores and one-night flings.  
Am I the only one who notices  
how this world is falling apart?  
When it seems like my problems are over,  
that's when they all seem to start.  
They say if your heart stops beating  
the doctors consider you dead.  
My heart is broken by the world, and the beating has ceased.  
instead of living, God please, call me home instead.  
People wonder why I never smile,  
I only frown and pout.  
I'm trapped in a world full of HATE: NO LOVE,  
and death is the only way out.*

## Perfectly Imperfect

The pursuit of peace and normalcy can be a matter of life and death; therefore, a subject must be strategic when making decisions. There is often no space for error and no time for waiting on others to act. I have often said, I am independent by force, not by choice. Failure was not an option; it could not be my truth. Therefore, I believed the lie that I could not make a mistake. In a genuine desire for approval and success, I became a perfectionist (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). Consequently, amid an imperfect situation, one must negotiate while striving towards an unattainable perfection.

Tasha discussed her experience with negotiating independence and perfection. *“My mom would say I am very independent,”* said Tasha with a smile. Tasha demonstrated her independence and need to succeed by accessing diverse educational opportunities. She credits her middle school for introducing her to the early college program as an alternative option to traditional high school. After hearing about the opportunity, she began to observe a few eighth-grade girls who went to early college. Although they did not know her, she admired their accomplishments and goals and followed them on social media. She was determined to go to early college. Benard (2004) cites goal direction, achievement motivation, and educational aspirations as future oriented resilience strengths. Upon entering eighth grade, Tasha independently devised steps to accomplish her goal. In the excerpt below, she describes the process and highlights her determination in comparison to her peers who received parental support.

*When I was in eighth grade and the guidance counselor came around and was talking about it [early college options, I definitely applied because it was something I knew about since I was in sixth grade, and I did it all by myself. A lot of people that I went to*

*high school with was like “Nah, I ain’t do my application,” or “My momma did my application for me,” or “My momma helped me with my application.” But, no, I did my application all by myself because it was just something that I wanted. And for college, I did my college stuff by myself. I don’t know how, but I did it by myself, and I did all the scholarships.*

Even though Tasha demonstrates pride in her independence and accomplishments to date, she acknowledges the challenges with negotiating failure and achieving success. To overcome failure that seems imminent for many exposed to adversity, she subscribes to what she calls, being an overachiever. She attributes her perseverance and that of her siblings to the absence of her father. She explains,

*He isn’t here, so we’re trying to do it by ourselves, or we’re trying to prove that we can do it by ourselves. And that’s probably what gets me overwhelmed too because whenever I slip up and I’m not doing as good as I feel like I want to do or I know that I can do, I’m just like, “Dang, like what happened, what happened to me?” I want to be better, or I want to get better. I just feel like I’m too hard on myself, like I want to get better academically, socially, mentally, everything. I just want to get better.*

Tasha verbalizes her attempt to negotiate between what is expected of the maltreated and fatherless and the need to defy the odds. Consequently, she strives for perfection, reaching for an unattainable better after best. She also expresses her disappointment when she does not attain her expectations, which highlights the pressure of the pursuit. Perfectionist children who are easily frustrated can become despondent when they encounter difficulties, which can be taxing (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). Tasha describes this negotiation as overwhelming.

Tasha’s story of how she navigates life as a fatherless daughter resonates with me. As a child, nothing put a brighter smile on my face than the sight of my daddy pulling in the driveway to pick up my brother and me for the weekend. It seemed like each time he came, he was in a

different vehicle: Toyota pickup truck, little gray Corvette, long burgundy Cadillac, Jeep with the zip up doors, ragtop BMW, etc. You name it; he drove it. He made his living working at RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston-Salem, NC, and yes, he smoked a lot of cigarettes. He even smoked with me in the car, despite my bouts with childhood asthma. He started smoking at age 16 and quit at age 67, four days before his death, which was February 3, 2013. Despite the excessive spending and smoking, he was my daddy, and I thought he was perfect.

I was five years old when I met the lady that would become my stepmother. I know this because I was at my grandmother's house the first time they pulled up to pick us up. She had six children from her first marriage, four sons and two daughters. All her children were older than my brother and me. She chose to refrain from marrying my father until her youngest son graduated high school; I was twelve when they eloped to California.

During their courtship, we shared some good times. For one, my stepmother could cook really well, so I always enjoyed the full-course, home-cooked meals she prepared. I also remember riding with them up the Blue Ridge Parkway and having a picnic in the mountains. Once, we went to Carowinds amusement park where we attended a concert at the amphitheater that night after we enjoyed all of the rides. The concert featured Luther Vandross as the main act. New Edition, a young, R&B group, opened up the show for him, so I was excited! By the time Luther was on stage, I was sleepy. I remember my stepmother holding me on her lap, a form of nurturing I rarely experienced from other women. In that moment, I felt like a daughter.

I was nine years old the first time I asked my daddy if I could I move in with him. I felt a sense of calming relief when he said he would see what he could do. That Sunday, once we arrived at my mom's house, he asked her if he could take me and raise me. My mother became

irate and angrily said, “No!” At that moment, I lost all hope for security and normalcy. If a man, my own father, could not save me, no one could. Why didn’t he try harder? Did he not want me to stay with him? Did he not care? Did he think I would be worrisome as some of the other relatives acted when my brother and I had to stay at their houses? My demeanor thereafter was one of sadness and pessimism; I remember being physically and emotionally fragile and sensitive until around age 12.

Claire has demonstrated a sense of responsibility and independence as caretaker for her parents when they express monetary needs. Continuously, she embodied perfectionism in her efforts to meet their demands for financial support, which she described as essential. However, the pressure to meet the demands is overwhelming. Some perfectionists may engage in coping behaviors that distance themselves from others in order to avoid the stress resulting from their inability to perform (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). Claire describes a time she experienced extreme anxiety over financial matters.

*I just shut down. I stay inside my room, and I’ll just shut down. I won’t answer any phone calls. I won’t answer any text messages. Physically, I can’t describe it, it’s harder to breathe like you’re out of breath. It’s a very depressed feeling. I’m very aware of my mental health, and I know when I’m getting in a spiral, when it’s getting ready to happen. There was just an immense amount of depression. I know depressed, I know the difference between having a sad day and depression, and it’s just, it was just like stuck on sadness, like stuck on this negativity.*

The sense of extended obligation stemming from an early age, coupled with her understanding of mental health issues as a public health major, has caused Claire to approach negotiating her tendencies to be perfect and responsible differently. Her need for normalcy supersedes her need for perfection. She has begun to take a more relaxed approach to life approaching responsibilities and obligations like, what she describes as, a normal 21-year-old person.

*To be good mentally is to have a day where I wake up, and I'm just, I'm thinking about normal college stuff, like what's my attendance policy for this class. Not because I don't feel like going, or I've entered a mood of wanting to stay in the room, but because like I might be too hung over [from drinking alcohol] to go. I'm okay when I just have a normal, 21-year-old college life. I'm not responsible for x, y, and z, things that most kids are not going to be held responsible for. I only deal with the issues that are presented to me or that I deal with...the ones I've caused, not issues by someone else's pointless needing help with something, or the stress is because of something I've done, not something that someone else's actions have forced on me, per se.*

Her compromise allows her to release some sense of responsibility for her parents and for some matters that pertain to her personally, such as alcohol intake and class attendance. This depicts her attempt to negotiate between a responsible adult who handles all matters perfectly as a caregiver and a normal 21-year-old girl in pursuit of peace. To access peace and protect her mental wellbeing, she has established what she calls boundaries. She explains,

*Dealing with other people's issues, I can get frustrated because I've been held, especially with my family, to a higher responsibility than most kids, but at this point it's either I can help you or I can't. So, I set up boundaries. One thing I say now is, I won't answer their phone calls in the middle of the week, intentionally, because if something happens I won't know about it until I'm out of class.*

The price she pays for peace is the risk of being classified as insensitive towards her parent's needs. She also exposes herself to the risk of alcohol addiction and academic challenges due to class absences. Yet, there exists a sense of pride as she reveals her attempts to assert her independence from her dysfunctional family pressures. While alcohol consumption and skipping class could be perceived as negative coping, Claire presents these acts as resilience to overcome the pressure her family presents. While circumstances demand her responsibility, she chooses what she perceives as normalcy.

Like Claire, my sad and sensitive demeanor soon faded, and I engaged in more risky behavior. At age 12, I transitioned from elementary to junior high school. The quiet, reserved

elementary kid I was began to evolve into an unruly teenager. To fulfill a sense of belonging, I became more interested in friends and my reputation with peers than I was with impressing my teachers. Though I continued to maintain my class assignments while in school, I became involved in risky behaviors in the community. With no boundaries or guidelines, my friends and I were able to participate in activities of our choice. Consequently, we began staying out later, cursing, experimenting with cigarettes and marijuana, and drinking alcohol as well. Many of my friends began experimenting with sex before I decided to engage because despite the freedom, I still attempted to maintain some boundaries. I remember some of my friends, even older ones, calling me the ‘mama’ of the group because I would always think things through and highlight the potential consequences. I was always the last to try whatever the next thing was, if I chose to participate at all. Although experimentation may seem to be typical adolescent behavior, this was a major shift in my identity development compared to when I was in elementary school. While in elementary school the unity and protection teachers offered seemed beneficial and of necessity, considering the lack of support and encouragement I received at home. However, the emotional strain had begun to intensify, which caused a shift in my subjectivity and demeanor, thus a negotiation of my identity. Similar to Claire, I used boundaries to avoid situations from which I knew I could not rescue myself.

Looking back now, I realized that those boundaries were my way of staying out of trouble. It was not the activities themselves that encouraged me not to engage; it was the fear of not having someone to aid or rescue me if I got in too deep. My subjectivity constantly reminded me that I lacked support. Therefore, I identified as the mother-figure in my group. While my friends accessed a carefree sense of security, I was not able to express this type of freedom.

Though beneficial at the time, this degree of caution became a hindrance in later years. I became a perfectionist, anxiously ‘crossing’ every I and ‘dotting’ every T; despite my efforts, I came to realize, nobody’s perfect, not even me. I always made efforts to ‘get it right’, yet most times I took the long road through a tunnel that lead to a dead end filled with mud; there, I would spin. I blamed that on a lack of guidance and oversight, which added to the anger and frustration.

Despite my efforts to refrain and maintain, my attitude and frustration level became more intense revealing that I was getting off track. I began to demonstrate outbursts of anger that included yelling and cursing. I had also begun to stay out late at night despite employing boundaries with the activities in which I would partake. Concerned with my safety, by the middle of my ninth-grade year when I was age fourteen, my brother, who at that point managed the household and all of my mother’s affairs, asked my daddy to take me to live with him until I graduated high school. My father complied, so I moved in with him and his wife, my stepmom. Life there was awkward and unwelcoming. It was apparent from the start that my stepmother did not want to raise any more children, considering she had raised her own six children who were all grown at that point. She rarely interacted with me; if she wished to give me instructions, she would tell my daddy and he would tell me. Considering his hard upbringing and time in Vietnam, his instructions were always harsh, usually containing numerous curse words despite the simplicity of the demand. For instance, wash the dishes, was translated as, “Wash the damn dishes!”, even if I hadn’t eaten off any of them because most evenings after school, I would go straight to my room.

When I left my hometown to move with them, I was in junior high school; the new school I attended once I relocated was a high school that included ninth grade. The summer after

I finished ninth grade, we moved from a condominium to an apartment while we waited for their house to be built. I lost my friends from my hometown, and then the friends I made at the new school would be no more. Once we moved into the new house, I was enrolled into a second high school, my third school in two years. The inconsistency and instability caused me to feel unsafe and alone. That summer, I turned fifteen; I could not wait to get a learner's permit, and then my driver's license so I could visit my friends in my hometown. Once I finished driver's education, I continued to ask my dad when I would be able to get a permit. He kept denying the request, suggesting I was too young to drive. He accused me of wanting to be grown.

Some may view my disdain as rebellion. However, the mixed messages and hardships made me angry. According to my experiences and subjectivity, I was grown and had been behaving as an adult since I could remember. I realized then that my father had no clue of all I had contended with in his absence. I viewed his lack of empathy as disregard for who I was as an independent person. Maybe it was me being unaccustomed to having adults in charge. It is possible that I was not open to instructions at all. Maybe I was hypersensitive to feeling unwelcomed, considering the various locations in which my brother and I stayed over the years. Perhaps not having a place to belong had taken its toll on me. Either way, the new living arrangements were not aligning with my sense of self. I had been on my own too long; the intervention came too late. I was independent by force, not by choice, and I could not adapt to the bondage and control I felt in their presence. I was a subject denied agency, which was a foreign concept to me because I had always been in control of the decisions and outcomes affecting my life. There were many nights when I cried in my bed uncontrollably. This arrangement lasted two years from the middle of my freshman year until the middle of my junior

year. I gathered my belongings, as many as I could stuff into a duffle bag, and in pursuit of peace, I ran away in the middle of the night. I stayed one week with a maternal cousin and then I moved back to my hometown to live with my brother. I did not want to be grown or fast, which is a cultural reference to girls who are or appear to be promiscuous or flirtatious; I wanted to be me, independent and decisive, traits I consider positive attributes. Consequently, I paid a high price for peace. Due to my imperfect choices, my father disowned me. I was accustomed to not being owned, so I persevered.

### **The Unlovables**

When one is consumed with caring for others and attempting to attend to matters that pertain to her and her success with limited to no support, all while perfectly pursuing a place of peace, there is not much time left to embrace friendship. As was the case for Tasha. Adversity in her household compromised her ability to be a friend while in school. According to Masten (2014), “Schools can play a major role in risk and resilience, exacerbating or mitigating risk in the lives of children, shaping resilience capacity, and restoring a sense of normalcy (p. 219)”. However, Tasha recalled times when the family was transient due to her mother’s unemployment, which required her and her siblings to change schools periodically. She started to recognize the effects of their transient lifestyle during her high school years. Prior to their most recent move, she began attending a middle college high school located in the previous city. Between the college course work, the driving distance to and from school, and the girl groups, which she described as cliques, she began to feel like a loner during her senior year. Even though she made attempts to converse with other girls in school, she recognizes the effects of her anxiety on her ability to act as a friend. She explains:

*I still talked to them, like the girls that I used to talk to, but it would just feel awkward and I guess that was my anxiety or maybe my depression, but I always felt awkward around everybody. Like I wanted to talk but I didn't know what to say, so yeah, it might have been my anxiety.*

Benard (2004) cites social competencies, including responsiveness and communication, as an indicator of children's overall positive adaptation or wellness. Tasha struggles with responsiveness, which means to be well-regulated and positive in mood to exhibit an easy temperament that is appealing and sociable (Benard, 2004).

Females exposed to trauma and adversity are found to show more symptoms of distress, depressed mood, or anxiety than boys of the same age particularly during and beyond adolescents (Masten, 2014; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). Social anxiety has plagued Tasha throughout her college years as well. She has not embodied an identity as friend. Friendship presents another role to maintain when she is already consumed with serving as caregiver to her mother and siblings. Although her college course of study allows her to be part of a small cohort of students that she has been in class with since her freshman year, she still feels left out of any clique. She admits:

*I kind of wish I had a clique, but I'm kind of a loner and I guess it's because of my, my anxiety, so I just be overthinking, like when I'm in social settings I'm just, I'm just like a overthinker, I'm just be overthinking everything.*

Navigating subjectivities increased feelings of vulnerability that sometimes lead to withdrawal. "Withdrawn behavior can be a symptom of depression, anxiety, fear of negotiating interpersonal relationships, or difficulties arising from compromised self-confidence" (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005, p. 37). Tasha seems to be withdrawn from her peer group, and she has identified her anxiety as the reason for her withdrawal. It seems she has accepted her identity

as a loner.

Tasha has a growing concern for her siblings who remain in the household with her mother. Therefore, her role of caregiver to her siblings seems more important than her role as a friend. She notes that her mother and siblings recently moved in with her grandmother, which required her sister to change schools. She also recognizes a generational pattern of transiency and displacement:

*I feel like it's a lot on them because my sister constantly had to change schools, like I didn't have to deal with that as much, but my sister, she don't even remember her first grade teacher's name or her second. I'm like wow, you don't remember any of your teachers' names, because she just been moving from city to city, from school to school. Yeah, that's the same thing that my grandmother did to her kids, like all my aunts and my uncle, they all been to a million schools because she always was moving around and stuff.*

Although Tasha has concerns and negative feelings about her mom's behavior and choices, she has never discussed her feelings with her mom to spare her feelings. She explains:

*We've never spoke about our feelings per se, but I just always felt like she kind of knows how we feel, but I don't feel the same things anymore. It's kind of like out of sight, out of mind. Sometimes I might think about it, but it doesn't—I don't let it like affect me too much.*

Despite her mother's drama, Tasha manages to reflect on the time when she was on track and views her as a good mom who can be caring and loving. According to Tasha, "She just sometimes needs to get uplifted . . . when she gets down, it's just like bad, but . . . she's still really good." Tasha consciously focuses on the positive versus the negative encounters she has experienced with her mother. Therefore, she is able to express compassion and forgiveness towards her mother, which are social competencies related to resilience (Benard, 2004).

Compassion is the desire and will to care for and to help alleviate another's suffering, and the

ability to forgive another is a positive indicator of wellness (Benard, 2004).

Nevertheless, Tasha's fear for her own emotional and social well-being remain a concern as she approaches her senior year in college. She is struggling with self-awareness or mindfulness, which includes observing one's thoughts, feelings, moods, strengths and needs without getting caught up in emotion (Benard, 2004, p. 26). She confesses:

*Overall, I feel like, like I'm doing good, but emotionally, I might not be okay. On like the outside, I'm okay, but privately, I'm probably not okay. I guess I'm okay because I'm in college and I work and I'm just doing good for myself, but I guess I'm not okay because like I get depressed and sometimes I get anxiety, like really crazy anxiety, and I just get really sad sometimes, but I kind of know how to pick myself up.*

Negotiating between opposing perceptions and subjectivities is challenging as it can affect trust of self and others and lead to misunderstandings (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005).

In some instances, Tasha views her mother as unstable, irresponsible, and unproductive. Yet, she recalls times when her mother was nurturing and demonstrated affection. Tasha must navigate her loneliness with bouts of guilt for the feelings she has towards her mother. The guilt and loneliness are coupled with challenges to communicate with her mother and peers—a key factor that aids in fostering relationships and resilience (Benard, 2004). Tasha's efforts to negotiate between her role as a responsible college student and the emotional strain of lacking parental support persists as a challenge to her ability to foster relationships with others. Consequently, Tasha exists as a loner who is consumed with her mood and attention to caring for herself and her siblings as she resists being like her mother while maintaining love for her. Navigating subjectivities is complex.

Claire experienced these struggles to “become” through an intense jealousy of her peers, which affected her ability to act as a friend. The college campus exposed her to a diverse group

of peers from various socioeconomic backgrounds in comparison to the students at the magnet high school she attended for the arts. Most of the students she has met in college are white and, what she describes as, privileged. She realized a few months ago, after experiencing a rough time, that she was acting ‘really petty’ and ‘hating’ on people. She became frustrated by their complaints regarding matters she considered minute. She vents:

*It became frustrating. The only issue has been what do I want for dinner instead of am I going to have dinner, which are two completely separate things. So, it just got frustrating, because I can remember just like hating on other people, like it's not fair that I've been through x, y, and z and you just get the easy road out and you're complaining.*

Regarding relationships, Claire struggles with comparisonitis—the compulsion to compare one’s accomplishments to another’s to determine relative importance, etc. Sociologists call it relative deprivation, which is a theory that states, a person may feel deprived of some desirable thing relative to their own past, another person, persons, group, ideal, or some other social category (Walker & Pettigrew, 1984). I experienced relative deprivation in college when one of my good friends continued to speak of what her mother said. I recall her confidently saying, “Mama said [this], and Mama said [that],” as she quoted proverbs and nuggets of wisdom that her mother had shared with her. One day, I became irritated and replied, “Well, what do you say?” I told myself I was frustrated by her lack of effort to think for herself. However, I was jealous over my own lack of maternal tutelage that forced me to think for myself with uncertainty and doubt. Truth is, I would have given anything to know what Mama said.

Although Claire confessed the jealousy she encountered, she works consistently to make sense of her feelings and resolve to be a better person,

*Now, I realize it's not fair, but just know it's life, and you just got to go on; you've got to deal with it. I use that in the way of goals, kind of. I noticed, I always say that my*

*children will never...I'd rather have them on that side [of privilege]. I hope they never get to that complaining side, but I'd rather have them be more than to ever go through anything I've been through. So, I do use it as goals.*

Claire reflects on others' experiences with privilege to set goals for herself. As mentioned, goal-setting provides a sense of purpose that fosters resilience and helps to negotiate subjectivities (Benard, 2004). She also reflects on the pressures of being an imperfect caregiver seeking peace to relate to those who face struggles, which has benefitted her socially. She recalls individuals sharing their problems with her when she served as a resident advisor (RA). Although she would not share details about her life openly, she realized the power of understanding. Like Tasha, she exudes a sense of compassion and empathy for others, which is a personal strength that supports resilience (Benard, 2004). If she assured them she understood what they were experiencing, her peers shared more about their struggles, which aided her in her role as RA. Claire was able to maximize on her negative subjectivities in a positive way to support others in their time of need, thus extending her role of caregiver beyond her parents despite the burden it caused.

My story has some similarities with Tasha's. Although I was better able to manage friendships with friends in my neighborhood, I was consumed with my wellbeing and progress during high school after relocating to live with my brother. When I was 15, he had to place my mother in a nursing home facility, so when I moved in with him, I assumed a new role, 'roommate' and had to become more responsible. The agreement with my brother was that I had to get a driver's license and a job. My brother still had my mother's car, a burgundy 1984 Volkswagen Rabbit, as a backup car, so that's what I drove. I secured a job as the drive-thru cashier at Hardee's. I worked every day at Hardee's from 5:00 PM-10:00 PM Sunday-Thursday until I went to college. While living with him through my senior year of high school, I was

responsible for my own toiletries, food, gas, automobile maintenance, etc. He even assigned me a few monthly bills. I had my space in the house, and he had his. I could not bother my brother for anything, so I stayed out of his way. For example, I had to complete applications, SAT testing paperwork, and financial aid forms and pay the fees on my own in preparation to attend college. The responsibilities made me feel overburdened. It demanded perfectionism as I felt I could not afford to neglect any of the tasks. Yet, maintaining the responsibilities promoted a sense of self-efficacy and pride, personal strengths that promote resilience (Benard, 2004). I often reminded myself that I should be dead or at least on drugs, but I wasn't, so I persevered.

Although, I was able to maintain friends in the community, this independent way of being affected my social interaction as I transitioned into adulthood. The limited interaction while living with my brother and the feelings of being a burden still affects my relationships to this day. I have a hard time asking others for assistance despite the minuteness of the matter. Whether it is financial support or a simple ride to the airport, I dread being a bother to others. I even experience difficulties with sharing my space and belongings.

It was a combination of the fear of failing and the sense of responsibility that aided my tenacity towards success. Similar to Claire, I set a goal to ensure my adulthood exceeded my childhood, and I worked towards it. Therefore, I am strategic in my approach to decision-making. This stems from the fear of making mistakes and not having anyone to assist. Interpersonally, it causes me to appear indecisive, when in all actuality, I make pretty good decisions, weighing all consequences and possibilities to the maximum. The perceived indecisiveness can lead to misunderstanding when trying to include others in my decision-making process. It also exposes my tendencies toward perfectionism and causes me to appear to

be a know-it-all. It is not that I know everything, I just consider all possibilities and maybe think it through more than the next person. Like Tasha, at times the overthinking mixed with the skepticism leads me to misinterpreting the actions of others; however, for the most part, the two have kept me out of a lot of trouble. Even when I have gotten into trouble, these skills have helped me to determine a way of escape.

As mentioned, I was a perfectionist and an overachiever. Initially, it seemed to be for attention, attention from my daddy and positive attention from my teachers. Eventually, the perfectionism stemmed from my unrealistic belief and fear that I had no room for mistakes (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). This can cause one to become self-centered, not because they want to disregard others, but because they must focus on their own wellbeing. This disrupts interpersonal relationships in that people tend to stand clear of those with high expectations and standards.

Not only did I make efforts to depict perfect skills, I also made efforts to perfectly hide my true feelings and pain, which also impacted my interpersonal relationships. I put on a tough demeanor and a strong exterior, when all the while, I felt empty inside. This presents an additional identity to maintain. I did not feel safe or secure, and though independent, I longed and still long for someone to depend on, someone to care. The problem is, no one knew to care. My effort to negotiate the subjectivities in private sent mixed messages to family members who might have helped. I have been told by family members that they thought I was okay since I was successful in school, college, and career. This reflects a vicious cycle of revolving subjectivities: I needed someone to care; I didn't have anyone, so I took care of myself; people didn't think I needed anyone or anything, so they didn't come to my aid; people won't come to my aid, so I get

angry and then stronger, and persevere; I feel weak and need someone; no one comes to my aid since I hide it so well; I get angry, on and on the cycle continues . . . I don't like the strong person I am; I would rather have a safe place to be weak. My self-esteem swings left to right like the pendulum on a grandfather clock, time ticks, time passes; yet, my plight remains the same.

The most difficult factor I have had to contend with is the feeling of not having a place to belong. When I lived with my father and stepmother, I felt like an uninvited guest. When I lived with my brother, it was temporary, so I never became settled. Furthermore, I never established an identity as a daughter. With time, I convinced myself I did not have a mother. Consequently, I never established a sense of safety and security, so there was a constant, nagging feeling of fear. To negotiate between being the responsible leader I aspired to be and the insecure, unsettled young woman I was, I sought affirmation from others, which made it tough for others to entreat me. It is almost as if I did not trust others to hold up their end of the deal, so I sought reassurance. I was afraid to rely on people since I rarely had a successful experience when attempting to do so. If you could not rely on your mother and father, the question remains, who can you rely on? This mentality creates a pessimistic view of people and the world around you, which breeds defiance in an effort to take control (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). It makes for a lonely way of being. The loneliness fuels more frustration and anger. I recall crying and declaring, "I am unlovable!" I expressed the loneliness and need for nurture in the metaphorical poem that follows, which clearly expresses the subjectivities that manifest:

*Abandoned Ship*  
(Original Poem by Brooksie A. Broome July 3, 2003)

*Abandoned Ship*  
*With sails beaten and torn*  
*Decks and mast are weathered*  
*No shine or glisten aboard*

*Misplaced ores deter the voyage*  
*Drifting to and fro*  
*Waves rhythmically push then pull*  
*Seeming to never let go*

*Deserted*  
*Left with a loud silence*  
*Seldom creaking*  
*But with hesitance*

*Because no one hears*  
*Blinded by what appears*  
*To be the damaged exterior*  
*Of what use to be*

*On a path to a place*  
*Yet drifted off course*  
*Somehow North became South*  
*And South became North*

*No one to steer*  
*So it floats astray*  
*Stormy winds increase*  
*The guilt and dismay*

*Oh eyes please see*  
*The abandoned ship*  
*That can be restored*  
*Formed and equipped*

*For every ship has a treasure*  
*That lies inside*  
*Buried beneath*  
*Hurt shame and pride*

*There are jewels with great value*  
*Far above a ruby's cost*  
*Still possessing radiant shine*  
*Untainted yet lost*

*Who will hear the abandoned ship*  
*Pushing against the pressure of the tide*  
*Who will travel the dark corridors*  
*To discover the beauty inside*

*Who will steer the abandoned ship*  
*Who's drifted so far off course*  
*Who will interpret the creaks and moans*  
*Of a screaming silent voice*

*Who will teach this ship to sail the sea*  
*Come wind storm or rain*  
*Who will expose and reveal*  
*The treasure behind the pain*

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I present a portion of the findings from this research study in two parts. In Part I, I present my story and the narratives participants shared of their memories of household dysfunction due to what Black feminists consider “suspended” mothers (Collins, 2000). The suspended woman is consumed with her woes, thus incapacitated to attend to her responsibilities

and over reliant upon escapism and avoidance techniques to cope. Consequently, her daughter is deprived of stability, security, and guidance, and therefore, subject to navigate subjectivities and negotiate identities independently.

Part II of this chapter highlights the subjectivities and identities revealed through the stories told. The participants and I each embodied the role of caregiver, I for myself, Tasha for her siblings, and Claire for her parents. Considering the pressures of having to embrace responsibility at an early age, each of us expressed a need for peace, which required decisions that, sometimes, disrupted relationships we ultimately desired. In an effort to maintain and cope, we each became consumed with perfectionistic tendencies, an overcompensated effort to persevere. Despite our efforts to be perfect in an imperfect situation, we recognized our flaws, which resulted in disappointment and, at times, self-hate, causing us to feel cast out and unlovable.

Our subjectivities required us to negotiate between the way we had become because of our experiences and the way we wished to be. Although we were subjected, we did not allow the circumstances to subjugate us. We demonstrate resilience to access agency, which is revealed in the research findings and presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Accessing Agency

### Introduction

Agency is the ability to act. According to Davidson (2017), agency requires 1) having the ability to choose to do or not to do something, 2) rationality to guide those choices to one's own advantage, and 3) having one's agency recognized by others as a sacrifice for humanity. However, maltreated youth exposed to adverse circumstances with limited support are subjected to environments that can interfere with their agency—actions, will, and rationalization. Therefore, agency and subjectivity correlate. An increase in subjectivity can decrease one's agency. Nevertheless, despite our stories of despair, we were not defeated. In this chapter, I present Part III: The Fight to show the negotiation between subjectivity and agency through the demonstration of resilience among African-American women exposed to childhood maltreatment as the research findings reveal.

Luther et al. (2000) indicate that resilience is the process of competence despite hardships, which focuses on what one demonstrates in times of hardship. Yet, the process can be complex in the context of significant and continual adversity. As established in Chapter 4, when facing adversity, subjects must negotiate between contradicting identities and extreme subjectivities. Therefore, what one demonstrates may not appear to be resilience at times. It is a fight, a struggle, and the struggle is real. There is a constant negotiation compromising, at times, to simply be okay. Ungar (2008) highlights the navigating and negotiations of subjectivities in his explanation of resilience, noting that resilience is both the capacity of individuals to *navigate* their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity to *negotiate* for their resources to be provided and experienced in

culturally meaningful ways. What resources do Black females use to navigate adverse situations and maintain a sense of self and well-being and achieve success? In this chapter, I address Research Question 3) What do the participants' stories reveal about the nature of their academic resilience and agency despite childhood adversity? I inquire into the narratives of the research participants and my own to examine resilience as a means to access agency. The findings from this study reveal the use of othermothers and fictive kin (Collins, 2000), extracurricular involvement, writing, counseling, and religion as resources to foster resilience and access agency.

### **Part III: The Fight**

#### **Othermothers & Fictive Kin**

Collins (2000) elaborates on the concept of othermothers and their impact in African and African-American communities. Othermothers are women who assist bloodmothers or birth mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities (Collins, 2000, p. 192). Othermothers can be grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins who engage in child-care responsibilities for one another's children (Collins, 2000). "Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood" (Collins, 2000, pg. 194). According to Collins (2000) when the women-centered networks of community-based child care extend beyond the boundaries of biologically related individuals it is considered 'fictive kin'. Othermothering and fictive kinship proves beneficial in the participants' lives in this study.

Claire benefited from her grandmother's active presence as an othermother in her life throughout childhood and her teenage years. She describes her grandmother as stable and

consistent. Claire found comfort in the fact that her grandmother had financial means. She was a teacher, an educator, so her income and medical benefits were consistent and sufficient. She also supported Claire academically, providing resources and materials, such as books and practice opportunities for literacy and math development at an early age. Claire appreciated the consistency she offered each evening, as Claire would come home to her after school. Even when Claire's father and mother decided to cohabitate, they moved across the street from the grandmother's home. Thus, Claire was able to retreat there to "take a break" when her mother and father would yell and argue, as was the case much of the time.

Her grandmother's role as othermother was threefold. Not only did she provide financial stability and security and act as a buffer to negativity, she also served as an inspiration for Claire to succeed. Claire explains,

*She would yell at me, but it was never like the same yelling my mother would give me. It was yelling to do better, yelling to progress, or if she got upset with me, and she never did that on a frequent basis. Only like if I didn't do my homework, then the yelling would come. You know, it would be like, "Why are you not doing your homework? Do your homework. Then you can read or look at T.V." So, it was never a yelling for something ridiculous. It always had purpose and it always had meaning to it.*

Claire's grandmother's stability, consistency, protection, and encouragement were key factors that contributed to her resilience to persevere past the maltreatment and abuse she experienced at the hand of her bloodmother and father.

Like Claire, I benefited from my grandmother acting as an othermother when I was a young child. I also recall a few aunts and great aunts who would allow me to stay with them periodically when my mother was sent away. However, throughout my childhood and adolescent years, I remember and appreciate a number of my babysitters and friends' mothers who acted as

fictive kin. They all were aware of my mother's condition, so they made efforts to include me in activities with their daughters. Although I did not refer to them as aunts, they embodied the role of an ideal aunt in my life. One friend lived in a neighboring city, so her mother would take me to stay at their house for weeks at a time. Another friend's mother, who lived up the street from me, allowed me to ride with her and her daughter to girl scouts and softball practice. I remember one year she allowed me to accompany them while Christmas shopping; otherwise, I would not have had any gifts. That particular year, my mother was zoned out as was the case a few years during the winter holidays when family is usually at the forefront. Many of the mothers in the neighborhood also allowed me to eat dinner with them most evenings when my mother did not cook. Not once did I feel unwelcomed; most times they suggested that I stay and eat because they knew I would never ask. In spite of the shame I sometimes felt, I would appreciatively visit their homes just to get a glimpse of what life should be. I admired the fresh and savory aromas in their clean homes and the simple yet intentional décor. Those moments offered me hope.

Not all my friends' mothers acted as othermothers or fictive kin. Some of my friends also lived in unstable households. One of my friend's mother and stepfather were addicted to crack cocaine. Consequently, I spent a lot of time at her house, helping her attend to her two younger brothers and making efforts to keep their house clean. Despite the level of chaos at their house, it was still safer than mine if my mother was on a rampage. Another friend's parents were much older, considering she was the last of twelve children. Though her mother did not attend to us much, I spent a lot of time there eating her delicious fried chicken and learning from her older sisters. Then there was another friend whose mother was intellectually delayed with multiple personality disorders. We would take turns at one another's house for as long as we could until

they decided to flip on us and run us off. In our neighborhood, we supported one another during those tough adolescent years. According to Collins (2000, p. 113), “In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversations and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist.” It was those friends who taught me how to ride a bike and about menstruation and choosing bras. We would style one another’s hair while we poured out our pains. Back then, I called them my homegirls; currently, I hear them referred to as “Sis”, short for sister. There was no shame because we each had our own story. For African-American women, the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women’s objectification [and subjugation] is another Black woman (Collins, 2000, p. 114). I recognized the injustice; we were denied the opportunity to be sweet little girls. Therefore, we encouraged one another, emotionally and academically. These friendships with other women were vital to my growth and well-being (Collins, 2000). Friendships served and continue to serve as a pertinent social resource that fosters resilience and affirms my sense of agency. In times when I feel I cannot, my friends remind me I can.

The fictive kin were not the only women who made an impact in my life during the early years. My most pleasant memories derive from my time spent at school with my teachers. The consistency, structure, and healthy interactions were a welcomed relief to my troubling circumstances. I looked to my teachers as a model of what it meant to be a woman. Most of my teachers in elementary and middle school were women. Those women were informative and resourceful. The knowledge they provided offered me a sense of stability and hope. They had control, yet they were not controlling; they allowed me to be myself, no matter how many times I changed my mind about who I wanted to be. They listened even when my screams were silent. I

believe they prayed for me. Two of them had to have been angels, my fourth-grade teacher and English teacher in junior high school. Somehow, they could see the picture plainly despite the scattered puzzle pieces I presented. My fourth-grade teacher comforted me when I was young, fragile and afraid. She inspired my love of language as she meticulously shared the power of letters to make words and how those words make meaning through sentence structure and the parts of speech. My junior high English teacher further fostered my love of language through strategic lessons in writing various text genres and engaging novel studies. She also mentored me, providing poignant nuggets of wisdom and truth when I was facing peer pressure and making life decisions. Later, during my senior year of high school, she wrote a college reference letter for me, and after college, she was assigned as my mentor teacher during my first and second year teaching. Her support throughout the years gave me a sense of self-efficacy, which encouraged me to strive for success, thus enacting agency.

Tasha did not experience othermothering or fictive kin in the same manner as Claire and I did. As noted in Chapter 4, she does not maximize on friendships either due to social anxiety. The women in Tasha's family have a history of mental illness. Her grandmother and mother are on medication and her great grandmother was bipolar. According to Tasha, the great grandmother raised her grandmother and her mother, and she would put them down often, criticizing Tasha's mother for being 'light-skinned' in particular. The cycle continued with Tasha, as her mom often makes offensive comments to Tasha and her sister. Tasha shares,

*There's certain times where she'll call me or my sister out of our name, like she'll call us a bitch while she's angry at us and then later on apologize for it, and it's kind of like she does it because that's what was done to her. I hope that I don't do that to my kids if I have kids.*

Tasha also recognizes a pattern of transiency that continues with her younger sister. Her grandmother moved a lot, and now Tasha is concerned because her sister is experiencing the same instability from moving often with their mom.

*She don't even remember like her first grade teacher name or her second, and I'm like, "Wow, you don't remember any of your teachers' names!", because she just been like from city to city, from school to school, so yeah, and that's the same thing that my grandmother did to her kids, like all my aunts and my uncle, they all been to a million schools because she always was moving around and stuff.*

Tasha recognizes the lack of othermothers and fictive kin in her life. She expresses concern about the instability she has endured due to mental illness among the women in her family, and she is concerned about the generational cycle and the affects it may have on her sister academically and socially.

### **Writing as Resistance**

As a teenager, I had to wrestle to simply maintain. These instances exposed my anger; I could not conceal it. It was during the latter teenage years that I decided to etch my hurts, applying pen to pad to reflect my heart of stone. Ink leaked from my heart to form a collection of diary entries and poems. Writing became my way of coping, permitting me to erupt versus implode. I captured these sentiments in the acrostic poem that follows:

#### *Confrontation*

(Original Poem by Brooksie B. Sturdivant written on October 13, 2004)

*Voices venting inside my head  
Otward expression, silent instead  
Lava imploding about to spew  
Confront or conceal, what should I do?  
Aggravation rumbles, stirring animosity  
Navigate to decrease the velocity  
Overflowing as the tension grows  
I'm about to explode!*

Tasha also used writing to cope and release some of her feelings. She did not write poetry. Instead, she used writing as a form of communication between her and her father to address his abandonment and neglect. She decided to write a letter to her father and send it to him via a social media messenger service when she was in high school. Research tells us that letter writing among adolescents provides a tangible way for problems to be externalized, named, and then confronted (White & Murray, 2002). Tasha's aim was to share some of her struggles and her sadness because of his absence from her life. She applied persuasive techniques, including updates about her sister and brother in hope he would reconsider his attitude and actions. He did not respond. She said she is certain he received the message because she has since seen him active on the social media outlet. She allowed me to read the letter, but she did not wish to include the contents in the study. She was embarrassed by her need to plead and disappointed by his lack of response. Although it felt satisfying to release her feelings, ultimately, she regrets sending it because of the outcome.

Similar to Tasha, in my early thirties, I opted to write a letter to my eldest living uncle at that time to express my concern for the ill-treatment some of my maternal family members demonstrated towards me. They had developed negative opinions about my lack of interaction with my mother who was in a nursing home at the time. By then, I had developed symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting in re-traumatization and hyperarousal when I would attempt to visit her followed by long periods of avoidance (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). I started the letter this way,

*I am writing this letter to share my feelings as it relates to my childhood and perceptions [subjectivities] growing up. I desire to share because it seems some of the family members have a misconception about my actions or the lack thereof as it relates to my*

*mother. I am writing this letter to you as the eldest family member on the [surname omitted] side. It is my hope that in sharing you all can gain a clearer sense of where I am coming from and begin to respect me for the woman I have become in spite of. Regardless, I feel it necessary to share in order for me to forgive and move forward.*

As Collins (2000) notes, I found it to be a struggle to use the range of my voice to attempt to express the totality of self. This excerpt documents my intentions to advocate for myself and re-establish my identity. The consciousness and will to act on my behalf demonstrates agency.

Unlike Tasha, I do not regret it, as the response and interactions that ensued were positive.

Considering the enhancements in technology, Claire utilizes video to record diary entries in the form of video journals. She explains,

*I got to release it, so I just talk, because for me I feel like at times writing, it could be a struggle. I just don't get out the words fast enough when I write. I'll talk to the camera, whether it be on the laptop or on the phone. I'll just talk it out, and I post it to YouTube, so I won't lose it. But there's a way on YouTube you can set it to where nobody sees it, so I made sure that only I could see it.*

When asked to describe the videos, she said,

*The videos are a mixture of self-help, venting, and reflection. Not all the videos are bad. Some are good. My keeping them is also a point of reflection. It allows me to remember what I've been through. When I'm at my higher moments, I can look back and be like wow. I remember where I was at the time of making a video and then I just think like okay, so this is what you were thinking at that timeframe.*

Claire uses the video logs as a psychological resource to release her frustrations during adversity and to celebrate her successes. These entries allow her to monitor and reflect upon acts of resilience and instances of agency.

Writing poetry, letters, and verbally articulating journal entries on video are ways participants embrace the power of the pen. We apply the academic skills and vocabulary accessed in school to navigate our subjectivities and vent our frustrations. The pen provides a

tool for resilience, providing relief and a means to reflect on positive and negative thoughts and a way to communicate concerns to others for resolve.

### **Agency through Extracurricular Activities**

Benard (2004), believes that opportunities that offer engaging, challenging, and interesting activities, including opportunities for participation in group or cooperative activities, promote resilience in the lives of youth since these can foster a sense of belonging. As these narratives suggest, involvement in the community and at school promoted resilience and agency in the lives of the participants in this study.

Claire was actively involved in school-based, extracurricular activities throughout her childhood. She played the clarinet and attended a performing arts school. There, she participated with the concert band, which allowed opportunities for socializing, performing, and some travel. She was also a member of a school-based, competitive book club called Battle of the Books. She credits school-based and community involvement with keeping her out of trouble. She explains,

*Extracurricular activities allowed me opportunities to participate in stuff and to get outside the house. I tried to stay out of the household, not like in a negative way, but just tried to do things to be involved, but in high school, I didn't smoke, I didn't drink, I didn't do any of that.*

Like Claire, I attended a specialized school called 'The Career Center'. For a portion of the school day, I went to the neighborhood high school, and then I transitioned with other students to a community college, which had a designated area for the career center. I recall an application process by which participants declared their focus area. I chose cosmetology. I had styled my own hair since I was a young girl, so I became pretty good at it. I had begun to style my friends' hair as well. Although I did not pursue a career in cosmetology, this opportunity

allowed me to enhance my attention to detail and master my styling capabilities which proved resourceful during my college years. Since I left my father's home to live with my brother, he did not provide me with funding for college. I received no additional money other than a refund check from student loans and a monthly stipend for federal work study. Hence, I styled hair on campus and accepted donations and tips which provided extra income. Self-efficacy and mastery are manifestations of autonomy, one of four categories of personal strengths or internal assets associated with resilience (Benard, 2004). The resilience I demonstrated as a young child through styling my own hair and the techniques learned at the Career Center fostered skills that enabled me to access agency despite my father's lack of financial support.

Tasha also attended another type of specialty school: early college. The small class sizes were helpful for Tasha. Unlike Claire, she did not maximize on school-based, extracurricular activities, partly due to failed attempts and social anxiety. She confesses,

*I tried out for things, but I never made the team. I tried out for volleyball, didn't make it, cheerleading, didn't make it, step team, didn't make it, so I just kind of gave up. In high school, even in college, like I always start off involved and start off going to the meetings and then I just stop going to the meetings.*

Compared to Tasha, I tried a variety of community-based activities as a young girl, but I did not continue with consistency. As mentioned, a few of my friends' mothers would allow me to join their daughters for some extracurricular activities, such as girl scouts, dance class, cheerleading, and soft ball, but I was too young to maintain the schedule and attend regularly. I do not recall completing a full season of either of those. In sixth grade, I took lessons to play a musical instrument; however, I did not stick with it either. The absence of a consistent and stable support system affected my capacity to engage in extracurricular activities during my elementary years.

I did, however, participate in my community's Summer Recreation and Vacation Bible School (VBS). Summer Recreation, or Summer Rec' as we called it for short, was an enrichment opportunity for children from low-income housing. For a few weeks during the summer, I would attend daily; each day was designated a particular focus, i.e. art, gymnastics, reading, math, and fieldtrips. The fieldtrips included skating, golf, bowling, and swimming to name a few. I was able to access this opportunity, as my older brother also attended. He was better able to follow the schedule and maintain the requirements for participation than I was. The exposure to the Summer Recreation activities was rewarding. I learned about new multisyllabic concepts like trampoline and skills such as swimming. Such was the case with VBS. Each church in our community would host a week of VBS during the summer. A group of my friends and myself would attend each one. Since the meetings were daily for one week, I was able to better understand and manage the schedule and ride with my friends. The consistent, daily routine, leadership experience, and public speaking opportunities offered at VBS exposed me to the benefits of order and structure, a contrast to the chaos I encountered at home. In addition, the opportunities to lead and speak further enhanced my confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy. I was able to apply each of these skills during school, which added to my academic success. Tasha might have benefited from engagement in extracurricular activities as she shared she currently struggles with public speaking.

*I'm in my junior year. This might be my hardest year because I'm not really good with speaking in front of people. It's like I'm expected to do more now since it's my junior year, so I get overwhelmed. I feel like that's where a lot of my anxiety comes from, but I'm excited to graduate. Sometimes, I feel like I want to drop out, and I want to take a semester off or take a year off because it is just too much, but I doubt I'm gonna do that.*

These community-based activities increased my personal strengths of social competence,

problem-solving, autonomy and sense of purpose (Benard, 2004). I relied on these strengths then, as I rely on them now, to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. The strengths also empower me with the will to act as an agent when I feel disempowered. I am reminded of my capabilities when adverse circumstances seem insurmountable.

Like Claire, during my teenage years, I was able to maximize on school-based, extracurricular activities since I could maintain schedules and negotiate transportation better than when I was a child. In 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I served as the manager for the girls' basketball team. As manager, I observed each game to track locations of shots taken—those hit and missed—for future coaching sessions. I also maintained checklists of supplies and assisted with packing and distribution. This experience reinforced my sense of responsibility, attentiveness, and management. Again, the effectiveness of my performance affirmed my sense of self-efficacy. These skills proved essential to my success in my position as cashier at Hardee's while in high school. Before resigning to attend college, the manager asked me to serve as crew leader for the evening shift due to my attention to detail and accountability. Nevertheless, due to my evening hours at Hardee's, I was not involved in afterschool activities. I was initiated into the National Honor Society and the Beta Club for my academic performance, but I never attended the meetings. The demand for independence and autonomy outweighed the desire for a 'normal' high school experience thus the compromise.

After I transitioned back to my hometown to live with my brother, I was a student in the theater arts class my junior and senior year. I possessed more autonomy than I had when I lived with my father, so I was able to stay after to perform when we displayed productions for parents and the community. Since participation was a course requirement, the manager excused me from

work. I loved acting and performed well, but I never had a guest to attend the performances. I remember my eyes leaking in the car as I drove myself home my senior year after an evening production of *A Rose for Emily*. Reflecting, I am not certain if I invited anyone due to the fear of rejection. By then, I had attended three high schools, and I had abruptly left my father's home without notice. Due to the transiency, I felt somewhat displaced, and I did not believe anyone would care to see me perform because of my choices. Nevertheless, I demonstrated confidence and resilience through the pursuit of a special interest (Werner and Smith, 1982), which is evidence of resilience; yet, I was not confident or secure enough to risk additional rejection.

Community or school-based extracurricular activities offered impactful opportunities for the participants' and me to enhance resilience skills necessary for agency and academic success. Nevertheless, demonstrating agency is not guaranteed nor consistent when one is simultaneously navigating subjectivities amidst adversity.

### **Counseling to Conquer**

African-Americans experience greater stressors due to racism, prejudice, and economic disparities. Still, many avoid counseling as a potential solution to depression, anxiety, PTSD, and marriage and parenting issues. Claire, however, has participated in counseling twice, once her freshman year and a second time starting her sophomore year. She decided to seek assistance in her freshmen year to deal with the experience of being sexually assaulted by her older cousin when she was five years old. Due to the positive benefits of this experience, she decided to return in the year of this study because she was facing several challenging situations with friendships and academic stressors. In addition, one of her aunts passing away and her parents' continued requests for financial assistance, along with her grandmother being placed in the nursing facility

for dementia have resulted in her need to pursue counseling. She describes her rationale for seeking help,

*It was a combination of everything. I did not feel the urge to live. Every day, you're waking up and something's not adding up or something is constantly going left, let's try to get help for it. Knowing my family's history of mental illness, I don't want to get to that same level of where they've been, because I've had several family members, the aunts and what not, that have been in mental institutions, so I didn't want to get to that point. If there's an issue let's talk about it.*

Claire's self-awareness and critical thinking insight about her family history with mental illness gave her the will to take control of her own mental health care (Benard, 2000). Acting from a place of power and control towards a resolution is the essence of agency (Masten, 2014).

Oftentimes, we attempt to rely on our friends to assist us in tough times. However, Claire realized her issues required assistance from a trained professional. She elaborates,

*I don't think the spiral I hit, any friends could help. We can help each other to a certain extent but we're not trained. You're trained in certain things and you can handle that; I'm trained in certain things, and I can handle that, but my friends are not psychologists. It's one thing to have conversation; it's another thing to get counseling and therapy.*

Prior to going to counseling this year, Claire applied other methods to address the stressors in her life. For instance, she recognizes that there are periods where she needs to be alone. She simply needs to take a break.

*My roommate left the apartment for spring break, and I was happy. For two days, I stayed in my room because there are times when you've just been through enough and you're just like, "I just need some peace and clarity, and I don't have money to go to no wellness spa." So, you just need to be by yourself, not my yourself in a dark room, but by yourself to check in on yourself.*

Claire's familiarity with mental health issues due to her family history and her study of public health aids her in recognizing when she needs help and when she needs to access some alone time to clear her mind.

In contrast, Tasha has considered counseling, but she had never engaged in any counseling sessions. Despite awareness of her family history with mental health issues and her attempted suicide, she rejected the opportunity to engage. She explains her hesitation,

*When I went to that hospital, I was supposed to go to counseling afterwards, but I was like, "I do not want to go to counseling!" I kind of felt like I was in denial. I was like, "It was just one incident; I'm not like really depressed." Because when I went in there you seen so many other girls that was just like really depressed and really like going through things, so I was just like I'm not really depressed, like I'm okay. Later, my mom tried to encourage me to go to this counselor, but I didn't like it, and I didn't feel comfortable with it. I don't know if it was her or the way she counseled, but I didn't like it, so I didn't stick through with it.*

Although Tasha may benefit from counseling services, her decision to refrain from counseling is an act of agency although refraining may not appear the optimal decision. She did not succumb to her mother's perspective. Instead, she chose to manage her emotions and cope independently, which reflects her belief in her ability to act as an agent of change for herself (Masten, 2014). A few years have passed since then, and she admits she considers going now. She has scheduled an appointment recently but decided to cancel it. Between school, her internship, and her job, she forgets to go to the appointment or decides to complete homework assignments instead. It is apparent she struggles with the idea. She concludes, *"Eventually I hope that I can start going to counseling. I want to start going to counseling, but yeah, it just hasn't happened yet."*

Like Tasha, I hesitated to seek counseling. Despite realizing I should have had counseling as a child, I did not seek counseling as an adult until I was 31 or so years old. During that time my father's health was declining, which caused me to reflect on my strained relationship with my mother. I felt that if and when I lost my dad, I would have no one. I was contending simultaneously with people's perceptions of me due to my detachment from my

mother. I felt empty, yet heavy and burdened down. No matter how normal and perfect I tried to pretend life was, it wasn't despite achievements and success. I summed up the cause and cure for my pursuit of peace in the poem that follows:

***Heaviness***

*By Brooksie Broome*

*August 30, 2010*

*I have experienced...*

*broken friendships,  
breakups,  
death of loved ones,  
car wrecks,  
surgery,  
rejection,  
judgement,  
slander,  
misunderstanding,  
betrayal...*

*...yet, I have known no pain that exceeds that which is evoked by the lack of a mother's love.  
How can emptiness feel so heavy?*

Grappling with the subjectivities that ensued, I needed to free my mind and transform my thinking about *who* I was and *how* I was. I started the poem that follows in 2003. I was not able to finish it until 2005. This gap in completion illustrates the daunting task of navigating numerous dichotomous subjectivities. It also shows my hesitation to seek assistance.

*Through God's Eyes*

(Original Poem by Brooksie A. Broome started October 24, 2003, finished May 10, 2005)

*Through God's eyes I'm transparent, clear,  
He peers past my doubts, overlooks my fears.*

*He doesn't see the wounds or scars that remain.  
Through His eyes they are healed. He removed the pain.*

*He doesn't acknowledge the weakness of my arms  
as I shudder at His voice with disarray and alarm.  
He takes no notice that my feet are lame  
as I hesitantly drift encamped by shame.*

*He orders my steps, directs my path,  
blots out my sins and suppresses His wrath.*

*My filthy rags appear as white as snow.  
He's the Most-High God yet sees so low.*

*My downcast gaze brings Him no surprise.  
Lord, help me to see me through God's eyes.*

Nikki Giovanni (1992, p. 140) declares, "If we don't like the world we're living in, change it, and if we can't change it, we can change ourselves. We can do something." I worried that others would view me as weak and flawed. Truth is, I was, and I needed a safe place to be weak. Resolution was more important than reputation, as my resilience was waning. Therefore, I resisted the fear of judgement and courageously utilized my resources as an act of agency. Counseling sessions helped me sift and sort the many subjectivities I had acquired throughout life. Thus, I was able to change in my consciousness (Collins, 2000) and self-awareness (Benard, 2004), which was necessary to continue life in peace. I was tired of debating and negotiating between that which I heard in my surroundings and that which I believed to be true about me. Collins (2000, p. 123) declares that when Black women's very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definition becomes essential to survival. Thus, self-definition is one of the key

tenants of black feminism (Collins, 2000). I no longer wanted to simply cope, I desired to conquer, and with counseling support, I did.

### **Agency through Religion and Faith**

“Because he lives I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone,  
because I know who holds the future, now life is worth the living just because he lives.”  
~Lyrics by B. Gaither

Tasha, Claire, and I each find comfort in our Christian faith, which fosters meaning-making and personal strength for resilience (Benard, 2004). Tasha’s mother did not go to church when Tasha was younger; however, she and her siblings were able to ride a church bus to attend a local church. She attended frequently as a younger girl. Now that Tasha is in college, she does not attend church regularly. However, she listens to sermons on YouTube, and she enjoys listening to gospel music to lift her mood when she is feeling down. She also describes a combination of prayer and meditation,

*I just talk to God about it, because sometimes I get really bad anxiety. Some days are good but then some days, I’ll just feel so nervous like all day, like just crazy anxiety. So, I just recently started doing yoga for my anxiety. I’ll look up yoga videos on YouTube, and it really helps; I’ll be in a much better mood afterwards.*

According to Masten (2014, p. 255) many religions teach self-regulation skills, encouraging prayer, self-reflection, or meditation practices that facilitate executive function and arousal regulation that promote self-control and well-being.

Claire has one aunt and two uncles who are ministers, so Christianity is a major part of her culture. She says,

*It’s very ironic, my mother’s side of the family has a long history of drinking, smoking, and all this negativity, but I guess when they came to Jesus then they all went and switched. So, they definitely raised me and my cousins in the church.*

She credits church as the one thing that has kept her centered. She also prays and listens to gospel music to seek guidance and motivation. Claire also credits her youth pastor with encouraging her and the other children to make wise choices. She explains,

*She made sure we didn't get on the streets, she was definitely an active role model. In fact I still talk to her, so she's been a great mentor. Yeah, she's definitely kept me centered.*

Masten (2014, p. 255) confirms, that in a dangerous community or situation, adults in religious organization and peers can provide help, mentoring, and prosocial activities that foster competence and resilience in times of turmoil.

Like Tasha and Claire, my faith is a significant part of my life. As a young girl, I attended a small church with my grandmother. Once I moved in with my mother, I rode a church van to a church with a few friends from my neighborhood. We attended Sunday school, and I sang in the children's choir. When I moved in with my father, we did not attend church. I did not attend church regularly again until my senior year of college. For me, faith has been the challenge of convincing my brain to agree with what my spirit believes— "You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and *that* my soul knows very well." (Psalm 139:13-14, The New King James Version). Faith has been the feat of seeing light with my heart when all my eyes could see was darkness. I know I have faith because when darkness engulfed me, I found comfort and meaning. People seek stability in the face of change, and they turn to meaning to help create stability (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002, p. 609). Whether they attribute meaning to factors outside of their control or create one's own meaning, meaning-making is a personal strength that fosters resilience (Benard, 2004).

Baumeister (1991) notes four meaning-related needs: to have purpose, value, and a sense of self-efficacy and self-worth. Attending church fostered a sense of each of these within me. Church provided guidelines that shaped my morals and values (Masten, 2014), which acted as boundaries when negotiating peer pressure during my teen years. Like Claire, I also established positive role models with the Sunday school teachers and choir director and prosocial bonds with my peers. Successful participation in activities, such as choir and Bible trivia competitions, offered opportunities for mastery (Masten, 2014) and promoted self-efficacy and self-worth. Finally, the belief that life had meaning fostered a sense of hope and a sense of purpose, which encouraged and sustained my resilience (Masten, 2014). Ultimately, church afforded me a positive cultural identity (Masten, 2014) that helped me negotiate the negative identities I established from exposure to adversity. I was given a choice to be bitter or better. I enacted agency and chose to be better rather than bitter.

*Where would I be? You only know.  
So glad You see through eyes of love.  
A hopeless case, an empty space 'twas not for grace*  
~hymn, author unknown

In the absence of a primary caregiver's support and guidance, I learned to rely on the grace and mercy of an Almighty God.

## **Summary**

This chapter concludes the findings from this research study. In this chapter, I address Research Question 3) What do the participants' stories reveal about the nature of their academic resilience and agency despite childhood adversity? The findings reveal the use of other women and resources in the community to gain the skills necessary to demonstrate resilience in the

absence of the maternal caregiver's support and guidance. The findings show that participants rely on other women, both relatives and friends, and counseling for understanding, support, and mentorship. In addition, they rely on skills such as writing and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills developed through extracurricular activities and religious organizations to negotiate their subjectivities and identities and achieve academic success. Each participant accesses agency by embracing an identity she rationally chooses instead of becoming what circumstances prescribe.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions & Implications**

In this chapter, I will review the research methodology and objectives, summarize the findings and conclusions, present theoretical connections, provide recommendations for future research, and share practice implications for schools and communities. I end the chapter with final reflections.

### **Research Methodology and Objectives**

The qualitative research study inquires into the narratives and related identities and subjectivities of African-American females who demonstrate educational resilience in the absence of their mother's support. In this section, I review the usefulness of the methodology utilized and present the research objectives for this study.

According to Ungar (2004), narrative accounts of resilience provide evidence of resilience in lived experiences. Such accounts are readily available in the forms of memoirs, autobiographies and biographies; however, these forms omit the “rigor of structured qualitative analysis to understand the mechanisms that promote healthy outcomes” (p. 17). This project provides a “fuller exploration of the systematic and rigorous study of narratives of resilience” (p. 18) grounded in subjective experiences. Furthermore, the utilization of autoethnography presents narratives of the self, inviting readers to relive the events emotionally to send a message about the larger cultural setting and scholarly discourse (Glesne, 2011). Participants' stories provide additional evidence to support the telling of the known, which I express through the autoethnographic accounts (Kim, 2016). According to Benedetto Croce, “Where there is not narrative, there is no history” (cited in Altman, 2008, p. 1). The stories connect past accounts with adversity to present struggles, providing insight into the evolution of subjectivity, identity,

and agency. The results should evoke skepticism “about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture” (in Glesne, 2011).

The following question guides this study: What are the narratives of African-American women who have experienced maternal neglect while demonstrating academic resilience? Sub-questions are as follows: 1) What stories do participants’ recall from their memories of adverse childhood experiences? Using the rich text from the narratives collected, I then applied a post-structural approach to interrogate resilience in the lives of African-American females and examine subjectivity, identities, and agency from a socioecological perspective using a black feminist lens for analysis in response to the following sub-questions: 2) What do the participants’ stories reveal about their complex identities and subjectivities as these are derived from experiences with childhood adversity? 3) What do the participants’ stories reveal about the nature of their academic resilience and agency despite childhood adversity? My purpose is two-fold: to share stories that reveal the ways subjectivity and identity development describes the struggles African-American females face when experiencing adversity and to highlight the quest to demonstrate resilience and access agency. I provide conclusions and theoretical connections from the findings in the two subsequent sections, *Negotiating Subjectivities* to address Research Question 2 and *Accessing Agency* to address Research Question 3.

### **Conclusions and Theoretical Connections**

The theoretical framework for this qualitative, narrative study includes poststructural perspectives of subjectivity and the concept of resilience and a black feminist view of agency as self-definition. In this section, I note ways these theories explain the research findings.

**Negotiating subjectivities.** I applied Weedon's (1997) definition of subjectivity to inquire into the narratives to answer sub-question 2) What do the participants' stories reveal about their complex identities and subjectivities as these are derived from experiences with childhood adversity? Weedon (1997) defines subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world." Poststructuralism says experience alone has no inherent essential meaning, but it is given meaning in language through a range of discursive systems of meaning which are often contradictory and constitute conflicting versions of social reality (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, experience becomes reality and perception is everything even if only for a moment. Depending on the magnitude of the experience, subjects are left to sift and sort an ever-changing truth as we internalize external norms (Stone, 2005). According to Weedon (1997), in poststructuralism the individual is always the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity, and as we acquire language, we give voice and meaning to those experiences. In this study, the participants and I found ourselves negotiating identities and subjectivities as derived from their adverse experiences with maternal maltreatment and neglect. When analyzing the findings, I paid attention to the telling of the told. A summary of the findings related to the subjectivities and identities revealed through the narratives voiced in this study follows.

Circumstances required that each participant embody the role of caregiver at an early age. Tasha became caregiver to her mother, her siblings, and herself. She maintained the household during her mother's bouts with bipolar and depression as if she was the woman of the house. Claire assumed the role of caregiver and financial provider to her mother, an alcoholic, and her father, paying their bills and assisting them to make ends meet. Since I was the youngest child in

my household, I took on the role of caregiver to myself while my older brother assumed the role of caring for my mother who suffered from schizophrenia. Each of us mentioned frustration, anxiety, and fear as a common theme related to our role as caregiver. Our environments evoked emotional pain and negatively shaped our ways of being subconsciously. Our emotions become the stories we tell, resulting in the scripts we follow with each new encounter throughout the process of becoming. This describes the very essence of subjectivity one is charged with navigating. And as the narratives in this study reveal, subjectivity can be consuming and disruptive to one's peace.

The pursuit and price of peace is another common theme revealed in the data. Striving to overcome adversity can be taxing, and in chronically stressful environments, resilience can require enormous effort, generating additional stress (Masten, 2014). There is a constant quest for peace. Those exposed to adversity must negotiate for positive outcomes amidst negativity to calibrate their subjectivities and solidify their identities. Tasha's experiences caused her great emotional distress, resulting in a desire to lash out. At one point, she considered harming one of the perpetrators, and another time, she vented her frustrations in writing. Claire's pursuit of peace caused her to change her way of being. She attempts to shift her identity from one who cared to give to one who some may perceive as inconsiderate or selfish regarding her family's financial needs. In an effort to be at peace, she chooses to exercise self-care which is care nonetheless. Her will to take control of her life outcomes and attend to her personal well-being over the will of another is the epitome of agency enacted. Shifting one's way of being, thus changing identity from one who was caregiver to another is a challenging shift, resulting in ridicule and sometimes ostracization. Nevertheless, peace or normalcy, however classified,

seems inaccessible, yet essential to wellbeing. Each of us describe a form of bondage that can subjugate and deprive one of autonomy and agency.

Perfectionism and misperceived unlovability are the final two themes extracted from the data. The two coincide as we attempt to balance our subjectivities, resulting in an overexertion of effort to achieve and an overcompensation to mask the ever-present reminder of the lack of maternal guidance and support. Tasha overexerted herself to become an independent woman when she was but a girl. She accepted duties and chores to maintain the household during the times her mother was emotionally incapacitated. Though draining, she perseveres to defy the odds despite becoming overwhelmed. Claire and I each established boundaries to avoid the pressure to perform perfectly; yet, we each expressed displeasure with the perceived negative identities we assumed in order to avoid perfectionism. Boundaries cause each of us to feel unlovable. I conclude that perfection is the illusion we present, attempting to perfect the unacceptable. If the world around me is flawed, surely, we cannot be flawed too; therefore, we pursue an unattainable flawlessness, telling ourselves we can when in reality, we cannot but for so long. This leaves us feeling unlovable, thinking, if the world sees the mess I have become, I understand why it doesn't love me.

Applying a poststructural lens to analyze subjectivity and identity in the narratives allowed me to shift emphasis from that which is declared universal, permanent and simplified to that which is local, irregular, contradictory, and complicated (Clark, 2003). The narratives in this study reveal the power of the truths presented to us through lived experience, which aim to objectify our identities through the formation of our self-knowledge (Kim, 2016). The findings align with the poststructural view of self that is overcommitted to often divergent pulling forces

and unpredictable demands of surroundings that constantly adjusts to turbulent, dislocating conditions (Chang, 2008). Yet, we negotiate and “attend to the ramifications of multiple truths to reject the meta-narrative” (Kim, 2016), avoid objectification, and demonstrate resilience to access agency.

**Accessing agency.** After analyzing the data for subjectivity, I then address sub-question 3) What do the participants’ stories reveal about the nature of their academic resilience and agency despite childhood adversity? Agency is the ability to act (Davidson, 2017). It is the rational exertion of one’s will to negotiate, act, and become that which one chooses despite the circumstances to which one is subjected. The study shows that negotiating varying degrees of socially constructed subjectivities and environmentally influenced identities can be binding. A person’s will may be present, but the way may be obscure. Children exposed to the adverse experiences of maternal maltreatment and neglect must strive to demonstrate resilience without the support of their primary caregiver, which is cited as a key protective factor in resilience literature (Benard, 2005; Masten, 2014).

Considering this notion, I further inquired into the narratives to examine and deconstruct the concept of resilience in the context of exposure to significant adversity define as:

both the capacity of individuals to *navigate* their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to *negotiate* for their resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008, p. 225).

A poststructural approach is useful to decenter our belief that resilience is ‘ordinary magic’, as Masten (2014) proposes by presenting stories of struggle from the margins. According to Masten

(2014), “Human resilience usually arises from the operation of ordinary and common adaptive systems, both inside and outside of people, and not from rare or extraordinary actions, resources, or processes” (p. 305). This study confirms the notion of family, community, and schools as sites with the potential to provide opportunities for resilience development (Masten, 2014; Benard, 2005; Pintrich, 2003). Nevertheless, resources may be readily available for some people more than others depending on context. Therefore, this study addresses a gap in the literature that reveals the complexity and extremes of the actions and processes many undergo to negotiate identities and access resources needed for resilience to manifest and for agency to be realized.

I propose resilience as a prerequisite for one to negotiate subjectivities and enact agency to exert her will and choose an identity more befitting rather than to remain as circumstances demand. Consequently, exploring narrative accounts is necessary to gain a more in-depth understanding of resilience as a construct. The data from this study reveal the positive impact of supportive relationships, positive activities, and religion and faith to foster resilience in the lives of maltreated youth. A review of those findings follows.

The research data shows that accessing the support of others offers support, stability, and security to buffer the effects of adverse circumstances. Othermothers and fictive kin (Collin, 2000) played an important role in Claire’s life and my life, but Tasha did not experience the same degree of beneficial exposure to female relatives and women due to mental illness among the women in her family. Growing up in a rural town with a close-knit community, I also benefited from my peers who assumed the fictive kin role of sister, which provided confidants and dialogue to aid with negotiating subjectivities and pursuing agency during tough times. Tasha and Claire were more transient during their childhood years, and they lived in larger cities,

which affected their capacity to connect and maintain peer friendships for added support. In addition, I benefited from supportive relationships with my teachers. Lastly, mental health counselors aided Claire and me to calibrate our thinking to overcome self-doubt, find our way, and exert our will. Although Tasha has not yet visited a counselor, she has and is considering it.

The importance of activities, particularly extracurricular activities and writing, is another research finding revealed through this inquiry. Extracurricular activities included school and community-based opportunities. Claire maximized on school-based activities, including clubs and band as she attended a public performing arts school. Tasha and I attended specialty schools also, which offered opportunities for goal-setting and a sense of self-efficacy and accomplishment. Neither Tasha nor I engaged in school-based activities consistently during our childhood years. However, despite working a part-time job, I was better able to maximize on school-based activities during my high school years as my cognitive and time-management skills improved with maturity. I benefited most from engagement in community-based program and church related opportunities. Claire reported benefits from church involvement as well. Writing is another activity that promoted coping and resilience, offering an outlet for expression and communication. We applied various techniques and modes from poetry, journaling, letter writing, and video journaling, both private and shared.

In addition to relationships and opportunities, religion and faith prove beneficial to resilience development and a sense of agency. Each participant attended church as a child, which also promoted a sense of self-efficacy and self-control. Tasha uses faith and religious practices to calm her anxiety, while Claire credits church involvement with guarding her from trouble in the community and in school. Although neither of us attends church regularly at present, we each

demonstrate a degree of spirituality through prayer and uplifting music, and our faith is enduring, offering hope during tough times apart from church activities.

“Poststructuralism does not allow us to place the blame elsewhere, outside our own daily activities, but demands that we examine our own complicity in the maintenance of social injustices” (St. Pierre, 2000, p.484) and that which subjugates. Each individual then is responsible for his or her own self-mastery and must harmonize any perceived antagonisms to create a balanced person (Brown & Heggs, 2005). Considering my own experiences and subjectivities, I have been resistant, consistently striving towards self-definition, which is one of the tenets of black feminism (Collins, 2000) and is evident in the processes examined through the narratives in this study. Each participant and I demonstrate resilience in order to access agency and define ourselves as we will instead of resorting to the identities our experiences present. According to Ungar (2014), “In one form or another, high-risk youth seek acceptance and mental health by acquiring, maintaining, and most importantly, challenging socially constructed identities upon which their self-definition as resilient depends (p. 17). Participants in this study demonstrate acts of defiance and disorder that reflect signs of depression and anxiety; yet, their narratives reveal optimism, self-efficacy, independence, and aspirations towards agency. Thus, this study presents a poststructural perspective regarding the role of resilience in the quest for agency. Furthermore, the study provides greater clarity into nonconventional negotiations of ecologically influenced identities and the disruption of agency where surviving is thriving (Ungar, 2014).

This concludes a summary of the research findings related to subjectivity and resilience towards agency and the connections of the findings to poststructural and black feminist theories,

which I applied during the data analysis.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Reflecting on the findings, additional research ideas surface. It interests me that even with the supports we accessed, coupled with the academic skills we acquired throughout childhood and adolescents, we struggled to negotiate subjectivities, demonstrate resilience, and access agency. This causes greater concern for African-American females facing adversity who do not acquire academic skills and strategies to negotiate for resources that will assist with navigating subjectivities and identities and accessing agency. An inquiry into the lives of black females who succumb to the pressure is also of interest. In addition, an inquiry and analysis of black males' subjectivities to determine ways they negotiate identities and their perceptions about agency and power compared to their female counterparts would provide useful insight for planning interventions. I believe resilience research could also benefit from examining the teacher's perspective on behaviors and relationship building. Numerous studies highlight what schools can do; however, added insight into barriers and successful implementation of practices would be beneficial.

### **Practice Implications for Schools and Communities**

By providing rich narratives of adversity, subjectivity, and resilience on a quest for agency as it pertains to maltreatment in the lives of academically resilient African-American females, this research study presents useful practice implications for schools and communities.

**Schools.** Each research participant benefited from exposure to a school setting. School offers a sense of security, structure, and models for success. School also promotes academic skills and personal strengths necessary for success. Therefore, engagement and access to schools

that nurture resilience are important. The following are practice implications for school personnel. In this section, I outline practice implications for administrators and teachers.

Administrators must recognize adversity and trauma as an equity issue. Although equity seems to be a trending buzz word in education, it is important for leaders to realize exposure to trauma, for many, is not simply a trend but a way of life. Therefore, it should be addressed seriously and with urgency. The term equity is rooted in the notion of creating a fair playing field by addressing individual needs. In contrast, equality is a notion based upon distribution—the idea that providers should distribute services of an identical nature equally to each. The findings from this study reveal a need for a holistic approach to aid students’ social and emotional development in addition to academic development in schools. The findings reflect the need for special attention for students who are transient and change schools frequently.

While content knowledge is essential, classroom management and empathy are equally important. To re-conceptualize misunderstandings among educators about risk, resilience, and responses to trauma, administrators should provide professional development opportunities for teachers to challenge biases and preconceived misperceptions. Sessions should offer counternarratives to promote understanding, cultural competency, and high expectations for all students. The focus should be on what happened to students, not what is perceived to be wrong with them.

Nevertheless, professional development is not sufficient in isolation. The inequity with most trending equity initiatives is the one-sided emphasis to change the hearts and minds of teachers and staff members. Addressing bias among staff members alone will not meet students’ needs. Equal attention, if not more, must be devoted to the social and emotional needs of

underserved youth. Thus, administrators must consider scheduling and allow opportunities for dialogue, enrichment, and exposure to foster positive social and emotional development for students. Research participants benefited from specialty schools that addressed student interests and goals. Participants also gained essential skills for resilience, such as self-efficacy and interpersonal skills, through school-based enrichment activities. Such activities offer positive exposure to counter the negative experiences from dysfunctional households and under-resourced communities.

Students exposed to adversity need to be empowered with social, emotional, and academic skills. Therefore, lost instructional time is counterproductive. Findings from this study reveal a sense of harm and negative emotions in the lives of maltreated youth. Thus, educators should offer students care and correction instead of punishment and further subjection. Instead of a punitive approach for behaviors that are normal responses to adversity, teachers should employ a restorative approach to establish community, build relationships, and repair harm by doing things with students, not to them or for them (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). Restorative Practices enhances students' word knowledge, thus allowing them to name and process their emotions and behaviors for communication and self-regulations which is empowering. A restorative approach will foster a sense of well-being and maximize learning opportunities. Relationships and trust are prerequisite to academic engagement.

While serving as an instructional coach and as an equity specialist in an urban school district, I often asked teachers, "How are you teaching? Who are you reaching? To what extent are you selling what you're selling?" Student engagement is important when attempting to meet the needs of students exposed to adversity. If students do not see the immediate relevance of the

information shared, they are less likely to engage. Therefore, understanding students' needs is essential to presenting content as relevant. Tasks should also present cognitive challenge that can boost one's sense of self-efficacy once accomplished. The worst thing we as educators can do to children who are underserved is to lower the standard and expectations and underserve them even more. On the contrary, we should overserve them with enriching opportunities to encourage hope.

**Community.** People and organizations in the community also promote resilience development and positive identity for participants. The findings from this research study suggest practice implications for communities related to counseling and skill development.

Participants in the study struggled with the decision to access counseling services to assist with subjectivity and stress. Therefore, community members should encourage rather than stigmatize counseling and supports for mental health concerns, especially suicide ideations, depression, and anxiety. Concerted community efforts should emphasize and educate citizens on the benefits of accessing counseling services. Agencies and organizations can also include self-regulation, wellness, and self-care efforts in their goals and objectives to share effective techniques.

In addition to counseling, community organizations should promote cognitive school development through hands-on experience. The participants in this study gained numerous skills that enhance cognitive development and personal strengths through community-based resources. Participation enhanced our communication and problem-solving skills to name a few, which improved our self-confidence and counter insecurities. Therefore, community organizations and/or members should establish intervention and enrichment programs to close the opportunity

gap and allow youth to engage and explore.

### **Researcher's Reflections**

Choosing an epistemological stance was most challenging for me as a researcher. To theorize one's own personal, lived experience through autoethnography can be emotionally daunting, considering the sensitive nature of this research focus. In this section, I reflect on my evolution from practitioner to researcher.

Initially, I considered an interpretivist philosophical world view, which assumes that the world is not simply out there to be discovered; it is an ongoing story told and refashioned by individuals, groups, and cultures involved (Butin, 2009). Interpretivists believe the world is always interpreted through the mind; therefore, interpretivism is accessing others' interpretations of some social phenomenon and interpreting themselves, other's actions, and intentions (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). The ontological belief is that reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing; consequently, it is important to know how people interpret and make meaning of some object, event, action, perception, etc. (Glesne, 2011, p. 8) because every individual, group, or culture privileges the truth of their particular viewpoint (Butin, 2009). Bochner (2005) explains, ". . . we can never completely separate what is being described from the describer. We can never distinguish unequivocally between what is in our minds and what is out there in the world; the mind plays an active role in the construction of knowledge." (p. 65). I also considered an interpretivist stance because constructivism resonates with my initial thoughts about risk and resilience. Constructivism is defined as an interpretive stance, which attends to the meaning-making activities of active, cognizing human beings (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). According to Creswell (2009, p. 8), "Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek

understanding of the world in which they live and work.” Constructivism assumes that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experience that are varied and multiple and then negotiated socially and historically (Creswell, 2009). An interpretivist approach might have sufficed if I wished to simply explore risk and resilience as a phenomenon. Although there is not a vast amount of literature related to resilience among African American women, I did not want this project to result in another check list. I resisted the containment of interpretivism and produced knowledge that emerged as a creation out of chaos (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

I chose to apply a poststructuralist lens to analyze the data, which allowed me to discard binary thinking to which I am accustomed. To deconstruct resilience as a concept, I could not demonstrate loyalty to predetermined criteria for resilience. I knew from lived experience that instances of resilience were not straightforward as in either, or, neither, nor. Considering the lack of maternal guidance I experienced, I became risk averse, employing binary thinking to remain safe. I naturally evaluated and judged encounters as right/wrong, safe/harmful, good/bad, etc. I found comfort in “knowing” and confidence in “choosing”. Although this way of thinking kept me safe and out of trouble in many instances, it also created a critical nature that is constantly on edge. Through poststructuralism, I found peace in the autonomy to analyze the data without definitively naming the observations in this study. Poststructuralism allowed me to present the gray area, that which is both black and white. I know I am resilient, and I know I persist to enact agency. Nevertheless, the ebbs and flows of resilience in operation to access agency occur unseen. Poststructuralism allowed me to present the positive and negative aspects, the gray area, from the lives of subjugated youth.

Another consideration was the use of critical race theory or a black feminist critical

approach. Black feminist thought was useful to describe and explain encounters presented in the data. However, I decided not to use a feminist approach even though there are numerous systems affecting the subjectivities and identities represented in the narratives in this study, such as patriarchy, family structure, race/culture, and classism. I presented the negative subjectivities to evoke empathy and highlight the inequities present among maltreated youth. Yet, while systems warrant critique to promote awareness and effect change, I find that emphasis on power structures can be binding, repressing hope and further subjugating the marginalized. While I understand the need for equity initiatives and anti-oppression efforts, I prefer a pro-empowerment approach to inspire the oppressed. Imagine one's state of mind if she realizes her parents are incapacitated and "the system" is supreme with all power. There is no way I would have made it if I had believed myself to be unequal to my white peers or less capable in comparison to the boys in my classes. I could have easily blamed my parents, relatives, social services, etc. As some point, I am sure I did. Nevertheless, I believed I could overcome, and I did. Ultimately, no one was responsible for me, but me. Through this study, I intend to provide strategies for resilience towards agency by presenting detailed accounts from live experiences. I aim to inspire hope and encourage the reader to establish herself so that she is unoppressible. Thus, a poststructuralist approach allowed me to acknowledge power and systems but refrain from blaming the systems for my plight. Systems have power, but self-definition is essential to overcoming a subjected state. I refuse to allow circumstances or *how* I am to define *who* I am.

### **Final Reflections**

I have served as a middle school teacher, instructional coach, and equity specialist in underserved communities for the past 18 years. In my practice, I have witnessed many black

females grappling with their emotions while attempting to maintain academic expectations. I have observed, and discipline data shows that African-American girls are suspended or expelled from school mostly for insubordination and noncompliance, neither of which are criminal or violent offenses. In *Pushed Out*, Morris (2016) notes that black girls are punished in schools for their smart mouths, attitudes, and appearance. Yet, when I converse with young girls and reflect on my childhood and adolescent years there is usually a story that explains their behaviors. I recognize the behaviors and actions as justified responses to trauma and adversity, and I desired to hear and learn more.

Initially, I wanted to talk with school-age girls who succumbed to the pressures of adversity and did not achieve well academically. I desired to foster understanding among fellow educators. However, I did not want to perpetuate stereotypes, encourage deficit thinking and promote low expectations (Valencia, 2010). I started to reflect on my persistence, obstinate continuation despite difficulties and opposition, and I began to explore the literature related to risk and resilience. When reviewing the literature, I appreciated the checklists, tables, and figures that outlined the criteria for optimal social and emotional development. Examining the correlates for resilience was a confirmation of personal strengths I possess and the supports I accessed to cope and overcome. However, I was somewhat disappointed. The checklists made resilience seem easily accessible like ‘ordinary magic’; if a person has access to these things, he or she can be resilient and overcome adversity. I wanted people to know about the extraordinarily messy middle. Despite access and personal strengths, I struggled to act the way I should despite the way I was because of my experiences and subjectivities. I have always appreciated the power of stories. Attending church as a child, members would share testimonies of how they overcame

challenges. Their stories provided strategies to cope and fostered hope. The stories also provided answers, insight into the attitudes, actions and changes in demeanor that I sometimes experienced after facing challenging situations. Rather than to paint the picture of pain, I opted instead to share stories of challenges and triumph using autoethnography and narrative inquiry methodologies.

After completing this study, I learned that although adversity disrupts agency, access is not denied. Although parts saddened me, I felt a sense of pride and relief after hearing the research participants' stories. I was pleased to note their willingness to reflect and their persistence to push past the pain. I was also impressed with their capacity to resist blaming, deflecting, and resting in defeat. Instead, we maximized on personal strengths and cognitive skills acquired through community and school networks, which aided in promoting resilience and mitigating the effects of adversity in our lives. Resilience enhanced our capacity to access agency and regain control over negative subjectivities. Thus, resilience is a byproduct of exposure to ordinary supports; nevertheless, accessing those supports can be an extraordinary feat without support from other people. Research has proven repeatedly that relatives, community members, educators, and friends can assist with acquiring the skills necessary to demonstrate resilience and obtain agency. Yet, I continue to ponder: Are the sisters alright? Are we living our best life? Are we viewing superficial standards such as beauty, fashion, companionship, materialism, travel, and position as the determinants for success?

Ntozake Shange proclaims, "When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves" (cited in Collins 2000, p. 115). If the needs for resilience to manifest require 'ordinary' resources, I will

not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind without questioning whether or not it is a matter of 'can anyone attend' or is it a question of 'will anyone attend' to the emotional health of black girls? Many with resources and skills blame the parents, primarily a single mother, and deprived communities with limited resources for the outcomes of their youth. However, my mother's condition and the mothers featured in this study like so many others are considered "suspended women" (Collins, 2000). These women are incapacitated, yet they have daughters striving to assimilate to anything resembling peace while negotiating bitterness. As an act of resistance, these daughters deny the lies they believe, aspiring to simply become something other than what they see. Their families silence them, and their community silences them. If they speak against their black mothers and bring shame to aspects of the black community, they are shunned. Too many proceed pretending that surviving is thriving. I ask, Are the sisters really alright? Is alright enough?

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Letter to University Personnel

Dear Professional Colleague,

My name is Brooksie A. Broome, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Appalachian State University. For my dissertation research study, I want to inquire into the narratives of African-American females exposed to childhood neglect during their childhood and adolescent years due to an absent father and strained relationship with their mother. I wish to explore their experience with emotional development and academic resilience. I am seeking African-American females who are currently in their sophomore or junior year in undergraduate college. I am writing to request any recommendation for potential African-American female participants who meet the criteria.

The reasons for participants' strained relationship with their mothers might include mother's abuse of drugs and alcohol or mother's mental health diagnoses, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia, etc. In the study, I want to learn more about any social and emotional effects the strained relationship has had and may be currently having on them, and I am interested in ways they coped and are coping with those feelings and emotions. I also want to know more about how they not only survived but also thrived academically despite their circumstances.

For data collection, I will conduct one-on-one semi-structured, in-depth interviews and gather artifacts to support their narratives. I will also employ autoethnography to share my own experience with childhood maltreatment and academic resilience. Through this study, I will be able to compare the participants' experiences and resources with those I applied to enhance our understanding of risk and resilience in the lives of African-American females. It is my hope that the participants will realize the power of their stories and their potential to reach others who are facing some of the same challenges they faced.

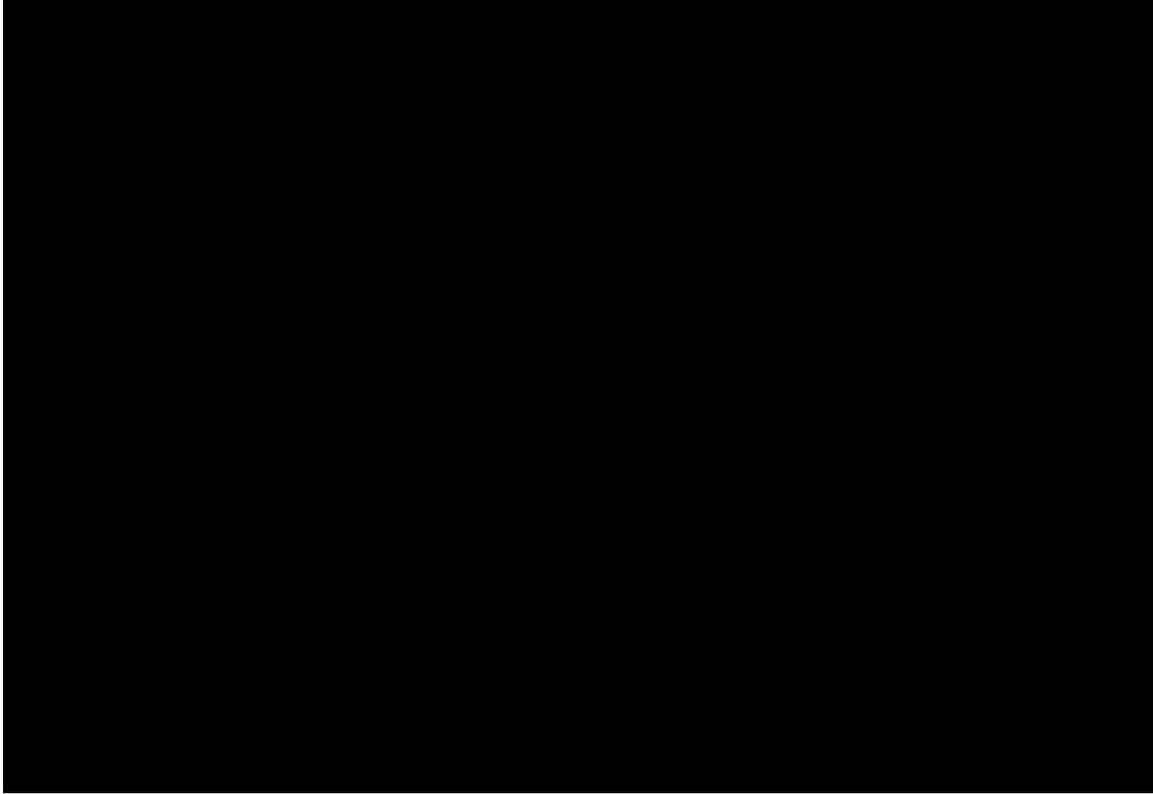
Here is a link to an online flyer/information form you can forward to any potential participants: <https://goo.gl/forms/oHd8hCi4AuUfTW322> If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 336-324-0016 or [bb65310@appstate.edu](mailto:bb65310@appstate.edu). Please forward the flyer link or send me the name and email address or phone number for any likely participants. I appreciate your support.

Sincerely,

Brooksie A. Broome, Ed.S.

## Appendix B: Electronic Recruitment Form

Click the embedded object below to view the form or follow this link to view the form online:  
[www.tinyurl.com/IamResilient](http://www.tinyurl.com/IamResilient)



## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

### **Title: How Did You Make It Over? An Autoethnographic and Narrative Inquiry of Emotional Development and Academic Resilience among African-American Females**

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Brooksie B. Sturdivant, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Appalachia State University. For my dissertation research study, I want to explore the stories of African-American females who were exposed to childhood neglect during their childhood and adolescent years due to an absent father and strained relationship with their mother. I have been informed that you may be a likely participant based on your childhood experiences.

The reasons for participants' strained relationship with their mothers might include mother's abuse of drugs and alcohol or mother's mental health diagnoses, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia, etc. In the study, I want to learn more about any social and emotional effects the strained relationship with your mother has had and may be currently having on you, and I am interested in ways you coped and are coping with those feelings and emotions. I also want to know more about how you not only survived but thrived academically despite your circumstances.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential. I will collect data to analyze and compile your story during two one-on-one interviews. The interview will be audio recorded for better analysis. We will converse for about 5-7 hours on a date and at a location convenient for you. I will also collect and analyze at least one artifact that supports the information you share during the interview. This artifact could be a letter, poem, photograph, teacher comments, etc. of your choice. During the analysis, I will share the findings with you for feedback. You may also have access to the study once the project is complete. In addition, I will provide a list of community and campus resources for you to contact if you need assistance with your emotions.

This study will benefit me as a researcher and you as a participant. I experienced childhood maltreatment and faced several social and emotional challenges because of it. Nevertheless, I have thrived academically and employed a variety of strategies to develop socially and emotionally. Through this study, I will be able to compare your experiences and resources with those I used to enhance researchers' understanding of risk and resilience in the lives of African-American females. It is my hope that in sharing your strategies for success, you will not only realize how far you have come, but you will also potentially be able to reach another person facing some of the same challenges you faced. For your willingness to give of yourself, you will receive a \$50.00 VISA gift card

If you have any questions or concerns about the study before the study begins or during, please do not hesitate to ask. If you agree to participate in this study, please sign this consent form and complete the attached questionnaire. You are signing it with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep. I look forward to working with you!

Sincerely,

Brooksie B. Sturdivant, Ed.S.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Appendix D: Participant Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

College/University \_\_\_\_\_

Current Year in College: Sophomore Junior

**Demographic Information:**

Questions	Answers
<i>Your Current Age:</i>	
<i>Home City, State:</i>	
<i>Median Household Income: (circle one)</i>	Less than \$25,000 \$25,000 to \$34,999 \$35,000 to \$49,999 \$50,000 to \$74,999 \$75,000 to \$99,999 \$100,000 to \$149,999 \$150,000 or more
<i>Mother's Current Age:</i>	
<i>Why was your father absent? (circle all that apply)</i>	Divorced Never Married to Mother Incarceration Death Other:
<i>Why was your relationship with your mother strained? (circle all that apply)</i>	Drugs Alcohol Mental Illness If so, what type? Other:

## Appendix E: Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire

**While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:**

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often ...  
Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you?  
**or**  
Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often ...  
Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?  
**or**  
Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever...  
Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?  
**or**  
Try to or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_
4. Did you often feel that ...  
No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?  
**or**  
Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_
5. Did you often feel that ...  
You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?  
**or**  
Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_
6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_
7. Was your mother or stepmother:  
Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?  
**or**  
Sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?  
**or**  
Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_

10. Did a household member go to prison?  
Yes No If yes enter 1\_\_\_\_\_

**Now add up your “Yes” answers\_\_\_\_\_ . This is your ACE Score.**

## Appendix F: Interview Protocol

### Interview 1: Family Dynamics and Social and Emotional Effects

During this first interview, we will discuss your family dynamics and any effects that has had on you socially and emotionally. You will have the opportunity to share your artifact that supports your story.

Question	Notes	Observations
1. Why was your father absent? Describe the situation or events that led to his absence.		
2. Explain your mother's conditions and the effect her condition had on her behaviors and interaction with you.		
3. What is your most vivid memory where you experience neglect from your mother? Describe that moment; what happened.		
4. Has the exposure to childhood maltreatment affected you socially and/or emotionally? In what ways; explain.		
5. Share and explain your artifact. What does this artifact reveal about the severity of your circumstance?		

## Interview 2: Coping Strategies and Academic Resilience

During this second interview, we will discuss ways you cope and how you managed to demonstrate academic resilience despite your circumstances. During our last session, you shared a few encounters with you mother that affected you socially and emotionally.

Question	Notes	Observations
1. Overall, would you say you're you are okay? What does "being okay" or "doing well" look like for you?		
2. Are you currently struggling with some of the social and emotional consequences of those encounters? In what ways?		
3. Have you ever felt like quitting? What helped you press on?		
4. What do you do to be okay? How do you cope? What resources or strategies do you use?		
5. Despite the neglect, you have demonstrated academic resilience. To what do you attribute your academic success?		
6. Have you accessed support for social and emotional development while in school? Please share those experiences and the results of those efforts.		

## Appendix G: Local Mental Health Resources

### Local Mental Health Resources in Greensboro, NC

<http://www.mhag.org/local-mental-health-resources/>

#### Local Mental Health Service Providers

**If you live in central NC and have never had contact with the mental health system, we recommend starting by calling the Sandhills Center: (1-800-256-2452)**

Sandhills is the publicly-funded LME-MCO (Local Management Entity-Managed Care Organization) serving central NC. This organization has licensed clinicians on-call who can answer any questions you may have about getting treated for mental health concerns, and will help match you with appropriate care that you can afford. Their call center is available 24 hours.

#### Providers Offering Free Services

Organization Name	Services Provided	Contact Info	Insurance & Payment Info
Monarch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Open Access</li> <li>○ Outpatient Therapy</li> <li>○ Assertive Community Treatment Team (ACTT)</li> <li>○ Medication management</li> </ul>	The Bellemeade Center 201 N. Eugene St. Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 676-6840	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ No Insurance</li> <li>○ Sliding fee scale</li> <li>○ Accepts Aetna, Cigna, Humana, Medicaid, Medicare, NC Health Choice, Self Pay, Tri-Care, United Health Care</li> </ul>
Family Services of the Piedmont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Domestic violence shelter</li> <li>○ Consumer credit counseling services</li> <li>○ Employee assistance program</li> <li>○ Group counseling</li> <li>○ Individual &amp; family counseling</li> <li>○ Male batterers program</li> <li>○ Victim services</li> </ul>	315 East Washington St. Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 387-6161	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid</li> <li>○ Sliding fee scale</li> <li>○ No insurance required</li> </ul>

Mental Health Association of Greensboro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Wellness and recovery classes</li> <li>○ Compeer program</li> <li>○ Peer support services</li> <li>○ Support groups</li> </ul>	301 E. Washington St. Suite 111 Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 373-1402	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Free services</li> </ul>
Therapeutic Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mobile crisis services</li> </ul>	Mobile Crisis phone 1-(877) 626-1772	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Free services</li> </ul>
Sanctuary House	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Psycho-social Rehabilitation clubhouse</li> <li>○ Individual and group therapy</li> <li>○ Clinical assessments</li> </ul>	518 N. Elm Street Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 275-7896	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Free services</li> </ul>
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Guilford	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Wellness classes</li> <li>○ Support groups</li> </ul>	(336) 370-4264	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Free services</li> </ul>

**Medicaid – Sliding Fee Scale – Payment Assistance**

<b>Organization Name</b>	<b>Services Provided</b>	<b>Contact Info</b>	<b>Insurance &amp; Payment Info</b>
Brassfield Center for Psychotherapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Psychotherapy</li> <li>○ Life coaching and guidance</li> <li>○ Bodywork and movement therapy</li> </ul>	2012-E New Garden Rd. Greensboro, NC 27410 (336) 288-0588 Ext.:2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sliding fee scale</li> <li>○ Blue Cross Blue Shield, Medicaid, State Employees, Tri-Care</li> </ul>

<p>Carolina Psychological Associates</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Psychological evaluation.</li> <li>○ Individual, marital, and family counseling.</li> <li>○ Crisis intervention and conflict resolution.</li> <li>○ Stress reduction and management.</li> <li>○ Career counseling.</li> <li>○ Parenting issues.</li> <li>○ Psycho-educational groups.</li> </ul>	<p>5509-B West Friendly Avenue, Suite 106 Greensboro, NC 27410 (336) 272-0855 Ext.:111</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid</li> <li>○ Accepts Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Cigna, Humana, Medcost, Medicare, NC Health Choice, Self Pay, State Employees, Tri-Care, United Health Care</li> </ul>
<p>Guilford Counseling</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual therapy</li> <li>○ Dialectical behavioral therapy skills group</li> <li>○ Wellness workshop</li> </ul>	<p>430 Battleground Ave Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 337-5469</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid</li> <li>○ Self Pay</li> </ul>
<p>Hillcrest House</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 9 bed therapeutic residence for adults who have a primary diagnosis of mental illness and/or emotional disorder.</li> </ul>	<p>1505 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro, NC 27403 (336) 273-1782</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid</li> <li>○ Self-pay</li> </ul>
<p>Presbyterian Counseling Center</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual therapy</li> </ul>	<p>3713 Richfield Rd. Greensboro, NC 27410 (336) 288-1484</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sliding fee scale</li> <li>○ Medicare</li> <li>○ Accepts most insurance plans</li> </ul>
<p>Restoration Counseling Center</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual Christian counseling for women</li> </ul>	<p>1301 Carolina Street, Suite 114, Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 542-2060</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Payment assistance available</li> </ul>

Step-by-Step Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual and family therapy</li> <li>○ Community support team</li> <li>○ Diagnostic assessment</li> <li>○ Comprehensive clinical assessment</li> <li>○ Mental health assessment</li> <li>○ Medication management</li> </ul>	<p>709 E. Market Street, Suite 100-B Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 378-0109</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid</li> </ul>
The Ringer Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mental evaluations</li> <li>○ Individual and family therapy</li> </ul>	<p>213 E. Bessemer Ave Greensboro, NC 27401 (336) 379-7146</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid</li> <li>○ No insurance required</li> <li>○ Sliding fee scale</li> <li>○ Accepts Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Champus, Cigna, Medcost, Medicare, NC Health Choice, Physicians Health, State Employees, Tri-Care, United Health Care</li> </ul>
Tree of Life Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual and family counseling</li> </ul>	<p>1821 Lendew St. Greensboro, NC 27408 (336) 298-1832</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ No insurance required</li> <li>○ Some services free</li> <li>○ Sliding fee scale</li> <li>○ Medicaid</li> <li>○ Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Humana, Medcost, NC Health Choice, Self Pay, State Employees, Tri-Care, United Health Care</li> </ul>

### Self- Pay and Insurance

Organization Name	Services Provided	Contact Info	Insurance & Payment Info
Cornerstone Psychological Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual and family counseling.</li> </ul>	2711-A Pinedale Rd. Greensboro, NC 27408 (336) 540.9400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Accepts Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Cigna, Medcost, Medicaid, Self Pay, Tri-Care</li> </ul>
Serenity Counseling and Resource Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Outpatient therapy</li> <li>○ Comprehensive clinical assessments</li> <li>○ Medication management</li> <li>○ Community support team</li> <li>○ Psycho-social rehabilitation</li> </ul>	2211 W. Meadowview Rd. Suite 10 Greensboro, NC 27407 (336) 617-8910	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Accepts Aetna, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Humana, Medicaid, Medicare, NC Health Choice, Tri-Care</li> </ul>
Wright Care Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual Therapy</li> <li>○ Psychosocial Rehabilitation</li> <li>○ Crisis Management</li> </ul>	204 Muirs Chapel Rd Ste 205 Greensboro, NC 27410 (336) 542-2884	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Accepts Blue Cross Blue Shield, Medicaid, NC Health Choice, Self Pay</li> </ul>

## Local Mental Health Resources in Winston-Salem, NC

Organization Name	Services Provided	Contact Info	Insurance & Payment Info
Monarch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Outpatient Therapy and Psychiatric Services</li> <li>○ Open Access– no appointment necessary for first visit</li> <li>○ Psychosocial Rehabilitation</li> <li>○ Innovations Community-Based Services</li> <li>○ Assertive Community Treatment Team (ACTT)</li> <li>○ Intensive In-Home Services</li> <li>○ Developmental Therapy</li> </ul>	<p>4140 N. Cherry St. Winston-Salem, NC 27105 (336) 306-9620</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Free options based on income and family size; sliding scale and insurance options available</li> </ul>
Cardinal Innovations Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Referral Service</li> </ul>	<p>4045 University Parkway Winston-Salem, NC 27106 336-714-9100</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Medicaid or Sliding Scale payment options</li> </ul>
Daymark Recovery Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Substance Abuse Outpatient Treatment</li> <li>○ Mental Health Outpatient Treatment</li> <li>○ Substance Abuse Intensive Outpatient Program (SAIOP)</li> </ul>	<p>Behavioral Health Plaza, 725 N Highland Ave, Winston-Salem, NC 27101 (336) 607-8523</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sliding Scale and Insurance Payment Options Available</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Psychiatric Services/Medical Management</li><li>○ Advanced Access/Walk-In Clinic</li><li>○ Mobile Crisis Management Services</li><li>○ Peer Support Services</li><li>○ Community Support Team</li><li>○ Dialectic Behavioral Therapy</li></ul>		
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**A list of additional resources in Winston-Salem that offer a sliding fee scale can be found at:**  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-OWTRzPZP5dZFBLd044WUFWQUk/view?usp=sharing>

# **Are you RESILIENT? Have you overcome challenging situations? Share your story of "How You Made It Over?"**

*This research study will explore stories of resilience  
among young African-American women.*

**Resilience (n.)- the capacity of individuals to adjust successfully to situations that threaten their well-being. If you...**

- 1) are an African American female,**
- 2) are currently enrolled in an undergraduate program as a sophomore, junior, or senior OR have graduated from community college or a four year institution and are age 25 and under,**
- 3) have faced challenging situations that should have caused you to quit, but you were resilient instead,**

...then this is the opportunity for you to share your challenges and triumphs! Our stories are powerful. In sharing strategies for success, it is my hope that you will realize how far you have come and be able to potentially reach another person facing some of the same challenges you faced. Your participation in this study will be voluntary, and your identity will remain confidential.

I will conduct two, one-on-one interviews at a time and in a location that is convenient for you, and I ask that you provide at least one artifact from your past that supports your story, ie. a poem, letter, or journal entry you wrote, photographs, or other documents that reflects how the situation affected you.

After completing the study, you will receive a \$50.00 Amazon gift card for your participation. I will also provide a list of community and campus resources for you to contact if you need assistance with your feelings and emotions after you share your story.

**If interested, please complete the form at www.tinyurl.com/lamResilient or email me at bb65310@appstate.edu**

I look forward to conversing with you,  
**Brooksie Broome Sturdivant, Ed.S.**

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I look forward to conversing with you,  
**Brooksie Broome Sturdivant, Ed.S.**

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## **Vita**

Brooksie Broome Sturdivant was raised in Walnut Cove, NC located in Stokes County. Her parents were the late Larry Rogers Broome of Sandy Ridge, NC and Lucy Loretta Hairston Broome of Walnut Cove, NC. Mrs. Sturdivant has served in public education since 2000 after earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in middle grades education from UNC Chapel Hill. She also holds a Master of School Administration degree, which she was awarded in 2006 and a Specialist of Education certificate, earned in 2009 from Appalachian State University. In 2010 she completed a Nonprofit Management certification program at UNC Greensboro, and in 2011 she began coursework toward a Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University. Having worked in education as a teacher, literacy coach, curriculum facilitator, and equity specialist, Dr. Sturdivant loves developing and facilitating professional development sessions, coaching teachers, volunteering in the community, and mentoring underserved youth. She is a licensed Restorative Practices trainer, and she serves as an adjunct professor to train future school administrators at the graduate level.

She currently serves on the advisory boards for two nonprofit organizations and she is member of the board of directors for another. Her most rewarding achievements are receiving recognition as one of five finalists for the Rockingham County district Teacher of the Year in 2006 and as one of ten honorees for the WFMY News 2 “2 Those Who Care” award in 2006 for her volunteerism with youth. Dr. Sturdivant currently resides in Raleigh, NC with her husband, Mr. Norlonn A. Sturdivant.