

Understanding Biographicity:
Redesigning and Reshaping Lives in Young Adulthood

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Dedication

To John Nestor, who has accompanied my life journey every day for more than 50 years. Without your enthusiasm, patience, and unfailing support, I would never have fulfilled my long-deferred dream of completing this degree.

To all the teachers (especially to all the Catholic sisters), who inspired me to become a lifelong learner.

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Understanding Biographicity: Redesigning and Reshaping Lives in Young Adulthood

This study explored biographicity as the process through which individuals repeatedly shape and reshape their lives to meet their own needs and desires in response to conditions of life in late modernity, a time of rapid social and economic change. The study highlighted the particular issues faced by marginalized populations, and especially urban young adults, who were the focus of the study.

Using biographical research methodology, the study sought to understand the complex interplay between individuals and the constraints and/or supports of social structures and contexts. Seventeen adults, aged 23 to 32, participated. The participants attended high-poverty urban schools where historically fewer than 50% of students receive a high school diploma. Each was the first in the family to attend college. Participants told their life stories in extended, unstructured interviews, producing their own *narrated life*. Interpretation of this interview *data* was an iterative, abductive process that explored the life stories through structural descriptions of the narratives, process structures of the life course, and thematic horizons that emerged from the life stories as told.

Three thematic horizons (expectations/imagining a different future, suffering, and belonging) formed the foundation for the exploration of patterns of meaning that concluded that certain consistent elements were essential to participants' exercise of biographicity. These elements led to a configuration that allows scholars and practitioners to understand biographicity as a complex, organic process that cannot be reduced to

simple characteristics or a linear set of variables. The study concluded that learning and biographicity are inseparably linked, forming an *enactive ecology of learning* in which individuals engage in processes that allow them to interact with their environment across the learning domains of cognition, emotion, and social interaction as well as participatory sensemaking and autonomy/heteronomy. In addition, experiences of recognition are essential to the exercise of biographicity. Biographicity was found to be a continual process of learning from one's life experiences and enacting a desired future as a form of lifelong learning. Finally, these particular participants provided insights that contribute to recommendations for theory, research, and practice that reflect their own experiences of biographicity.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. . . .
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden. . . .

The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering,
release from the inner
And the outer compulsion. . . .

Only through time time is conquered.

—“Burnt Norton,” T. S. Eliot (1936)

Nearly 100 years ago, Eduard Lindeman (1926) wrote, “If learning is to be revived, quickened so as to become once more an adventure, we shall have need of new concepts, new motives, new methods; we shall need to experiment with the qualitative aspects of education” (p. 4). Since Lindeman’s early conceptualization of *The Meaning of Adult Education*, adult/lifelong learning has become a philosophy, a program, an ideology, even an industry, and yet individuals continue to face learning challenges that appear intractable in the early 21st century, and the need for *new motives* and *new methods* of learning continues. Within that context, this research study sought to respond to questions about the learning lives of adults by considering how individuals in late modernity manage to adjust or alter their life trajectory in accord with their own needs

and desires as well as in response to the demands of the globalized risk society (Jarvis, 2007, 2010; Ollagnier, 2002).

In our time, “All substantial challenges related to learning, upbringing and education are rooted in complexity. Complexity is the main problem in modern society and at the same time, the principle that explains modern society” (Rasmussen, 2010, p. 15). This inherent complexity requires an evolving individual biography, defined in this study as biographicity (Alheit, 1992; Alheit & Dausien, 2002a). This study of biographicity is aligned with Luhmann’s theory of society and his definition of complexity (Luhmann, 1997, as cited in Rasmussen, 2010): “Complexity is not an act or an action. It is not something a system does, or something that happens in a system. It is a concept for observation and description” (p. 17). The study proposed that a nonreductionist view of learning, supported by elements of enaction, provides a means to *observe* and *describe* the life experiences of individuals who are engaged in learning as “a process of emergence and co-evolution of the individual, the social group and the wider society” (Morrison, 2008, p. 16).

Statement of the Problem

In contemporary times, many if not most (or perhaps all) individuals arrive at times in their lives when the life path forward is not clear and when they are not sure they possess the wherewithal to reshape their lives in response to evolving personal or societal conditions. For decades, individual men and women have experienced the effects of rapid social and economic change and persistent movement toward globalization (Jarvis, 2007, 2010; Ollagnier, 2002), and societal trends have led to success for some and failure for others (Mills, 1959). A lingering problem for individuals, for educators, and for society

as a whole is how to understand why some people navigate through such times quite naturally, while others struggle to forge new directions for their lives. The term *biographicity* has been used to describe the process through which “we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and ‘designable’” (Alheit & Dausien, 2007, p. 66). A robust understanding of biographicity may, in fact, support more individuals in shaping their lives in response to the demands of conditions in late modernity (Alheit, 1992, 1994b; Alheit & Dausien, 2002a, 2007; Giddens, 1991).

The subject of how human beings experience and shape their lives has interested thinkers at least since Plutarch wrote his biographies of noble Greeks and Romans in the late first century, and social science has dealt with “problems of biography” (Mills, 1959, p. 143) across disciplines and contexts for at least 100 years. Early in the 20th century, interest in biographical study developed in multiple philosophical and theoretical traditions, such as the work of the Frankfurt School and the influential studies of Thomas and Znaniecki (1919) at the University of Chicago. The Chicago School, following Mead and others, stressed well into the 1960s the importance of engaging directly with individuals and continued to emphasize that “human beings should be researched in their natural surrounding and that individuals are not static, but rather the self, or society, is in a process of development and change as well as continuity” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 60).

For many years in the mid 20th century, however, positivist approaches to social science prevailed because of sociology’s strong emphasis on abstract theories and

scientific methods, like those promoted by Talcott Parsons and others (Merrill & West, 2009). Then, in more recent decades, biographical explorations reemerged and have included a complex array of traditions that “range from symbolic interactionism to phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnosociology, structuralism and cultural variants of Marxism” (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984, p. 218). Perhaps in part *because* of these wide-ranging approaches to the study of individuals’ lives and ongoing debates about the most effective way to capture and understand human experience, a clear understanding of how people actually exercise biographicity seems to have eluded researchers, and some suggest that more interdisciplinary approaches to biographical research are needed (Merrill & West, 2009).

Connecting biographicity to learning might serve as one such interdisciplinary approach. This connection builds on Lindeman’s (1926) seminal work on adult learning, which asserted, “The whole of life is learning” (p. 5), suggesting that biography and learning are inextricably connected. Adult learning has gained importance over several decades but particularly as the worldwide recession of recent years has put even greater demands on adults across the socioeconomic spectrum, especially those in groups that are marginalized in some way. Merrill and West (2009) provided a working definition of marginality that is pertinent to understanding the problem of biographicity:

Marginality refers to situations in which people may not be full members of a potential group and stand on the margins between differing social spaces, wondering, at some level, where they belong. A marginal person can be in transition between worlds whose norms and values may conflict, which can induce status confusion and vulnerability but also freedom to innovate and a capacity to be critical of a predominant social order. (p. 69)

An estimated 42% of all working-age adults in the United States, for example, lack the ability to participate in postsecondary education or to succeed in the knowledge

economy of the 21st century (Torraco, 2007), and social class and gender are closely related to levels of educational attainment (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a; Field, 2006). Because today “life courses are . . . much more unpredictable than in the past” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a, p. 7), the need for marginalized individuals to exercise biographicity is particularly significant, and some scholars have gone so far as to say that “only those [individuals] will survive, who are able to learn, to change, to transform themselves continuously” (Formenti, 2009, p. 2). The conditions of late modernity require individuals to “learn, or pay the penalty of personal collapse or permanent social disadvantage” (Korber, 1989, as cited in Alheit & Dausien, 2002a, p. 7). As more and more jobs require higher-level skills, “the risks of exclusion for those who fail to meet those standards are more draconian than was ever the case in bygone industrial societies” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a, p. 8).

Lifelong learning has been emphasized as a way for adults to overcome the barriers they face and to begin such a continuous process to reshape their lives according to their own desires across the life course (Dirkx, 2004; Jarvis, 2010). An overview of lifelong learning theory and practice has suggested,

Lifelong learning appears in the literature and in political discourse in a bewildering number of different guises. For instance, it is an instrument *for* change; it is a means of increasing economic competitiveness and of personal development; it is a social policy to combat social exclusion and to ease the re-entry of the unemployed into the labour market; it is a way of promoting the professional and social development of employees and of acquiring new knowledge through the labour process; and it is a strategy to develop the participation of citizens in social, cultural and political affairs. (Coffield, 1999, p. 487)

In short, lifelong learning has become a complex ideology often driven by functionally defined economic, social, and technological forces, in spite of the highly

personal need for contemporary individuals to change and adapt through continuous learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a; Field, 2006).

Learning throughout life has become part of “the complex interplay between the social and economic structures which shape people’s lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the learners themselves” (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003, p. 58). Lifelong learning has become a widely accepted answer to contemporary uncertainty, with a commonly held assumption that “societies, organizations and individuals have to learn in order to survive in the lifelong learning society” (Hake, 1999, p. 79). These notions underscore the imperative that both individuals and institutions have an interest in understanding the outcomes that occur when individuals constitute themselves in new ways (Rustin, 2000) that meet their own needs, as well as the needs of organizations and societal structures.

Alheit (1994b) described the potential impact of biographicity on individuals and on social structures when he wrote:

Substantial elements of these ‘structures’ are the unquestioned certainties functioning in the background to which social individuals relate intuitively when they act on the everyday plane, but also when they act *biographically*. As soon as such prescripts—or only parts of them—enter our awareness and become available, then structures begin to change. Unlived life does indeed possess socially explosive force. (p. 289)

Mills (1959) described this kind of force as the *sociological imagination* when he wrote: “Men [*sic*] now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society” (p. 7). In other words, greater understanding of the potential force of biographicity might support individuals in reshaping their lives with more robust

awareness of its impact on their own lives *and* on their surrounding social contexts (Edwards, Ranson, & Strain, 2002).

A greater understanding of the link between learning and biographicity is needed if policy makers and adult educators, who continue to influence the future of lifelong learning and education in general, are to gain insight into how individual lives and their social contexts are *designable and shapeable*. According to Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf (2000), “We make our own history but not under conditions of our own choosing, and we need to understand these conditions of action more if our future making of our own history is to produce outcomes closer to our intentions and projects” (p. 7). Learning underlies the individual’s ability to understand his or her own history and respond to rapidly changing conditions in what Giddens referred to as “the reflexive project of the self” (Zhao & Biesta, 2012, p. 335).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore biographicity as the process through which individuals repeatedly shape and reshape their lives to meet their own needs and desires in response to the conditions of life in late modernity. In other words, the study considered the link between learning and biography in order to respond to the problem embedded in Alheit’s (1994b) challenge: “The question which actually needs clarifying is . . . how and especially why normal people succeed again and again in mastering crises and living their own lives” (p. 286). Nearly 20 years after Alheit’s challenge, the need to adapt and change (biographicity) is seen as even more essential, but how such adaptation happens is still poorly understood. This problem affects people throughout the lifespan and across socioeconomic groups, but it is particularly dangerous for “those who are

excluded from [the lifelong learning] process, or who choose not to participate” (OECD, 1997, as cited in Field, 2006, p. 114), as these individuals often face growing inequality in their lives. For that reason, this study focused particularly on the life stories of young adults (aged 23–32) who have been economically, educationally, and/or socially marginalized, but who have attempted (repeatedly) to shape their lives, according to Alheit and Dausien’s (2007) definition of biographicity.

The study reviewed the literature to develop a better understanding of the “huge capacity for learning” (Antikainen, 1998, p. 216) that underlies the exercise of biographicity. In fact, Alheit (1992) referred to biographicity as a “learning ground” (p. 187), stressing that the evolving biography depends on learning processes as the very ecology of life experience and, thus, suggesting that learning and biographicity are inextricably connected. This learning ground requires a context within which individuals are not merely economic capital, but represent the essential *social* capital that sees everyone as a genuine lifelong learner, with no one excluded (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a). Alheit (1994b) also asserted that creating a learning ecology is at the center of adult learning when that ecology supports individuals engaged in “reshaping structures and conditional frameworks” (p. 293) through learning projects and processes that relate directly to the learner’s own experience and promote the individual’s own needs and desires. Biesta and Tedder (2007) described this ecology as “a form of biographical learning, understood as learning about one’s life and learning from one’s life” (p. 7).

This study viewed a theory of holistic learning as the basis for adaptation throughout the life course by exploring how learning that occurs at the *intersection* of cognition, emotion, and social interaction (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2006) may provide the

foundation for individuals to repeatedly reshape their lives. Further, the study considered whether enaction or the enactive paradigm (with its emphasis on autonomy, sensemaking, experience, embodiment, and emergence) (Thompson, 2004) provides an even deeper understanding of how learning serves as the basis for biographicity.

This study was guided by the following overarching research question:

RQ: How do young adults (particularly those from so-called marginalized populations) repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives?

Two related questions also were important to this study:

1. What patterns of meaning and experiences of learning emerge in the stories of biographicity told by individuals?
2. In what ways do social structures support or limit the exercise of biographicity?

Theoretical Foundation

This study was grounded in the notion that holistic or integrated learning is the *sine qua non* of biographicity. A conception of learning that represents only the cognitive domain seems insufficient to support the complexity of reshaping a person's life. Thus, more contemporary theorizations of learning that include the cognitive, affective, and social interaction domains (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2007) served as the basis for this study.

Another important theoretical foundation for this study was the addition of the enactive paradigm, which brings theoretical enrichment and commensurate complexity to holistic learning through its emphasis on autonomy, sensemaking, experience, embodiment, and emergence (Stewart, Gapenne, & Di Paolo, 2010) as factors that contribute to change within an individual who is co-creating dynamic, emerging relationships with others within his or her own context. Enaction is grounded in

biological views of cognition and the ways in which one's lived experience constitutes the very life of the changing person (Thompson, 2004). It thus brings an important interdisciplinary dimension to bear on research to reach a fuller explanation of biographicity.

Overview of Conceptual Framework

The rich variety of human life experience (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Dominicé, 2000), coupled with the complex nature of contemporary, holistic learning (Illeris, 2007, 2014; Jarvis, 2006), suggests that no single factor by itself can account for the way in which some individuals successfully redesign their lives while others struggle to do so (Mills, 1959). The conceptual framework for this study sought to introduce constructs that may contribute to understanding biographicity: one's biography or life experience seen as a learning ground; holistic learning (cognition, emotion, and social interaction); and theoretical elements of the enactive paradigm (autonomy/heteronomy, sensemaking, and emergence). These elements of the conceptual framework are defined at the end of this chapter and are explored more fully in chapter 2.

Reflexivity is a complex process that undergirds biographicity. This study sought to avoid a reductionist description of the reflexive process by providing a theoretical framework that is a more complete representation of the multiple interrelated elements that may be essential to a meaningful understanding of learning and biographicity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McGann, 2007). Kohli (1981) asserted, "The autobiography—as a comprehensive view of his life by the subject—is the basis on which this life can best be understood by others. The self-biography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding (*Verstehen*) of life is confronting us"

(pp. 63-64). Rather than study isolated single elements of biography, this theoretical framework was used to explore and synthesize the life histories of individuals to consider whether and how participants have engaged in biographicity in their lives.

Statement of Potential Significance

Human learning has been the subject of countless theoretical and empirical studies, and the notion of lifelong learning has come to be accepted as a central feature of life in late modernity. The subject of learning for those in so-called marginalized communities is the focus of political discourse as educational policies and corporate interests have stressed training and formal educational programming in the interest of solving social and economic problems, often without a commensurate commitment of resources to support such efforts. Jarvis (2007) wrote that lifelong learning has become a social phenomenon that includes both “the individual learning process and the formal bureaucratic educational process” (p. 67), but in spite of espoused commitments to lifelong learning, overall educational and economic disparities have changed little or have even deteriorated.

At the same time, individual life stories demonstrate that people themselves do manage to “redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of [their] life within the specific contexts in which [they] (have to) spend it, and that [they] experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and ‘designable’” (Alheit & Dausien, 2007, p. 167). That is, they exercise biographicity in ways that have been as yet not well understood. Mills’s (1959) work on the sociological imagination provides a means to consider biographicity as a way of imagining life changes, particularly with the distinction he made between the “personal troubles” faced by individuals and related “public issues of social structure” (p.

8). In a similar way, Merrill (2007) wrote, “Biographies do not just help us to understand individual lives but are also an important tool for understanding shared experiences of the social world such as class and learning as an adult” (p. 71). A robust understanding of biographicity in marginalized individuals illuminates this interrelationship between public (shared) and private (individual) lives as the meanings of life experience within a social context are unfolded and interpreted, and this fuller understanding can be applied to enhanced theory and practice at the micro, meso, and macro levels—or the *systems* level of analysis (Alheit, 1999; Alheit & Dausien, 2002b; Merrill, 2007; Merrill & Alheit, 2004; Olesen, 2007b).

While biographical research (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a and b; Dominicé, 2000) has considered life narrative in a variety of contexts, primarily in formal education, little comprehensive or ecological understanding of the phenomenon of biographicity has emerged. Empirical studies on possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) led to studies of a variety of interventions to encourage individuals to understand and/or reshape their lives (Alhadeff-Jones, 2003; Dominicé, 2000; Rossiter, 2007; Stroobants, 2005). As outlined above, society’s changing needs have put greater demands for so-called lifelong learning on contemporary adults and have affected policy decisions in Europe and the United States (Alheit & Dausien, 2002b, 2007; Jarvis, 2007, 2010). Miller (2007) suggested that research is still needed that “facilitates the development of praxis and the operation of participatory research paradigms” in biographical studies (p. 184), and Yorks and Kasl (2002) asserted that adult educators need both a theory and practice of “whole-person learning strategies that fully engage learners affectively” (p. 176). Two

decades ago, Alheit (1994b) also suggested that strategies were needed to provide *biographical coaching* for individuals seeking change in their lives.

Research based on the conceptual framework used in this study provides a fuller *theoretical understanding* of biographicity. The study shows that factors that have an impact on biographicity begin early in life, in elementary school or even before. A variety of approaches at all levels of learning (formal, informal, and incidental) can benefit from a more robust understanding of these factors that promote the shaping and reshaping of one's life. This fuller description can guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational *practices and policies* (Merrill, 2007) that support individuals across the lifespan in responding to the 21st century demands that were outlined earlier in this chapter. Alheit (1994b) suggested that the importance of understanding biographicity lies in its potential to “influence the ‘social ecology’ of learning . . . in order that individuals’ hidden possibilities are brought to the surface and developed, and that ‘unlived’ lives can be lived instead” (pp. 292-293). In other words, a contextualizing of learning and biography can significantly alter assumptions about who learns and for what purpose. Most importantly, the results of this study may provide *individuals an understanding of their own learning* in ways that could help them achieve the life trajectory that they need and desire within whatever social context they find themselves (Merrill, 2007). In summary, this study provides insight into the intersection of learning theory, educational practice and policy, and personal, humanistic growth in the individual from childhood into adulthood.

Summary of Methodology

The methodology for this study was situated in the tradition of biographical research and narrative. Chase (2011) defined narrative as “a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 421). Biographical research was well suited to answer the research question for this study: *How do young adults repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives?* According to Alheit (1994a), biographical research provides “a rigorously *inductive* route, i.e. trying to trace the perspective from which our informants viewed their situation, asking them to describe how they coped with the problems that interested us” (p. 20). Biographical research emphasizes personal and social meanings that support this study’s efforts to understand patterns of meaning and experiences of learning in the narratives told by participants and to consider in what ways social structures support or limit their efforts to reshape their lives.

The study focused on 17 young adults living in a mid-sized city in the Midwest region of the United States. Participants were men and women, aged 23 to 32, who have experienced poverty and limited educational experiences that have tended to marginalize them from a variety of life course opportunities. They attended high schools in an urban setting and were the first in their families to attend college, although they had not necessarily continued beyond the first year. In extended life history interviews, each participant constructed a present version of his or her lived life.

This study used an abductive approach to analysis and interpretation; that is, the researcher constructed an interpreted life, not by allowing theory to guide the analysis, but rather by using the life history to shape the analysis and interpretation of data in order to reveal patterns of meaning that lead to theoretical understanding of biographicity (Brinkmann, 2014). Analysis of this type is viewed as an intersubjective process of interpretation (Denzin, 1989; Merrill & West, 2009; Riessman, 1993). Analysis and interpretation occurred throughout the research process, during the *telling* of participants' stories, in an iterative process of *transcribing* and repeated listening to the individual narratives, and in *analyzing* emerging patterns of meaning in each participant's account and observations of links to the research question and the theoretical framework for this study (Riessman, 1993). A research journal provided the analytical space in which bracketing of data, memo writing, and diagrams constructed the evolving interpretation of data. The study moved toward findings that led to individual and/or collective life stories that uncovered configurations/types of biographicity that contribute to the desired significance of the study.

Subjectivity Statement

The researcher of this study has worked in the field of education as a student, teacher, teacher educator, and curriculum designer with a particular interest in the needs of urban students and families and in issues of social justice. In addition, the researcher has been a community activist and volunteer in a variety of contexts for more than 40 years. The researcher's belief that highly individualized learning is the basis for the improvement of each person's life is part of the subjective perspective that she brought to

this study. The researcher's own repeated experiences of biographicity, including doctoral studies after the age of 65, have influenced her interest in this study.

The researcher's background and worldview led to a number of assumptions and biases that influenced this study:

- Too often, individuals are viewed using a deficit perspective that limits the effectiveness of teaching and learning practices. The researcher believes that respect for individual strengths and gifts is the starting place for any understanding of learning processes. Research to understand the experience of individuals demands respectful, ethical interactions between the researcher and research participants.
- Both individuals and social institutions need to adapt to the rapidly changing social and economic circumstances in our time. Individuals are often blamed for their failure to respond to the needs of the workplace. The researcher's primary interest is in positive life experiences for individuals within a humanistic tradition, but she also believes that the contemporary pace of change puts demands and constraints on both individuals and social structures to adapt in ways that are mutually beneficial or co-emergent.
- Reflexivity is an essential element of life in the late modern era (Archer, 2007; Giddens, 1991). Given adequate internal understanding and external support, individuals can enhance their ability to redesign and reshape their lives within the bounds of their own needs and desires and the contexts in which they live and work.

- The theoretical grounding of this study “is not a neutral process, as positivists maintain, but rather a subjective one in which the subjectivity of the researcher—in interaction with cultural and intellectual structures, power, language, experience and unconscious processes—has an important role” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 53).
- The researcher agrees with Lincoln and Guba (2013) that interpretive inquiry can not only serve to illuminate the life experiences of individuals, but also be “carried out with praxis or social change as a goal” (p. 89).
- The researcher has been a student and teacher of literature and writing throughout her career in education. She is committed to clear, concise language, accessible to a variety of readers, as essential to scholarly writing.
- The researcher believes that narrative is a powerful tool for understanding human experience and that each person has *something important to say* (Ueland, 1938/2010). The researcher’s “path of explanation” is to “listen to them, seek cooperation and communication, and try to find out under what circumstances we could consider to be valid what they are saying” (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004, p. 42). Further, the use of narrative ensures “that the voices of ordinary people are listened to, to improve lives in democratic and empowering ways” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 53).
- The researcher acknowledges her position of socioeconomic and educational privilege and the limitations and benefits that position places on her understanding of the experiences of others. Many decades of working to monitor and limit this reality only confirm that it continually appears in unexpected ways

that require vigilant attention to issues of unequal power relationships (Kvale, 2006).

After a long career in education (or perhaps in spite of it), the researcher committed herself to a humble approach to inquiry described by Bertaux (1981), Denzin (1989), and Schein (as quoted in Lambrechts, Bouwen, Grieten, Huybrechts, & Schein, 2011; Schein, 2013). This research was motivated by an overarching attitude described by Brenda Ueland (1938/2010): “Tell me more. Tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you. Let more come out” (Kindle Edition, Loc. 91 of 2409). This openness and curiosity about the lives of participants was tempered by the awareness that each person ultimately tells her own story in the way that she chooses to in the moment. The study was guided by the belief that we can never fully understand another’s life, but, guided by respect for others, we can attempt to understand “how do we do what we do as we do whatever we do as human beings?” (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004).

Definition of Key Terms

Autonomy. Freedom from constraints that allows for the satisfaction of internal requirements (Di Paolo et al., 2010).

Biographical method/research. “A distinct approach to the study of human experience” (Denzin, 1989, p. 17); “research which utilizes individual stories or other personal documents to understand lives within a social, psychological and/or historical frame” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 10); “the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals’ lives” (Denzin, 1989, p. 13).

Biographicity. The process through which “we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and ‘designable’” (Alheit & Dausien, 2007, p. 66); self-enaction.

Cognition (cognitive domain). What is learned; the knowledge, skills, and understandings that form the content of learning within the mind; equated with learning itself in traditional theories of learning (Illeris, 2007); knowing and thinking (Jarvis, 2006); “all processes by which . . . sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered and used” (Neisser, 1967, as cited in Duncan & Barrett, 2007, p. 1184).

Embodiment. View of the mind as “inherent in the precarious, active, normative, and worldful process of animation,” and view of the body as “not a puppet controlled by the brain but a whole animate system with many autonomous layers of self-constitution, self-coordination, and self organization and varying degrees of openness to the world that create its sense-making activity” (Di Paolo, Rohde, & De Jaegher, 2010, p. 42).

Emergence. “The formation of a novel property or process out of the interaction of different existing processes or events” (Di Paolo et al., 2010, p. 40); self-constituting behavior (Adams, 2010).

Emotion (affective domain). “The mental energy that is necessary for the learning process to take place” (Illeris, 2009, p. 11); feelings, motivation, volition, attitudes; the collection of embodied “action-guiding values, drive and preferences, . . . meaning-generating and adaptive mechanisms . . . [that] allows the organism to

adapt to life-challenging circumstances, is constitutive of action and organizes diverse behaviors” (Colombetti, 2010, p. 150).

Enaction. An emerging paradigm in cognitive science that is nonobjective, nonreductive, and nonfunctionalist (Di Paolo et al., 2010) and asserts that “the world, as it can be diversely known by living organisms from bacteria to contemporary humans, is actually brought about, ‘enacted,’ by the cognitive organism itself. . . . The knowable world is, for each of us, *not* independent of who we are, and how we go about our daily business of living” (Stewart, 2010, p. 27); “through biological, embodied processes, the individual becomes aware of his/her potential in relation to the local context and literally moves into that context” (Crowell & Holliday, 2004); this movement or change is constituted by five intertwined ideas: autonomy, sensemaking, emergence, embodiment, and experience (Di Paolo et al., 2010).

Heteronomy. Freedom within constraints or norms; “the positive freedom to do things one could not do, that one could not even imagine doing, if one were to remain in pure autonomy” (Steiner & Stewart, 2009, p. 531); particular emphasis in this study on social structures and/or context as experienced constraints or norms.

Learning. “The combination of processes whereby the whole person—body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses)—experiences a social situation, the perceived context of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s individual biography resulting in a

changed (or more experienced) person” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 13); the transformation of behavior through experience (Maturana & Varela, 1980).

Marginality. “Marginality refers to situations in which people may not be full members of a potential group and stand on the margins between differing social spaces, wondering, at some level, where they belong. A marginal person can be in transition between worlds whose norms and values may conflict, which can induce status confusion and vulnerability but also freedom to innovate and a capacity to be critical of a predominant social order. (p. 69); “Marginalized populations are those excluded from mainstream social, economic, cultural, or political life” (Cook, 2008, p. 495).

Reflexivity. “An individual reflecting about herself in relation to her circumstances and vice versa” (Archer, 2007, p. 58); “the possibility to understand and choose the circumstances and rules of one’s life” (Rustin, 2000, p. 33); “self and social questioning” including “the capacity to develop critical awareness of the assumptions that underlie practices, especially the meta-cognitive, interpretative schemata that constitute worlds” (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 527).

Sensemaking. Interlocked behaviors between actors that make social processes “intelligible” (Weick, 1979, p. 3); a process for “self and social questioning (reflexivity)” that allows individuals to work together to address the challenges of contemporary life (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 527).

Social interaction (domain). The social/societal context that “influences the nature of the learning that takes place and how one can relate to this” (Illeris, 2007, p. 96); action, communication, cooperation (Illeris, 2009).

Success. Often used as a taken-for-granted term without formal definition; when defined, often used to describe competence in academic performance (Clark, 1984; Levine 2012), financial success, work-related hierarchical position or on an individual's own terms (Sturges, 1999); in this study success is defined according to the participants' own needs and desires.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explored biographicity as the process through which individuals reshape their lives in response to their own needs and desires as well as the demands of contemporary life. The study was rooted in the research tradition that has been referred to as the *biographical turn*, which has emphasized personal and social meanings as the foundation of human action (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). The study used holistic adult learning as the primary lens through which to examine experiences of biographicity within the life history of individuals in order to explore how they have managed to redesign or reshape their lives in ways that are meaningful to them. The literature on holistic adult learning is limited because of a continuing emphasis on the cognitive domain and instrumentalized views of adult learning. This study argued that such views of learning limit the understanding of biographicity and proposed that holistic learning, coupled with principles of enaction, provides an enhanced theoretical framework for studying how people reshape their lives.

This literature review provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the complex process of *biographicity*, a still-emerging construct that holds theoretical and practical promise, but has not been fully developed. Because this study was grounded in biography as content *and* method, this chapter begins with an examination of biography's place in the social sciences, as well as the ontology and epistemology of this study. The first part of the review also pursues an understanding of the connection between biographicity as a temporal human activity and the theory and rhetoric regarding the role of lifelong learning in the redesign of individual lives.

Second, the review of the literature establishes a conceptual link between the emerging construct of biographicity and holistic views of lifelong learning, exploring whether the two constructs may, in fact, be inextricably connected or even two ways of describing the same phenomenon. The review uses the term *holistic* learning as a tentative term to describe the combination of the cognitive, affective, and social interaction domains of learning, with particular emphasis on the affective domain, which is essential to the embodied view of human experience that is part of the enactive paradigm and is neglected in the theoretical literature on adult learning.

The third part of this literature review examines enaction (or the enactive paradigm) in more detail as an additional theoretical lens to understand more specifically what factors may contribute to biographicity and lifelong learning. In ways that parallel theories of holistic learning, the literature on enaction emphasizes that humans constitute themselves through complex cognitive, emotional, and social processes linked to everyday, embodied experiences within their particular social contexts. The enactive paradigm uses certain key elements that are particularly pertinent to biographicity and lifelong learning: autonomy/heteronomy (freedom *from* personal and social constraints and freedom *within* personal and social constraints); sensemaking (social learning activities that create meaning and lead to action); emotion (embodied feelings that encourage or constrain action); and emergence (novel outcomes that allow or constrain changes within individuals) (Thompson, 2007).

The chapter closes by providing a synthesis of the literature, with inferences for the current study. First, it offers a conceptual framework for this study. It closes by reviewing the problem and research questions.

This literature review—and indeed this research study—began in response to personally pressing questions about how it is that some people manage to redesign their lives repeatedly while others struggle to do so, and what learning has to do with the process of redesigning a person’s life. Those questions, coupled with concerns about social justice and the needs of society, led the researcher on a wide-ranging exploration of human experience and learning that began with literature searches on lifelong learning, holistic learning, biographicity, biographical and narrative methods/research, life history, unlived lives/possible selves, successful aging, educational attainment, transformative learning, and workplace learning, as well as the philosophy and history of learning theory. An important additional line of inquiry that emerged from the early research was the enactive paradigm (or enaction), and literature searches were conducted using elements of that paradigm (sensemaking, autonomy, embodiment/emotion, emergence) as search terms.

As with many topics in the field of education and learning, many cited resources are books and edited books within these topic areas, but key journals and conference proceedings also are important, including *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *The International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, and proceedings of the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA). The literature review included more than 100 of the large number of sources that were considered. These sources were accessed through Google Scholar, Articles Plus, ProQuest, JSTOR, Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory, and ERIC. Seminal readings (from 1894 to the mid 1980s) were used to establish the foundation for the study, but most of the sources used were published since the mid-a980’s, which

seems to be the first use of the term *biographicity*. Literature on the enactive paradigm began to emerge in the early 1980s and has accelerated in the last decade.

Biographicity and Biographical Research

The focus of this study is biographicity, defined as the process through which “we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and ‘designable’” (Alheit & Dausien, 2007, p. 66). Chapter 1 introduced the problems that individuals face as they attempt to respond to the rapidly changing demands of the late modern globalized society. This literature review, thus, is grounded in “a theoretical perspective on education and training that takes as its starting point the life history perspective of the actual learner” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a, p. 9). The individual’s biography or life narrative is the starting point for understanding the intricate basis for this study in which the individual’s exercise of biographicity is the subject (or content) of the study, while at the same time biographical research (and the individual’s biography) is the methodology for the study.

Biography as Content and Method

Researchers of human life experience face an important dilemma as they begin considering their research design. On the one hand, researchers seek to discover relevant data from the biography or life history of individuals. This data (content) emerges from the biography as it is told as a life story to the researcher (method), and thus, the researcher uses biography as both the content of the research and the method of data collection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). But even more importantly, every person lives

his or her own biography, and that biography provides the content that is used as resource material that guides a participant's and the researcher's own present and future action. Giddens (1991) affirmed this when he wrote, "Each of us not only 'has,' but *lives* a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life" (p. 14). Thus, social researchers who use biographical methods "expect connections to be made between individual life stories and wider frameworks of understanding" (Rustin, 2000, p. 42) that are the result of biography as content and method for the individual relating his or her life story *and* for the researcher interpreting that life story.

This notion of biography as content and method requires an examination of the ontological and epistemological roots of biographical research. Biographical research as pursued in this study is grounded in a subjective ontology and the interpretive paradigm, which attempts "to understand and explain the social world primarily from the point of view of the actors directly involved in the social process" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 227). As early as the late 19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey reacted negatively to positivist traditions and asserted that researchers should try to "understand human beings, their inner minds, and their feelings, and the way these are expressed in their outward actions and achievements" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 227).

Using an interpretive perspective to study human actions thus reflects a constructivist epistemology that affirms that knowledge emerges from personal experience and depends on "a transaction between the knower and the 'to-be-known' in the particular context in which the encounter between them takes place" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 40). By using the method of *verstehen* (understanding), researchers

interpret human experiences and their meaning through the life stories of others (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The interpretive/constructivist tradition has stressed the importance of social interaction, but also the need to focus on individuals, not only on societal structures (Merrill & West, 2009; Ollagnier, 2002).

The interpretive/constructivist perspective of this study was also influenced by the pragmatist paradigm related to empirical research and practice using biography.

Dominicé's (2000) work on educational biography illustrates the influence of pragmatism with its emphasis on "social, historical, political, and other contexts" and on the "intended consequences" of the research (Creswell, 2013, p. 28). Neubert (2001) also underscored the link between constructivism and pragmatism in the tradition of Dewey's theory of experience with its emphasis on "the varieties and perplexities of human life-experience" that reflect habits of meaning that are culturally embedded (p. 5). Dominicé (2000) urged biographical researchers to probe not only their own epistemology, but also the varied epistemology of participants so that each participant also becomes a researcher of her or his own experience and its consequences.

According to Olesen (2007a), feminist theorists and others respond to the pragmatic aspects of sociological, psychological, and educational contexts, and he strongly supported the value of critical theory in some of the empirical work that he reviewed. Rorty (2007, as cited in Huff, 2009) said that the pragmatist orientation asserts that theories are "ultimately justified by their instrumentality, or the extent to which they help people meet their aims" (p. 112). This stance aligns with the theoretical view of lifelong learning as an approach that is focused on the individual subject (Alheit & Dausien, 2002b).

Nearly all of the sources considered for this review were positioned at various points within the interpretivist tradition that includes constructivism, pragmatism, and certain forms of critical theory. Thus, the overall paradigm that guided this study was well summarized by Wilson (1970), who described interpretive processes as the way that individuals “assemble, communicate, and justify accounts to themselves and each other of what they are doing and why they are doing it” (p. 707). Denzin (1989) applied this perspective directly to the ontology and epistemology of this study, as well as the biographical research methods used, when he wrote,

The biographical method rests on subjective and intersubjectively gained knowledge and understandings of the life experiences of individuals, including one’s own life. Such understandings rest on an interpretive process that leads one to enter into the emotional life of another. Interpretation, the act of interpreting and making sense out of something, creates the conditions for understanding, which involves being able to grasp the meanings of an interpreted experience for another individual. Understanding is an intersubjective, emotional experience. Its goal is to build sharable understandings of the life experiences of another. (p. 28)

While this study embraced this perspective, it also took into account the viewpoint that researchers are always part of an evolving understanding of paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and later in this review the researcher considers how enaction may provide an additional enhancement of the epistemology guiding this study.

Historical Overview of Biographical Studies

Scholarly interest in biography as a research method for understanding individuals dates back to the early part of the 20th century, revealing a valuable historical context that relates to the contemporary study of biographicity. Virtually all scholarly writing on biographical methods traces biographical studies in the social sciences to Thomas and Znaniecki (1919), members of the Chicago School at the University of Chicago, and their

work using case studies to analyze the letters of Polish immigrants (Apitzsch & Souti, 2007; Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; West et al., 2007). This classic, qualitative study analyzed the written and spoken words of people who had often been overlooked in earlier attempts to understand history or sociology (Chamberlayne et al., 2000), and it is now referred to as an important seminal work for biographical methods.

The Chicago School's approach to social research continued to some extent well into the late 20th century (Apitzsch & Souti, 2007; Elder & Giele, 2009). Influenced by G. H. Mead's emphasis on remaking the self through social interaction and language learning, the Chicago School developed social interactionism to "capture the dynamic, learned, malleable and constructed quality of human identity and society" and emphasized that the interaction of individuals creates the social order (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 4). The Chicago School's naturalistic approach, also grounded in Mead, sought to capture the continuity and change inherent in life experience. This dynamic view of human learning and emergence provides an important backdrop for the evolving theory of learning and enaction that grounds this study.

The Chicago School's methods were replaced in many quarters by the late 1930s with quantitative research methods (and surveys in particular) that reflected a scientific, positivist epistemology rather than an interpretive stance (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Goodson & Gill, 2011; Jindra, 2014; Merrill & West, 2009). This return to positivist approaches (a situation that persists in the United States today) focused on structural aspects of life that sought to find causal, quantitative relationships between life events, coping strategies, and the integration of possible selves into the life goals of individuals (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Frazier, Hooker, Johnson, & Caius, 2000; Jindra, 2014). The

biographical, interpretive method reemerged in the 1970s in Germany and, while by the 1990s it had become a widely used approach in much of Europe (West et al., 2007), it has not spread as broadly in the United States except for notable exceptions such as Elder's (1974, 1994) work on children of the Great Depression, which examined deeply the intersection of individual lives and history. Jindra (2014) noted a certain irony in the limited use of biographical research in the United States, which she found puzzling, since it continues to be rooted in the early sociological traditions begun in this country.

The so-called *biographical turn* gained greater momentum in the 1990s (Chamberlayne et al., 2000), fueled by the work of Giddens (1991), who wrote that in late modernity, "the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of personal and social change" (p. 33). According to Merrill and West (2009), "Biographical Methods have claimed an increasing place in academic research and are alive and well (if sometimes marginal and contested) in various academic disciplines such as literature, history, sociology, anthropology, social policy and education" (p. 2).

The Learning Lives project (Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010), for example, was a 4-year longitudinal study of the learning biographies of 117 people based on 528 extended life history interviews. In addition, the researchers analyzed data from surveys of 5,500 British households. This extensive study explored "the potential of the stories people tell about their lives for the ways in which they might learn from and for their lives" (Kindle Edition, p. 4 of 237), a purpose closely aligned to the notion of biographicity. The data from this study enhanced the understanding of narrative learning, and its findings highlighted the great potential for future research to "ask more difficult questions about the processes through which personal issues can be transformed into

public issues that have political rather than just personal significance” (Kindle Edition, p. 130 of 137).

Biographicity as an Emerging Construct

The notion of biographicity emerged from the renewed interest in subjective views of life experience in the work of Alheit (1992). He advanced his own work on biographicity based on Kohli’s original definition of biographicity as “a code of personal development and emergence” (Kohli, 1988, as cited in Apitzsch & Souti, 2007). Kohli (1981) wrote, “The construction of a life history is the mode by which the individual represents those aspects of his past which are relevant to the present situation, i.e. relevant in terms of the (future-oriented) intentions by which he guides his present actions” (p. 65). Alheit (1992) built on Kohli’s *open design* conception of biography, asserting that the individual does not simply reproduce structural expectations or conditions (powerful as they are), but rather is open to “qualitative leaps, breaks, surprising fresh starts, moments of emergence and autonomy” (p. 190). This view suggests important possibilities within life experience that may be connected to holistic learning and enaction, to be explored later in this literature review.

This emphasis on the relationship among past, present, and future is foundational to any understanding of biographicity, and both empirical studies and theoretical work on life history often find inspiration from the seminal writing on *temporality* of G. H. Mead (Flaherty & Fine, 2001). In *The Philosophy of the Present*, Mead (1932) stated, “That which marks a present is its becoming and its disappearing” (p. 1). Another description of Mead’s view of time that relates to biography is “the idea of the constitution of the past in the problems of the present” (Joas, 1985). Any recounting of life experiences is a process

in which both “past and future impinge upon and influence action in the present” (Strauss, 2008, p. 33).

Echoing this view, Jarvinen (2004) wrote, “The past we choose, consciously or unconsciously, is a past that is significant to our present undertakings. The meaning of our world lies in what we are going to do with it” (p. 47). Bruner (1990), in a way similar to Giddens (1991), described this temporal view of experience as reflexivity or “our capacity to turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the past nor the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity” (Bruner, 1990, p. 109). The individual who is attempting to redesign or reshape her life must work on making meaningful connections among past, present, and future in spite of the intense temporal challenges of contemporary life that inhibit time for reflection and encourage thinking and action in the present alone (Alhadeff-Jones, Lesourd, Roquet, & LeGrand, 2011).

Alheit (1992) examined lives as lived across time and asserted that biographicity is a way of considering life history as a “learning ground” (p. 187) through which individuals engage, throughout every aspect of their life experience, in “difficult learning processes” (p. 188) that determine their capacity to repeatedly redesign or reshape their lives. Underscoring this suggested connection between learning and biographicity, Alheit (1992) referred to Schuetze’s [1967] assertion that learning individuals must navigate the balance between *emergence* and *self-creation* with the constraints of structure and societal expectations. These notions of emergence and self-creation are explored later in this review through literature that suggests the enactive paradigm’s potential role in describing the holistic learning that occurs when individuals exercise biographicity.

The role of learning has been a central focus of biographicity as an emerging construct, and the term *lifelong learning* is used, often without clear definition or understanding, as a necessary factor in reshaping one's life. The Faure report established an early direction for the notion of lifelong learning when it asserted,

The aim of education is to enable man to be himself, to "become himself." And the aim of education in relation to employment and economic progress should be . . . to "optimise" mobility among the professions and afford a permanent stimulus to the desire to learn and to train oneself. (Faure et al., 1972, p. 161)

Evolving conceptualizations that followed from this report emphasized the importance of lifelong learning as "an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationship among individuals, groups and nations" (Delors, 1996, p. 14).

In other contexts, however, this emphasis changed, and lifelong learning rhetoric and practice challenged the focus on personal growth (Coffield, 1999; Edwards et al., 2002), such that by the early 21st century, Field (2006) wrote, "The lifelong learning debate appears to threaten the existing adult education structures, not only because it is so clearly dominated by economic and vocational concerns, but also because it celebrates and promotes a fragmented and distributed view of learning" (p. 14). Rather than supporting the individual's ability to redesign or reshape his or her own life, lifelong learning has increasingly been instrumentalized and politicized through public policies, workforce development efforts, and formal education structures that lead to problems as well as benefits for individual lives (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a; Coffield, 1999; Field, 2006; Hake, 1999). In many cases, lifelong learning policies and practices have served to promote inequalities rather than empower adult learners (Edwards, 1995). There are those who assert, "Lifelong learning can liberate or further enslave" (Cruikshank, 2002, p. 2).

In many cases, lifelong learning has been used as an ideology to guide training in the workplace or in other forms of formal, instrumentalized continuing education (Coffield, 1999; Edwards et al., 2002), but such approaches have failed to take into account the complex personal life histories of individuals (Field, 2006; Jarvis, 2007). Illeris (2003) provided insight into the complexity of the problem of how individuals respond to conflicting purposes and outcomes of lifelong learning when he wrote, “A theory is needed which relates to the learner as a human being in general, as a member of the present late modern globalized market and risk society, and as a specific individual with a personal life history, situation, and future perspective” (p. 169). The purpose of this study emerged from the need to develop such a theory.

Alheit and Dausien (2002b), in an extensive analysis of lifelong learning, highlighted the limitations that formal and nonformal education practices place on individuals, beginning in childhood and extending throughout life. Their analysis pointed to somewhat deterministic notions of the extent to which people can actually overcome the educational and social experiences that have shaped their lives. In spite of these cautions, however, their analysis also affirmed learning as a “biographical opportunity” for individuals, organizations, and society (pp. 233-234). Researchers should seek to understand biographicity’s potential to change the individual, but also should not ignore its potential to interact with and alter surrounding societal conditions (Olesen, 2007a).

Giddens (1991) broadly influenced conceptualizations of adult learning and its relationship to the developing individual in late modern society. His work supports the view that the exercise of biographicity requires a level of reflexivity that allows the individual to engage in the introspection required for reshaping one’s life (West, 1996).

When individuals seek to reshape their lives, “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of personal and social change” (Giddens, 1991, p. 33). Zhao and Biesta (2012) critiqued some aspects of Giddens’s (1991) *reflexive project of the self* and cautioned against minimizing the influence of social structures, a notion explored in this study through the concept of heteronomy within the enactive paradigm.

The notion of the capacity of individuals to shape their lives has taken many forms in theoretical explorations, empirical studies, and policy decisions as society’s changing needs have put greater demands for so-called lifelong learning on contemporary adults (Alheit & Dausien, 2007; Jarvis, 2007, 2010) and parallel demands for research into the biographies of adults. Hake (1999) urged researchers to study how biographical work is an essential competency in uncertain times. An example of this view appeared in a study of 70 individuals’ life histories, in which Crossan et al. (2003) concluded that life changes are affected by dynamic interactions between social structures and individual life experiences as well as lifelong learning. Their research on young adults in nontraditional further education confirmed the fragmented and inconsistent course of the life history and of lifelong learning over time. They agreed with Alheit’s formulation of biographicity, but critiqued it as well, asserting that it needs to emphasize more strongly not only individual actions but also “changing values and relationships within social structures” (p. 66).

In a similar way, empirical studies of life trajectories (Table 1) have elucidated aspects of lifelong learning and analyzed individual experiences of biographicity in relation to specific social, economic, and biographical challenges.

Table 1
Empirical Studies of Life Trajectories

Study	Findings
Alheit, 1994a—Longitudinal qualitative study to explore the meaning of unemployment in the biographies of youth; extended unstructured interviews guided by the narrators themselves	Complex findings organized around a number of themes: features peculiar to the generation of youth who participated; the risks of exclusion in a modernized social space; issues of marginalization related to the previous themes.
Antikainen, 1998—Biographical interviews with 44 men and women from various social contexts in Finland; focused on learning experiences embedded in life stories	Findings fell into categories of the meanings of education: education as a resource, education as status, education as conformity, education as individualization.
Barreto & Frazier, 2012—Quantitative study of 198 participants 18-84 years old to understand how life-changing events impact a person's life goals	Positive correlation between stress level of a life event and the degree to which that event integrates into the possible-selves repertoire, leading to a positive impact on coping.
Buday, Stake, & Peterson, 2012—Quantitative study of the relationships among perceived social support, beliefs about how one would fare in a science career, and perceptions and choice of a career in science.	No significant differences between men and women in their perceptions of the support they received for a science career, their ratings of their science career-related possible self, or their career outcome.
Frazier et al., 2000—Mixed methods, 5-year longitudinal study of older adults exploring continuity and change in possible selves in relation to health, health locus of control, and life satisfaction	“Although stability is the norm, our findings illuminate how possible selves reflect individuals' changing images of themselves over time, and shed light on how changes emerge in positive potential for growth in the future” (p. 242).
Lee & Oyserman, 2007—A study of education-related possible selves of mothers applying for welfare and those making the transition from welfare to work, using open-ended questions asking them to describe their future selves	No difference between groups in education-related possible selves. Indicated a need for programs and policies that more directly address the educational possible selves of low-income mothers in order to facilitate future educational attainment.

Study	Findings
Merrill, 2004—A summary of a study that used biographical interviews to link past and present lives in order to determine the impact of policies and practices that enhance participation of those traditionally excluded from higher education in six countries	Multiple meanings emerged, e.g., life stories “illustrate the interaction between agency and structure in people’s lives in dealing with the daily inequalities produced by a class society” (p. 90); affirmed that the reasons “why some people participate and others do not has to be understood within the context of their past and present lives and their class, gender, and race location in society” (p. 91).
Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006—Experimental, quantitative study of low-income, minority teens exploring a link between possible selves and academic outcomes after a brief intervention	Using a complex statistical model, the study “demonstrates the real-world power of a social psychological conceptualization of the self as a motivational resource” (p. 201).
Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001—A study of so-called marginalized students who were the first generation in their families to attend college; explored upward mobility in regard to ego identity formation	After three interviews with each of the 15 participants, narratives were analyzed primarily through the sociological lens of class. Findings “demonstrate upward mobility’s multiple influences on family and social interactions” (p. 111); “this group’s path to success is psychologically more complex and demanding than is generally imagined” (p. 117).

These and other empirical studies have explored discrete elements of change within the life stories of individuals and provided insights into particular aspects of biographicity, but they have not provided a broad understanding or synthesis of how individuals actually succeed in redesigning and reshaping their lives according to their own needs and desires over time. The need remains to understand more fully how biographicity and learning inform conflicting purposes of lifelong learning, such as personal fulfillment and development throughout life; active citizenship and inclusion; and employability (Centeno, 2011; Cruikshank, 2002).

Bierema (1996) suggested that development of the person “must be systemic and holistic if it is to have any lasting effect on either the individual, the organization, or

society” (p. 22). Indeed, unless lifelong learning practices respect the complex cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2010; Kegan, 1982; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991), lifelong learning may be “actively reproducing inequality. It may even be creating new sources of inequality” (Field, 2006, p. 114). For example, Field described a report that noted “a worrying trend for the skills-rich to extend their learning and competence while the skills-poor fall further behind” (p. 114). This potential outcome is particularly important when considering the life histories of the educationally marginalized young adults who are the subject of this study as they embark on their own path of lifelong learning. Holistic learning may, in fact, be an essential understanding “if our future making of our own history is to produce outcomes closer to our intentions and projects” (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 7).

Biographical Practice and Research

One important practice-based strand of biographical study, particularly as it relates to biographicity and to notions of lifelong learning, is the educational biography as described by Dominicé (2000) as a way for the individual to engage in a more holistic form of reflexivity and to discover “the extent to which learning in many different situations is an active search for meaning” (p. 4). In this form of the biographical method, he asserted, “a person’s life history is understood as an educational process” (p. 1), and the approach is situated within the context of formal education. In this context, the individual prepares her or his life history narrative, but it is shared with others in a class setting. This approach may hold potential for meeting the needs of individuals in contemporary life. It appears that limited direct empirical study has considered its impact,

although individual interviews have been used to produce and study biographicity across a spectrum of individuals (Weber, 1999; West & Carlson, 2006).

Alheit (2009) noted that the use of educational biography (as well as life history in general) in formal education is appropriate for nonformal and informal learning processes as well, so that biographical learning might “instrumentalize and emancipate at one and the same time” (p. 117). Using biography in educational settings, on the other hand, has also prompted concerns that if the method becomes too mechanistic it might have the opposite effect and actually disempower individuals rather than serving as a learning opportunity (Goodson & Gill, 2011). In fact, Rossiter (2007) described the adaptation of the educational biography for a wide variety of settings, including interventions and research on “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) with low-income mothers, adults in career transitions, and individuals in mentoring or coaching relationships, among other settings. Another vehicle for the study of biography has been to use individual interviews to produce and study biographicity across a broad spectrum of individuals (Weber, 1999; West & Carlson, 2006).

Stroobants (2005) pointed out that researchers often seek to understand the experience of participants while at the same time looking for “intervention-oriented outcomes” (p. 53) to provide relevant information to the practice community. The underlying focus of much that has been written about biographicity was summarized well by Bron (2000, as cited in Tedder & Biesta, 2007): “People need, constantly, to work on their biographies and find some authentic rhythms, in the light of change, and to find the resources of hope . . . to compose a biography, and some stability, meaning and authenticity, from the fragments of shifting experience” (unpaginated). Dominicé (2000)

highlighted the need for a theory of learning that “is close to a theory of life changes” (p. 190). The present study aligned with these views of biography and learning and the potential for practice-based directions for the future.

It is apparent from this overview of biographicity and biographical methods that education and lifelong learning are often suggested as key components of the process of reshaping one’s life. Alheit and Dausien (2002b) summarized this assertion well when they wrote, “Without biography there can be no learning, without learning, no biography” (p. 230), thus reinforcing the close ties between holistic lifelong learning and biographicity.

Holistic Learning and Biographicity

Defining Holistic Learning in a Biographical Context

In order to advance this understanding of the relationship between learning and biographicity, this section considers in more depth the overarching concept of holistic learning. Indeed, Alheit (1994b) said, “The real theoretical provocation within the ‘biographical approach’ is its insistence on a *different way of learning*” (p. 285; italics in original). An empirical study of Dutch young adults suggested that learning “is an integrated part of the concept of the biography: a life story in which learning experiences from all life domains and life phases are integrated and attain meaning” (Diepstraten, du Bois-Reymond, & Vinken, 2006, p. 176). This integrated view might serve as a reconceptualization of the term *lifelong learning*, which has been conceptualized in a wide variety of ways for disparate purposes. Too often lifelong learning has served to discourage those who want to enrich or change their lives, but who also fear that available learning opportunities will run counter to their own needs and desires (Illeris,

2003b). This study, on the other hand, positioned lifelong learning as a more holistic, humanistic process that is closely aligned with the individual's biography.

A holistic conceptualization of learning was developed by Illeris (2009), who stated that learning is a “complex matter” (p. 1) for which there is no clear agreed-upon definition, but instead a growing number of overlapping theories. In its broadest meaning, learning can be defined as “any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing” (Illeris, 2009, p. 7). This definition supports the connection between change in one's biography and learning across the lifespan.

This view of learning finds its seminal roots in Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), which argued for an understanding of learning linked to active change within the individual. Musolf (2001), in a contemporary neopragmatic analysis of Dewey's seminal thinking (as well as that of other pragmatists such as G. H. Mead), provided a clear link between learning and biography:

For Dewey, intelligence developed through education led to instrumental habits that provided human beings with an adaptive function to meet the contingencies of everyday life. Individuals, endowed with minded behavior, had the *adaptive capacity to make and remake themselves* [italics added] and, in addition, to reconstruct the institutions of society and all of culture, the very structures that influenced what we as a species could become. (p. 281)

An essential element of this view is that the individual has the ability to think and act creatively in the present in order to act in new ways in the future (Elkjaer, 2009) and, in the process, to reconstruct social structures. This is an important element of this study's attempt to understand how individuals exercise biographicity and the ways in which they believe that social structures respond when they do.

This basic understanding of learning points to the question of what the processes *are* that lead to change within the individual biography. Illeris (2007) provided a map of how learning theorists might answer this question, beginning with the assertion that learning consists of two basic processes: (1) external interaction between the individual and the environment; and (2) the internal process of interpreting and dealing with external information. Illeris's theoretical map also highlights the three commonly addressed dimensions or domains of learning: cognitive (knowledge, understanding, skills); affective (motivation, emotion, attitude); and social interaction (action, communication, cooperation) (Figure 1). In addition, other theorists have stressed that learning in all three domains starts with the body (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2010; Kegan, 1982; Varela et al., 1991).

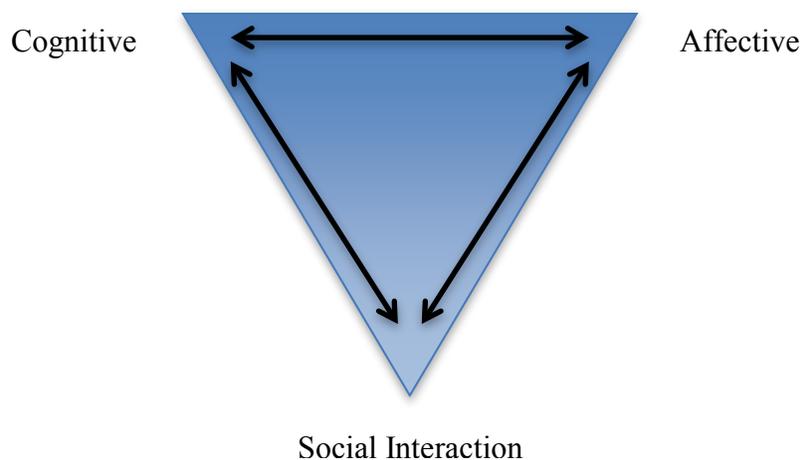


Figure 1. Domains of learning.

This movement toward a holistic understanding of how people learn is summarized in Jarvis's (2006) definition of learning:

the combination of processes whereby the whole person—body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses)—experiences a social situation, the perceived context of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively, or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person. (p. 13)

Jarvis’s definition seems to provide a sound theoretical basis for this study of biographicity as a holistic learning process that necessarily involves the cognitive, social, *and* emotional domains and supports the conceptual framework for this study.

In a similar way, Kegan (1982) described the “lifespan developmental approach” (p. 74) that *constitutes* the self within the interaction of emotions, cognition, and social interaction. Olesen (2007a) emphasized the dynamics of learning by asserting that emotional and cognitive processes linked with interpersonal and societal interaction actually *constitute* an essential framework for learning. Though many theories of learning continue to refer to learning cycles (often across various domains), Seaman (2008) and Miettinen (2000) went so far as to challenge such linear *cycles* of learning as a barrier to adequate conceptions of learning in favor of mediated, holistic models of learning.

The theory of holistic learning attempts to account for the complex factors that promote a clearer view of how individuals reshape their lives, related to lifelong learning, “resulting in a changed person, one who has grown and developed as a result of the learning” (Jarvis, 2007, p. 123). Rather than viewing biographicity and learning as stepwise or linear processes, this study explored them as dynamic, coemergent processes. Holistic learning may, in fact, provide a renewed conceptualization of lifelong learning that fulfills the standards set by the Delors report (1996), which asserted that learning throughout life must include *learning to live together, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to be.*

The Undertheorized Importance of the Affective Domain

Much of learning theory, as well as research in education, has emphasized the cognitive and social interaction dimensions of learning, but the affective domain has received much less theoretical or empirical study, particularly as it relates to individual decisions or actions (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Mezirow, 2009). Dirkx (2011) suggested that adult and continuing educators have begun to reflect more on the role that emotions play in adult learning in a movement away from the “Cartesian dualism of mind and body” and toward more holistic views of learning (p. 356). Olesen (2007a) noted, “Learning is activated by and influenced by emotional involvement. . . . We are particularly interested in the interference between cognitive and emotional aspects of individual experience building in specific social contexts, and between individual and collective meaning making” (p. 7).

References to the importance of emotion in learning go back more than 100 years (Dewey, 1922; Garrison, 2003; James, 1894). In fact, Bruner (1986) wrote, “There are some simple, probably biologically based linkages between emotion . . . and learning, problem solving, thinking on the other. . . . They seem fruitful to pursue . . . [because they] bear upon the question of how we construct and construe the worlds in which we operate” (p. 113). When emotions are considered in this way, learning throughout life (and biographicity by extension) is not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but rather an ongoing process that engages the whole person, including a strong element of the affective domain (Morrison, 2008).

Olesen (2007a) insisted that emotional and cognitive processes are closely connected, or perhaps even identical, dimensions of learning that reflect individual

subjective meanings within cultural and societal (social) contexts. In his meta-analysis of several empirical studies of people in life transitions, using a more emotion-focused approach than the original studies took, Olesen (2007a) studied the “individual lived life as a context for learning” in an attempt “to understand how specific individuals experience their present in the light of the past and their subjectively projected future” (pp. 8-9). He concluded that learning is based on the subjective interaction between cognitive activity, emotion, and social practice, much as this study theorizes a connection between biographicity and holistic learning as well as the relationship between individual biographicity and impact on social structures.

Jarvis’s (2006) review of the limited research on emotions and human learning highlighted the practical challenge of researching the affective domain of learning. Even when the affective dimension was mentioned, as in the study of Hoerning and Alheit (1995), emotions were not considered fully when addressing the difficulty some people faced in exercising biographicity. Human emotions seem closely related, however, to times of transition when individuals experience significant learning and subsequent change (Mezirow, 2009; Wildemeersch & Stroobants, 2009). These periods of transition are frequently used as a way of studying biography, and they have been described as experiences of disjuncture, when individuals are forced “to find new explanations, new knowledge, new ways of doing things. In other words, we must learn” (Jarvis, 2010, p. 64). Jarvis (2010) went further to assert that two conditions are required for learning in one’s life—disjuncture and social interaction—again reinforcing the notion of holistic learning. He explained that social interaction implies disjuncture because “people are

different, and during interaction we learn to respond to those differences, accommodate them and even to learn from them” (p. 64).

Disjuncture has been, in fact, frequently noted as a necessary, emotion-laden precursor to the kind of learning that seems closely related to various perspectives on lifelong learning and to biographicity (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 1987, 2006, 2010; Wildemeersch & Leirman, 1988). Jarvis (2010) and Miettinen (2000) described disjuncture as an interruption in the taken-for-granted flow of time that creates a gap between what we expect based on our previous learning (biography) and what is actually happening within our current experience. In an earlier theoretical examination of disjuncture, Mezirow (1981) defined such experiences as “disorienting dilemmas common to normal development in adulthood which may be best resolved only by becoming critically conscious of how and why our habits of perception, thought and action have distorted the way we have defined the problem and ourselves in relationship to it” (p. 7). He, too, seemed to connect this to the notion of biographicity when he referred to the “probability of transformation” (p. 7).

A sense of disjuncture may be exacerbated today because of temporal pressures that confront individuals and make it difficult for them to consider the past while dealing with intense time pressures in the present and the uncertainties of the future (Alhadeff-Jones et al., 2011). Nevertheless, such disjuncture remains essential to a learning process that creates a willingness to engage in self-reflexivity, which is related to holistic learning (Archer, 2007; Bron, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Seaman, 2008), particularly in the late modern era.

While experiences of disjuncture may provide fertile ground for the exercise of biographicity, they can be problematic for individuals who may be forced to confront powerful emotions, past and present, and there is some debate about the role of emotion-charged memories in learning contexts (Ochsner & Schacter, 2003). Even Miller (2007), an enthusiastic proponent of the biographical approach, cautioned those who participate in it to be aware of the powerful emotions that may emerge for individuals and the ethical standards required to protect participants. Such concerns, coupled with the paucity of robust understanding of the affective dimension of learning, seem to point to the possibility of using elements of the enactive paradigm to gain greater insight into how biographical learning, particularly seen as holistic learning, is related to individuals' capacity to reshape their lives.

Enaction and Biographicity

A robust exploration of the broad conception of the enactive paradigm is well beyond the scope of this study or this literature review. Instead, this section considers key dimensions of enaction as they inform the experience of biographicity in individuals. Varela et al. (1991) recalled that in the early 1900s, Husserl, the father of phenomenology, suggested, "The lived world is not the naïve, theoretical conception of the world found in the natural attitude. It is, rather, the everyday social world, in which theory is always directed toward some practical ends" (p. 17). Cummins (2014) suggested, "It is therefore to be hoped that the careful curation of the enactive vocabulary may help us to untie the conceptual knots that arise from a sterile and immovable split between mind and world" (p. 110). In effect, the enactive paradigm moves the study of cognition toward the study of human action (Engel, 2010) and provides a theoretical lens

to use in trying to understand human biography and by implication biographicity. Alheit and Dausien (2002b) suggested this possible connection as well when they described biographical learning as

a self-willed, 'autopoietic' accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively 'organise' their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions. (p. 233)

This view of biography aligns well with the enactive view of human life being self-creating or autopoietic (Di Paolo, 2005; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 1991). In the same way, enaction connects back to biographicity and learning through its view that "the point of departure for the enactive approach is the study of how the perceiver [the individual person] can guide his actions in his local situation" (Varela et al., 1991, p. 173).

The Ontology and Epistemology of Enaction

The enactive paradigm is fully grounded in nonobjectivist ontology and asserts a strong constructivist perspective (Stewart, 2010) that aligns with this study and may provide additional epistemological insights into how individuals exercise biographicity and how learning occurs across the lifespan. In one study of how enaction extends constructivism, Proulx (2008) wrote, "For constructivists, learning is seen as an active process, and not as a passive one. It is not a matter of linearly acquiring and accumulating knowledge, but of actively construing and modifying our own 'knowings'. . . as an inherently social endeavor" (p. 13). Enactivists agree with that position, but emphasize what is known as *radical constructivism*, which asserts that "knowledge is an individual,

personal-construal that is shaped by our own experiences as learners in the world” (Proulx, 2008, p. 14). Dell (1987) described Maturana’s seminal work on enaction as a “constitutive ontology” (p. 463) through which the individual as an observer in the world engages in language to actually define his or her emerging humanity. In addition, a “constitutive ontology supports the notion of the interdependent interrelationship between the individual and the social context, with a concomitant belief in the enactment of reality through the experience of living” (Kennedy-Reid, 2012, p. 56).

The essence of enaction is that *the world* is actually brought about or *enacted* by the human person. Stewart (2010) wrote, “But the fact of the matter is this: what the knowable world is, for each of us, is *not* independent of who we are, and how we go about our daily business of living” (p. 27). Because the enactive paradigm embraces a nonlinear view of phenomena, it addresses some of the challenges faced by researchers who are committed to more holistic views of a phenomenon such as biographicity (Froese & Di Paolo, 2011). It provides the basis for a move beyond linear models to “acknowledge the circular character of many of the processes that exist in nature” (McGann, 2007, p. 471). By using an epistemological lens that extended constructivism in this way, the conceptual framework of this study followed the epistemological description of enaction of Beer (1980) that is “not about analysis, but synthesis. . . . It does not interrelate disciplines, but transcends them” (p. 65).

Enaction also cites its roots in what some have called a pragmatic turn, influenced by the writing of Dewey and Mead as well as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger (Engel, 2010; Steiner & Stewart, 2009). This pragmatic tradition has emphasized the emergence of the self in Dewey’s “genetic analysis of mind as emerging from cooperative activity”

and Mead's "analysis of perception and the constitution of reality as a field of situations through the 'act'" (Engel, 2010, p. 222). This paradigmatic view also aligns well with the ontological and epistemological ground established earlier for this study—and, in fact, extends it—to address the question of how individuals are able to redesign or reshape their lives, using what enactivists might call constitutive ontology and enactive epistemology.

Defining Enaction

When people exercise biographicity, they move toward practical outcomes by reflecting on their life stories and questioning how the interpretations of those stories bring meaning and value to their life experience and to their life path forward. Caracciolo (2012) suggested that enaction might be particularly effective in addressing practical human problems because "it places meaning and meaning-making at the core of cognition" (p. 367). In effect, enaction provides a lens that links complex notions of human consciousness, emotion, and perception with everyday human experiences (Torrance, 2006) and with learning. Thompson (2004) asserted that the seminal work on enaction of Varela [and Maturana as well] affirms that direct experience *constitutes* the embodied mind and the ensuing actions of the individual.

For the purpose of this study, the enactive approach is defined in a basic way following Thompson (2007): "According to the enactive approach, the human mind emerges from self-organizing processes that tightly interconnect the brain, body, and environment at multiple levels" (p. 37). A further definition relates more directly to biographicity: "A cognitive system is a system whose organization defines a domain of interactions in which it can act with relevance to the maintenance of itself. . . . Living

systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition” (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 13). This definition echoes and expands Illeris’s (2009) definition of learning, stated earlier, as “any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing” (p. 7).

This definition also aligns well with concepts of biographical learning, such as Herzberg’s (2006) analysis of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and how biography emerges from the confluence of biology, social and societal structures, learning experiences, value orientations, and meaning-making experiences. In effect, the individual who exercises biographicity may experience what enactivists view as a kind of autopoiesis (Caracciolo, 2012; Di Paolo, 2005; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Thompson & Stapleton, 2009), which Di Paolo et al. (2010) described as an *adaptive* autopoiesis through which the individual observes their own experiences and uses that information to emerge anew. In a similar way, using the language of biographical research, Merrill and West (2009) wrote, “The self is open to change and can challenge subjectification and transform itself in creative and courageous acts. This is a self that is emotional, embodied, relational, socio-cultural, discursive and potentially agentic at the same time” (p. 70). Similarly, the self, as described in life stories, reflects “our physical movements and journeys in time and space and the accompanied emotions” as well as our cognitive abilities (Horsdal, 2014, p. 47).

A further elaboration of the definition of enaction identifies five key ideas that constitute the enactive approach: autonomy, sensemaking, emergence, embodiment, and [life] experience (Di Paolo et al., 2010; Thompson, 2007; Torrance, 2006). Each of these

elements provides material for considering how enaction can serve as a framing construct through which to enhance the study and understanding of biographicity.

Autonomy and Heteronomy

The enactive paradigm provides its own definition of autonomy: “What makes living organisms cognitive beings is that they embody or realize a certain kind of autonomy—they are internally self-constructive in such a way as to regulate actively their interactions with their environments” (Thompson & Stapleton, 2009, p. 24). This definition is grounded in the seminal work of Maturana and Varela (1980) who wrote, “Autonomy and diversity, the maintenance of identity and the origin of variation in the mode in which this identity is maintained, are the basic challenges presented by the phenomenology of living systems to which men have for centuries addressed their curiosity about life” (p. 73).

Autonomy also reflects the notion that individuals “have some capacity to direct and control themselves in order to maintain their own living existence” (McGann, 2007, p. 466). In the social sciences, the construction of the person has been described through a number of theoretical perspectives, especially through identity theory, which has influenced social science since the middle of the 20th century. According to Adams (2010), criticisms of identity theory “gather around accusations of excessive voluntarism in accounting for contemporary identity, while critiques of Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus deem it overly deterministic” (p. 511). The enactive paradigm moves beyond identity theory, preferring an emphasis on autonomy as *self-constitution* (Adams, 2010; Di Paolo et al., 2010) or perhaps *self-making* (Bron, 2007) that aligns well with the descriptions of changes within individuals in more recent biographical literature. Alheit

(1994) emphasized the notion of autonomy in his early formulations of biographicity, and autonomy is also an important factor in descriptions of lifelong learning (Field, 2006; Jarvis, 1987, 2010; Merrill & West, 2009).

As the enactive paradigm has evolved, autonomy has come to be seen as a nondualistic construct that moves back and forth between the satisfaction of internal requirements and the constraints and norms of the external environment (Di Paolo et al., 2010), or as De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2008) noted, “The enactive approach gives the autonomous agent its proper ontological status as an emergent biological self instead of subordinating it to a passive role of obedience. The organism is an embodied and experiencing center of activity in the world” (p. 33).

Unlike autopoiesis in its traditional meaning (a closed system producing itself), in the evolving enactive approach, sensemaking and the resulting change in the individual require an “adaptive autonomy” (Thompson & Stapleton, 2009, p. 25). Some call this balancing or adaptive autonomy *heteronomy* (Steiner & Stewart, 2009). They described this important distinction when they noted, “Autonomy might be (negative) freedom from external constraint; heteronomy—abiding by norms—involves the (positive) freedom to do things one could not do, that one could not even imagine doing, if one were to remain in pure autonomy” (p. 531). This view echoes Lindeman’s (1926) assertion that “successful human adjustment is never wholly *to* or against nature, but always partially *with*; we cannot be free *from* ourselves or the natural objects that surround us, and consequently the only freedom worth talking about is *freedom-with*” (p. 44). In precisely this way, the enactive view of heteronomy addresses the “interplay of macro and micro

change processes” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 41) that shape the individual within the social structures that impinge on, and even limit, individual biographies.

This understanding of autonomy reflects much of the biographical literature about the extent to which individuals can and do exert control over their own lives. Alheit (1994b) noted, “None of us has all conceivable possibilities open to him or her. But within the framework of a restricted modification potential, we have more opportunities than we will ever put into practice. Our biography therefore contains a sizeable potential of ‘unlived life’” (p. 288). As noted earlier, researchers must take into account the power of structural limitations on the exercise of biographicity. The balance between autonomy and heteronomy may be a key factor in the exercise of biographicity as conceived in this study and serve as a catalyst for sensemaking activities that encourage individuals to reflect on life stories as resources to contribute to their understanding of how free they are to exercise biographicity in their lives (Andersen & Trojaborg, 2007). Thompson and Stapleton (2009) described the close connection between autonomy and sensemaking when they wrote, “Sense-making is the interactional and relational side of autonomy” (p. 25) through which the individual establishes his or her own identity in interactions with the world.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the next of the key factors that have been used to describe enaction. Thompson (2007) went so far as to say, “Living entails sense-making, which equals enaction” (p. 158). Weick (1979) and Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld (2005) used the word *enactment* to describe the starting point for sensemaking activities. Weick’s recent thinking (2010) seems to connect to the enactive paradigm more directly, as he has

explored how conception (cognition) and perception (emotion) are related to mindfulness and sensemaking within social contexts. This notion echoes Thompson and Stapleton's (2009) assertion that "sense-making comprises emotion as much as cognition. The enactive approach does not view cognition and emotion as separate systems, but treats them as thoroughly integrated at biological, psychological, and phenomenological levels" (p. 26).

Sensemaking's inherently active, social nature makes it clear that so-called *participatory sensemaking* can be employed across a wide range of activities, from simple, informal dyads to full, formal interpersonal collaboration (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, 2008; Di Paolo et al., 2010; Steiner & Stewart, 2009). In fact, social sensemaking processes generate results that are not possible for the individual on her own (Froese & Di Paolo, 2011), like those described in the use of the educational biography (Dominicé, 2000) or in interactions with significant others (Zhao & Biesta, 2012). In a critique of Giddens's emphasis on individualism, Zhao and Biesta (2012) asserted that we determine *who we are* in dialogue with others or that "we make sense of ourselves in intersubjective relationships" (p. 347). The question of how individuals balance inner, autonomous learning with external, social sensemaking remains an open question in the rapidly changing circumstances of the 21st century (Archer, 2007). Such questions connect sensemaking to the social interaction domain of holistic learning and suggest that sensemaking's connection to learning is indeed an important element to consider within the conceptual framework of this study.

Sensemaking may actually provide a way for a scholar-practitioner to create a bridge between holistic learning as a high-level theoretical construct and the practice of

biographicity by developing more practical meaning-making activities (Kegan, 1980). Kegan described such meaning making as a framework that includes cognitive and emotional dimensions and provides a “descriptive, external-frame-of-reference on enduring regularities and distinctions between and within persons in their meaning making” (p. 373). Lave and Wenger (1991) amplified this possibility in their description of situated learning that involves the whole person in social relations that create meaning for the individuals within a group setting. They asserted, “Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by . . . systems of learning” (p. 53), and Giddens (1991, as cited in Zhao & Biesta, 2012) asserted that the *project* of shaping one’s life takes place against “the backdrop of ‘life as a whole’” (p. 340). This emphasis on the whole person links holistic learning (as the intersection of the cognitive, affective, and social domains) (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2006) with lifelong learning, sensemaking, and biographicity and provides a lens for observing sensemaking processes in individual life narratives.

Sensemaking, as developed by Weick (1979, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), emerged from the study of the social psychology of organizations and has been researched empirically in a wide variety of organizational contexts (Cornelissen, 2012). Weick (1979) grounded his original conception of sensemaking in Allport’s seminal work from the mid-20th century on interlocked behaviors between actors that make social processes “intelligible” (p. 3) as well as Maturana and Varela’s (1980) work on structural coupling. While the vast majority of work on sensemaking has been conducted at the *meso* or organizational level, the appeal of sensemaking on the micro level of analysis has emerged as well (Dorner, 2011; Miller, 2007). Sensemaking provides a process for “self

and social questioning (reflexivity)” that allows individuals to work together to address the challenges of contemporary life (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 527). Sensemaking thus provides a way to consider biographicity at the systems level. It also relates to the social interaction domain of holistic learning, providing a means to move beyond highly individualized theorizations of adult learning that undervalue the “ways in which adults learn in/with the social world” (Niewolny & Wilson, 2011, p. 340).

Allard-Poesi (2005) affirmed sensemaking at the individual level when she described “the adoption of micro/interpretivist data-gathering techniques that aim to *grasp the meanings* that people attach to themselves, to others, to their experiences and to the situations they encounter” (p. 177)—a description that seems to provide a reasonable basis for using biographical methods to explore sensemaking within individual life experience. Schwandt (2005) analyzed the distinction between sensemaking as an organizational process that seeks strategic or tactical outcomes and sensemaking as an individual effort that seeks personal growth and change. Both of these views relate to the notion that sensemaking is, in fact, an individual “common-sense-making device” that is grounded in individual storytelling activities (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012) and, thus, in the life narrative.

Sensemaking activities begin with the notion of enactment (Weick, 1979, 1995), which is strikingly similar to the concept of disjuncture as a catalyst for learning as described above. Weick et al. (2005) noted, “Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world” (p. 409). In order to *engage the world*, individuals necessarily move beyond the original idea of sensemaking

as primarily retrospective to the more recent characterization of sensemaking in the service of action (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). Weick (2010) listed the “warning signs” for such a disjuncture in the individual: *I don't want it. I didn't anticipate it. I don't understand it.*

Weick's statements seem to resonate with the emotions experienced by an individual at such a point of disjuncture and point back to the affective dimension of human learning that is related to an evolving understanding of human sensemaking (Magala, 1997; Schwandt, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). The role of emotions in sensemaking has not been fully explored (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), and some would say has been “undervalued in favor of rationality, both by practitioners and researchers” (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006, p. 215).

As originally conceived (Weick, 1979), sensemaking is a linear and/or cyclical process that moves from enactment (observing past actions or events) to bracketing (determining categories or themes) to selection (making choices regarding what is important) to retention (the basis for subsequent action). In a similar way, Archer (2007) suggested that individuals engage in a reflexive process (also linear) that moves them from personal concerns to developing courses of action and eventually to determining satisfying, sustainable ways to live. While these elements of enaction resonate with human experience, this study proposed a more holistic view (embedded in the conceptual framework) that asserts that holistic learning and enaction are dynamic, nonlinear, evolving processes within the individual. By viewing life experience through the cognitive, affective, and social domains, this framework may, indeed, provide a richer

understanding of how individuals practice sensemaking by using life narratives or educational biographies as resources for reshaping their lives.

The components of Weick's original process correspond to the kinds of questions that Dominicé (2000) highlighted in his use of the educational biography. He, too, noted the affective challenges that individuals face in their efforts to reflect on their lives: "They have, however, a real difficulty in finding the thread that holds the pieces together. They can state the needs underlying the choices they have made at particular stages of their lives, but they have a difficult time interpreting these needs in terms of the dynamics of their life histories" (p. 110). This may point to the ambivalence that seems embedded in the persistent contradictions in human experience and the need to exercise more holistic ways of making sense of life experience.

Embodied Emotion

The enactive view of sensemaking also provides an important link to the role emotion plays in learning, to the extent that "emotion is essential to all intentional behaviors" (Freeman, 2000, as cited in Thompson & Stapleton, 2009). Thompson (2007) wrote, "Affective force manifests as a rapid, dynamic transformation of experience, mobilizing one's whole body" (p. 377). Colombetti (2010) reviewed the evolution of enaction and echoed the holistic learning theorists' view that emotion is essential to any understanding of human learning. She asserted, "Emotion provides action-guiding values, drive and preferences, . . . meaning-generating and adaptive mechanisms. . . . Emotion allows the organism to adapt to life-challenging circumstances, is constitutive of action and organizes diverse behaviors" (p. 150). Enaction also underscores the idea that emotions have an impact on the positive or negative feelings or valences that individuals

bring to bear on memory, attention, and future action (Colombetti, 2010; Thompson & Stapleton, 2009), the kind of temporal processes described earlier that seem particularly applicable to biographicity (Jarvis, 1987).

It must be noted that the phrase *embodied emotion* is, in some sense, redundant within the enactive paradigm. The word embodied means “first, that cognition depends upon the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context” (Varela et al., 1991, p. 173). This definition helps to answer some critiques of the role of emotion in learning since it grounds emotion in the physical body, but asserts that emotion is more than simple bodily sensation (Jarvis, 2006). In a further expansion of this view, cognition and emotion are tightly linked as “emotional thought that encompasses processes of learning, memory and decision making, in both social and nonsocial contexts” (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007, p. 8).

Perhaps most importantly, the role of emotion or affect, as seen within the enactive paradigm, affirms the value of this approach to a study of biographicity. Traditional views of cognition have seen cognition and emotion as “separable (and often opposing) mental processes”—that is, with *thinking* and *affecting* as two different processes (Duncan & Barrett, 2007, p. 1184)—while more recent definitions grounded in neurobiology assert that affect or emotion is a form of cognition. Supporting the inseparable link between cognition and emotion asserted in holistic learning theory, this view of the affective domain of learning asserts that cognition and emotion are dynamically interconnected (Duncan & Barrett, 2007; Pessoa, 2008).

Emergence

Emergence within the enactive paradigm is rooted in complex adaptive systems theory and is closely related to autonomy/heteronomy. Like the notion of autonomy/heteronomy, emergence involves two dynamic conditions, known as dynamic coemergence, through which novel outcomes occur that allow or constrain changes within the individual (Thompson, 2007). In essence, coemergence describes how the whole emerges from the parts and the parts emerge from the whole. It is interesting to note that although the science behind this view was not part of early conceptualizations of biographicity, Kohli (1981) and Alheit (1992) used the word *emergence* to describe how individuals move toward future actions, and actually enact their world, using biographical resources. One might, in fact, say that the whole person emerges from the parts and the parts of a person emerge from the whole.

Emergence is a term that easily can be used superficially or inaccurately (Di Paolo et al., 2010), and it is tempting to apply it to biographicity without a clear understanding of its meaning. Emergence springs from a connection between autonomy and sensemaking and the dynamic self-organizing between the external environment and the internal conditions of the individual. It has been defined as “the formation of a novel property or process out of the interaction of different existing processes or events” (Di Paolo et al., 2010, p. 40). It would appear that this may be a way to conceive of the actionable shaping of one’s life from personal events that is part of biographicity, but application to this context has not been explored empirically in any rigorous way. For that reason, it serves as a central theoretical lens for this study.

Emergence is also closely connected to the notions of time (addressed earlier in this literature review) as developed by Mead (1938). Jarvinen (2004) suggested that Mead's insights provide a foundation for understanding emergence: "From emergence, novelty reaches out in both directions. The present structures time by finding in the past the conditions for the emergent event and predicting consequences for the future. The present is the holding together of past and future *as possibilities*—all pasts are as essentially subject to revision as are the futures" (p. 50). In effect, the past brings meaning to the exercise of biographicity as, through their life narratives, individuals use the resources of the past to imagine the future and to emerge into actions in the present time (Flaherty & Fine, 2001; Jarvinen, 2004).

One criticism that is frequently leveled at the enactive approach is that it fails to adequately deal with higher-level cognition, and Caracciolo (2012) suggested that narrative is a way to address that problem:

Producing and interpreting stories can infuse our lives with meaning by shaping the value landscape of each of us. . . . Engaging with stories can, thus, be understood in enactivist terms, as one of the activities whereby we enact a world of significance (on the production side)—or we imaginatively enact the 'storyworlds' generated by other human beings (on the reception side). (pp. 367-368)

In short, emergence provides a way of thinking about what occurs when people begin to reshape their lives and changes begin to occur in the actions of their lives.

This understanding of enaction as a bridge between cognitive science and inquiry that matters to individuals relates directly to the educational biography (and perhaps to biographicity itself) as "a way to transform the past into resources for the present" (Dominicé, 2000, p. 140). Human beings live in narratives, and storytelling is one of the primary ways in which they interpret their lives and enact their worlds. This view

supports biographical research as the methodology for this study. The enactive paradigm offers a promising lens for considering how life stories shared in joint sensemaking or learning settings may be a starting point for a more robust understanding of human experience (Caracciolo, 2012; Olesen, 2007a).

Conceptual Framework of This Study

Throughout this literature review, the researcher has attempted to build the case that holistic lifelong learning and elements of enaction provide theoretical grounding for the study of biographicity in individuals. These theoretical perspectives combine to provide a novel way of looking at the ways in which individuals reshape their lives repeatedly within the contexts in which they live and work. This literature review has explored theoretical and empirical literature suggesting that biographicity can and should be studied in more complex ways that bring commensurate complexity to the biographicity process itself. Building on the literature reviewed, this section presents the conceptual framework for this study in more detail.

The conceptual framework is an essential tool in designing a qualitative biographical study. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), biographical research is supported by a “theoretical clarification of the theme [topic] investigated” through the *thematizing* that takes place in the literature review. While this *thematization* is developed in advance through the literature review, it does not create a firm set of concepts or variables to be tested, but rather provides a broad frame for the “understanding and reflection” (p. 107) that takes place during all stages of the study. In this study, the life experience of individuals serves as the learning ground for

biographicity, and holistic learning and enaction support the emergence of the reshaped biography.

This conceptual framework, shown in Figure 2, depicts connections between biographicity, holistic learning, and enaction foreshadowed by an early definition of biographicity as “a code of personal development and emergence” (Kohli, 1985, as cited in Aritzsch & Souti, 2007, unpaginated). Alheit (1992) built on this conception of biography and began to question its potential role in understanding one’s life history as a “learning ground” (p. 187), the overall space in which individuals engage in a continual series of “difficult learning processes” (p. 188) that determine each person’s capacity for reshaping his or her life.

Kohli’s theoretical work positions life experience as the foundation for changes in the life course of individuals. The underlying focus of much that has been written about biographicity was summarized well by Bron et al. (2005, as cited in Tedder & Biestra, 2007, p. 2): “People need, constantly, to work on their biographies and find some authentic rhythms, in the light of change, and to find the resources of hope . . . to compose a biography, and some stability, meaning and authenticity from the fragments of shifting experience.” This *learning ground* of life experience, then, serves as the large field (the outer dotted circle) within which the person (at the center of the framework) exercises the complex process of biographicity. As such, it serves as an underlying assumption of this study that the totality of life experience, including the connection to social structures and contexts, is the ground for understanding both learning and biographicity.

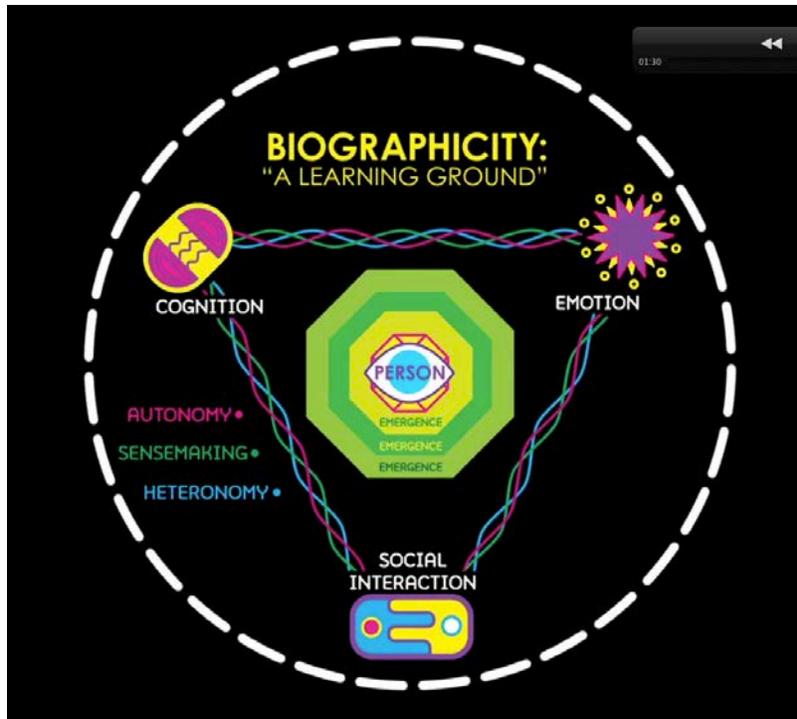


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of this study: Biographicity as a learning ground.

Holistic Learning

In this framework, *holistic learning*, represented by the large triangle that connects cognition, emotion, and social interaction, is closely connected to the notion of embodiment, which lies at the heart of the enactive paradigm (Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 1991). Di Paolo et al. (2010) noted, “In a concrete and practical sense, a cognitive system is embodied to the extent to which its activity depends nontrivially on the body” (p. 42). Traditional conceptions of learning have separated the body and mind and treated the body as a distraction, but approaches to cognitive science emerging from the enactive paradigm now suggest that the mind cannot be separated from body and emotion (Gibbs, 2006). Over time, a growing number of learning theorists have asserted that learning starts with, and is dependent on, the body (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2006, 2010; Kegan, 1982;

Olesen, 2007a; Varela et al., 1991), and this view of learning is central to the theory supporting this conceptual framework.

This review cited Illeris (2009) in stating that *holistic learning* has no clear, agreed-upon definition, but instead a growing number of overlapping theories. Illeris's theoretical map (adapted in this triangle) highlights three dimensions or domains of learning that he and others have considered essential: cognition (knowledge, understanding, skills); emotion (affect, motivation, attitude); and social interaction (action/behavior, communication, cooperation). Research using this framework looks for how biographicity is related to learning through the intersection and dynamic coemergence of the cognitive, emotional, and social interaction domains, forming *embodied holistic learning*.

Elements of the Enactive Paradigm

The sides of the holistic learning triangle are depicted as three continuous, interactive processes that are part of the enactive paradigm: autonomy, heteronomy, and sensemaking. They are represented as undulating lines that interconnect to enact holistic learning. The first of these is the notion of autonomy, described by Thompson (2007) as a key element of the enactive paradigm. Autonomy has been defined as freedom from constraints that allows individuals to respond to (specify) their own needs and desires (Di Paolo et al., 2010). As the enactive paradigm has evolved, however, autonomy has come to be seen as a nondualistic construct that balances the constraints and norms of the external environment with the satisfaction of internal freedom from such constraints (Di Paolo et al., 2010). Steiner and Stewart (2009) called this adaptive autonomy *heteronomy* (depicted as the second undulating line in the sides of the triangle). In simple terms,

autonomy operates as freedom from constraints and heteronomy as freedom within constraints. Heteronomy is particularly important to this study since it provides the lens for considering the extent to which individuals intentionally construct their own world and to what extent they are supported or constrained by social structures (Archer, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Scott, 1998). Based on this understanding, individuals bring both autonomy and heteronomy to serve as underlying and malleable processes that help them to learn and, thus, to exercise biographicity in their lives (Andersen & Trojaborg, 2007).

Sensemaking serves as the third factor or undulating line embedded within holistic learning processes. Allard-Poesi (2005) affirmed that individual sensemaking allows individuals “to *grasp the meanings* that people attach to themselves, to others, to their experiences and to the situations they encounter” (p. 177). Thompson (2007), as noted, said, “Living entails sense-making, which equals enaction” (p. 158). Weick (2010) has also considered how cognition (conception) and emotion (perception) are connected to sensemaking within social interaction. Sensemaking’s inherently active, social nature makes it clear that so-called *participatory sensemaking* (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) is an additional factor warranting attention in the search for understanding of the nature of biographicity (Colombetti, 2010). Sensemaking is closely aligned with holistic learning and biographicity as “it includes the way people imagine, negotiate, talk, and make commitments that invent the future” (Gephart, Topal, & Zhang, 2010, p. 279).

Emergence, another key element of the enactive paradigm, springs from a connection among holistic learning and the elements of enaction described above (experience, embodiment, autonomy/heteronomy, and sensemaking) that forms “a novel property or process out of the interaction of different existing processes or events”

(p. 40). Emergence serves as a way to conceive of the repeated, actionable shaping of the individual person (at the center of the graphic) from personal events that may provide a key to understanding biographicity as an ongoing process throughout the lifespan. In other words, the newly reshaped individual repeatedly *emerges* as a result of holistic learning and enaction as depicted in this framework.

The notion of emergence has not been used specifically in biographical studies to consider how change occurs in individuals, but the current study considered the life stories of participants to see if emergence may describe what happens as participants have reshaped their lives. Once this holistic view of learning and enaction has been considered in relation to biographicity, it may illuminate when and how life changes begin to emerge.

In this framework, as the individual brings life experience to the process of holistic learning, influenced by autonomy/heteronomy and sensemaking, he or she begins the process of emergence into *self-constituting enaction* (a changed self) or biographicity. Once the individual has developed a redesign of her or his life, that new redesigned person becomes the beginning of a renewed, ongoing life narrative, or what the enactive paradigm refers to as *autopoiesis* (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Varela et al., 1991).

Biographicity as an Integrative Process

This framework in its entirety serves as a synthesis of the literature that has been reviewed and as a conceptual map for exploring the lived experience of individuals as they narrate their biographies and experiences of biographicity. Since learning theory as described above suggests that learning must be seen as a holistic process, this framework provides an integrative lens through which to analyze multiple factors that promote

biographicity. This integrated, dynamic view of biographicity supports the notion that “experience never ends and is open to constant recreation in light of the present” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 19). This study analyzed the way that individuals describe their own experiences of reshaping their lives and looked for how patterns of meaning and experiences of learning emerged that may be similar to those described within this theoretical foundation.

Synthesis of the Problem and the Research Questions

Scholarly literature and policies emerging from economic and social concerns confirm that the need to reshape one’s life is a nearly universal characteristic of the human condition in late modern times. While the literature affirms this need across social and economic conditions, it stresses the importance of biographicity for those who are disadvantaged or marginalized in traditional learning settings. A variety of empirical studies have explored variables that address specific factors (e.g., nontraditional learners, gender, race), but an actionable understanding of biographicity for such populations (or, in fact, for any population) has not emerged.

The vast literature on lifelong learning, and the practice of so-called lifelong learning, has produced a confusing array of approaches that have failed to provide a coherent framework for using the concept of lifelong learning in praxis. By asserting a more holistic theory of learning across domains and life conditions, this study attempted to unfold the meaning that individuals place on the learning processes that help them to exercise biographicity. The researcher’s understanding of the literature reviewed has led to the underlying assumption for this study that if we understood adult learning processes

more holistically, we might gain insight into how lifelong learning and biographicity may actually be closely related or even two ways of describing the same phenomenon.

In order to gain such insight into the complex factors that influence individuals to reshape their lives, the research had to be grounded in open-ended questions that did not attempt to assign in advance particular variables that account for the exercise of biographicity. Thus, the question for the study was “How do young adults repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives?” with the corollary question, “What patterns of meaning and experiences of learning emerge in the stories of biographicity told by individuals?” The literature review also affirmed (and this study thus assumed) that individuals do not operate in isolation, but always within the contexts in which they live their lives, and so a third question was addressed: “In what ways do social structures support or limit the exercise of biographicity?”

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study explored biographicity as the process through which individuals repeatedly shape and reshape their lives to meet their own changing needs and desires in response to the conditions of life in late modernity. Chapter 1 reviewed the persistent demand for change and adaptation in contemporary times and defined the purpose and significance of this research. This chapter acknowledged that the need for repeated adaptation is a problem, often addressed within the context of lifelong learning, that affects people across the lifespan and across educational and socioeconomic levels, but it also highlighted the particular issues faced by marginalized populations and especially urban young adults, who were the focus of this study. In order to better understand how young adults exercise biographicity, the study explored the following central research question:

RQ: How do marginalized young adults repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives?

Two related questions also were addressed:

1. What patterns of meaning and experiences of learning emerge in the stories of biographicity told by individuals?
2. In what ways do social structures support or limit the exercise of biographicity?

Before describing the research design for this study, it is useful to return to the purpose and significance of the study as described in chapter 1. The need to adapt and change one's life (exercise biographicity) is evident at all levels of society but particularly for "those who are excluded from [the learning] process, or who choose not

to participate” (OECD, 1997, as cited in Field, 2006, p. 114). Such so-called marginalized individuals or groups face growing inequality of opportunity (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a; Field, 2006; Formenti, 2009; Galimberti, 2014; Torracco, 2007), and yet some young adults who have experienced such marginalized circumstances move beyond their life challenges and have begun to reshape their life trajectory by the time they enter young adulthood. An understanding of why some young people are able to constitute themselves in new ways (Rustin, 2000) while others cannot has eluded urban educators (including the researcher herself). Alheit (1994b) suggested that a better understanding of how people act biographically has the potential to exert “socially explosive force” (p. 289), and such an understanding might support educators to guide more young adults to reshape their own lives and, as a result, their surrounding social contexts (Edwards et al., 2002). As a scholar-practitioner who is committed to research that promotes social justice (see Charmaz, 2011), this researcher has developed research “carried out with praxis and social change as a goal” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 89) in order “to make persons’ lives better” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 11).

This study focused on the lived life of individuals or “what actually happens” (Bruner, 1984, as cited in Denzin, 1989, p. 30), but its purpose was to understand the complex interplay between the individual and the constraints and/or supports of social structures and contexts in our contemporary, globalized risk society. In order to create a platform for studying the complexity of individual lives in this way, the researcher proposed a conceptual framework (Figure 2), grounded in the literature reviewed in chapter 2. The prestudy framework emphasized a holistic theory of learning, asserting that changes in the individual biography occur in learning that takes place at the

intersection of cognition, emotion, and social interaction rather than in any one domain of learning. In addition, the framework suggested that the principles of embodied enaction (including autonomy, heteronomy, and sensemaking) are factors influencing this learning and the repeated emergence (biographicity) of the individual throughout life.

Research Design Strategy

Assumptions: Ontology and Epistemology

This study was grounded in the lived life as described by individual participants and interpreted the experiences that have shaped each life and that provided insight into how individuals have exercised biographicity. This study was situated within the interpretive paradigm described by Wilson (1970) that looks to patterns of action and meaning that emerge from “interpretive processes of interaction rather than by reference to a body of culturally given common definitions” (p. 78).

The ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology of this study (Table 2) were directly related to the theoretical perspective developed in the literature review in chapter 2. Simply stated, the study’s subjective/constitutive ontology and (radical) constructive epistemology shaped the theoretical perspective, which included holistic learning and enaction. Olesen and Weber (2012) described this perspective as “a radical epistemology of societal dynamics” that asserts “unconscious dynamics in the subject and unconscious or unintended dimensions of societal and cultural processes” (unpaginated), which supports this study’s focus on the dynamic between individuals and social structures.

Table 2
Summary of Research Paradigms Developed in Chapter 2

Theoretical perspective	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	Axiology*
Biographicity	Subjective; interpretive (Wilson, 1970)	Constructive; pragmatic	Biographical research (Alheit, 1982; Denzin, 1989, 2001, 2014); narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008)	Respect for “the moral, ethical, prudential, aesthetic, and action commitments of constructivism” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013)
Holistic lifelong learning	Subjective	Constructive	Life narrative/ history (Spector-Mersel, 2010); life history	Attention to whole person required for learning; humanistic
Enaction	Constitutive (individual as observer in the world); nonobjective	Enactive; radical constructive in pragmatic tradition; “radical epistemology of societal dynamics” (Olesen & Weber, 2012)	Hermeneutics; “ <i>Verstehen</i> hermeneutics” (Erben, 1998, p. 7)	Emergent meanings; synthesis, not analysis

Note. Format based on Lincoln and Guba (2013).

*See subjectivity statement at the end of Chapter 1.

Biographical Research Methodology

The methodology for this study followed this ontological/epistemological grounding and was situated in the tradition of biographical research that provides “a rigorously inductive route” (Alheit, 1994, p. 20) and allowed the researcher to learn about the subjective perspectives of each person in order to illuminate the problem of biographicity. In this study, biographical research provided a complex way of

understanding the lives of individuals in a particular life context (Roberts, 2002; Rustin, 2000; Merrill & West, 2009): that of young adults, from an urban environment in the United States, who have experienced poverty and limited educational experiences that have tended to marginalize them from a variety of life course opportunities. Narrative research was particularly well suited to this population since it “can be aimed to create contexts where marginalized people are ‘given voice’ and it is possible to recognize their ‘silenced lives’” (Formenti, 2014, p. 12).

As a broad methodological category, biographical research has been defined as an approach that uses individual life stories to understand lives within social contexts or by means of complex ways of understanding life experience (Merrill & West, 2009; Roberts, 2002; Rustin, 2000). The alignment between biographical research and biographicity was clear when Bron (2007) described biographical research further as research that studies how people construct and reconstruct themselves in particular contexts and in processes of social interaction. In addition, biographical research is appropriate for gaining insight into the influence of social structures and contexts on biographicity in the way described by Roberts (2002):

The appeal of biographical research is that it is exploring, in diverse methodological and interpretive ways, how individual accounts of life experience can be understood within the contemporary cultural and structural settings and is thereby helping to chart the major societal changes that are underway, but not merely at some broad social level. (p. 5)

A layered understanding of the broad category of biographical research is necessary in order to support life history as the specific approach for this study. *Narrative inquiry* or narrative research (Bruner, 1986; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merrill & West, 2009) is the form of biographical research that focuses on stories people naturally tell that

allow them, and researchers who study their narratives, to make sense of their lives (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Chase, 2011; Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry seeks holistic representations that bring together cognition, emotion, and social interaction over time (Spector-Mersel, 2010) in a manner that aligns with the theoretical perspective of this study. The issue of time is central to narrative inquiry and to this study, as it implies a “temporal sequencing of events, including having a beginning, middle and end” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 10), or a window into the participant’s view of how his or her life unfolded over time. This sequencing of events uncovers “processes of selection” through which the individual has decided between alternatives that were available at a given time and circumstance (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 64), processes that seem closely related to biographicity as a reshaping of one’s life over time and in specific contexts.

The *life history* is a further distinction within biographical research that some suggest should be seen as a more nuanced level of narrative (Dominicé, 2000; Merrill & West, 2009). Rather than simply relating events or describing phenomena from the past, the life history emerges from “a developed individuality, a self-conscious ‘I’ being able to grasp itself as the organizer of its own life history and as distinct from its social world” (Kohli, 1981, p. 64). The life history makes a distinction between “biography as the told life, and life history, in which the researcher brings his or her interpretations and theoretical insights into play” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 19). Bruner (1984, as cited in Denzin, 1989) summarized these important distinctions:

A life lived is what actually happens. A life experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is. . . . A life as told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context. (p. 30)

The emphasis on life history aligned well with the questions of this research study. Specific methods for this study emerged from this layered understanding of biographical research, narrative, and life history. Biographical research, and the *life history* in particular, aligned well with the conceptual framework (Figure 2) for this study, which attempted to understand how young adults exercise biographicity within social structures and contexts through learning processes and enaction. The conceptual framework was not used as a set of taken-for-granted assumptions or firm hypotheses, but rather served as a starting point for the research process. In fact, biographical research provided a means to employ abduction to develop theoretical insights into biographicity through “an ongoing pragmatic process of ‘puzzling out’ and problem solving that draws on existing ways of understanding what the phenomenon [biographicity] is” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 167). Such an abductive approach, using the life history as the basis for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, guided the research process.

The Methodological Framework

Alheit (2010a) provided a graphic representation of the narrative structure of life experience that serves as the *methodological framework* that includes the data collection and interpretive methods used in this study. This representation (Figure 3) provided a map for the sensemaking process that shaped the research inquiry in alignment with the interpretive/constructivist epistemology of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Wilson, 1970).

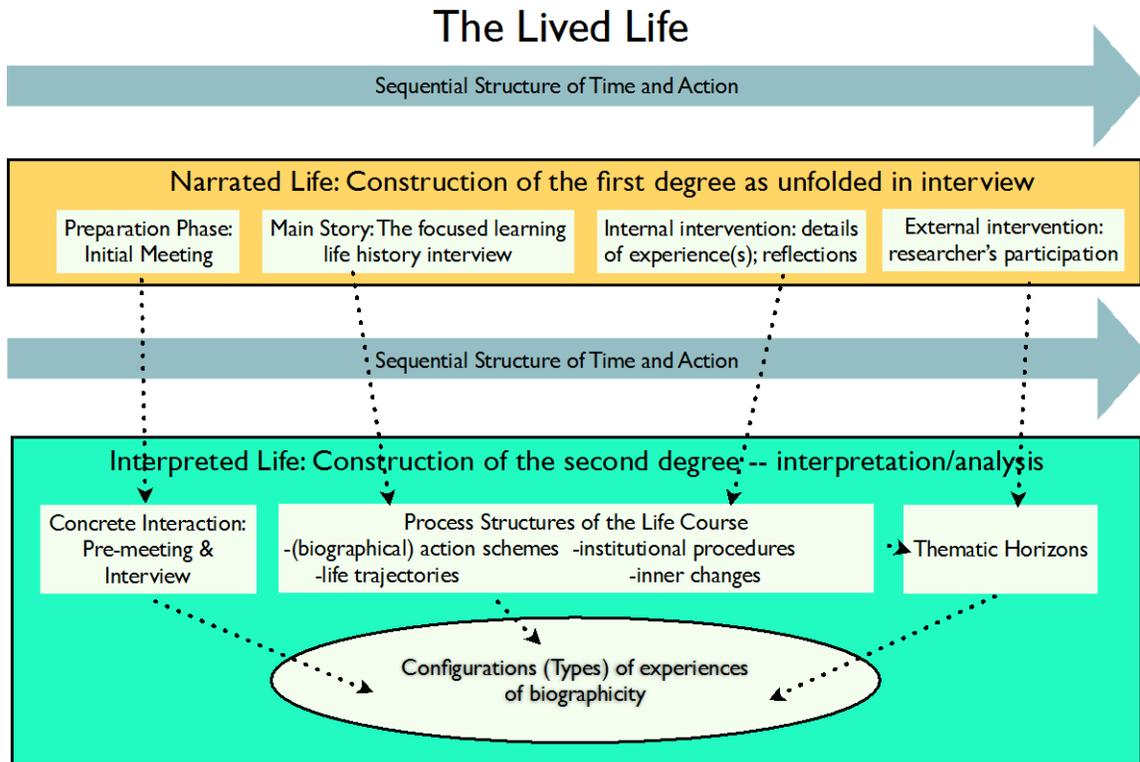


Figure 3. Methodological framework. Adapted from Alheit, 2010a.

1. *The lived life*. The lived life of participants, a sequential structure of time, action/experience, and behavior (first arrow in graphic), was the data source for understanding biographicity in this study. The research process placed particular emphasis on lived experiences of learning through the lens of the *life history* as described above.

2. *The narrated life* (data collection). Each participant engaged in an extended interview session of at least 90 minutes, which was organized using the guidelines of narrative interview (Alheit, 1982) outlined in Appendix B. Each participant narrated or told her/his own life history (narrated life), creating a present version (Schuetze, 1984, as cited in Alheit, 1994a; Denzin, 1989; Rosenthal, 1993; Strauss, 2008) of the sequential

time and action of her or his life experiences and behaviors (second arrow in graphic).

This present version narrated in the interview “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1).

3. *The interpreted life* (analysis and interpretation). The iterative process of analysis/interpretation is a second-degree construction of the narrated life, in which the researcher attempts to understand each participant’s narrated life by formulating a structural description of each interview and analyzing the concrete interactions that were described, with special emphasis on a detailed examination of the *process structures of the life course*, derived from the work (in German) of Fritz Schuetze as described by Alheit (1994a) and Riemann (2003). There are four process structures:

- *Biographical action schemes*: The learning life experiences of the participant; plans and events, changes in life circumstances, delineation of time periods
- *Institutional patterns for life course procedure*: The social structures and contexts that influenced participants’ experiences, cycles, patterns of living and working
- *Life trajectories*: The significant, often troubling, events that influenced the life course; critical junctures (positive or negative) that led to changes in the life course
- *Inner changes*: The transformational and/or embodied changes and experiences of biographicity that emerged within each life history

These process structures are “understood as *modes* of the narrated life history, as a sort of ‘inner disposition’ . . . of the time period the storyteller is referring to in the immediate situation of narration” (P. Alheit, personal communication, September 15,

2013). By considering these process structures throughout the interpretation of data, the researcher sought to “understand the mixture of uniqueness and common features” that were present in each participant’s narration in order to “reach an empirically grounded concept of the overall biographical structuring of the whole life history as told in the autobiographical narrative interview” (Schuetze, 2003, p. 3).

A variety of interpretive tools and processes, described in the abductive analysis section below, were used to gradually deepen the researcher’s interpretation of each life history. The analysis of concrete interactions and process structures built toward the interpretive construction of *thematic horizons* and patterns of meaning that emerged from the narrated life stories. According to Rosenthal (1993), “The narrated life story . . . represents a sequence of mutually inter-related themes which, between them, form a dense network of interconnected cross-references” or “thematic fields . . . which form the background or horizon” of the narrated life history (p. 4). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) described thematic horizons as “meaning fields” of others that exist in time and space, that are flexible and that change over time and across individuals, and that allow researchers to gradually revise and enrich their interpretations of participants’ experience (p. 120). The thematic horizons served as the vehicle for crafting individual profiles of participants that gave voice to their life histories.

4. *Configurations (types) of biographicity*. In the final phase of interpretation, the researcher identified configurations of experiences by making qualitative comparisons (Alheit, 2013; Mjoset, 2000; Rokkan, 1972) among the individual stories that emerged from the analysis of the life history interviews. The process of identifying configurations is an attempt to “discover generalized patterns that are common to comparable cases or

. . . determine their respective distinctiveness by means of a detailed observation of the individual cases” (Alheit, 2013, p. 2). These comparisons synthesized the interpretation of individual life histories extending across the interviews. This full cycle of interpretation was repeated using a variety of research tools that led to the conclusions and implications of this study.

Participant Sampling

Participants for this study included 17 men and women, aged 23 to 32, who were the first in their families to enter college immediately after graduating from high school. (Two participants dropped out of high school and later obtained a GED.) The participants lived in a medium-sized Midwestern city in the United States with historically high rates of poverty. The life experiences of these individuals served as the data for this study. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), “In a qualitative research interview, knowledge is produced socially in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee” (p. 82); thus, their participation as narrators and active interpreters of their life stories made them coauthors of the research study (Alhadeff-Jones, 2013).

Throughout the development of this study, frequent questions arose about who defined or decided what a redesigned or reshaped life is. To gain the level of understanding that the study sought, it was important to address this question throughout the research process, beginning with the identification of participants. While educators can provide insight into which individuals demonstrate biographicity, it was also important to privilege the understanding of those in the target group and their view of what constitutes biographicity. Following that perspective, selection of participants used both a purposive component and a snowball component.

A college access organization in the targeted city sent an email to all clients they served who fit the criteria for this study. The email (Appendix F) described the study and invited recipients to respond directly to the researcher via email if they were interested in participating in the study. Their response included their age, gender, and whether or not they graduated from college or other postsecondary education. This information was used to begin contacting potential recipients, and the group who responded included men and women across the age range of the study.

The researcher engaged in an initial phone interview with potential participants to determine their interest and willingness to commit to the research process. During this call, the researcher (1) shared the research questions, (2) explained the biographical methods to be used in the study, (3) obtained basic personal biographical information (Appendix A), (4) discussed issues of confidentiality and anonymity, (5) reviewed the informed consent statement (Appendix G), (6) answered any questions, and (7) made arrangements for the life history interview. (Note: The informed consent description was reviewed at the beginning of the full interview session, and each participant agreed to participate.) A \$25.00 gift card was given to participants after the full life history interview out of respect for their time and to cover any incidental travel expenses. The phone interview process was duplicated for those identified through snowball sampling.

Once interviews began, in order to expand the participant pool, the researcher used snowball sampling, asking the first nine individuals who participated in the study to recommend other individuals who they believed reshaped their lives; afterwards, the second group of participants recommended a third group. Rather than serving simply as an expedient means to identify participants, for which this sampling approach is

sometimes criticized, snowball sampling can be viewed as a dynamic research tool for participants to suggest others who provide additional insight into the phenomenon that is being explored—in this case, the process of reshaping life trajectories in themselves and others (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). In this way, the sampling technique contributed meaningful social knowledge and addressed power relations that otherwise might have limited the opportunity for participants to contribute to the very definition of biographicity, the phenomenon under study (Kvale, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Noy, 2007).

Data Collection

Each of the 17 participants engaged in an extended interview session of at least 90 minutes. The interview used a three-part, open-ended format, guided loosely by the interview protocol (Appendix C). Part 1 of the interview asked participants to tell their life story in any way they chose as the *main story* of the individual's experiences of biographicity or the sequence and actions of each life. The life story was the longest and most important part of the interview. Part 2 revisited the story told in Part 1, to elicit details of experiences related to biographicity, asking questions designed to prompt further narration and elaboration (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 2). In Part 3 of the interview, the researcher sought the participants' reflections on the meaning of their experiences of biographicity and asked them to add anything that they felt was important to add. In addition, the researcher was aware that her interactions throughout the process provide *external* inputs/reflections that influence the first-degree construction of the narrated life. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.

Abductive Data Analysis

Interpretive Tools/Processes

Preliminary analysis of data. The process of analysis and interpretation began with a written summary immediately following the interview. The researcher used a research journal to capture life story elements, details, impressions and observations that are the first step of analysis in the iterative process of interpreting each life (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Olesen, 2013; Olesen & Weber, 2012; Riessman, 1993). Questions outlined in Appendix D served as a template for this stage of analysis.

Transcription. Next, a transcriptionist transcribed each completed interview, including all actual words used by participants, as much verbal and nonverbal material as possible, and all comments or questions made by the researcher on the recordings. The transcripts provided the data for the iterative process of the *second-degree construction of the interpreted life* in the research framework (Figure 3). The researcher also repeatedly listened to the actual recordings themselves and in tandem with reading the transcripts to ensure that the interviews, not the transcripts, were the data for this biographical study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Research journal and diagrams as part of abductive analysis. Each interview was analyzed by itself in a detailed research journal and, later, integrated with other interviews to develop emerging configurations as described in the framework. In this study, the construction of the interpreted life (as described in Figure 3) took place through what Erben (1998) called *verstehen hermeneutics*, a combination of biographical information based on the life history as told and the interpretations made by the

researcher in repeatedly responding to the data within the interview texts. Such an abductive approach required reasoning that began with the individual life history, explored a wide variety of possible factors/explanations within the process structures of the life course, and then identified thematic horizons that were repeatedly explored before theoretical conclusions or configurations were proposed (Brinkmann, 2014; Charmaz, 2006; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Brinkmann (2014) summarized the abductive approach used in the research journal when he wrote, “Abduction occurs in situations of breakdown, surprise, bewilderment or wonder . . . a form of reasoning used in situations of uncertainty, when we need an understanding or explanation of something that happens” (p. 722).

Memo writing in the research journal was, in fact, the tool used for this study’s abductive analysis and aligned well with the subjective, constitutive ontology and epistemology of this study. Corbin and Strauss (2008) went so far as to say, “Without memos and diagrams there is no accurate way of keeping track of the cumulative and complex ideas that evolve as the research progresses” (p. 140). Memo writing in a research journal had particular appeal for the researcher, who has maintained a longstanding practice of thinking/synthesizing through journaling, thus allowing an ongoing conversation between the researcher and the data (Lempert, 2007). Visual devices such as diagrams and drawings also supported the process of analysis and interpretation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Condensation. The iterative abductive process is a form of the *hermeneutic circle* that is an important tradition in the social sciences and requires a repeated back-and-forth motion between the parts and the whole within a transcript that leads to a gradual

deepening of the interpretation of human experience (Josselson, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Roberts, 2002). It relies on a gradual *condensation* (as opposed to coding) of data to distill the meaning expressed by participants, initially by bracketing events, behaviors, emotions, interactions, ideas, and concepts and then through the use of extensive memo writing and diagrams that capture the researcher's evolving thinking about the data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

For each interview, condensation of the data took place in three main iterative cycles (Figure 4), as adapted from Charmaz (2006) and Corbin and Strauss (2008).

1. *Initial condensation*: Built on the preliminary analysis, using the completed transcripts; an open-ended process that bracketed experiences and developed a structural description for each participant, identifying events, behaviors, emotions, concepts, contextual details, and metaphors within an approach that highlighted narrative units, how the individual weighted the content of the life story, elements of self-evaluation, assertions of significant turning points or life changes (Alheit, 1994a), and metaphors that the researcher identified in the life history; highlighted surprises and anomalies (Reichertz, 2010; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Beginning at this stage of analysis, the researcher began to develop a series of abductive analyses that described the experiences of all participants in a variety of areas including demographic information; family dynamics; current life status; level of expectations from self, family, school and others; engagement in communities of practice; interactions with a wide variety of social structures; emotional disruptions as well as positive emotions; expressed values; and

- experiences of recognition. Ongoing iterations of these analyses and others continued as the abductive condensation process continued.
2. *Focused condensation*: A process of reflection on process structures (as described in the methodological framework) that identified biographical action schemes, institutional procedures, life trajectories, and inner changes as described above; moved interpretation toward decisions about which condensations represented broader *thematic horizons* as defined above that provided preliminary differentiation among participants and provided an organizing principle for giving them voice through profiles of the individual stories; asked questions about the social structures, conditions, contexts, consequences, and processes emerging from the interview data using a context/social structure matrix represented in Appendix E (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
 3. *Theoretical condensation*: Identified and synthesized patterns of meaning, learning experiences, and embodied life changes that represented biographicity (Alheit, 2010a and b; Clandinin, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009); developed a systematic analysis of the relationship, if any, with the conceptual framework proposed in this study (Figure 2); further refined the interpretation, pointing to emerging configurations or types of experiences of biographicity; developed qualitative comparisons and broader theoretical understanding across the participants' life histories.

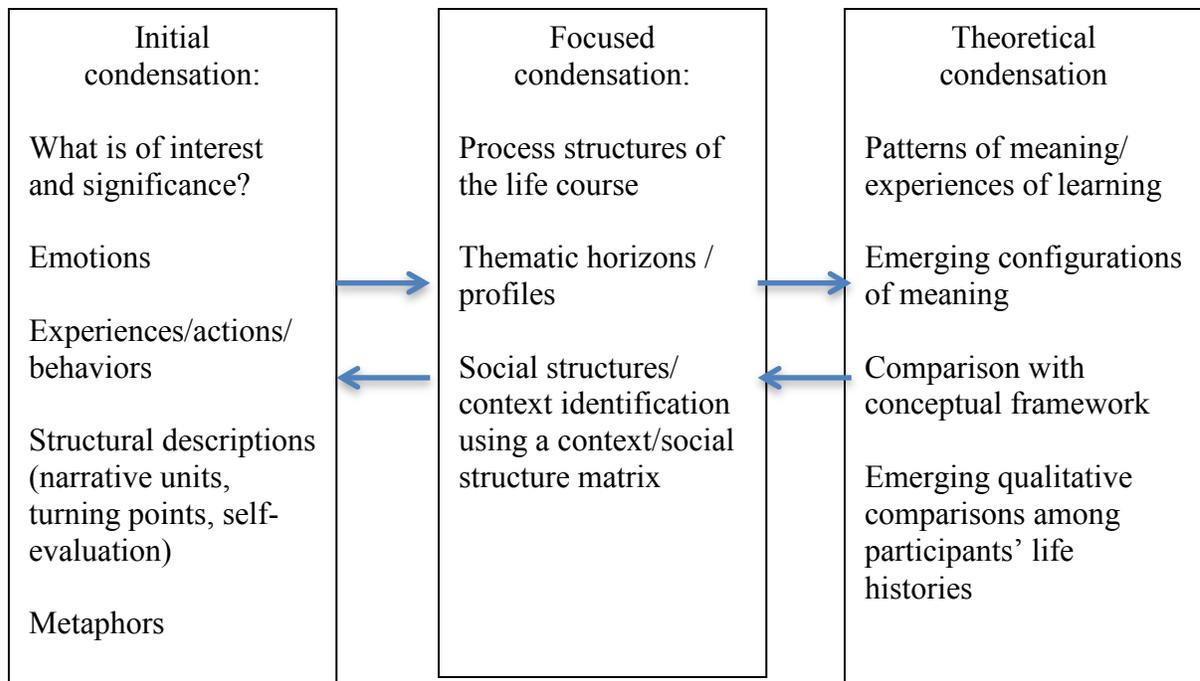


Figure 4. Iterative process of condensation.

Throughout the process, the researcher continually referred back to the challenges inherent in biographical research. Riessman (2008) cautioned that condensation of this type should not follow schemes that fragment the learning life histories, but rather should be sensitive to the meaningful narrative events, temporal sequences, or even whole stories that may emerge from the process. Multiple iterative cycles of condensation allow for richer interpretive analysis and more meaningful findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Holton, 2007; Saldana, 2013).

Stivers (1993, as cited in Riessman, 1993) cautioned that even after several iterations of such multiple phases of analysis, “Our analytic interpretations are partial, alternative truths that aim for ‘believability,’ not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control” (p. 23). Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted, “I might say that analyzing data is like peeling an onion. Every layer that is removed takes you closer to the core” (pp. 230-231).

Synthesis and Reporting of Findings

In close connection with the research questions for this study, the researcher anticipated that the identification and exploration of patterns of meaning and experiences of learning about individuals and social structures that unfolded during the abductive analysis would lead to configurations of biographicity as outlined above. These patterns of meaning were held up to careful scrutiny and questioning in comparison to the theoretical grounding of the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 2) to see if configurations of biographicity could be asserted that suggested new or enhanced understandings of the way that young adults have repeatedly engaged in redesigning or reshaping their lives and the way that social structures respond to their exercise of biographicity.

The synthesis of *configurations* was the final step in the methodological framework presented in Figure 3 of this study. Alhadeff-Jones (2013) described such configurations as potential findings or finalities of the study, which need to be envisioned, though not predetermined, beginning early in the research process. In so doing, the researcher anticipated the hoped-for configurations or types that eventually emerged from the study. The research questions, purpose, and research design process of this study pointed to the desire for enhanced understanding of biographicity that is of value to scholars, practitioners, and *regular folks*, particularly urban young adults. Following Alheit (2013), this goal required a move beyond outcomes that merely described similarities and differences among individual experiences of biographicity—and toward interpretive theorization that illuminated how social structures are connected

to individual experiences and meanings and a reformulated conceptual framework that could serve as an overall configuration of biographicity.

The abductive research design of this study began with a substantive topic/phenomenon (biographicity) that was connected to multiple bodies of theory described in the conceptual framework for this study, engaged in complex analysis that was open to empirical challenges, and finally moved toward “theory discovery that will require further specification in research practice” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 181). Following this design, Alheit’s (2013) notion of configurations provided a suitable approach for synthesizing the data from this study in order to reach conclusions regarding biographicity. In a similar way, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) wrote,

Every [hermeneutical] interpretation involves innovation and creativity—“*Jedes Verstehen ist ein Besserverstehen*” (Every understanding is an understanding better). The interpretation goes beyond the immediately given and enriches the understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interrelations in the text, extending its meaning. (p. 211)

These extended views of qualitative research gave the researcher confidence to explore certain novel methodological possibilities described by Alheit (2013):

The principle premise of a methodically controlled comparison is the reference to a comparative perspective, the so called ‘*tertium comparationis*’ [thinking space]. This common third premise becomes the criterion for those aspects of two or more constellation of cases [the participants in this study] that are compared from a perspective which transcends the case level (p. 2).

Because the study was committed to praxis as a goal (see p. 17), it seemed appropriate to push the boundaries of qualitative methods in order to “compare cases, thus improving our understanding of the processes and mechanisms involved in each single case” (Rokkan (1955) as cited in Mjoset, 2000, p. 385). Citing Elias (1989), Alheit (2013)

suggested that such qualitative comparisons provide important insights into a variety of dynamic social processes. Thus, the researcher bridged qualitative and quasi-quantitative (or perhaps neo-quantitative) explorations to develop configurations of recognition and holistic learning as described fully in Chapter 4. These configurations contributed to the final level of abductive analysis that led to the conclusions of this study.

Validity and Trustworthiness of the Research

Within the interpretive paradigm that guided the researcher's work (see Table 2), concerns about validity or trustworthiness were continually present. Any discussion of validity in qualitative research is related to Dewey's (1929) notion that "practical activity deals with individualized and unique situations which are never exactly duplicable and about which, accordingly, no complete assurance is possible" (p. 6). In an extensive analysis of the social construction of validity, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) wrote, "*Validity* refers in ordinary language to the truth, the correctness, and the strength of a statement" (p. 246). In order to clarify the search for such truth, correctness, and strength, the researcher was guided by certain overarching questions:

- "Are these findings sufficiently authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications?"
- "More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them?" (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 120).
- Are these results sufficiently rigorous in their interpretation of data?

Contemporary scholars of qualitative research call for new standards of validity in line with such questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The research design for this study proposed three categories of validation: craftsmanship validity, communicative validity, and pragmatic validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In short, methodological rigor depended on the researcher's ability "to be able to identify and locate one's own research trajectory so that it can be understood by others, shared, communicated, and to some extent be reproduced" (Alhadeff Jones, 2013, p. 41).

Craftsmanship Validity

The quality of the craftsmanship of a dissertation is based on the rigor the researcher has brought to developing the problem statement, the research questions, the literature review, and the research design and the extent to which verification is built into the entire research project. It should be clear that the research was based on "continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 248). High standards required that the researcher herself and the dissertation committee monitor the thoroughness and currency of the literature review, adequate theorizing of the phenomena, the use of broad-based and high-quality support for positions taken, and exploration of alternative points of view. The epistemological roots of a study were challenged for consistency throughout, and each aspect of the research design was aligned with those roots (Olesen, 2013).

The interpretive research methodology of this study included iterative steps to challenge the conclusions reached, no matter how tentative, and to look for alternative meanings or interpretations of data. The researcher's journal provides evidence that she

served as her own “devil’s advocate” throughout the research process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 249), as addressed in the design’s commitment to thoroughgoing memo writing. High-quality craftsmanship also requires that there be internal consistency and coherence within the study.

Particular issues of craftsmanship are related to the use of biographical research. In many circles, life histories are contested as a valid means of obtaining data for interpretive research (Alheit, 1994; Merrill & West, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Roberts, 2002); thus, it is important to repeatedly acknowledge that life histories are a present version of events from the past. The researcher monitored internal consistency and coherence within each interview to judge the trustworthiness of the stories that were told (Merrill & West, 2009; Roberts, 2002).

In order to establish a standard of craftsmanship for this study, the researcher kept in mind C. Wright Mills’s description of social research as *intellectual craftsmanship*:

Be a good craftsman: Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man [*sic*] be his own methodologist, let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. (Mills, 1959, p. 224, as cited in Brinkmann, 2012, p. 65)

Communicative Validity

Alheit (2010b) noted, “The validation of qualitative processes is . . . only possible ‘*communicatively*’ by comparing each suggested way of interpretation and reading with the ideas and suggestions of others” (unpaginated). Communication about this study began with the development of the problem statement and research questions. As part of

the Executive Leadership Program (ELP) at The George Washington University, these elements of the research emerged from an iterative, interactive process over many months in a learning community made up of cohort members (from a wide variety of fields of practice), faculty, and visiting scholars. This process relied on repeated presentations and feedback to develop the research proposal. In addition, because biographicity is a nearly universal human problem, the researcher repeatedly engaged with *regular folks* to see if the conception of the problem resonated with them and received powerful feedback that the problem and questions were important and needed to be addressed.

The design of the research study began by identifying a scholarly conversation that focused on the matters addressed in this study. The researcher presented her early conceptualization of the study in a paper at the annual conference of the Life History and Biographical Research Network of the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Canterbury, England, in February 2013 and received valuable feedback that refined the research design. In addition, the researcher attended the ESREA triennial conference in Berlin in September 2013, where she attended a doctoral student preconference, observed the current state of research in the field, and also had the opportunity to interact informally with leading scholars about the specific content of this study in ways that helped to reshape certain important facets of the design. Most recently, the researcher discussed the research in a symposium presentation at the XI International Transformative Learning Conference at Columbia Teachers College.

Communication through collective interpretation by people from different backgrounds can greatly enhance the interpretive rigor of a research study (Charmaz,

2006; Olesen, 2013; Olesen & Weber, 2012). For that reason, the researcher collaborated with others regularly throughout the interpretive phase of the research:

1. The researcher participated in a research group made up of doctoral students in the ELP program engaged in qualitative, interview research; the group engaged in periodic dialogue about the unfolding data collection and interpretation.
2. The researcher engaged individually with a small number of educators who have worked directly with the population that was the focus of this study to verify the authenticity of the voices heard in the interviews, the interpretations made by the researcher, and the conclusions drawn for practice recommendations at the end of the dissertation.

Pragmatic Validity

At each stage of the research process, the researcher actively asked the question “So what?” because “the final import of the conclusions as to knowledge resides in the changed idea it enforces into action” (Dewey, 1929, as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 4). Lincoln and Guba (2013) asserted that this questioning requires (and actually produces) authenticity. Questions of generalizability are often raised, and this study took the stance that the question is not whether the findings can be generalized in any global way, but rather whether the findings may be useful in other situations.

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research does not suggest that the findings of the study can be repeated precisely. Following Alheit (2010b), the reliability of this research study “exists in the *careful documentation and reconstruction* of the research data produced

during comparatively ‘natural’ situations” (unpaginated) created in the execution of multiple interviews using narrative methods that have been used in a wide variety of contexts.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed the prescribed ethical guidelines for informed consent, confidentiality, and avoidance of harmful consequences. The researcher changed all details of each biography that might identify an individual participant in order to preserve the anonymity of each person. The researcher paid particular attention to the fact that interview research poses powerful ethical demands because of the uncertainty involved in an open-ended interview process and the need to be sensitive in responding to unexpected circumstances that may arise in interviews. The researcher monitored herself in each interview in order to respect the “boundary between research and therapeutic practices” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 167), particularly in light of the intimate and sometimes challenging life experiences described by a number of participants. In one case, the researcher consulted with a seasoned qualitative researcher to discuss one interview that demanded a deeper understanding of epoché. Grounded in an ethics of care (Noddings, 1986), biographical or narrative research demands responsibility for relational ethics while in direct contact with participants, but also in analyzing and reporting their stories (Clandinin, 2013). The researcher was guided by the work of Seidman (2013) who asserted, “We may never be perfect in our quest to do good, careful, and thoughtful work in every step of the process, but a sense of imperative to move in that direction would lead us in the direction of doing ethical research with our participants” (p. 143). Finally, the researcher respected ethical standards that are grounded in “a keen sense of social

justice and a commitment to the development of relationships and trust, to careful listening, ethics and attention to participant voices, and to the co-construction of knowledge” (Trimmer, Riddle, & Black, 2015, p. 3).

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, it seems valuable to return to the earliest days of the process, when the researcher, concerned with the path ahead, asked a seasoned scholar and researcher, “Is there a way I can do a dissertation that is authentic for me?” That teacher/mentor responded, “It is the only way that you *can* do it.” That notion was the guiding principle for this study. The methods used in this study reflected a systematic yet authentic response to the researcher’s desire to understand the human experience of biographicity in a way that respected her own ontology and epistemology and her desire for insight that contributes to theory, praxis, and social change, while at the same time privileging the voices of participants.

CHAPTER 4:

RESULTS

How do we do what we do as we do whatever we do as human beings? (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004)

This study was designed to address the main research question: *How do young adults (particularly those from so-called marginalized populations) repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives?* As a scholar-practitioner, I¹ sought to understand why, in our complex times, some people succeed in shaping their lives according to their own needs and desires while many others do not. The literature review in chapter 2 confirmed the relevance of this topic and the theoretical questions that need to be explored, and the methodological framework outlined in chapter 3 provided a path for answering the research questions.

The study was grounded in a subjective, constitutive ontology and (radical) constructivist epistemology that required a qualitative approach that empowered individuals to tell their life stories as the *data* for this study. The biographical method privileges the voices of participants to lead the way in answering the research questions. Thus, the following chapters focus on the stories as they were told and interpreted beginning in each interview itself and moving through multiple layers of abductive analysis. Such inquiry is a process that seeks understanding through sensemaking and ongoing reflexivity (Brinkmann, 2014; Markham, 2005) that continues in iterative cycles of interpretation throughout the research process and beyond. Reporting the data within a

¹ In the remaining chapters, the researcher used first person, in alignment with the personal nature of the data collection and interpretation.

dissertation poses particular challenges for such an abductive approach, since it does not provide a traditional linear path from data to results/findings to conclusions. Biographical research also poses dilemmas for the researcher who seeks to privilege the life stories of participants while gradually moving toward scholarly interpretation and conclusions that make a contribution to both scholarship and practice. As Bourdieu (1993) cautioned, “There is doubtless no writing more perilous than the commentary which a public writer must provide for the messages that have been confided to them” (p. 625).

This type of commentary demands of the reader a similar willingness to allow the *messages* that participants shared to gradually unfold toward interpretation, findings, and conclusions. Figure 5 provides an overall map of the unfolding nature of abductive analysis as used in this study. The process of interpretation, in fact, began immediately in the life history interviews themselves and throughout the process moved through and

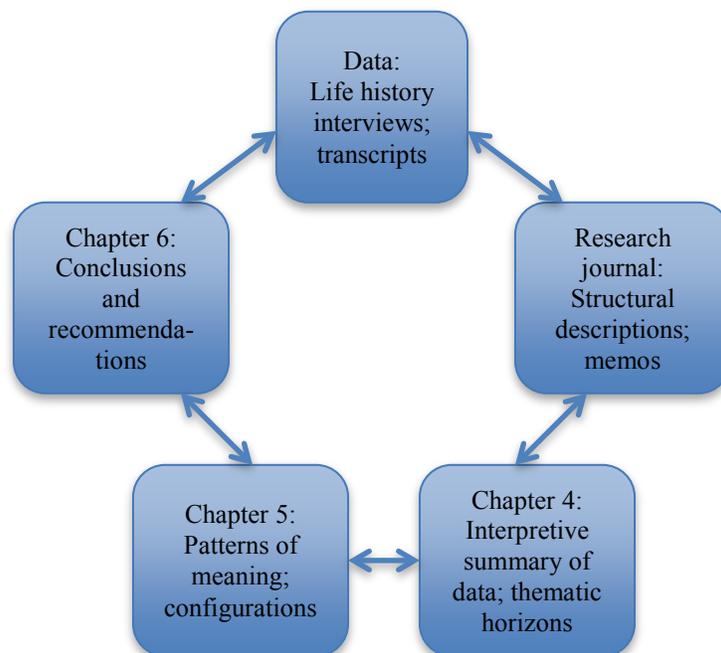


Figure 5. Unfolding abductive analysis.

across each element summarized in Figure 5. The life stories remained the primary focus, but I used a variety of tools and perspectives grounded in a belief that the more iterative the process, “the more dimensions and consequences of a text will be illuminated” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 682).

Table 3
Deepening Layers of Analysis

Chapter	Deepening interpretive processes
Chapter 4: Results	Demographic data: Participants by sampling phase; participant demographic overview <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Structural descriptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary of family composition • Summary of distinctive school experiences • Unique features of individual structural descriptions 2. Process structures of the life course <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual profiles of biographical action schemes, institutional patterns, processes of suffering, transformation processes • Preliminary cross-analysis of profiles 3. Thematic horizons across the life stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations/imagining a different life • Suffering • Belonging
Chapter 5: Findings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Patterns of meaning within the life stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognition • Emotion: Inadequacy, success, safety and security, caring • Social interactions and social structures: micro, meso, and macro levels • Autonomy/heteronomy • Sensemaking • Recognition: primary relationships, legal rights, acknowledgment by community • Emergence/biographicity 2. Configurations of biographicity
Chapter 6: Conclusions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Theoretical conclusions 2. Recommendations: Policy, practice, research

To further clarify the deepening layers of analysis as presented in this chapter and the following chapters, it is important to recognize that each arrow represents a back and forth motion as well as forward motion, as the analysis continually revisited the life stories as the foundation for greater understanding throughout the process of analysis.

Table 3 outlines the interpretive tools that produced the gradually deepening understanding through the layers of analysis.

Foundational Summaries of Data

This chapter begins, then, by describing the data collected during the recruitment phase of the study, from basic demographic data to preliminary condensation of biographical information that provides the first layers for understanding the life stories of participants. As the abductive analysis gradually emerges, it is essential to remember that each participant created a version of the past, present, and future within the specific context of this research, on a particular day, influenced by a particular interaction with a particular researcher. This caution is closely tied to the methodological framework (Figure 3) that clearly distinguishes between the *lived life* and the *narrated life*, and this distinction needs to remain central even in this first-level exploration of the life stories.

Overview of Participants

Participant sampling, outlined in chapter 3, identified the original group of participants from an email sent by the college access organization to the targeted population. The first nine participants from this group then began the snowball sampling that led to the final number of 17 participants who participated fully in the study (Figure 6). Demographic details gained in the preliminary phone interview with each participant are summarized in Table 4.

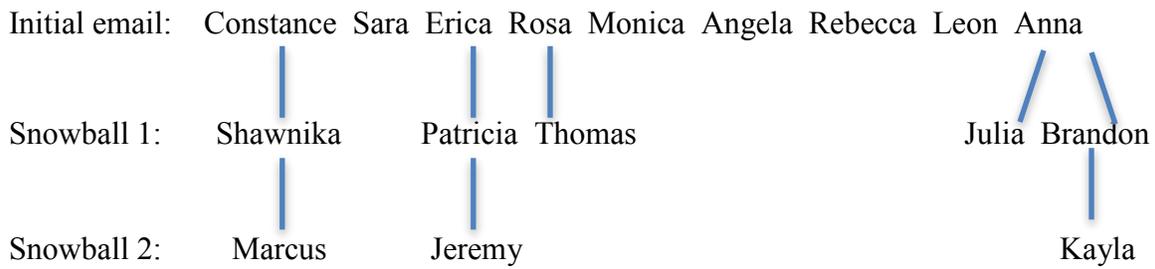


Figure 6. Participants by sampling phase.

Table 4
Participant Demographic Overview

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education—highest level Current Employment	Interview length (min.)
Angela	Female	25	African American	Master’s—counseling/art therapy Employed in field	88
Anna	Female	30	Asian American, White	Master’s—nonprofit management Employed as executive director	138
Brandon	Male	31	African American	Ph.D.—leadership and organizational strategy Employed in government agency	110
Constance	Female	23	African American	Bachelor’s—sociology and English Employed in nonprofit	110
Erica	Female	25	White	Bachelor’s—English and philosophy Employed in nonprofit	101
Jeremy	Male	22	White	Bachelor’s in progress—sociology Employed and student	72
Julia	Female	32	African American	Master’s in progress—fashion design Full-time student	108
Kayla	Female	30	African American	Master’s—nonprofit management Employed in nonprofit	81
Leon	Male	23	African American	Bachelor’s (for-profit program)—business Employed—seeking preferred job	114
Marcus	Male	26	African American	Certificate—licensed practical nurse (for-profit program) Employed—seeking preferred job	63
Monica	Female	30	African American	Bachelor’s—nonprofit management Unemployed; seeking nonprofit job	177
Patricia	Female	23	White	Bachelor’s—mathematics	125

Rebecca	Female	30	Hispanic	Employed at technical firm Associate's (for-profit program); Bachelor's in progress—social work Employed part-time—health care	105
Rosa	Female	23	African American	Master's in progress—social work Employed and student	69
Sara	Female	28	African American	Three years of college; certificate— medical assistant (for-profit program) Employed in health care	126
Shawnika	Female	23	African American	Ph.D. in progress—engineering Full-time student/researcher	110
Thomas	Male	24	African American	Community college certificate; Electrical maintenance Employed—seeking preferred job	62

Structural Descriptions

Following Alheit (1994a), formal analysis began by creating a structural description for each participant, an early layer of interpretation designed “to get to know their own [the participants’] assessments of their situation” (p. 30). Primarily using actual quotes from the transcripts, these descriptions were condensed into the *distinct narrative units* that make up the life story told in the interview, or the way in which each participant structured or organized his or her experiences. These might be described as the key chapters of the life story as told. It is important to note that some participants had more weakly developed narrative competence or storytelling skills, and their narrative units were more difficult to identify and required more interpretation. In addition to narrative units, each structural description highlighted four additional factors: (1) places where the person put particular *weight* on aspects of the story; (2) statements that indicate self-evaluation or *stock taking*, often from the contemporary perspective; (3) descriptions of self-perceived significant change(s) in their lives; and (4) the expression of particular emotions, such as anger or fear. This process served as a first level of condensation, interpretation, and synthesis of the lengthy narrative interviews, seeking “to unfold their

material [rather] than encode it prematurely” (Alheit, 1994a, p. 28). It was already clear that even the first activity of identifying the narrative units was an interpretive process that moved beyond the individual’s own telling of the life story. The structural descriptions were 5 to 9 pages in length, and samples are provided in Appendix H.

Certain narrative units were repeated in many, if not most, of the life stories. One such narrative unit repeated in all of the life stories was the description of each participant’s family. Kayla described the importance this narrative unit held for her (and other participants) when she began her story by saying, “I guess it would be appropriate to start with my family makeup because thinking about . . . how people shape their lives—that dynamic of how my family came together played a big role in kind of shaping *my* life.” In fact, all but three participants *began* their story with a description of their family composition (parents’ marital status, siblings, place in family), and some went into great detail about family dynamics to start their story.

The narrative unit of family life often provided valuable clues for understanding the individual’s exercise of biographicity. The details were explored as individual stories unfolded throughout the layers of analysis, but participants seemed to agree that it was important to consider their overall family contexts in order to position their biographies. Of the 17 participants, only three spent all of their youth in what is portrayed as the traditional two-parent family. Six had a parent who was deceased. A number of participants experienced complicated relationships with siblings with different fathers or mothers. Table 5 summarizes these family characteristics for each participant as a reference point to revisit in the deepening analysis of the stories.

Table 5
Summary of Family Composition and History

Narrator/age	Family history/current family status
Angela 25	Parents divorced, age 4; mother remarried, age 8; stepfather died, age 16; only child, then one sibling. Single.
Anna 30	Parents divorced, age 12; parents immigrants (Asia and Europe); younger of two girls; father had wife and ten older children in Asia; he returned to Asia after divorce. Married to African American, two children.
Brandon 31	Single mother; influential extended family; middle of three boys. Single.
Constance 23	Parents married; oldest of three girls; strong relationship with grandmother connected to biographicity. Single.
Erica 25	Parents divorced, age 12; older of two girls. Single.
Jeremy 22	Parents divorced, age 12; sole custody granted to mother; reunited with father shortly before he died, age 17. Single.
Julia 32	Parents married; middle child with five brothers. Married to a Latino, one child.
Kayla 30	Parents divorced, age 2; mother remarried, age 7; close relationship with stepfather; only child. Single.
Leon 23	Parents married 30+ years; mother recently deceased; seventh of 11 siblings; younger sibling died when he was 7. Stable relationship; one child.
Marcus 26	Single mother; oldest of three siblings, all with different fathers; introduced to his father, age 11; mother died, age 13; sent to live with aunt in chaotic household; separated from sister. Single.
Monica 30	Parents divorced and remarried; oldest of father's five children; youngest of mother's three children; unstable atmosphere in both family situations. Long-term relationship with father of her three children.
Patricia 23	Single mother (younger child of two); father married (oldest child of four); mother frequently ill and hospitalized. Engaged to be married.
Rebecca 30	Parents divorced; mother in long-term relationship with a woman; father absent for many years. Divorced (married age 16); single mom; three children/three fathers.
Rosa 23	Parents divorced, before age 2; mother then had a number of violent live-in relationships; father connected sporadically; father died, age 16. Single.

Narrator/age	Family history/current family status
Sara 28	Parents married but essentially separated; youngest of three girls (sisters considerably older); estranged from father due to his indifference to her needs. Married, no children.
Shawnika 23	Single mother; middle of three siblings (one adopted), all with different fathers; mother died, age 11; separated from siblings and sent to live with father and his wife; fourth of seven siblings including four other girls; unwelcome in that family. Single.
Thomas 24	Single mother, worked two jobs; middle of three boys with three different fathers; father unknown to him; little connection to extended family except for one uncle who helped him after his prison sentence. Single.

These factual details provide only a starting place for interpretation, however, and do not capture the complex factors that shape the descriptions of family life. Several participants (Anna, Monica, Patricia, Jeremy, Rosa, Rebecca) went into great detail about challenging family dynamics, often exhibiting heightened emotion in talking about their families. These more complex factors of family influences became increasingly significant in the deepening abductive analysis, but it is interesting to note that the stability of family life did not by itself determine how a particular individual exercised biographicity.

In our society, schooling is another narrative unit that is emphasized in most biographies (Alheit, 1994a), and this proved true in this group of individuals. It is interesting to note that a number of participants put the greatest emphasis on school, while others emphasized family dynamics as described above. At this early stage of analysis, it became clear, however, that certain key features of their schooling provided valuable context for understanding connections between schooling and biographicity. Frequency of school moves was one such contextual factor that appeared in a number of the life stories, as when Thomas described a number of moves from predominantly

African American schools in the city to all-white inner-ring suburban schools to an affluent suburban community and the varying impacts on his school experience. In another example, Constance was homeschooled, and this context had a strong influence on her schooling that unfolded later in the abductive analysis. Table 6 provides snapshots of the features of schooling for each participant as highlighted in their structural descriptions, emphasizing the unique factors they described in their life stories.

Table 6
Overview of School Experiences

Narrator	Distinctive features of each participant’s schooling
Angela	Moved schools frequently as young child; self-described average student; felt there was little support for students at her level; small high school and college; support from teachers/counselors at key transitions
Anna	Non-English speaker as child—ESL placement; powerful cultural/racial influences and challenges to identity throughout her school experience; frequent school moves; felt she never belonged; thwarted in attempts during high school to get into more advanced classes; recipient of prestigious national scholarship
Brandon	Saw the nurturing of his “leadership qualities” as the key to his academic success; stressed his natural curiosity; significant impact of sports; importance of gang affiliation in his adolescent schooling; intense involvement in high-level internships and mentoring
Constance	Homeschooled from grades 4 to 8; high level of academic independence and curiosity; early and consistent engagement with high-level internships and special programs; associate’s degree before graduating from high school; negative impact of racial/socioeconomic bias in college
Erica	Very positive school experiences beginning in preschool; always in gifted or honors tracks; intense involvement in arts activities as well as internships
Jeremy	Had to be questioned to reveal even low-level detail about K-12 schooling; described occasional disagreements with teachers over ideas he held; indifferent (in spite of good performance) about school until he became engaged in service learning in college
Julia	“Hated” school because of bullying due to her light complexion; powerful influence of marching band and the arts in general; dropped out before end of senior year; circuitous route to college
Kayla	Mother and stepfather very engaged in her schooling and actually provided much of the “critical thinking” she learned to do; changed schools every year until grade 5; significant role of mentoring and internships from high school well into adulthood; associate’s degree before graduating from high school

Narrator	Distinctive features of each participant's schooling
Leon	Detailed, positive story of his elementary school experience; dramatic change and pattern of ambivalence between school success and gang/drug involvement beginning in high school; ongoing academic success in spite of this pattern; completed high school in accelerated program with honors diploma; dropped out of college and attended for-profit certificate program and bachelor's program
Marcus	Good student until mother's death; gifted track; moved to chaotic household with no support for learning; put into trade school track as nursing assistant; attended for-profit postsecondary program; felt he made bad choices that have hampered his life goals
Monica	Frequent school moves; strong influence of racial identity issues and bullying in school; significance influence on school experiences from drug use beginning at age 11; erratic school performance; college supported by programs and financial aid for older learners; became independent learner related to issues her children had
Patricia	Anxiety a powerful influence on her early schooling; significant influence of music (including marching band) on her school experience; high level of extracurricular involvement in college
Rebecca	Early success in school and opportunities for college scholarships while still in middle school; left home at 15, married at 16, and worked intensely to graduate before she had her first child at 17; postsecondary education hampered by involvement in for-profit program; significant learning in the workplace; working on bachelor's but early student loans may prevent completion
Rosa	Called school "the only good thing in my life"; always got "straight A's" until father's death, which led to a significant disruption in her commitment to school; attended community college during high school; had a circuitous route to bachelor's in social work; about to start graduate work in prestigious program
Sara	Very positive attitude toward school; gifted track throughout; had to leave college junior year for financial reasons; very satisfied with results from medical assistant training at for-profit school
Shawnika	Made college the central focus of her life story; powerful impact of a high-level internship in engineering while still in high school and a long-term mentoring relationship; associate's degree before graduating from high school; full-time M.A./Ph.D. student
Thomas	Frequent school moves; very little emphasis on schooling; lack of engagement in school because "ashamed" of not understanding; dropped out shortly before graduation from high school; gained GED while serving a prison sentence; recently completed certificate in electrical maintenance at community college

One common feature of the narrative units of schooling that emerged even in this very early layer of analysis is that *all* of the participants described (in varying degrees of detail) their lack of academic preparedness for postsecondary education. This is particularly notable since a number of them mentioned that they were near the top of their high school graduating class, some even completing an associate's degree from community college before graduating from high school.

As the structural descriptions were written, it became apparent that few participants spoke directly about poverty (though all appeared to describe moderate- to low-income to very low-income households) *except* in relation to their schooling or their desire to work to acquire material things. Their stories of postsecondary educational experiences *all* highlighted the importance of financial aid for their postsecondary choices, the ongoing difficulty in financing their education, and/or the high level of student loan debt they had accrued.

In addition to the shared narrative units of family and schooling, the structural descriptions served to reveal unique features of participants' life stories through the way that they weighted the story, engaged in self-evaluation, highlighted important life changes, and revealed emotions during the interview. In this way, the structural description captured the particular qualities of each person and contributed to the gradual condensation of data rather than a premature movement toward firm comparisons. These distinctive life story features are summarized in Table 7 to provide another early snapshot of each person's life story. It is important to emphasize, however, that all of the data summarized in the structural descriptions provide only the first-level summary of the

narrated life and that the voice of each person gradually unfolded in subsequent layers of description and interpretation.

Table 7

Summary of Distinctive Life Story Features Each Participant Stressed

Name	Distinctive features stressed by participant
Angela	Stable single mother; only child; average student; support from teachers/counselors at key times; conscious shaping of how she wanted to present herself in the world
Anna	Parents immigrants (Asia and Eastern Europe); powerful language and cultural influences/challenges to identity; intense family disruptions; extensive travel to Asia related to her family/ethnic identity; married to African American with two children
Brandon	Mother's biography influential; experienced homelessness/poverty; emphasized his leadership qualities from a young age; sports; gang affiliation but no criminal activity; strong internship opportunities; has published a book; works for large government agency
Constance	Homeschooled early; strong curiosity/learning independence; strong statements regarding race as a barrier; significant change in life course after grandmother's death; thoughtful reflection and self-evaluation throughout; emphasis on community service
Erica	Early education influence from father; parents divorced in early teens; positive school experiences throughout; impact of extracurricular involvement and work experience; strong independence; strong reflexivity
Jeremy	Parents divorced; reunited with father at 16, shortly before he died; grew to "hate" his mother over this; became fully independent at 18; life-changing experience with community service
Julia	Intact family/five brothers; strong negative influence of race issues on her schooling; positive influence of marching band; dropped out of high school, moved to another state; gradually found a satisfying career/educational path; influential study abroad
Kayla	Parents divorced when she was 2; moved frequently; stepfather had a strong influence on her intellectual development; consistent involvement in high-level internships beginning in high school; intellectual curiosity nurtured by home and college
Leon	Large, supportive family; strong early schooling experiences; intense gang involvement, sex, drugs, violence; cycles of positive/negative/ambivalent activities; turnaround after death in family; has daughter who lives with her mother
Marcus	Half-brother of Shawnika; separated from her when mother died; expressed ongoing grief/depression; chaotic family life after mother's death with no guidance or support from home or school; licensed practical nurse;

Name	Distinctive features stressed by participant
	unfulfilled life goals
Monica	Early traumatic experiences including sexual abuse/early sexual activity; frequent moves involving racial identity issues; drug and alcohol abuse beginning at 11 and lasting many years; three children; began to turn her life around with birth of her daughter
Patricia	Severe anxiety as a child; mother ill/hospitalized frequently/very unstable home life; good student; strong influence of marching band and college extracurriculars and work experience
Rebecca	Intense/traumatic family experiences including sexual abuse as a young child; early sexual activity/marriage/abuse; mother of three children/three fathers; consistent employment and job success; ill-served by higher education system
Rosa	Traumatic childhood experiences including violence/sexual abuse; early sexual activity and periods of drugs, alcohol, etc.; consistent success in school; strong influence of church affiliation
Sara	Positive influence of her neighborhood; strong maternal influence/expectations; dropped out after 3 years of college due to financial problems; satisfying career as medical assistant; called herself “Mrs. Optimistic”; married
Shawnika	Single, very supportive mother died at age 11; difficult transition to father’s family; strong mentoring/internship; learning disability/great difficulty in academic work in college; strong research capabilities; pursuing Ph.D. in engineering
Thomas	Virtually no parental support or involvement; invisible at school; dropped out and became drug dealer; prison sentence; strong influence of church affiliation; satisfied with his progress but concerned about ongoing limitations of his academic decisions

Process Structures of the Life Course

Following the methodological framework of this study (Figure 3), the next layer of interpretation or condensation used the *process structures of the life course*, derived from the work (in German) of Fritz Schuetze as described by Alheit (1994a) and Riemann (2003) and highlighted in chapter 3. These process structures involved four components:

- *Biographical action schemes*: The learning life experiences of the participant; plans and events, changes in life circumstances, delineation of time periods.
- *Institutional patterns for life course procedure*: The social structures and contexts that influenced participants' experiences, cycles, patterns of living and working.
- *Life trajectories/processes of suffering*: The significant, often troubling, events that influenced the life course; critical junctures (positive or negative) that led to changes in the life course.
- *Inner changes*: The transformational and/or embodied changes and experiences of biographicity that emerged within each life history.

This layer of analysis helped to differentiate the experiences and underlying attitudes and feelings of individuals while also underscoring common features shared across the life stories. Each story was examined to uncover these process structures in the individual life. This section presents the process structures for one participant, highlights some similarities in the process structures of three other participants, then summarizes shared features of all participants.

Sara. Sara's life story provides a good example of how these multiple biographical structures were revealed in the analysis.

Biographical action schemes. Sara described her enthusiasm for learning and her dedication to her schoolwork throughout her childhood. When she was placed in gifted education, she said, "I didn't realize I was so smart [chuckle]. I felt like I was a good student. I just felt like school was there for me to be educated and for me to learn, so while I'm here for the 6 or 7 hours, I should sit here and get educated and learn." Sara

continually emphasized her attitude and her belief that there was “nothing I could not learn. The sky was the limit.”

Upon arriving at college, however, she was faced with overwhelming academic challenges. She changed her major twice to correspond to the limitations of her knowledge and skills and had made it through sophomore year when she was forced to leave when her father refused to contribute the portion required for her to receive financial aid. Even then, however, she exercised biographical action when she said,

I was definitely resolved in my head like from that point on I don't want to rely on anybody else. I'm going to take care of everything on my own. Since you can't come through for me, it's time for me to put the big girl panties on and keep going.

After a short period of inaction, Sara attended a for-profit program to become a medical assistant. Upon completion, in spite of fear of her ability to move into the workplace, Sara began a career in health care that she found extremely satisfying; she said, “Medical assisting doesn't have to be the end for me. Right now, I love what I do.”

Institutional patterns. Sara's actions throughout her youth were deeply influenced by her neighborhood experiences. (In fact, she was the only person who mentioned the neighborhood as a factor in her childhood.) She said,

My neighborhood's very family oriented. There's lots of kids on the street and then you have like the moms working, parents working and stuff. . . . So everybody is always helping somebody when it came to schoolwork or just being outside to play.² So growing up on the street was—it was very nice. . . . [As I got older] a lot of the older folks, they didn't tolerate the loud noise and the playing of the rap music and standing on the corner because you want to deal your drugs.

² Sara was the only person to use the word *play* in her life story.

Later when she went to high school in a more challenged neighborhood, she saw the contrast and made her decisions as an adolescent based on what she had learned from the supportive neighborhood she lived in.

Sara was in gifted education programs throughout her K-12 schooling, but no one really supported her to go on to college. A life planning class senior year and visits to her school from college recruiters, however, led to her attending a private university. She described her deep disappointment that she was unprepared for academic work in college. In spite of her eventual success, she was forced to leave in her junior year because of requirements of the financial aid system.

Among the participants in the study, Sara had the most positive experience in a for-profit training program. She received job training and eventually found employment in that field.

Life trajectories/processes of suffering. In spite of her self-described optimistic attitude and her very positive feelings of support from her mother and her neighborhood, Sara described her deep frustration with her lack of preparation for college and “this feeling of failure.” She never mentioned her father until she told the story of having to leave college because he would not help her with financial support. She said,

So I spent like those next few months just trying to get some money together . . . because I didn't want to tell my mother . . . I'm basically a college dropout. . . . I was just like so close—like I had like I said maybe about a year and a half of classes and I would have been able to graduate with a bachelor's degree, and it didn't happen, so I was like: Oh my God.

Sara emphasized the fear that she has dealt with because of her limited life experiences in her family and her community and her struggles to get to the place she is today.

Inner changes. Sara highlighted a few of the key points of change in her life such as her description of the life planning course that helped her think about the future in a new way. She said, “Your life is at stake.” Like other participants, Sara was also motivated by seeing what she *didn’t* want in the lives of those around her. She was very reluctant to ask for help when she was doing poorly in college, but eventually said, “If I don’t get help and don’t learn to get better and excel, I’m not going to have anything out there.” After she finished the medical assistant program she was afraid and felt unprepared for work in health care and briefly took a job in a call center. She then realized, “I knew it wasn’t meant for me. I felt like this is not the role that I was meant to be doing—that I was meant to be doing something else for me.” Only then did she gain the courage to accept another health care job when it was offered, and she has worked in that same position in women’s health for nearly 7 years.

Shared features: Rosa, Rebecca, and Monica. As the structural descriptions were developed, they also began to suggest examples of shared features of the various process structures as well. One clear example of similarities can be seen in the stories of sexual abuse told by Rosa, Rebecca, and Monica.

Biographical action schemes. All three were sexually abused in their own homes by relatives (though not be a parent) before the age of 8. All three acted by reporting the abuse to an adult, but to no avail. Monica stated, “It really hindered me in life because after that I didn’t trust anyone. I felt as if this could happen to me under my father and he does nothing about it, then what’s the point? So I never told anyone else.” All three became sexually active in early adolescence. As Rosa commented, “A lot of my curiosity came too early, and it was just because I was exposed to things that I probably shouldn’t

have been exposed to but—you know. So at 13 I was dating an 18-year-old guy.” In addition, all three eventually realized that they could no longer accept patterns of abuse. Rebecca said, “My oldest son was a year old when I decided: Okay, this is not going to work. He’s going to continue to hit me.” In spite of this significant biographical experience, all three took action to exercise biographicity according to their own needs and desires.

Institutional patterns. The family structure failed to protect the safety of these three women and did not respond even when informed of what had happened. The judicial system did not protect them either, and in Rosa’s case actually humiliated her when her abuser was prosecuted because Rosa had become sexually active at a young age. When the consequences of these events became clear (drug abuse, truancy, dropping out of school), schools made no attempt to explore what was happening in the lives of these girls and/or to intervene to find solutions.

Life trajectories/processes of suffering. The suffering that these participants experienced is already evident, but their own words provided deeper insight into the impact on their life trajectories, often contributing to biographical disruptions or “fragile standstills” (Alheit, 1994a, p. 11). At age 11, Monica began abusing drugs and alcohol and said, “A lot of my pain kind of went away. So then I’m like: Well, hey, if I do this, this can kind of ease my pain, you know, from the things that I’m going through.” In a similar way, Rosa said,

I think my choice of men and my choice of continuing to stay with guys that I knew weren’t good for me [tapping table] had a lot to do with what I watched my mother do—you know, I watched her do the same thing. I seen her kind of—you know, have the same habits, so putting up with the same things. Of course, I didn’t see it that way. Then . . . it’s kind of like I accepted suffering, I accepted pain. It was kind of like: Well, this is just how life works, you know, because my

whole life this is all I'd seen, you know, so I was just like, well, maybe this is life.

Inner changes/transformations. This pattern of suffering did not change for Rosa until she became deeply involved in a church described in more detail later in this chapter. She said, “If I wasn’t surrounded by such a great church family, I would not be the person I am.” For Monica and Rebecca, the change did not come until they had their own children and were determined that they would have a different life. Rebecca summarized her inner changes when she said, “I’m always thinking about the future and how I can make things better and improve on areas in my life to make it better for my kids.”

Shared features: All participants. Thus, it became clear that these individual profiles using the process structures of the life course (Appendix I) provided preliminary insights into a variety of experiences shared across the life stories. They began to reveal patterns of experience that could be seen in subgroups of participants. The shared features found in the profiles are summarized in Table 8 to demonstrate the growing understanding

Table 8
Shared Features of Process Structures of the Life Course (Alheit, 1994, 2010a)

Biographical action schemes:	Institutional patterns:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always planned to attend college (often related to parental expectation) • Action to gain quick success at some key point • Repeated foiled intentions to make significant change • Financial aid–driven action plans: variety of plans and failure of plans—100% of participants • Clear career path laid out; responses to barriers • Participation in workplace learning • Involvement in arts • Involvement in service: 100% of participants • Drug dealing or violent activity to gain financial success or social status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patterns of family makeup/dynamics—single parents, divorce, remarriage, etc. • Failing school system(s); substandard educational outcomes; failure to address students’ social needs • Higher education—community college, traditional 4-year, for-profit, graduate schools as distinct institutional patterns; financial aid system • Poverty (as defined by participants) • Institutional/societal racism and/or bias • Role of justice system • Neighborhoods as positive and negative patterns • Religious communities • Supports from nonprofit sector: internships, programs, support services • Government safety net programs—e.g., food stamps, supported housing • Social affiliations: gangs; service organizations;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building networks • Actions to overcome experiences of suffering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • arts programs • Work—adolescent options; transitions to adult workforce
<p>Life trajectories/processes of suffering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma, fear, sexual assault • Varying degrees of parental (guardian) neglect • Gang violence or criminal activity • Alcohol/drug abuse: self or parents • Chaotic family dynamics • “Fragile standstill” (Alheit, 1994, p. 11) • Intense cultural conflict • Poverty in varying degrees • Illness/death of parent/close relatives • Financial challenges regarding education—all in varying degrees • Experiences of racism, bias 	<p>Transformational processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental examples of “what I don’t want” • Lessons learned from parents • Connection to influential church community • Change in environment/context • Periods of reflection • Individuals who presented impetus for life change: mentor, teacher, relative, friend, sometimes incidental contact • Death of someone significant • Parenthood • Exposure to serving others; desire to “give back” • Participation in internships/mentoring relationships

of patterns of biographicity that contributed to the next layers of analysis: thematic horizons, patterns of meaning, and configurations of life experience.

Second-Layer Summaries of Data: Thematic Horizons

The review of the *structural descriptions* and the analysis that emerged from examining the *process structures of the life course* provided a growing picture of the events, relationships, and emotions that the participants described through their life stories. This is not the same, however, as respecting the actual *voices* of the participants or getting a sense of their stories as complex depictions of their biographies. My commitment to respecting their voices demanded a fuller presentation of their stories. For that reason, the next layer of interpretation identified *thematic horizons*, or fields of meaning (Alheit, 2010a) Alvesson & Skolberg, 2009) that provide another layer of condensation to be used as an organizing structure for presenting more complete depictions of the life stories as told during the interviews in participants’ own words.

Denzin (2014) cautioned, “Our texts must always return to and reflect the words persons speak as they attempt to give meaning and shape to the lives they lead” (p. 4).

Using the research journal to repeatedly review and interpret the structural descriptions and processes of the life course (as described in Chapter 3), it was possible to group the life stories into thematic horizons according to the partial sense of the person’s life revealed in these condensations (Denzin, 2014). It is, of course, impossible to reduce any of the complex life stories that were told to a single factor that describes *how the participants have repeatedly engaged in redesigning or reshaping their lives*, but certain emphases or themes seemed to *dominate* individual life stories and appeared in multiple participant stories. These dominant features suggested the thematic horizons as summarized in Table 9.

Table 9
Overview of Thematic Horizons

Dominant features of process structures	Thematic horizon
Parental/school/community expectations Lessons learned from parents Clear career path laid out by self and others Community involvement: service, arts, etc. Exposure to postsecondary and financial aid opportunities	Expectations/ imagining a different future
Troubling or chaotic family dynamics Failure of institutional support: schools, justice system, safety net, etc. Poverty Trauma, lack of safety Experiences of illness and death	Suffering
Bias/racism/cultural conflict Positive community connections—internships, service/arts/work opportunities Other social affiliations—neighborhood, church, gangs	Belonging

These emerging thematic horizons not only provide a way to represent the participants' life stories in their own words and with richer narrative accuracy, but also provide a foundation for gradually deepening the analytical and theoretical interpretations of the life experiences of participants through the later layers of abductive analysis (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). The use of thematic horizons is in no way intended to oversimplify the life stories but rather to uncover the *patterns of meaning and experiences of learning that emerge in the stories of biographicity told by individuals* (the second research subquestion for this study). The thematic horizons provide a way to represent the life stories through the actual words of the participants.

First Thematic Horizon: Expectations/Imagining a Different Life

The first thematic horizon to emerge was related to the biographical action schemes highlighted above. A number of the life stories seemed to highlight the notion that certain *expectations* dominated the path participants took through life. These expectations arose from a variety of sources. A few participants, for example, lived in families where academic achievement was stressed and consistently supported, while other families failed to communicate any positive expectations at all. Schools or other formal programming also seemed to deliver a variety of messages as to what was expected from students. Some participants communicated their own expectations for their life path as a dominant feature of their life story. As a K-12 educator, I was predisposed to see the importance of expectations in the stories, but began to see that expectations also were closely related to the individual's capacity to *imagine* a different life, a notion described by Varela and Depraz (2003), who related imagining to "memories,

expectations, and preparation for action” (p. 202). This thematic horizon also reflects back to the problem statement and its grounding in Mills’s (1959) notion of the *sociological imagination*.

Kayla’s story is a good example of how expectations and/or imagining are related to the exercise of biographicity or the process of shaping and reshaping one’s life. Her story is not representative of the stories in general, but rather illustrates the range of expectations that have the potential to support biographicity.

Kayla. Kayla is a 30-year-old woman who graduated from a nationally ranked, small liberal arts college. Since completing a master’s degree at a well-respected private university, she has been employed by a number of nonprofit organizations with high profiles in her community. Early in her story, Kayla asserted strongly that her parents’ expectations had a powerful impact on the way that she shaped her life.

My stepfather and my mom were such a grounding force for me coming up. My mom was very clear about some things pretty early in my life, and I think a lot of it probably came from her upbringing and my stepfather’s upbringing—and one was that going to college was never a question. Like I was *going* to do well in school. I was *going* to college. Education was *very* important. I needed to do well on papers. My stepdad kind of modeled himself as a writer and loved to get into literature, so he felt it was his primary role to double check all my papers for school. . . . I’m like, “Just, c’mon, it’s a paper. Just let me be done!” I can remember being in elementary school and I would write a story and draw pictures to accompany it and my parents would be very meticulous about, “Go back and rethink that one part of the story”—back-and-forth negotiations and a lot of dialogue around writing and learning and reading and all those things in my home. I did really well in school. . . . I knew it was expected, like this was what I was *supposed* to do.

And the other big thing that my mom made very clear is that I would never work at McDonald’s. I would never work at that kind of odd job. If I were to have a summer employment, it needed to be something *meaningful*. So my first—yes, probably the—when I was still in high school a couple summer jobs were actually working at the YMCA. I could walk there and just volunteer or work in the summer youth program as one of the counselors.

Kayla was the only person to make the connection between the content of her work experience and the impact that had on her future. This unusual focus on the relationship between the quality of work experience and the life path for a young person was an interesting nuance to the notion of expectations. Most participants described the need for employment at a young age, and most actually had their first job in fast food restaurants. A number of them took these jobs to contribute to the family's financial necessities through their employment, while others were eager for employment to provide material things that they could not afford otherwise. Kayla was the only one to describe parents who actively asserted that work was an important force for shaping the life path for their child. Kayla described the way that this focus on what she called *meaningful* work influenced the way that she shaped her life.

And then the summer, probably before I graduated from high school, I got an internship at a [major national political organization]. That was a pretty pivotal internship just because it introduced me to the law and the civics and so many different topics and interests. [That organization] really takes a big stance on how it thinks about [issues], but it gave me an introduction to that and I was getting paid to do it. It was the first time I ever met . . . a lot of big names in the city. That meant so much—people that were doing great things. . . . That was an early sign for me that life is much bigger than where I grew up. There's just so much out here that I want to see and want to be exposed to.

Kayla experienced things she had not known of that allowed her to imagine that her life could be *much bigger*. It is notable that Kayla was *paid* to do this internship, as this is rare in internship programs, especially in high school. It alerted me to underlying factors of justice that may contribute to biographicity, factors considered later in the analysis.

As Kayla moved through high school, expectations for academic advancement also influenced her path. Through school district options and her participation in other

community programs for students with academic promise, Kayla was exposed to additional opportunities and expectations and she recognized, “I have friends that will never experience anything like this.” It is interesting to note that a number of the study participants were enrolled in community college classes while still in high school, programs planned to provide a higher level of academic expectation than that provided within the regular school program.

The last 2 years [of high school] I was taking pretty much all my classes at [the community college] by that point because they had the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Program—you know, I was on the honors and gifted track pretty much from like the third grade on. So by the time I graduated high school I had enough credits so I could have left college a semester early but I didn’t do that.

Even though I knew I was going to college—like it was something that was just you were *going* to do it—I don’t think I really had a strong view about where I would go to college. The most I came to is that I had a guidance counselor who had graduated from [a small Christian university] and because he was a graduate and knew that he could get me a good scholarship there, so that’s what I was focusing on. It wasn’t until I had a counselor through my Upward Bound Program that put my name in the database for [a prestigious liberal arts college] that it kind of piqued my interest and so I applied. Having parents that were going to pay for college was out of the question. I was looking for as many kinds of merit scholarships as I could, and I got quite a few. I was able to get through [college] for 3 years before I needed to take out a loan.

Kayla’s story of postsecondary expectations is significant for her and for others in the study, because even those participants who had support from their families and/or hoped to go to college often had little if any exposure to options they could consider unless they encountered individuals or organizations who clearly communicated how high they might aspire. Without this support, Kayla almost surely would not have attended a top-tier liberal arts college and, like other participants, would likely have accumulated much more student loan debt.

When Kayla arrived at college (like virtually all of the participants in the study), she encountered expectations and experiences that were far different than she anticipated. For Kayla, as for others in the study, these expectations connected to the extent to which they were (not) prepared for academic work, as well as how they experienced bias around race or socioeconomic status.

My college was an eye-opening experience for me. One, because it was a culture shock. Growing up, . . . you didn't see people that didn't look like you. But then to go to [college] and not only be faced with the difference of not just race, but then also socioeconomic status. . . . We were all pretty much on the same playing field back home in the city, and that took some getting used to. There was just a handful of Black students. We were here but there was always this dynamic of we didn't feel privileged the way a lot of our counterparts did.

I got really fortunate to have some great professors that kind of saw enough in me to say, "All right. Buckle down. We're going to work with you." I was struggling academically and then largely the level of conversations we were having in class was very different from what I was used to in high school. I mean high school was largely worksheets and to some degree [the community college] was largely worksheets, so there wasn't a lot of dialogue and pushing and testing on ideas—like that only happened for me at home with the parents I had. . . . What those students were reading in high school versus what I was reading in high school to prepare was just very different. You know, going from writing a page or two to explain an idea from a book study to 10-page, 15-page, 30-page papers—it was a big jump from anything I was used to.

I had a sociology professor—that turned out to be my major—that really worked with me that semester around my writing, pushing me to be more expressive about my ideas. He really helped me just kind of get grounded in [that college] and the way they taught and the way they expect the students to engage in learning. And beyond that first year I really began to find my own way in terms of studying and engaging in things that I was interested in. . . . He didn't really like babysit me through a lot of it, but he took enough time just to kind of push me to get it. I can recall in class where he would call me out on purpose just to get me to talk. It was scary at first, but I got used to that, to be in a class of peers where we would begin to challenge and dialogue with each other. It was helpful because it kind of set the stage for me to feel very comfortable that, you know, I got into this school because I am smart, right—I'm not a charity case.

The way that this professor supported Kayla communicated that she could perform to the same standards expected of all students, and he pushed her to achieve that

level of performance. Kayla began to develop strong academic interests that she was encouraged to pursue. In addition, Kayla (like other participants in the study) thrived when she was given responsibility outside of the classroom as well.

I got to travel to California and other places to do research and engage in conferences and things that were of extreme interest to me. I was also dancing, and that gave me just another outlet to have all of these things that I could be exposed to. . . . The student organization I ran was a dance troop that I joined probably my sophomore year in college, and it was part of my ongoing aspiration and growing passion around hip-hop culture. It was my first time [dancing] and after about a year and a half of working with [the director], she started to groom me to take over the group, which was scary in and of itself because pretty much everyone in the group except for me had been there with her from the time it started. So I had to learn to rally people behind a vision, how to be a strong disciplinarian, but also still be a strong friend who people come to, how to run auditions, how to run rehearsals . . . understand, how do you do all these things?

In response to the expectations held for her, Kayla had already shaped and reshaped her path in a number of ways by the time she graduated from college. As she made this important transition through college, she began to believe that she could actually achieve the expectations she had always had. Even more importantly, the support of the college community led her to imagine previously unknown possibilities. She had been turned down for a prestigious nonprofit internship in her junior year but applied again a year later, determined to get her “dream job,” and was accepted primarily because she had demonstrated persistence by applying a second time. In addition, she convinced a graduate program to accept her directly out of college because she had already demonstrated such a high level of work engagement throughout her high school and college years. These two examples of Kayla’s determination to meet her own expectations led to an ongoing career path in which she has actively shaped each subsequent career opportunity. She has held a number of positions in the nonprofit sector with increasing responsibility and influence. In fact, Kayla ended her interview with a

reflection that related to the role of expectations in *making sense* of her life experience and shaping her life.

I'm much more aware in my 30s than I was in my 20s that I will create as much of a plan that makes sense for me in my life and I try to execute it—but then be very open to how life is just going to happen to me despite all of my plans. I also want to have some sense of where I'm going or what's interesting to me and I don't stray too far out of those boundaries because I think that's probably the lesson I learned from watching my parents in their careers and their aspirations. They were big dreamers. There was always so much that they wanted to do and talked about doing, but they never really did it. And even my mom, watching her never really be sure where she wanted life to go. I just was always pretty much aware of, "I don't want to do that." But then I also knew that I had her support to say, "I don't want you to do what I did. You need to do something dramatically different." So that has always also been kind of a push for me to be aware of just what drives you. What makes you happy? What are you passionate about—and pursue those things. Then when the thing that you're doing no longer fulfills you, it's time to find something else to do.

Constance. Constance is a 24-year-old woman who responded almost instantly to the email request for participation in the study. Her life story presents a unique variation of the role of expectations and provides a picture that complements Kayla's story in significant ways. In the full interview, I learned that Constance was homeschooled for most of her elementary school education, a variation of schooling that I had not anticipated since I never encountered it in my work in this school district. This experience, coupled with her later experience in the metropolitan school district and beyond, revealed additional factors related to the thematic horizon of expectations/imagining. Constance was one of the only participants who did not begin her story with details about her family, but rather began with her school experience and emphasized it throughout her life story.

I started my education in a private school, a private Catholic school. My parents were beginning to be dissatisfied with [the school]. They started having vouchers for public school students and that was fine, but what the school decided to do

was to hold everyone back a year and teaching the material from a previous year. I was in third grade and we were learning material from the previous year so they could bring the kids up to par as opposed to putting them at grade level, and my parents weren't happy with that—particularly because they were paying for the experience. They thought this would be the thing their kid needed and if their kid wasn't getting educated then they didn't want to pay for it. And then my parents had gotten into tiffs with the teachers about curriculum. I remember one particular time where my parents came for a parent-teacher meeting and asked about the curriculum and my teacher had no answers. She just—she showed them a worksheet and my parents were just not happy. My parents were just not happy [chuckle].

So in the course of that school year, my parents decided that they were going to pull out and the next school year I was homeschooled. They thought about the places where they could send me and they didn't want to send me to public school because they didn't think that it was somewhere they wanted their kids to be.

All of the decisions about her schooling that Constance described reflected a focus on the high expectations her parents held for her. They were willing to pay for an education that they believed would be better for their child. They closely monitored that education and when they were disappointed in the actual outcomes of her school experience, they took the big step of deciding to homeschool her. This decision had a strong impact on the rest of Constance's schooling.

The homeschool that they enrolled me in was attached to a private school that was in Florida—so it was like their *virtual* school, but it was the same curriculum that their students had in their school building. It was pretty informal, so what I was interested in learning for the day [chuckle]—more in the topics I was interested in. I took the core subjects, but I also took things like drawing and foreign language—but I really focused a lot of my time on reading, writing, and the language arts, because that's what I really liked to do. The agreement I had with my parents was that I would spend 6 to 8 hours [a day] doing it. I had to be doing something that was educational, but it wasn't like really amazingly structured because I wasn't necessarily being graded on the work; the real indicators I had were the assessments that I did occasionally.

It is important to note that after I asked about her parents' background, Constance told me that her parents were not educators; her mother worked as a state licensed nursing assistant and her father as a mechanic. Her mother worked nights because “she

wanted someone to always be home with us and so my dad worked days and my mom worked nights . . . because she was homeschooling us so she needed to be there during the day, pretty present during the day.” As Constance described her homeschooling, however, it became clear that she became increasingly independent (autonomous) in her academic work, and expectations moved from her parents to her own expectations for her work.

There are things I loved about being homeschooled. I loved being able to set my own goals. I’m not learning this to get a grade. I’m learning it because it’s interesting. I did a lot of writing, a lot of stories, poetry, just kind of free writing, reading everything I could get my hands on. I think my favorite—my favorite work that I read when I was a kid was *As You Like It* by Shakespeare. I love that book! I read it like maybe 10 times when I was in middle school, like I read it a *lot* of times. So when I got into high school and people hadn’t read things I’d read, I was just like, “How could you—first of all, how could you not like to read?” I would go to the library maybe every few weeks and get 20 to 30 books and just kind of read them and read them and read them. If I wanted to spend the day reading and writing I could. If I wanted to spend the day learning a science topic I could—which was very different from, you know, a formal structure of learning.

[My mother and I] would do experiments, put things together in science and stuff like that, but a lot of it was just talking about it with her or getting me to do a book report or if I was having a problem with something in math, talking to me about it, helping me through that or something like that. Yes, so it wasn’t really formal [where] she’d teach something to me.

The end of homeschooling came when Constance’s parents anticipated her expected path to college and were concerned that homeschooled children might have a harder time being accepted into college. Because they could not afford any private school options, they sent her to the local, large public high school. Very shortly after beginning there, Constance herself asserted her understanding of what she expected from her education, and she experienced the low expectations the school held for students in general.

It was a culture shock. There were about 2,000 students—a little under 500 in my particular class, so we had classes of between 30 and 45 students. So it was a big—it was a *huge* change. I remember having migraines for just maybe the first month or so—not because everyone was loud but because there was noise because there were so many kids. In a lot of ways I see the structural issues now, but as a kid I just saw a lot of stuff going on because I didn't understand. We're in class for however many odd minutes and the teacher is mostly trying to corral us instead of teaching. Nobody seemed to want to learn—but a lot of people didn't seem to want to teach either [chuckle], and it was just kind of trying to navigate that.

Honestly, my freshman year I went to my guidance counselor's office and told her that I wanted to get out [chuckle], like I need to find another school—can you help me look for one [still laughing]? Because I just didn't—by that time I was frustrated—I just didn't want to be there any more. But he actually suggested [an alternative program on the community college campus]. You take two classes at your high school and then you take other classes at [the community college].

Constance did this the rest of her ninth grade year, with mixed satisfaction. At the beginning of 10th grade, a chance encounter with older students raised her awareness of what she could expect and Constance, yet again, imagined new possibilities and reshaped her life path.

When I [went back there] in the fall as a 10th grader, I met this group of girls. I don't even remember their names, but they were graduating seniors and they showed us around campus and then at the end of the tour they kind of just stopped at the library and they told us: “Look. Okay. So we all got our associate's degrees. And some of you should be able to do it, too. But it's going to be hard because no—essentially the administration is not structured to get you an associate's degree. But you're going to have to work and you're going to have to take classes outside of the times that everyone else is there and you're going to have to convince the administrators that this is something that you're planning on doing and to allow you to take that number of classes.” They said, “You can do it. We did it.”

I was like—“Oh, that sounds pretty cool.” And then I was telling my parents about it. So I convinced [the school district] that I really wanted to get an associate's degree and that I was serious about it. Funding was so limited they didn't want to. [They finally agreed.] It was an entirely different experience. You're in with the regular population of community college students and you hear about their experiences. You get to know them. You study with them. It was a really valuable experience that a lot of kids don't get.

Constance's own expectations for herself and her highly developed independence (autonomy) also led her to proactively apply for opportunities that she heard about in the community. In these experiences, she encountered other examples of how the community believed that such programs would raise her expectations for herself and allow her to see herself in new ways.

So I was a part of different experiments, explorations, and upper, higher education explorations at [a major hospital center] and [a private university]. I was getting paid to do things. I wouldn't have technically called that work, because it didn't really feel a whole lot like work, but it was a stipend. At the university it was about 6 hours a week [during the school year] and full time during the summer. There were benchmarks that you had to hit and stuff like having to present research that we were doing because it was in a lab in engineering school. I was interested in science . . . and I thought I wanted to be a doctor. So the person that introduced the idea to me was my friend Shawnika [another participant in the study]. She said, "Oh, I heard about this program. I've started doing it. They're still accepting people. Why don't you apply?" It wasn't a whole lot of money but it was a whole lot of money for a high school student.

When I was a senior, a program they were just starting [at the hospital]—we kind of got to see all the behind-the-scenes stuff. We were able to see the cardiac floors and things like that, but it was a clear exploration program for minority students. So part of what was built in was that we had a lot of interactions with minority residents and medical students . . . and a lot of interactions with surgeons, with minority surgeons and things like that and kind of career exploration stuff, but also a lot of things that I learned—how to network, learning how to sit at a formal dinner, you know, things like that.

Constance received more support in the college search than most of her classmates, because "honestly in my high school they tried to limit the type of information they gave out to people . . . so people with lower GPAs just weren't getting the type of access or the same type of information." Limited family resources were the most important factor in her college decision. In spite of the multiple positive experiences she had during high school, in college Constance encountered a profound barrier to her expectations when she arrived at university (the same one with the internship program).

I had a lot of challenges my freshman year. Even with the things I had done, I felt ill prepared. I was depressed a lot of the time. I was stressed. I was—I just—I didn't—and the thing that bothers me about that now as I think about it is—I had support, you know. . . . It was not that I didn't have contacts there. I just felt ill prepared for the coursework. I felt stupid sometimes because I worked really hard and I didn't feel like I was getting there. So there was a lot of debris in the air around that. There was also kind of a social aspect. I wasn't transitioning with other people like me. I was transitioning with other people who had very different experiences from me, and I just didn't feel connected to a lot of them.

The low expectations that the school district enacted had undermined her ability to achieve, but unexpected events occurred at the beginning of her sophomore year that caused Constance to look at expectations in a new way and to reshape the path she was on. Her reflection on this time in her life is a vivid example of self-evaluation or stock-taking as a process structure of the life course. A college advisor helped her to break out of her narrow view of possibilities to consider other academic directions. In a sense, this time of reflection returned Constance to the autonomy she exerted when she was homeschooled.

My sophomore year, my grandmother got very sick. She had terminal cancer. I took time off and I didn't go back to school until after she passed. To have that time to give her back even a little what she gave me was really important. Having been out for a while, I felt like a different person. I wasn't sure when I went back that I really wanted to be an engineer. Before I was in that situation where I had lots of time to think, I was kind of on this predetermined path that was determined by the things that I had done when I was in high school. A lot of people think smart black kids need to be a doctor or maybe even an engineer. Those are the avenues they see—first, is making money—they see it's contributing to society and then, you know, they can say, oh, they helped this kid become this amazing thing. So the outreach helped in a lot of ways—I was in a position to be in some places that I might not have ever been in. However, I do think other people's opinions got in the way a lot. Other people's vision for what a smart kid should do or what it means to be, you know, successful.

I didn't change until my advisor sat me down and really was just like, “You know, I don't think your head or your heart's in it. I don't know if you really want to be in engineering anymore, but this is the time to find out.” So I replaced all my engineering classes with just things I thought looked interesting, so just stuff I thought would be fun to learn. So I took gender studies classes. I took ethnic

minority classes. I took English classes. I just kind of went off the grid of the plan of an engineering student and just took what I wanted. I realized I really liked sociology. I realized I really liked English and that's kind of how I fell into my alternative major. My finishing major was sociology and English. I started to look at things that were more in the realm of where my interests lie. I just kind of started doing the things that I liked to do—so volunteering, being a part of things like that to see what I liked best and see where that landed me eventually.

I had a really close family that kind of let me find my own way, but also supported me. One of the things that I determined about when I took that break was that I would pretty much only do things that I loved, and I think I've been doing all right with that. You have to keep continually learning and growing.

Thomas. Kayla and Constance presented stories with significant similarities.

Both were from stable, two-parent families who were deeply committed and involved in their child's education. In a sense, they reinforced a taken-for-granted assumption that I have heard throughout my career in urban schools: that the family is the primary, and even the sole, deciding factor in life outcomes for young people. For that reason, it is important to look at another story where expectations dominated, but with entirely different dynamics. Thomas is a 24-year-old man who recently completed a community college certificate program in a technical field. During the interview with Thomas, I became intensely aware that for much of his life he was *invisible*—at home, at school, in the community. Everyone in his life held few, if any, expectations for him. Early in the interview, Thomas said, "I'm just always quiet. You don't really notice me as much, do you know what I mean?" This quietness characterized the interview, but it also added to the power the thematic horizon of expectations played in his life story. He began with his family story, which set the stage for understanding how expectations—and the lack of expectations—influenced the possibilities he saw and the way he has shaped his life.

Ah, well, I've got two brothers, so there's three boys. We all got different fathers. We all lived with our mother. I'm the middle child. My little brother's father died. My older brother's is still alive, but he's nowhere in sight and I don't—I don't

know my father at all, so. So, let's see—[my mom] always wanted us to have a better life than she had—[she had] a real bad upbringing—so she wanted us to have a better life. But like in order for us to have a better life, she worked two jobs to make sure that we would be able to live in a better place. So by working two jobs, she wasn't home a lot to—you know, be with us, and when she would be home she'd be—you've got to sleep, do you know what I mean?

Thomas spent the first 4 years of elementary school in an inner-ring suburban school district as part of his mother's hope for a better life for her children. After that he moved frequently and described mixed experiences and expectations in different school districts and at different levels of education.

It was kind of a change for me, you know, living in [Suburb A]. It was kind of different. Well, like no offense or anything, but you know, [Suburb A] is like predominantly white people and then going to the [metropolitan schools]—now it's going with Black people so it's just a different culture. Do you know what I mean [smiling]? . . . My grades was kind of always not good, even elementary really, my grades were never really that good. I didn't get in trouble in school. I just wouldn't do the work. I guess like one of the main reasons why I wouldn't do work was because I didn't understand it quick as everybody else and I would feel ashamed to ask the question because it might be a silly question to them. But to me, I didn't know—so I wouldn't want to sound silly.

I know—schools [in Suburb B, which was more affluent] helped me out a lot. I did pretty good at [Suburb B] schools. When I lived in [Suburb B], I was living with my auntie [because my family had been evicted]. And with my mom being at work all the time, . . . I'd just come home—I'm not about to do no homework because nobody is pushing me. My auntie was determined to make sure I got good grades so she was going to my teacher, talking to them and my teachers pushed me to do better. You know, they spent that extra little time with me, so that's pretty nice. Yes, so after that year I moved back with my mom. I really didn't care. I guess I'm kind of a "*it is what it is*" type of person.

[High school] was pretty much the same thing. It could have been a little interesting if I would have tried—even cared a little bit. I always knew that you need school to be successful in life, but I guess there's still that shame of asking questions and stuff like that. It would still hold me back. I wanted to play basketball in 10th grade. The biology teacher was a mean teacher, but I wanted to be on the team. So I'm trying real hard to get good grades and all my other grades was decent—good enough for me to be on the team. And then my teacher told me I had an F in her class, so I'm like—man!—so I just stopped going to practice. There's no point in doing all these drills if I've got an F in the class. So I can't play basketball. I got my report card and I had a B—oh, man!

Like Kayla and Constance, Thomas entered the workplace while in high school but with an entirely different effect. While Thomas retained his job for an extended period of time, instead of engaging in meaningful work with high expectations, Thomas's work experience led him in an entirely different direction.

I was already smoking a lot of weed. One thing about weed, it make you not care about things, and I'm kind of like a careless person already. I was already working at McDonald's so now I'm making money. I always liked money—buying clothes and weed, taking girls out on dates. That's pretty much my high school. [He dropped out in the middle of senior year.] Pretty much my main reason for dropping out because [the state graduation test]—you've got to pass all five parts in order to graduate. I only passed one my whole time there, and I kept retaking it and retaking them and retaking them and I only passed one, so I felt like there's no way I'm going to pass these—so I just dropped out. I was failing all my classes so I just dropped out. [No one ever contacted him or his mother to encourage him to stay or to offer assistance.]

I'm smoking weed and a lot of people at my job smoked weed. I could just deal weed, smoke it for free and sell it to them. I'd already dropped out of school, so I wanted to make some extra money. I always wanted to do real estate or something—so my mindset was if I could get some money to buy a couple houses and then flip them, I can be legit. I always wanted to be successful, but I didn't have the brains behind it.

Thomas's life took a sudden turn when two totally unrelated things happened around the same time. He was arrested for dealing drugs and just when he was awaiting his trial, an old friend from high school (Rosa, a participant in the study) started urging him to go with her to church. These disparate events had a profound impact on the way expectations shaped his life path forward. It is important to note that I interviewed Rosa and Thomas at their church and was struck with the welcoming environment and the positive interaction among the young people who were there as well as their hospitality towards me. This environment contrasted strongly with the home and school environments that Thomas described.

Right before I caught my case, Rosa called me one day out of the blue talking about going to church, and I'm like, "I'm not going to church. I sell drugs. I'm a drug dealer [ironically]. I'm not going to church—I'm a drug dealer [laughs]." Eventually she talked me into it. I didn't really like it too much, but I was just going to see what it's about. [But] we did get real good teaching. It made me look at life differently. If we ever needed anything, we can call our pastor—whether we need just some counseling, just to talk about anything. He like real down to earth. I can talk to him just like I'm talking to my best friend on the street. If I had any type of financial issue he will help me out—and just the love of God, period. Just seeing the love of God. Here I'm seeing people, everybody trying to get some type of education. Everybody bettering themselves.

I did a year in jail. So I got my GED in there. When I went in, I was 20 and anybody who was under 23 without a GED, they made you go to school. At that point, I was real serious about it because I started coming to this church pretty much every Sunday and Wednesday. I started trying really to get my life on track. So then when I went to jail two things mainly on my mind: getting closer to God and getting my GED. I was pretty focused. The GED teacher was real nice. [When I found out I passed], oh, I cried! I did—I honestly did. I did. Yes, I was like [long pause]—that was one of my biggest accomplishments at this point.

Thomas's exposure to another way of being in the world allowed him to imagine a new path for himself. When Thomas got out of jail, he struggled to avoid returning to dealing drugs. One study of young ex-offenders reported that only 30% were in school or work after 1 year at home (Xie, Bisakha, & Foster, 2014). Thomas avoided a negative outcome since the influence of the church continued and he now had higher expectations for himself. His path was circumscribed, however, because he had a limited view of the options that were available to him. The education he pursued was the result of a television commercial that his uncle saw, which he explored. When the director of the program was nice to him, he pursued that path without any examination of alternatives. In addition, the earlier expectations he experienced and his resulting lack of academic preparation remained (and continue to remain) barriers to his ability to shape his life.

When I got out of jail, my life slowed down a lot. The pastor pretty much told me, "You don't want to get back in the same situation and go back to jail." I wanted to get into school [and] my uncle suggested [the technical field] at the community

college. It's pretty simple. . . . They try to make it relevant to real life, so it's pretty simple. I went for 2 years. I got my certificate a couple weeks ago. I did real good in community college. The classes were a lot smaller. The teachers more so know you. At this point, we're all grown up, so if I've got a question, I'm not ashamed to ask because I'm *paying* for these classes. I've got to get it.

I can't let that little stuff hold me back forever. Like if you've got more negativity coming your way, then you're going to lean more towards negativity. If you've got more positive coming your way, you're going to lean towards more positive. If somebody is pushing you to do positive things, then you're going to do positive more. I think that's pretty much what it boils down to.

Thomas presented a vivid picture of the way that expectations limited and supported biographicity.

Sara. Sara provided one more brief insight into the thematic horizon of expectations. She presented an unusually upbeat, almost sunny, version of her life story. While no one provided particularly powerful expectations for her life, Sara stressed the importance of her own positive attitude for how her life would progress and even referred to herself as “Mrs. Optimistic.” Her dreams of finishing college (though it was never stressed by her family or most of her K-12 teachers) ended when she had to drop out in her junior year for financial reasons. While her expectations were diminished, she found a path to becoming a medical assistant and has had a satisfying career in that field for 7 years now. Sara said,

Everything just fell into place. I just feel like it's kind of a blessing—you know the college thing. I don't know where it would have—would it have led me here? I don't know. Maybe things were supposed to turn out like that, given the circumstances. I didn't like it, but maybe not—because this still turned out to be a beautiful thing. I mean I'm at a place—I have longevity here. I have stability. I do something that I love to do. And I would not ever go back in the past and change anything that has happened to me getting up to this point. I feel like this is a personal success. I feel like it's a personal victory, because there are so many times where I felt like I could fail, I could stop—but there was always something in the back of my head that said, that's not me. There is so much potential for me and it's like now the sky's the limit.

These stories serve to illustrate the ways in which the thematic horizon of expectations/imagining was evident in all of the life stories presented in the study. While expectations weren't as *dominant* a factor in others, it is worthwhile to consider the level of expectations each experienced from family, school, and themselves. Appendix J summarizes my interpretation of how each person in the study experienced these expectations.

Second Thematic Horizon: Suffering

The second thematic horizon emerged as early as the data collection phase of the study. A number of the early interviews included stories of the participants as children subjected to intense challenges and even suffering—stories marked by deep sadness and other powerful emotions. In the design phase of the study, I had questioned the description of the process structure of life trajectories as “largely identical with ‘processes of suffering’” (Schuetze, 1981, as cited in Alheit, 1994a, p. 15). After listening to several of the life stories, however, I began to appreciate in new ways the significance of the stories we encounter *theoretically* as educators, but seldom *hear* in the actual voices of the young people we serve.

If we are to understand how it is that marginalized young adults repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives, it is essential to analyze how they have experienced such intense suffering and yet have arrived at a place where they now say they have successfully shaped their lives. When suffering is a dominant biographical process, the individual “gradually loses his capacity for intentional action” and “life courses ‘fall into a spin’” (Alheit, 1994a, p. 15). But just as importantly, several individuals have sought to shape their lives in spite of suffering. Participants’ stories

provide diverse pictures of how they have done this and emphasize the powerful emotions that are a part of processes of suffering.

Rosa. Rosa is 23 years old and works as a social worker in a residential health care facility. She has been accepted into a program for a master's degree in social work at a well-respected private university. Throughout her interview, Rosa expressed an upbeat, enthusiastic attitude, often laughing as she related some of the more horrifying aspects of her life story. She began her story by making clear that she was very *wanted* as a child, after her mother had six miscarriages before Rosa was born prematurely at 3 pounds. She quickly moved (in a very trusting way), however, into the more challenging parts of her childhood story.

Growing up, my parents weren't together, so I lived in a broken home, but they each had their own separate relationships, ah, so that presented many challenges. We moved—we moved quite a bit. A lot of our moves had to do with [my mother's] relationships. [The man she lived with] was a crack addict and he would steal things out of the house to get money to buy drugs and she would always just continuously let him back. Around when I was 9 or 10 years old, she finally decided that she didn't want to be with him anymore, but it didn't turn out well. He started stalking her. We would come home and glass would be broken up and he would send threats saying that he was going to kidnap me. My mom tried numerous times to get a restraining order but that didn't work. And you know what's funny is all through this time, like when all these tragic situations were going on in my life, I was still getting straight A's in school. That's one of the things my parents always talked about. No matter what happened, "She was just always an honor roll student." And now that I think about it, I think that school was kind of like an escape for me—like that was the only good thing I had going, you know, so I made sure that it stayed that way.

We would come home and [this guy] would literally jump out of the closet or we would wake up and he would be in the window watching me sleep—so stuff for a kid that was just very traumatic. So I always had a lot of fear. But one particular night he called the cops and said that he was going to kidnap me and kill the two people that were inside, because my mom had found a new boyfriend. So that night SWAT came and they bust in the house and had a whole bunch of guns drawn and me, as a 9-year-old little girl at the time, telling me to get on the floor. It was just—it was *horrible*. I kinda had to grow up fast because both my parents didn't make the best decisions.

I went to live with my dad, but I always worried about my mother—a young girl far beyond her years, you know, to be worried about my mom every night. But when I was 13, he had a stroke and was no longer able to return to work and . . . he didn't have as much supervision over me. I was always curious about guys and stuff and I think that had a lot to do with the fact that . . . from the time I was 8, I was being molested by my stepsister's godbrother. So my curiosity came too early. So at 13 I was dating an 18-year-old guy—and still in school, still getting straight A's.

Rosa's story was punctuated with examples of the failure of social structures or institutions to protect her, such as the refusal to issue a restraining order or the way that the police handled the serious threats to her safety. In much the same way, there is no reference to her school's having any idea (or perhaps any way of knowing) of the issues she was facing. Rosa actually provided very few details of her schooling except for this repeated refrain of "getting straight A's," which seemed to serve as a metaphor for the only core of positive experience in her life. Until very late in her story, there was not one reference to a relationship with a teacher, counselor, or other supportive adult. She did repeatedly describe, however, the ways in which she took responsibility for herself.

As soon as I was 15, I got my first job because I wanted to provide more for myself, I guess. That's kind of something that my parents instilled in me: you will work, you go to school, you work, you go to school. Then when I turned 16—you know, again, this is me being wise beyond my years—I decided I think I want to start taking some college courses. I thought that it would be a good idea because once I do go to college, I'm going to get out as soon as I can. So I was going to college half a day, high school half a day. And I was always working at Walmart part time.

I was angry. I was mad. I was hurt. I was just angry for many reasons. It finally came out that the guy who had been molesting me went to court because my dad actually had caught him and it was his testimony that we needed to convict the guy. But my dad never showed up at court, so I was just angry.

My GPA at the community college was so good I actually skipped 11th grade and went straight to being a senior. So I told my dad, and he was so, so proud [said very lovingly] because his thing was he always wanted me to be different from him. At this point he was in rehab and he was trying to get clean, but I was still just so angry with him. But that night, something told me to tell your dad you love

him. I said it reluctantly, but I still said it. The next day, my aunt picked me up at school and told me my dad had passed. I didn't cry at the time—I *screeeeamed*. And my life was never the same after that.

Rosa described a period of increasing sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and skipping school. In spite of that, she graduated with an honors diploma, in the top 10 in her class. She received a full scholarship to attend a historically black college and her current boyfriend went to a nearby school—but Rosa's life did go into a spin and, for the first time, she seemed to lose her capacity for intentional action (Alheit, 1994a), making increasingly bad choices. After returning home, however, she changed direction rather quickly as a result of more positive relationships. It is interesting to note how Rosa referred to something she learned from her parents that became important to her life path.

So we went off to college and my freshman year was absolutely horrible, but I didn't even realize that I was in an abusive relationship. I accepted suffering. I accepted pain. It was kind of like—this is just how life works. I went on a psychotic episode. I was kind of like losing myself and then one day, like for some reason, I don't know, something clicked and I said, "I am turning into my mother." [So I left college and] started going to church. Because one thing my parents always instilled in me was there is a God that you can call on and the Lord will help you. So I went to church and I wasn't really invested, but I went and it helped when I did.

I ended up meeting a new guy, and I will have to say that relationship saved my life. Most people may say it may have been the church that stopped me from doing all those things, but I really wasn't taking church seriously. I think it was Chad who saved me. We didn't get into any trouble. His family loved me. His parents were still married. It was a whole different dynamic of life that I had never experienced before. My whole environment changed when I was with him.

I dedicated my life to Christ. I just became fed up with my old ways and fed up with just always waking up feeling empty. I told Chad I want to be celibate. I don't think he could do it—it didn't work out and we were never the same. I changed my major to social work because I would have been more available for ministry. I teach Bible study. I'm part of the outreach ministry. My life just hasn't been the same since. I'm single and I'm happy. I am returning in the fall to get my master's in social work.

It is clear that Rosa's relationships through her church helped her make different decisions and gave her new language for making sense of the direction she wanted her life to take (for example, her use of the uncommon word *celibate* and other words in the quote below). She actually posed her own question: "What makes me so different from myself and anybody else who wasn't able to overcome or who hasn't had that chance yet, you know what I mean?" And she also answered the question herself:

So it's literally just by living life well. We don't talk the same. You won't catch me saying any vulgar words or stuff like that. We just choose to live . . . separate from the things of the world, but still living amongst the world. . . . You don't have to get so angry or upset—having joy in the midst of any situation. You know, being accountable, being diligent. And of course you have people around you—you have examples right before you. Because if I'm just saying it and I'm not living it, it has no power—but the belief comes in and the action—do you know what I mean? It came from me being willing to try something different.

Monica. Monica is a 30-year-old mother of three children who, like Rosa, was the victim of early sexual abuse and premature sexual activity in early adolescence, as well as neglect from both her parents and her extended family, in which drug abuse was rampant. She was eager to participate in the study in order to tell someone her life story in the hope it might benefit others. Rather than repeating (and perhaps dwelling on) the parts of her story that are similar to Rosa's, however, this description highlights aspects of her story that are unique and provide additional insights into the thematic horizon of suffering and Monica's attempts to shape her life in spite of that suffering, even as a young adolescent.

I started going to my aunt's house and over there they were engaged in drugs, so I'm seeing all this and my cousin one day—I'm 11 years old—we smoked a little piece of a joint—crazy! And I felt loopy, *but* a lot of my pain went away. We were living in [an area] at that time which was extremely horrible. The school system was horrible. On the weekends I would smoke. My mother never knew.

We moved to [a suburb] when I was in fifth grade. Talk about drastic change. Educational wise I was so below. I was the only African American in the entire school system. So to walk into that school, I don't look like anyone; I don't talk like anyone. I was made fun of so much. I mean, you name it, like how it was in slavery I understand to a certain point, because they just bullied on me and "Oh, you're stupid" and "You a dumb [racial slur]." I would tell my mother, but like I said she worked so it was pretty much like, "I don't have time for you. Whatever. Get over it." I would go home. I would cry. I tried to commit suicide I was so depressed.

At the middle of my sixth-grade year, I began to study extremely hard. But I still had this deep hole of just not liking who I was. I got involved in sports. . . . I was a peer mediator, yearbook, choir, an office assistant. I did so much out there. But all that time I was still smoking. The kids that I hung around, they all smoked. I did everything in school to portray everything's fine. However, I did learn a lot. I loved that school because I was able to get developed more and I gained respect for a lot of people and they respected me.

Unfortunately, Monica's mother moved her out of this school system and she began recurring cycles of temporary improvement in her schooling situation followed by experiences ranging from indifference (she missed 56 days of school in 1 year) to profound discouragement to neglect, not only from her parents but from the schools she attended. Monica said, "I had a lot of dreams but it seemed like every time I had an idea people would shoot me down. So I began to think I'm not ever going to do anything. So I just went to school and barely got by."

A central feature of all of these cycles was Monica's continuing drug and alcohol abuse, still unaddressed by any of the adults in her life. Like Rosa, she started to work because she wanted material things that she couldn't have, particularly a car. The car, in fact, became a recurring metaphor throughout her life story: whether she had one, lost one, how good a car she had, or at one point even that she lived in her car. These frequent descriptions paralleled what was happening in her life at the time.

That summer I started working. I liked money. I liked name-brand things. I'm trying to save up for a car. My mom didn't care. She made me give her money. I

worked at [a fast food place]. I wanted a car. I paid my way through driving school and got my license. I was just as ecstatic as can be! I got a turquoise Sundance for 1000 bucks. That was my car. It was for me. I bought it. I'm in that car still smoking because it didn't matter what I did, I always had to get high. I would leave school and go right to work until 11:00 at night. Dropping out of school was not an option. I saw family members who didn't have a high school diploma and I said, "Okay, that's not going to work for me." I was good at portraying a certain role, but I still had deep pain in here. I was still having nightmares of the man bothering me.

Monica's desire to *avoid* being like people in her family is one example of this powerful motivation in so many of the life stories in this study. She and many other participants knew what they did *not* want their life to be even when they did not see a clear path ahead. Monica barely graduated from high school but started college, only to "get kicked out after the second quarter. I was a total mess." She ended up living in her car with her boyfriend who was a drug dealer, and she worked just enough to make the payments. She had her first child, kept herself drug free, and was back in school to become a nursing assistant when she was arrested for unpaid traffic tickets and spent 20 days in jail when her child (who was born prematurely) was only 4 months old.

When I got out, I went back to school and they let me finish my last 2 weeks of classes. I got all A's, but I couldn't pass the written [licensing] test. I finally passed and got a job at a nursing home that I kept for 2 years until I was injured on the job.

My son was developing but not in the right way. He wasn't doing everything he should at his age. Then I was pregnant again. Having my daughter is what motivated me to start back to school. She was my motivation because now I have this little girl who is going to look up to me. What kind of role model can I be? I can't be sitting around barely getting by and think that she'll grow up that way . . . or what kind of man will [my son] be if I'm half a mother?

This significant turning point that occurred with the birth of her daughter was possible, in part, because of social supports that Monica successfully put in place around this time. Like Rosa, she asked herself the very questions that are part of this study.

I got a public housing voucher and I thank them to this day because I didn't have to pay rent and I had the money to go back to school. I could have easily said: Oh, I don't have to pay no rent, why should I do anything else? I could sit home and do nothing—you know, why? I was in school, so I'm learning more about myself and I'm looking at my child. I would never fail you again. So I worked with them. I took Child Psychology. When I came home with my homework, I would sit down with them and I would give them activities and we would do things together.

So then I enrolled for some scholarships. I found out about the [college access program]. I was volunteering at the [homeless shelter]. I loved to help with the girls, you know, because I had a story. I was pretty much homeless, but I wasn't in a center. I was in my car. I was on the street. I didn't know about [programs like that]. I had nobody I really went to. I kept things to myself. I didn't want nobody to feel like I was a bad parent because I thought they would take my son from me. I was more so scared. But once I'm in [community college], I worked in the computer lab. I signed up for work/study through my financial aid. I was working in computers, so I learned a lot by myself—I pretty much self-taught. I found out about scholarships. I applied [for three] and I received all three of them. My second year I pretty much got paid to go to college. I wrote essays about my life. I said I wanted more for my kids. I think that was more so what grabbed their attention—and my GPA was impeccable. I thank God for the programs I heard about.

Near the end of her interview, Monica continued to reflect and evaluate her life experience from her current vantage point: a college graduate who is now on a path toward achieving her goals. She has graduated from a state university with a degree in nonprofit management. She has had difficulty finding work in nonprofits, but was interviewing for a position working with children and families at the time of the interview.

Now I'm wiser. Now I manage my money even more. I had a car, a 2003 Impala that was paid for. Fall semester comes—my car—my engine went dead completely. Now I have no car. I'm pregnant [with third child]. I'm almost done with school and I'm like, "This cannot be happening to me." I feel all the turmoil coming back. I can't do this. So, my mother lent me the money to get a van. [I graduated the following May.] For everyone who said I couldn't do it [crying briefly]. It was great but it is—hearing all that stuff to finally get through that. You just don't know how I felt and then my kids saw it [speaking through tears]. They were there to witness.

I have the education. I have the work experience, but I also have the life experience. It's not as if I picked up a book. I *lived* this life, so I can understand where these families are coming from. I understand what it's like not to even be able to feed your kids one day or if you're going to have a house—I understand every aspect of abuse. In community college, I saw a lot of women like me going to school. I saw African American professors. It was a lifestyle. Education helped me. Learning more about different things. Learning about different courses. Seeing a lot of people in my family not doing anything. So if I continue in this role then I'm going to be just like them, so that I consider motivation to not be anything like them. I don't want to be my mother. So I'm fighting through all the negativity and I'm still fighting through.

Rebecca. Leaving Monica's story, it is important to highlight a third story of suffering that involved childhood sexual molestation, severe parental neglect, and domestic violence. Rebecca is a 30-year-old single mother of three sons who left home at 15, but still managed to complete high school. In spite of multiple failed relationships, she found the support to shape and reshape her life in a different way than other participants, primarily through confidence gained in the workplace and incidental support from people she encountered there as well. She is now working part-time, owns her own home, and is trying to complete a bachelor's degree at a local state university in spite of large student loan debt accrued in a for-profit associate's degree program. Rebecca said,

So at 19 I started working for a great company. I was there for 7½ years. Best job ever. I started in customer service, worked my way up. That job was more about you, your work ethics, your character and I guess that I proved myself. But there were always those people that I've met here and there that were kind of like me and they did—they did help me out.

When I started at state university, I said, "I'm going to do it. If there's anything I want to do in life. I was the first one in my family to go to college, let alone graduate from high school. I've been sad and I've been ashamed and I've been put down and you know what—I have accomplished some things. And yes, I haven't made the best decisions but I would not be who I am today and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Leon. Leon's story is quite different from the others that are dominated by the thematic horizon of suffering. He was the only male to volunteer to participate from the original targeted email for this study. He expressed his eagerness to tell his life story even in the initial phone interview. Leon began his narrative in a very formalistic tone, almost seeming to want to do it *right*, and this more formal narrative style continued throughout the interview.

Unlike Rosa and Monica, Leon is from a large (more than eight children), loving, stable, two-parent family who had high expectations for him, and he had very positive and supportive school experiences. He actually described his early schooling with more detail and greater fondness than any other participant in the study. At the beginning of adolescence, however, he experienced what might be described as a period of “biographical discontinuity” (Alheit, 1994a, p. 31) that threatened to move him toward a negative life trajectory. At that time, his story alternated drastically among periods of stability, periods of instability, and attempts to regain stability. These alternating paths were often marked by the words, “At the end of the day . . . ,” a phrase or metaphor for his life path that he repeated at least 12 times during the interview. His story is notable for repeated ambivalence in emotion, thought, and action, but also for the powerful self-evaluation he related throughout his story from his current perspective.

My final year in elementary school was really kind of sad, because it was like I've been here all my life. I'm going to be around a whole bunch of new people. They chose me to give the graduation speech. They were happy about it, but it was sad leaving because that's all I knew [sigh] and that was the end of [name] Elementary School.

So the summer passes. I decided—I wanted—to start giving to things that were not of who I really was. Sometimes influenced by society—you know, peer pressure and especially living in the environment I did. Despite all this stuff in my home where education was important, rules and morals was foundation and

structure, I decided that I wanted to be outside of the home. I started getting into things that I had no business doing at the time. I started getting into sex and doing drugs—marijuana and nothing else—but that actually influenced me throughout my high school years. My parents stepped back a little due to the fact that they trusted me. I was ecstatic to be part of this school [that was very selective], so at the end of the day, I was kind of embarrassed to talk about the school outside because I was involved in things that wasn't a good type of nature, but at the end of the day everybody knew and they were proud of me, but this is not what I wanted to represent at the time. I wanted the same type of position at school, which I had accumulated over the years, but I just went about it the wrong way.

Leon related what can only be described as dramatic swings from motivation for success to succumbing to “the same old negative influences” throughout his high school years. Since it was an accelerated academic program, students completed high school in 3 years. Even during senior year, when he was determined to “get my act together” and did get straight A's, he experienced the continuing “negative pull” of the neighborhood.

I always separated myself from certain influences that I knew would take me over the edge as far as like jail. The gangs was a big thing. You had a choice, but at the time it was, “Okay, I've been with the neighborhood for all of my life. I have to be a part of this—and not just even to fit in. It was a rule of thumb. But at the end of the day I had to separate myself away from all that because that had become so bad in my life where I didn't even want to go to school. I didn't even want to be involved in anything that was positive in my life.

At this time, the gang stuff was at an all-time high. I'm not sure if you can see [pointing to his face]—I still have scars from back then. Around that epidemic, basically all the guys that I was looking up to at the time were either drug dealers or doing illegal things. And I had positive influence in my life like my parents and my older siblings. We all came from the same drug-stricken neighborhood of, so to speak *poverty*, so at the end of the day, like your morals and values will always stick with you from what you learned from the foundation of the home, but at the end of the day some of the stuff is outside of your door and you see all sorts of things.

In spite of this ongoing ambivalence, Leon graduated with an honors diploma and received a full scholarship to a historically black university. He proposed delaying his entrance to college for a year and his parents agreed because he had done so well, but Leon was drawn back into his neighborhood life.

Yes, I got involved back into the environmental factors of the neighborhood with the gang banging and all that. At the end of the day, these are people that I had known all my life. I was in the last—my last gang fight. I was 17 years old. I'll never forget it [details of the fight]. I get hit in the face with a 9 mm. I was hit with the gun in my face. Thank God he didn't pull the trigger! So my face is bloody and I'm out cold. . . . So my father and my mother, they just said, "We had enough. You're going to school."

Leon's period of biographical discontinuity did not end there, however. In spite of living in an honors dorm at college, he found students at the school and in the larger community who were living the gang and drug life and continued down that path. Only when he got a call telling him that his favorite uncle had suddenly died did he put an end to this erratic path.

I sat down with my parents and I talked with them about it. I thought I was going to go away to get rid of all the negativity and it then basically followed me—and I had to realize that it was *me*. It was me. It was me [very slowly]. And I had to realize that I had to evaluate myself.

That's when I quit everything. I stopped using drugs at the age of 18. I stopped all that. I went looking for a job. That wasn't successful. I didn't want to jump right back into the university so I decided I wanted to go do something I could get really quick to feel empowered, do you know what I mean? So I enrolled in a [for-profit] career college and I got an associate degree. I completed that 2-year program in 16 months. I cut all ties with friends of negative influences. I wasn't living in the neighborhood anymore. My girl [from high school] and I decided to get an apartment in a suburb. The college access program came to talk at my school. They were offering an adult learning scholarship for adults who had interrupted their education for over a year. And the Lord blessed me. I got the scholarship. I am forever grateful for them sticking with me throughout these last 3 years.

By the time I graduate and I'm feeling empowered, I have my life together. I have a sense of direction in the world. I'm 19 years old and God decides to bless me with a child. I just completed a degree and I was going to go to the state university [but I would have had to start all over again], so I went to [a for-profit university] because they took my credits. I'm 21 and I have a sense of direction. I've come to peace with myself. I know who I am. I'm excited about who I am. I completed a bachelor's of technical management and criminal justice in 2013 and now I'm sitting here today telling you my story. I just wanted to tell my story.

Third Thematic Horizon: Belonging

Social interaction and social structures were central features of the design of this study from the earliest days of defining the problem. Once the data collection began, however, the view of what constitutes the influence of social structures became more nuanced and indirect and gradually a thematic horizon related to *belonging* emerged. Some participants used the word directly, as when Anna (who used the word 21 times) said, “My entire life I didn’t belong,” but others described belonging (or not belonging) more circumspectly. It gradually became clear that variations on the importance of belonging were factors in every life story.

The stories shared in the other thematic horizons also involved experiences of belonging, but this section includes stories where the notion of belonging played a dominant role in answering the primary research question: *How do marginalized young adults repeatedly engage in redesigning and reshaping their lives?* While it is clear that the social dimension of life histories is universal, the stories included here provide insights related to the research question of how *social structures support or limit the exercise of biographicity*.

Julia. Julia’s life story is a particularly good illustration of the thematic horizon of belonging because it revealed a powerful example of the negative impact of not belonging and the supportive impact of a sense of belonging. Julia is a 32-year-old woman who is married and has one child. She is currently working on an online master’s degree in an art-related field, but hopes to move her family to California to complete the final year on campus. Julia told her story with enthusiasm and notable assertiveness, and her physical appearance is important in light of her story. One could describe her as

having a distinctive personal style that highlights her African American heritage and her interest in fashion, especially fashion for larger women, which is her passion as well as her career path. Julia's challenging experiences of race and her own racial identity actually describe biographical discontinuity and serve as a recurring element of belonging in her story of life in a part of the metropolitan area that is nearly 94% African American (2010 U.S. Census).

So yes—you know, living in [my town] was kind of tough. Got picked on a lot. I had some confidence issues, I guess, because of that. So I mean I just—I *hated it* [forcefully and laughing]. I really did. I *hated* it. I *hat-ed* it. It was just bullying. I don't know if that's—I mean it's probably common in a lot of schools, but it was just excessive, mostly because I guess my complexion. It was a lot of *that* going on. [She clarifies that it was because of her light-colored skin.] What I know now being older, it impacted the way I learned, you know what I mean? I think it had an effect on that because it was a disruption. It was a distraction all the time.

I did okay in elementary. I did fine. I just didn't want to be there. I just didn't like my surroundings. Yes. Yes. I didn't like being picked on. The teachers knew it. Of course! Of course they knew it! My mom came into school and talked to the principal but nothing happened—nothing came out of it.

I did my whole—from kindergarten to 12th grade—in those schools and I hated it. But I hated high school, absolutely. I felt like an outcast. I felt different. I just felt that I did not belong there. I did not graduate actually because I skipped class a lot.

This sense of not belonging dominated Julia's story, but the story of why she did not graduate from high school surprisingly was rooted in the first time that she *did* have a sense of belonging in her community. Her middle school band director suggested that she go up to the high school (which had a highly regarded marching band) to meet the director. She had just started to learn to play a musical instrument, but the high school director invited her to join the band right then as a seventh grader.

That band was phenomenal and I'm like, "Why am *I* here?" I just kind of fell in there and *loved* it. I learned so much. I did this band camp over the summer and I learned a lot—I learned *a lot*. I knew that I actually had a talent—maybe this is

what my band director saw. That practice that summer catapulted me—I was even arranging music because it was too amateur. We did the Battle of the Bands [at a big downstate university] contest and we won.

So I continued in the high school band and so 10th grade started—and—no band director! I had band on my schedule, so we'd go to band and there was nobody there. No teacher. No nothing. The drum major tried to get us together and practice, but we were like, "Why are we practicing?" Isn't that horrible? They got a new lady, so we go back. And the lady—she wasn't a good fit. We were a showcase band—I mean that's what we were *known* for. She did not want us to focus on that and she had us playing like "Hang on, Sloopy" [sarcastically]—dopey music. We just didn't play stuff like that [laughing hard]! The band—honestly the band—is what got me going to school. It's what kept me there. I do believe that if [the original teacher] would have stayed, I would have graduated and I probably would have been on a totally different path, music path. The fun was gone.

With the demise of her membership in the marching band, Julia began skipping school, and the district had no mechanisms for notifying her parents or putting an end to her truancy. By the time her aunt spotted her downtown during the school day, she had lost her entire sophomore year. She took extra classes and went to summer school to try to catch up, but at the end of senior year, she was a few credits short and the school notified her that she would have to return the following year to finish high school. In addition, she was not permitted to attend prom or any of the graduation activities with her classmates, a further isolating factor. She decided to drop out before the end of the school year, a situation that might have prompted a lengthy, or even permanent, barrier to biographicity. Later she passed an optional entrance exam at the community college, but did not attend long.

I just wanted to get away from my family. I did. I went to Reno. I took some classes there and got a job at a rental agency. I was making decent money, but I felt like I was going nowhere and I wanted to elevate myself. My dad hated his job. He was just so unhappy and I had to hear it every day and I knew that I did *not* want to be unhappy where I worked. I wanted *more*. I've always wanted more

out of life. My parents were never really all about education. They never talked to me about it.

She got a job with a major drug store chain in Reno and they provided training as a pharmacy assistant. A few of the pharmacists took an interest in her, valued her skills, and encouraged her to go back to school, raising her expectations. She returned home and began pursuing pharmacy studies, but struggled with the coursework until she began to make sense of her alternatives and reimagined a place where she had belonged.

I didn't want it enough. I knew that I liked performing arts. I kind of looked into my past to find myself, if that makes sense. I knew that I liked art in general. I was just unsure of my talent. Let me just take some stuff. I did voice. I did the theater makeup class, which was awesome. Going through these classes, I knew that yes, I'm an artist. I did some research on graphic design and I figured it would be—out of all the arts—the one that I could get a job doing. It seemed practical and still in an area that I would enjoy. But I started falling in love with fashion. I guess graphic design put me in that direction. I was like 25 at that point. I had my daughter at 27 and things slowed down for me. I was running out of loan money, so it was going to be hard for me to pay—like \$56,000. I graduated in 2011 and I would have graduated high school in 1999. A long time.

The connection of belonging to arts and service. Before leaving Julia's story, it is interesting to return again to a few other life stories that involved the arts. Patricia, whose story might have been included in the thematic horizon of suffering, also had a life-impacting experience in marching band. Later while in college, her positive experience with band laid the groundwork for connection to a wide variety of organizational activities. While describing the debilitating anxiety she experienced because of family circumstances, she said,

Most of my friends were in the marching band. Like I said, I wasn't a popular kid so I had—we had our little group, just a small group of kids that I was good friends with and not too many others outside of marching band so it was—everything all wrapped into one.

In a different way, Erica, who described clear biographical action schemes and solid self-understanding throughout her story, found her life path enhanced by a meaningful experience of belonging in theater during high school. Her clarity about her life path was also influenced by experiences like being part of a work team in fund development in college. Erica said,

High school was kind of my best time. The drama club was a huge deal for me. I was president junior and senior year. It was myself and a really close friend—we kind of revitalized the program with our teacher. She loved that we were willing to put work in like nobody else. The thing I am proudest of was the fact that during the time in the drama club, we had a lot of troubled students come in and by giving them something to do like building a set, they were really proud of it and [they learned] you have to do better in school.

While not involved in the arts, Jeremy found a similar result in service learning. He was estranged at a young age from his family and described his life in a workmanlike way, making his way through his schooling without great enthusiasm for his life path until he signed up in college for a service-learning course as a way to get a few credits in a quick and easy way. Jeremy said,

Went on a trip. Met a lot of people. Had a lot of fun. We worked with homeless in Savannah, and I'd say that's where I became who I am, I think, now. I just got back from my tenth trip. [On one trip] we worked tutoring boys and girls and just playing with them at the shelters and stuff like that. And just seeing how easy it is just to help a kid who doesn't have it. You know, that's what kind of got me switching to social work from computer engineering—what am I going to do with *that*? I'd say the first trip is what really changed me most drastically, but I think as time went on and I realized how much I really enjoyed it is what shaped the change.

It is interesting to note that 100% of the participants in the study described involvement in volunteer work, service learning, college work focused on caring professions (social work, nonprofit management, etc.), or caring for family members. This factor, too, seems related to a sense of belonging or affiliation and caring for others.

Brandon. Brandon's story is unique in many ways, but it is also a story of how support from a wide variety of social relationships can help individuals shape their lives. Brandon is a 30-year-old man who holds a Ph.D. in organizational strategy and leadership studies and works for a large governmental agency. Because of his academic background and his frequent work as a motivational speaker, Brandon has thought a great deal about the subject matter of this study. It is important to note, therefore, that Brandon's life story is more *practiced* than other participants' stories. His story highlights how family structure, friendships, sports, and internships were involved in creating a powerful sense of belonging that has shaped his life path.

Brandon began his story by relating his mother's life story, which he described as the most important influence on his life. A single mother at age 16, she had a 10th-grade education. "Why? Because she wanted to do the best that she could with the little resources and knowledge that she had to provide for us." With great respect he described the challenges she faced and the experiences he had with her and his two brothers, including homelessness, domestic violence within relationships, but also her eventual home ownership. He also described with great pride the deep sense of belonging that he had from her and from his extended family.

My mom's in part responsible for my success, my leadership at least, because as far back as I can remember . . . if we had to take a delivery during the day, guess who had to stay home from school? If she had a grocery list, guess who had to walk to the store? So at a young age my mom molded me into being a leader and I didn't even know it. My mother saw that I was a leader and she planted that seed and the rest is history. So that opens the door for student leadership opportunities. By fourth-fifth grade I was a student crossing guard, so that was the first time I officially had a leadership role. I liked school. I studied—a lot of good grades, honor roll, perfect attendance. Due to my diligence, that opened the door throughout my primary and secondary educational experiences for me to be a leader.

Now another influential person in my life was my uncle who was a wonderful father figure to my brothers and I. He had a paper route. In the summers we would go to the newspaper depot and pick up the papers and we would wrap them and drop them off on porches. As soon as dawn hit, we would be at a basketball court or we would play baseball. So I'm learning all this wonderful responsibility. He prepared me for the sixth grade basketball team. I got some good skills. And from that I turned into an athlete. And being an athlete, that gave me another level of discipline—discipline, confidence, and courage. I was never the star player, but I was always good enough to start, a great role player, if you will. [Brandon related other stories of how his grandmother and grandfather influenced his sense of belonging within the family.]

So then I have my godmother—all I learned from her was straight love. While there was perhaps some drugs, violence, crime on the circumference of myself and my environment, my intimate environment never had anybody speaking negatively in my life and give me a negative guide to adhere to. In school, of course, there was peer pressure, but within my immediate surrounding, it was nothing but love and positivity.

Brandon also talked about the role of friendship, or “brotherhood” as he called it, in a gang that had a very different code of belonging in sharp contrast to the one described earlier in Leon’s story. Sports also gave him a significant sense of belonging in a similar way.

About the fifth grade, myself and about five of my good buddies we formulated what’s called a gang. It was a loose affiliation. Our own gang. We created our own gang. It was kind of loose and kind of fun. We just stood together like a pack. We were all good students. By the time we got to middle school and high school . . . there were some true, [well-known] bona fide gangs. We started to see some friction from the other gangs. The essence [of our gang] was really brotherhood—brotherhood and self-defense. We would never go out and seek any delinquent activities. . . . But we’re a brotherhood, so we’ve got to stand up for ourselves and we strongly were rooted in self-defense. We’re just these tough athletes. We were all for the most part good dudes and we were all athletes, so the younger generation really looked up to us, because no one wants to be disrespected. . . . How do you stand your ground and still be responsible? We were very smart and intelligent and at the same time we were all tough, so if some drama came our way, we had no problem addressing it.

We were at the core of the football team. Through ninth, 10th, 11th grade, our football team sucked, but by our senior year, we put the high school on the map. We got a new head coach and he really related to us. He was an influential father figure and he helped us to be on the right track. So that not only transformed the

actual school, but it transformed the community as well. [He said], everybody is going to know that we literally gave it our all, and—as you know—you will be surprised what you can do in your life when you simply give something your all.

In 11th grade, a teacher “hounded” Brandon to apply for an internship because he was in a law enforcement vocational (non-college preparatory) track in high school. He was turned down, but the teacher pushed him to apply again the next year. For the first time, he responded with an approach that has become a formula he later applied frequently: “I listen. I learn. I implement.” This time he was accepted, and this became the first internship of many with important organizations including the U.S. Congress. Brandon’s experience (like Kayla’s *meaningful* work) is a good example of the powerful impact that internships had on a sense of belonging for many participants in the study.

Most kids are working at the local ice cream parlor or at the coffee shop or at McDonald’s. So internships opened an amazing door for me because I could sit at the seat of the wise, and those who are older usually have tons of wisdom that I don’t take for granted. Ever since 2001, to 2011 when I finished school, I’ve always had internships so I was an intern for 10 years. Me doing all these world-class internships, this local city boy from an impoverished community. I’ve learned tons as an intern. I really want to live a big life with a big purpose that is in full alignment with my big calling for the universe. I just want to be a light, the best I know how to be.

Shawnika and Marcus. The stories told by Shawnika and Marcus are told together because they are a brother and sister whose lives took divergent paths after the death of their mother when Shawnika was 11 and Marcus was 13.³ Their stories describe a great deal of suffering, but a sense of belonging played a dominant role in the way that

³ It is important to note that Marcus presented a significant challenge to me as the researcher. He spoke very slowly and with great feeling. His life story was dominated by an ongoing sadness about his mother’s death that stayed with me for some time after the interview, until a week or so later when I recognized the connection to experiences in my own life. In this way, his interview helped me to revisit the practice of *epoche* and the importance of identifying such impacts on my interpretation of life history interviews.

their life experiences were ultimately shaped in relation to their own needs and desires. Shawnika is a 23-year-old woman who is pursuing an M.A./Ph.D. in a specialized area of engineering at a private university. Marcus is 26 and has worked for 9 years as a nursing assistant and then a licensed practical nurse, based on training he received in high school and in for-profit institutions.

Shawnika and Marcus both had a positive, supportive relationship with their mother. Although they had different fathers, these two siblings clearly shared an enduring bond. Shawnika said,

[Our mother] always emphasized to us, “You guys need to do well in school.” And then on top of all that, like all her loose change she would put inside of a 5-quart ice-cream container, and every time she would fill it up she would take it to the bank for our college fund. She was always on top of college for us.

But even before their mother died, Marcus experienced confusion about where he belonged in the family. He said,

It was me and my mom—and Shawnika came 2 years later. My brother is adopted. Me and Shawnika have separate fathers. I was led to believe for the bulk of my childhood that her father was my father as well. And I didn’t find out otherwise until I was 7 when my mother told me one day. So then from 7 to 11, I didn’t really have a father, like just, you know, my stepfather. He taught me a lot of stuff, like how to tie my shoes. But one day we went to McDonald’s. My mother left us at the table and came back and told me that [the man who sat down with us] was my father. We were just sitting there chit-chatting and then she came back and formally introduced us. She let me go about getting to know him and let me form my own opinion about him. Yes. I mean we’re friends but we haven’t had that talk as to why—you know why not—why not in the picture.

Both Shawnika and Marcus described positive school experiences in their early years, and both were in gifted programs in elementary and middle school, but Shawnika and Marcus were separated when their mother died, creating a significant *biographical*

disruption. Shawnika went to live with her father's family, which included a stepmother and five half-siblings, where she did not have a good experience. She said,

I had to learn how to adapt. I didn't have the best set up with my stepmother and so I'm always a forgiving person, but as I have gotten older I kind of look to the things that she had done to me that I think wasn't proper—but I never had any ill feelings towards her because she is the mother of my siblings. I don't have a strong relationship with any of those people on that side of the family. My strong relationship is my two brothers on my mother's side. We always look out for each other.

Marcus's experience also was not good, and he had even less of a sense of belonging in his new living arrangement. He said,

Me not knowing my father well enough, me and my brother went to go stay with our aunt. It wasn't—it wasn't good. It was rough. I went from where we were disciplined and punished and everything to going to my aunt's house where there was no discipline. Like they were wild. Yes, it was rough. . . . Like to go from structure to chaos was a bit of an adjustment. The same year we lost our mother, we lost two grandmothers. So we were really, really messed up at that time. We should have had someone [long pause]. I believe we should have had someone because me and my sister did not handle it well. We should have had someone. I go over to my aunt's house. I'm the smartest person in the house. All her kids are on SSI [Supplemental Security Income], have the IEP [Individual Education Program].

In spite of this shared disruption to their family connection, during high school significant changes in their social affiliation led them in very different directions.

Shawnika found herself in a high school situation where she was urged to begin taking community college classes in her ninth grade year. Challenged to continue learning at a higher level, she seized on an opportunity she inadvertently heard about to apply for a paid internship at a local university in the engineering lab. In 10th grade, she became part of this research team, led by a strong mentor, which set the course for the way she has shaped her life.

We come into [the engineering lab] for 5 to 6 hours a week and we do research along with [graduate students] and our mentor and then during the summer we do 40 hours dedicated to research and stuff. I was more interested in the fact that we got to get paid. It's not like you do crummy little projects like building a fake bridge or something. You actually work on their dissertation with them. We were basically doing high barrier flexible films or flexible displays. They put a lot of trust in you. When I graduated from high school, a couple weeks after my 18th birthday, I received my first published publication in a science journal.

Fast forward to undergrad—I was not prepared correctly and on top of that I went from being the top of my class in high school to being the bottom and always on academic probation. That was horrible. My freshman year, . . . [one professor] told me, “Maybe [this university] is not for you. Maybe you should go to [a trade school].” My mentor, I will always mention him because he's my personal *he-ro*. Always been there for me and I know he always will be there for me. He like trusted me. And so many people didn't see what he saw in me and sometimes the things that I didn't see in myself. He would always say, “You can do it, Shawnika. This is why I will always stand for you [tearful].” When I went in there I thought my mentor might be like African American or something but come to find out he's a white male [laughing hard]. It's so funny. He's like a father figure to me.

Being in the lab is my comfort zone. It takes me away from my issues and struggles that I'm going through inside the classroom. In the classroom I feel so inadequate—but in the research lab I can understand what's happening. One of the post-docs in another group gave me a problem and said it cannot be done—and so I was like, “How can people not learn to *not* tell me something *cannot* be done [laughing]?”

I talked a lot about my mentor, but the one thing he told me was that when you make it to a part of your life where you feel that you're comfortable enough, turn around the ladder and help somebody, bring somebody up the ladder. And so I'm doing things right now, giving back and trying to help the next group of people—so we can work with people who are like me or like my mentor. We can really help change the social economics.

Shawnika was eager for me to meet Marcus precisely because she recognized how different their paths had become and she seemed to want me to understand the difference. His aunt chose a health careers technical high school for him, and his experience of not belonging in the home continued in his school situation.

[My school had] training and it had college prep. They offered college prep to me. I didn't want to do that. I got into nursing assistant. I had my nursing assistant

license in 11th grade. I got into it for the wrong reason, but I ended up enjoying it. They would let you out of school at 1:00, and those were the seniors that had cars. I wanted to have a car . . . make my own money. In high school I really wasn't challenged all that much. Like I said, I'm the smartest person in the house. Even at home no one challenged me or nothing. No one was able to help me with homework. No one was on the same level as me. I wanted to be a nurse practitioner. I still want to do that. I like nursing. I mean that's a challenge. That's a push. I want to get my RN [license as a registered nurse]. I want to go into the ER [emergency room] or the OR [operating room], somewhere like that, where it's more challenging. If I was trying, if I was challenged, if I was pushing, I could have gotten valedictorian. That's how I feel about it. It was—I don't know—skatin,' just skatin' [slowly and with deep sadness]. Not a standout—you know, a space filler, a space filler.

Marcus worked as a nursing assistant while he was still in high school and through a circuitous route, he finally graduated from a for-profit program to become a licensed practical nurse. He even had a setback from a serious surgical problem that had gone undiagnosed and untreated throughout his high school years. He has had a stable employment history in nursing and is now working to be certified as an independent nursing provider, but he is not satisfied with where he is.

I feel like I haven't fulfilled my potential. I want to go back to [a for-profit nursing school] in a bachelor's program. I want to get into more challenging—you know, exciting work. And then [become] a nurse practitioner. That's what I have laid out. When I get my bachelor's I want to do that for a couple years before I get my master's. So yes—challenge myself as I go along.

Part of the reason I got into pediatrics is because I had two girlfriends where the child ended up not being mine. I still want kids. . . . I always say like I want to make my mother proud. For my mother to walk the stage pregnant with me, the least we could do is graduate. My grandfather wanted me to be a doctor. He helped shape a lot. He was a constant. A lot of it's bittersweet. My high school graduation, my father came late, left early citing traffic. He didn't even make it to the nursing school graduation. Shawnika was there. It's bittersweet. I mean some hardships is good for a person but to have that many and the success is really not worth—you know, you want the success but you would give it back for some of the hardships. That's exactly right. The success is nice, but the life isn't.

Angela. In many ways, Angela's story is ideal as the final story to tell in this chapter. She is a 25-year-old woman who described herself as *quiet, observant*, and an

average student. As a matter of fact, I restarted the audio when after the end of the interview, she began to reflect in an evaluative way on the experience of being average and not being valued.

Growing up, I was never like the kid to talk out in class or ask questions, so I can kind of see now how I was like overlooked a lot because, again, I was like an average student. I didn't really talk to anybody. And when I think about other kids—my other classmates—we were almost just sitting in seats almost, like we didn't ask any questions, we didn't, you know, make a fuss, we didn't get in trouble, but we didn't, you know, excel—well, excel in their [the teachers'] eyes. I can kind of see now how kids would just get looked over. I can see how the average kid like either you're—you know, you're kind of one step up or one step away from going down, and there's really nobody there that's paying attention. They're either looking at the kids that rise above it or that have already dropped out, but I don't think there's like enough attention to the—you know, there's not really any support for those kids. That's probably like the biggest thing I didn't like about [high school] because if you're in the Top 20 there was a big fuss—you know, "Oh, these are the kids that are going to be successful and they're going to go to college."

In this way, Angela provided a window into the lives of so many of the *average* young adults in the target population for this study. She represented the many students who do not seem to stand out in any significant way (positively or negatively) or feel that they matter or belong. She faced many of the general difficulties faced by those living in large urban centers. Her mother was single for a number of years before marrying again and she "didn't really have a stable job." Angela "moved around a lot [and] . . . went to six elementary schools"; she was actually kept out of school for the end of second grade and the beginning of third grade. Her family dealt with significant health issues and her stepfather died when Angela was in middle school and "the family structure changed forever." In the quotation above, Angela herself told the story of how young people like her are often ignored. While Angela never used the word *belonging* in her life story, she

actually told an important story of how belonging can happen in short-term, seemingly insignificant ways that can have an outsized impact on the process of shaping one's life.

Once I was really stable [after all her moves], I liked school a lot. I had friends. I liked my teachers. My mom would just make sure that I was on top of things. After middle school I went to [a small magnet school]. I felt like I was learning a lot and we got to participate in mock trials. The year that I participated we won. That part of the school I really enjoyed because I felt it was getting me ready—it was preparing me. The teachers were told to teach to the tests and there were other points that we should be learning—so I kind of felt like I wasn't really challenged at all because they weren't really teaching much.

Oh, I left this part out—I forgot—I don't know how. At my high school we had the opportunity to do a work/study and I worked in the guidance counselor's office. I loved going in there. That was probably the highlight of high school. And she talked to me about what to expect and what I would need. I guess this is another thing I didn't like [about my school]. They were really focused on the top 10 or 20 students and they emphasized *they* were going to be the leaders and stuff like that. I wasn't in that top 20.

The small amount of extra attention that the counselor gave Angela was what guided her to a small, private college in the city and helped her to get the financial aid she needed to attend and live on campus. In fact, her transition beyond high school went more smoothly than that of most other participants in the study. She struggled academically, but attributed it to her own lack of “managing my time and being organized.” Her academic advisor occasionally gave her study tips and she adapted to college work. When it came time to decide on a major, Angela made an unexpected switch from her plan to be a lawyer to majoring in psychology.

I guess this is a pattern I'm starting to realize about myself: that I think about things for a very long time—like I thought I was going to be a lawyer for years and years and years and [then] in a matter of months I'm like, “Nope. I'm just going to change my mind and I'm going to do psychology and see how that works.” Sometimes I won't come up with a definite decision right away, but other times I feel like if I just let whatever it is sit, it will naturally come to me what I should do.

[The psychology professors] were more personable. They were just good at engaging you into the work and they were excited about what they were talking about. Like you could tell they loved what they were talking about and they loved what they were doing. . . . They was always open to meeting with you if you had trouble, and so I just took to them a little bit better than the prelaw professor. Just like trying to understand human behavior and why people do what they do. I never thought about this—this is great!

After Angela changed her major, she began taking art classes that she really enjoyed—“it was like a release.” Near the end of college a professor suggested she consider studying art therapy and she decided to look into it. Once again, a short-term connection with this professor and another supportive individual helped make this path possible.

When I decided to apply I had to do a portfolio [and] . . . I had never done a portfolio before because I was just an art minor. There was a Sister there who was my ceramics teacher. She was really nice. I remember calling her on the weekends—“I’m finishing my portfolio. Can you look at it?” I had a lot of support with that, so that was nice.

As a result, Angela was accepted into a master’s program in counseling and art therapy where she had experiences with individuals who helped her hone not only her academic skills, but also her interpersonal skills in preparation for her career in counseling. Near the end of her story, she even seemed to have a revelation about a pattern that she suddenly realized had emerged in her stories of interactions with individuals who supported her at key moments in her life story.

The support system that I found in staff at college kind of mirrored the support system I got from my classmates in grad school. We were all trying to deal with the same things . . . so we connected on a lot of different levels. [The internships] were stressful because you’re doing real work, with real people—but it was very gratifying. I got a lot of good and positive feedback from [my internships] and how to present myself. I had a really good supervisor there and she said, “I know you’re not being standoffish but other people might take it as you being standoffish.” So I’ve kind of worked to be more inviting in the way I present

myself, making more eye contact and smiling a bit more. I'm just aware of how to look friendlier.

A lot of people say, "Well, now that I've got to know you . . ." [chuckle with surprise]. Four of the people I mentioned here said exactly that—*now* that I've gotten to *know* you. I guess that's another thing that lays into it—there's not really enough time for you to get to know the average kids—you know, nobody takes enough time to pull them aside and talk to them and see what they want to be. My advisor in grad school said, "I think you did really well now that I've gotten to know you." My ceramics teacher would just ask me little questions while I was working, and so we kind of got to know each other as I worked. We spent time together.

Angela ended her interview with a return to the importance of being an observer to her ability to shape her life. But Anna actually provided the most powerful description of how observing is an important factor in the entire thematic horizon of belonging. Anna, in spite of being named a recipient of a prestigious national scholarship, stressed at the beginning of this section that she never belonged anywhere. She summarized that feeling and how she coped with it when she arrived at a competitive private university.

It's a completely different world and you're very aware of it in every single way: . . . I'm not ready. It was terrifying. . . . So it was clear to me that I didn't belong. And the one thing I realized I was good at was copying [laughing] because I was constantly aware of not belonging since the day I could remember. I don't have a memory of when I succeeded in this copying method that I developed for myself, but I realized that if I just observed what others did and those others *belonged*, right—so if I just observed what they did and did what they did, then maybe I could get by. Anything you can think of, from how they played or how they studied or how they walked or talked or dressed, I was always like, "Okay, that's how they do it—that's how I'll do it." So no, I didn't belong, but I had already found my strategy for getting by. I knew that I could fake it. The other issue, though—it took me so far, but then I had this huge internal problem with myself that still exists today—where I never feel like I belong, but it is because I tricked you [all said in very emotional manner].

Summary of Results

Each of the 17 biographical interviews was represented (in varying levels of detail) within these three thematic horizons. There was significant overlap within these horizons, and there were other thematic horizons that might have been identified and explored. These three, however, seemed to provide valuable ways of looking at the stories so as to form the foundation for moving forward to more refined interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations in the following chapters. It bears repeating that the abductive process of analysis must proceed with caution, aware that

the discourses are not merely ambiguous and in need of validation but that the interaction is played out in a potentially threatening environment where the biographical self—however difficult it is to formulate sufficiently clearly the theoretical demarcations here between the discourses of self and the construction of emergent identity—is in a state of becoming/changing. (Evans, 2013, p. 28)

Throughout the entire process of data collection and analysis, and in line with the abductive approach adopted for this study, I avoided moving to potential outcomes suggested by the problem statement itself and the literature review. In particular, I put aside the theoretical framework described in Figure 2 in order to avoid premature interpretations and certainly premature conclusions. But as the analysis and writing proceeded, and through extensive research journaling, the further *layers* of interpretation emerged, most of which represent clear connections to that conceptual framework and have yielded additional analytical *layers* that are explored in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: PATTERNS OF MEANING AND THEORETICAL CONFIGURATIONS

The metaphor of the researcher-as-traveler (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) has served as a helpful guide to the abductive process used up to this point in this study. The iterative process of analysis through condensation has moved through various phases as “the potentialities of meanings in the original stories are differentiated and unfolded through the traveler’s interpretations of the narratives he or she brings back to home audiences” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 49). Chapter 4 profiled the individual stories and used the voices of participants to describe their shared thematic horizons, but there is still a need to move toward findings and conclusions using the abductive process as “a form of reasoning used in situations of uncertainty, when we need an understanding or explanation of something that happens” (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 722)—in this case, *how individuals have repeatedly engaged in redesigning or reshaping their lives*.

Through further interpretation, then, chapter 5 explores a number of findings that unfolded through the thematic horizons in chapter 4 and begins to consider how they come together to provide a complex understanding of how biographicity has occurred in this group of marginalized young adults. Through this process, “interconnections of separate observations and concepts suddenly become evident . . . or the pieces of the mosaic gradually come together to form an overall picture of the object of interest” (Alheit, 1994a, p. 27). In particular, the chapter presents seven patterns of meaning:

- *Cognition*. Traditionally understood knowledge and skills were powerful factors in all of the life stories in a number of ways, not least of which was the limiting *deficit* of formal learning that every participant described. Issues of cognition

were also evident in the ways that individuals came to understand their experiences and gathered the information they needed to move forward in line with their needs and desires.

- *Emotion.* Positive, negative, and ambivalent emotions pervaded each life story and warranted further analysis across thematic horizons. The stories told by participants confirmed that feelings, motivation, attitudes, values, and preferences (all manifestations of the affective domain) were central to their life outcomes. Further analysis is needed to understand how these emotions are related to “life-challenging circumstances” that are “constitutive of action and organize diverse behaviors” (Colombetti, 2010, p. 150).
- *Social interaction/social structures.* The preliminary presentation of data, as well as each of the thematic horizons, uncovered patterns of meaning related to influences on biographicity from a variety of social structures (at the micro, meso, and macro levels), and further analysis and interpretation considers their specific impacts on individuals’ ability to shape their lives. This section in particular addresses the third research question: *How do social structures support or limit the exercise of biographicity?*
- *Autonomy/heteronomy.* The ability to think and act independently and/or to think and act within life’s constraints was mentioned directly by only a few participants, but clearly influenced the outcomes for all of them. It seems related to the nearly universal pattern of participants knowing what they *don’t want* in their lives and how that understanding became a catalyst for biographical action.

- *Sensemaking*. Many participants specifically said (or implied) that they needed to *make sense* of their experiences through processes that clearly involved “self and social questioning” (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 527). Further analysis explores participatory sensemaking in particular as a contributor to answering the research questions.
- *Recognition*. Recognition as such was not addressed in the theoretical design of this study but emerged as an unexpected strong finding in the life stories of participants through the process of abductive analysis. It seems clear that when participants felt a sense of being valued for their “individual uniqueness” (Honneth, 1995, p. 86) in a variety of ways, this supported their exercise of biographicity. In addition, issues of justice that emerged may be related to the basic rights that individuals should be able to expect. These notions suggested theoretical literature that needs to be explored in order to analyze more fully the impact of recognition on how people shape their lives.
- *Emergence*. In this chapter and the next, the analysis moves toward conclusions that describe how the factors described above influence the ability of the individual to exhibit changed behavior, take on new directions, or achieve desired outcomes, that is, the creation of emergence in individual lives.

These emerging findings return the study to the theoretical framework asserted in the first two chapters that was set aside once data collection began, but gradually reemerged during the abductive condensation of the interviews. The section that closes the chapter, then, discusses this relationship, with a focus on the cognitive, emotional,

and social domains of learning; the role of the enactive paradigm in biographicity; and a theoretical reconfiguration of biographicity.

Analysis of Patterns of Meaning

Patterns of Cognition

It is perhaps fitting to begin this further analysis by looking at the notion of cognition as it emerged in the life stories, since the problem statement and literature review of this study put heavy emphasis on biographicity as a “learning ground” (Alheit, 1992, p. 187). The research design asserted from the beginning that cognition is only one aspect of learning and proposed a more holistic way of defining learning. It is important to note, however, that at the beginning of each interview, I encouraged participants to tell their life stories in any way they wished, but in every case I said, “I would love to know the things that have happened in your life and what you have *learned* along the way.” Given this slight directive, it is even more surprising to me how little any of the stories talked about the content of learning or specific knowledge and skills (in the often taken-for-granted view of what constitutes learning), except for a few notable exceptions.

A number of participants described powerful learning outcomes when cognition was linked with individual interests. Constance, who was homeschooled, talked more than any other participant about the content of her learning, or *what* she learned. She described with enthusiasm how she focused on “what I was *interested* in learning” and the far-ranging content she explored. She also described her ability to go in-depth on certain subjects, even reading *As You Like It* many times during middle school. By contrast, when she attended public high school, she was dismayed by the lack of content and the limited knowledge and skills of her peers. In a similar way, Kayla stressed the

way that her own limited academic skills were a barrier to college success until she was coached in specific skills, but also until she connected them to an area of interest (hip-hop culture) that led her to in-depth research and transferable academic skills. Shawnika provided another valuable insight related to the importance of *experiential* knowledge and skills when she said, “The lab is my comfort zone. . . . In the classroom I feel so inadequate and like I just can’t do it, but in the research lab I’m like ‘I can do this. I can understand what’s happening.’”

Such descriptions of traditional cognition, however, were notable more for their absence from the life experiences of participants. As noted previously, in varying degrees, 100% of participants described their lack of preparedness for postsecondary formal education. Uniformly they described the failure of their formal education to provide the knowledge and skills they needed for success, and they compared their education unfavorably with that of students from more affluent school districts who were better prepared. Kayla echoed others when she said, “How is it possible I have a 4.0+ GPA but I can’t pass the [state graduation test]?”

Some participants who struggled less attributed this to their own ability to assess what was required and adjust their cognitive strategies. Erica, for example, said, “I think it’s reading the professor and learning what they want and just writing it that way. I learn people very quickly.” Anna employed her *copying method* when she arrived in a college lecture hall having never learned to take notes in class; she saw that other students were writing down what was on the board and realized that she had better do the same. Brandon’s cognitive refrain was, “I listen. I learn. I implement.” He said he was supported by his natural curiosity, which came to cognitive fruition when he began his

doctoral studies. He said, “I did not know that the Ph.D. thing was really just about asking questions.”

It is well beyond the scope (or desire) of this study to explore any connection between intelligence and the exercise of biographicity, but several participants told me they were in gifted or honors programs, while others specifically recalled that they were not. Erica described the difference between tracks: “It was like two worlds within one school really.” Participation in these programs, however, seemed to have little impact on the level of preparedness, and even those participants who earned a community college associate’s degree while in high school had the same academic struggles in postsecondary learning in addition to other challenges they faced in early adulthood. Yet, in spite of these traditional cognitive limitations, all of the participants managed to continue in their pursuit of postsecondary education. This paradox reinforces the notion that other domains of learning are also factors in educational attainment outcomes.

Patterns of Emotion

In chapter 1, emotion was defined as “the mental energy that is necessary for the learning process to take place” (Illeris, 2009, p. 11) as well as factors that “allow the organism to adapt to life-challenging circumstances, [that are] constitutive of action and organize diverse behaviors” (Colombetti, 2010, p. 150). While the problem statement and literature review asserted the importance of emotion, the interviews *confirmed* that emotion, in alignment with this definition, is a powerful force in the life experiences of participants and in their exercise of biographicity across thematic horizons. Vivid patterns of emotion emerged in the abductive condensation of the life stories and provided growing insight into how emotions (negative, positive, and ambivalent) support or limit

the exercise of biographicity, sometimes in surprising and unexpected ways. Often these patterns are evidence of *disruptions* from what the person expects as norms they can count on (Honneth, 1995), but they also can stem from experiences that generate positive feelings.

Feelings of inadequacy. Building on descriptions of the participants' lack of cognitive preparedness, it is valuable to see the direct link between those limitations and emotions, including feelings of inadequacy. When they realized they were not prepared, a norm that was disrupted was participants' expectations that the schools should have prepared them better (the social structure failed them), but at the same time, many described their own feelings of inadequacy. In one clearly articulated example, Sara had an upbeat tone in her life story and described herself as an optimistic person who had always been successful, but, like many other participants, she expressed emotional ambivalence when she described her transition to college:

I felt like, oh my God, I just felt I couldn't do it. Maybe I'm not smart enough like I thought I was or maybe there was something that I wasn't doing? Why? So I'm like this feeling of—this feeling of failure. I don't know what this is about. I don't like this feeling either.

That first year was rough. I even had to—I was like, “No, I don't need any tutors.” I was like, “Tutors are for people who don't know how to learn anything.” My advisor came to me and said, “You know you're not doing good in these classes. What do you feel could help you?” I was like, “I dunno . . . not going to college?” But it was like, “No, we don't have to get that extreme.” And she was like “You could do a tutor.”

I'm so used to, when it came to my education, being self-sufficient. To have to ask for *help*—that was pretty much just a blow on my ego that I wasn't ready to deal with. . . . I had to learn to adjust. I didn't want to accept I didn't know everything and I wasn't getting everything on my own like I was used to all through my years in school. But I did—I broke down. . . . It was a huge learning adjustment. I had to pretty much put the ego aside and say there's more important things here. This is about your education.

Like many others, with emotional support (social interaction), Sara was able to work through her feelings and devise strategies that allowed her to manage her ambivalence and continue on her desired path. She highlighted the precarious nature of these emotional challenges (she “broke down”); however, she moved forward and actively redesigned a new approach (exercised biographicity). Like others in the study, Sara reflected on the importance of attitude, another word used in the definition of emotion:

It’s just about your attitude really. It doesn’t matter what your circumstances are—how you grow up. I think if you have the right attitude, that in itself really can take you somewhere because a lot of times I feel like if I didn’t have the attitude that I have, I probably would have fell off somewhere. I probably would have failed and would not have taken the steps to go back and say—even when I was getting all those bad grades in college, I didn’t let that stop me because I felt like my attitude was always positive.

In fact, Sara provided additional insight into the importance of attitude for her when later she left college because of financial issues and accepted that she would not fulfill that goal she had. When she pursued technical training as a medical assistant, Sara not only designed and accepted a new path that did not meet her earlier expectations (sensemaking), but she embraced this career path and successfully adapted to the barriers she faced (heteronomy and emergence). In a different outcome to this pattern of emotion, it is important to recall how Thomas gave up even trying in school as a young boy and repeatedly after because he felt his questions were *silly* and he was ashamed that he wasn’t as quick as other students (“I didn’t have the brains”), severely limiting his exercise of biographicity for many years.

Feelings of success. In counterpoint to feelings of inadequacy, Sara, like others in the study, also displayed a reservoir of feelings of academic success that seemed related

to her ability to shape her own life as well. And Thomas, too, built on his feeling of accomplishment when he passed the GED test while in prison and eventually attended community college. Similarly, in spite of the many challenges that Rebecca faced, she relied on her accomplishments to help her overcome the *bad choices* she had made. Pride about accomplishments in the arts, too, often served as a foundation for future decision making for Monica, Kayla, Julia, Patricia, and Angela.

Leon relied on his history of success in elementary school, even as he repeatedly chose ongoing gang activity over academic focus. He continually repeated “at the end of the day” as a way to take himself back to the period in his life when he was successful, seeing it as an ongoing viable option. Similarly, Monica’s success in earning the money for her own car motivated (another word for emotion as well) her to keep moving forward even as she faced intense physical and emotional challenges.

Feelings about safety and security. Another example of disruptions that challenge norms or expectations is evident in the life stories that described threats to safety and security, such as the descriptions of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse/neglect that were especially evident in the thematic horizon of suffering. Of course, the stories that included sexual abuse are examples of these emotions at their most extreme, but the depression and despair expressed in each of those stories were ameliorated by even small experiences of belonging and/or expectations in their lives, as highlighted in chapter 4.

Even when the expectation of safety was challenged in less extreme ways, it appeared to have a meaningful impact on biographicity. Patricia is a good example of how the lack of a safe, caring environment can have broad implications. Because of her

mother's frequent hospitalizations, even as a young child she was frequently alone. In addition, her father denied his paternity and rejected Patricia for many years until paternity was proven. She suffered intense anxiety and disturbing psychological symptoms, and she asked her mother to get her help but was denied. It was the sense of belonging she gained through marching band and college activities and the fairly well articulated expectations her mother expressed for her education when she was a child that seemed to be overriding factors for her in restoring emotional stability and exercising biographicity.

While some participants did not express explicit stories of threats to safety, they did express other strong negative or ambivalent emotions related to security in their family life. At least seven participants, for example, described periods of grief at the loss of a parent or another relative or friend, some at very young ages. For some, this became a positive turning point in their life path (Leon for example) when it led to getting a new sense of priorities and motivated a change in life direction, while for others (Rosa for example) it signaled a downward spiral of unresolved grief. Worry about parents and their security was another repeated emotion, as when Brandon described his mother's experiences of domestic violence. He said,

I can remember distinctly as a child hearing the wails, hearing the weeps, hearing the screams, but more importantly the next day seeing my mom try to masquerade, if you will, the bruises, the wounds with make-up, right? Going out in public with sunglasses on in an effort to conceal the hurt, pain, and agony that she experienced. . . . So it's her strength. It's her courage. It's her tenacity that provides a wonderful bedrock for me, to use that as fuel for this fire to continue to succeed at astronomical levels.

In fact, the response of seeking changes in one's own life precisely in opposition to the experiences of parents was one of the most powerful patterns of emotion across the

life stories. Nearly all participants were clear that they knew that they did *not* want to be like their parents, and that helped them to shape their life path. Many expressed love for their parents, empathy for the challenges their parents faced, and even admiration for their resilience, but still were firm in their commitment to avoiding their mistakes. The strength of this finding led to an exploration of Hegel's work, which asserted that *recurring negations* lead individuals to "an increase in individual freedom" (Honneth, 1995, p. 16).

Feelings of caring. An unexpected finding of the interviews related to emotions was the desire to improve conditions for others or for the community that was expressed by every person in the study. Positive feelings experienced in situations of caring seemed to have a direct impact on biographicity, as when Jeremy changed his major and the direction of his personal life after becoming involved in service learning projects or when Constance worked in hospice during high school, took time off to care for her dying grandmother, and executed a major reorientation of her life according to her newly articulated needs and desires. In spite of her own intense challenges, Monica found new direction in part from her efforts to help younger women in circumstances similar to hers. Nearly all participants were engaged in caring professions such as social work or nonprofit management or continued to volunteer in a variety of settings. Citing G. H. Mead, Honneth (1995) suggested that autonomy is an important factor in the way that people experience self-realization (as similar to biographicity) through "socially useful work" (p. 88).

Patterns of Social Interaction/Social Structures

One of the research questions for the study sought to understand *how social structures serve to support or limit the exercise of biographicity*, and stories of the impact exerted by social structures were part of every one of the thematic horizons (expectations/imagining, suffering, belonging) explored in chapter 4. While one of these features dominated the stories included in each of these thematic horizons, social structures also were directly implicated in the way that an understanding of biographicity emerged more broadly in every story. In order to answer all of the research questions, it is essential to explore, across the life stories, the complex interplay of social interaction and social structures at the micro (family and other individual relationships), meso (institutions and community), and macro (societal) levels. Schuetze (1981, as cited in Alheit, 1994a, pp. 14-15), described the social aspects of biography when he referred to the “web of relationships” or the “social world” within which individuals operate, and patterns of meaning unfolded during analysis that provided insight into that social world.

Family and other individual relationships (micro level). The earlier exploration of emotion already pointed to the central importance of family interactions as individuals go about shaping their lives. All of the families in this study experienced a variety of challenging conditions that often are accepted as taken-for-granted assumptions or explanations of why urban young adults fail to succeed in life: divorce, illness, death, unstable employment, alcohol or drug abuse, homelessness, incarceration, and poverty. Some participants described loving, supportive families, but others did not. And yet, all of the participants in this study believed that they successfully shaped their lives according to their needs and desires, suggesting that these situations do not preclude

positive outcomes. In fact, micro-level relationships exerted a strong force—again positively, negatively, and ambivalently—in all of the life stories. Even when other conditions in the family were extremely challenging and even life-threatening, those participants who had heard a message (however limited) that someone in the family expected them to succeed described that as a powerful force for shaping their lives. Rosa, whose life was on a steep downward spiral after her father’s death, recalled,

My dad, he took me on trips. He took me out of town. He took me—you know, he always made sure I did something different so I’m pretty sure that made me desire something different than what I had, you know. I always knew that it took something to get that.

At least seven participants described relationships that played a large role in the way they shaped their lives that might be called mentoring relationships, though only four participants actually used the term *mentor*. There are thousands of references to mentoring in the academic literature, but the concept continues to have widely varying meanings, and lay people (including the participants in this study) who use the word seem to have their own definitions in mind (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011). Krum (1983), in what has been called the seminal work on mentoring, stated,

A young adult, in the first stage of his or her career, is likely to be engaged in forming an occupational identity, forming a dream, forming intimate relationships and forming a mentoring relationship. It is a time when questions about one’s competence, one’s effectiveness, and one’s ability to achieve future dreams are most salient. (pp. 608-609)

This view aligns well with the stories of such micro-level social interactions in the life stories of participants.

Shawnika’s entire life story was centered around the results of the relationship she established with the professor who started the high school engineering program that she

attended, and she described him as her advisor, her mentor, her father figure, her *he-ro* throughout her interview. She emphasized the significant cultural differences between them (he is a white man, she an African American woman of very limited financial means) and even referred to the way that others questioned his motives for supporting her or whether he was using her to advance his own professional agenda, but noted, “Before he became a professor he worked out in industry and the one thing that’s always been close to his heart is diversity.” Quotes about him peppered Shawnika’s story and provided insight into how the personal social interactions helped her to exercise biographicity:

- So many people didn’t see what he saw in me and sometimes the things that I didn’t see in myself.
- He always believed in me and even when I just didn’t think it was possible to be an engineer, he’s like, “No, no, no—you can do this. Come on, Shawnika.”
- I have been protected by my advisor.
- If I didn’t understand like something that should have been like a basic science thing, . . . one hour per each week we would have an hour that was just dedicated to me asking him questions about the research we was doing or just general science and then also he let me know that if I had any homework questions that I could ask anybody inside the research group and so they also helped me academically.
- He pushed the dean of engineering to allow me to attend graduate school—basically fighting for me.

Summarizing a clear connection to biographicity, Shawnika said, “If I didn’t have my advisor, I think I would have failed off and probably would have ended up somewhere else.”

Through a series of internships, Kayla and Brandon described multiple mentoring relationships that significantly increased their ability to shape their lives. Kayla described an important element of such relationships when, with guidance, she developed the skills to activate valuable social interactions herself (through meso-level programs). She said,

I learned it from the aspect of thinking about how do you create mentors or you know a personal board of directors or people in your life that you know you can call on and talk to if you're interested. I would also say the summer program at [a major foundation] probably let me experience it, to know that this isn't something that you should be afraid of. We were exposed to executive directors of all the different nonprofits where the interns were working, so I think by the time that summer was over with I was very used to walking up to someone that was influential and say, "This is who I am. I'm interested in getting to know you because. . . . Do you have a business card? I'd love to follow up with you." So yes, I think it was something that I learned through that exposure of the program in terms of just networking. Like how do people network and build relationships? That [gave me] some grounding in like how you do it, so by the time I worked at [a major arts institution] I was very comfortable with what that looked like.

Brandon, too, had several mentors and described a teacher who he said "spoke life into me" when he repeatedly insisted that Brandon consider getting a doctorate, when Brandon could not have imagined such a path. Like a number of other mentors or other supportive adults, he did not accept Brandon's initial hesitation, but persisted in encouraging him to consider previously unimagined possibilities for himself, and thus served as a significant catalyst to biographicity. It is worth noting that Shawnika, Kayla, Brandon, and Constance all were engaged in paid internships, a rarity in most such programs. The link between what were certainly powerful social interactions with mentors and the just reward for their time seems important. All of them indicated that being paid for their work helped to alleviate the financial constraints that their life circumstances imposed and that without pay they might have had to work regular jobs instead to earn money to further their education or support their basic needs.

Erica also said that she needed the extra push from key social relationships to shape her life. She said, "Not having a real mentor would have been a huge problem, because nobody I knew went to college." Without a number of people, including advisors in the college access program and the moderator of the drama club, she would not have

had adequate information or support to move into this unknown space. Erica also experienced a close mentoring relationship with her supervisor in her work-study position at the university, which also helped defray her college costs. While others did not identify formal mentors, they also benefited from key moments when interested adults made the difference, such as when Angela had a high school teacher and two or more college instructors who provided valuable short-term input at a key point of transition.

An unexpected finding was how small or indirect micro-level social interactions could be powerful and have an outsized impact on individuals who successfully shaped their lives. Several stories described chance interactions with other relatives, for example, that helped set a new direction—as when Thomas’s uncle (who had not previously been involved in his life) urged Thomas to go to community college and even suggested a deadline for him to begin. Rebecca, too, was empowered by a chance encounter when a client helped her write a letter that led to her getting a just response to a mediation in her workplace. She said, “When you go and network, you meet people and then he told me, he said, ‘Rebecca, I could write this letter for you and once I write these words, you *will* get a response.’ And I did.”

Somewhat surprisingly to me, very few participants described deep or long-term friendships. Shawnika, however, described the importance of her friendship with Constance when she said,

During high school my best friend, who you talked to, me and her—I think you would call it secretly competitive—to like see who could like do better in certain grades, and she always beat me [laughing], but it was always wonderful because I was, we were each other’s backbones.

While Leon made only a brief reference to a long-standing friendship with a girl from high school, it was she who came to live with him as he moved from the

neighborhood that was the source of his challenges and quite suddenly established a new phase of his life in a suburban community. Jeremy, who described himself as “kind of on my own ever since [high school],” nevertheless emphasized important social interactions that occurred when a new friend invited him to live in his family’s basement and the arrangement lasted for 2 years. He said, “Living at my friend’s house and seeing how they joke around and laugh and then talk to each other, it was like watching a sitcom. It didn’t feel right. It felt so weird, but it felt nice at the same time.” Later, he described how his girlfriend complained,

I don’t show emotions very well. Sometimes I have to explain to her it’s kind of weird for me to show emotions because I guess I never kind of learned that growing up. Her family joke around and they’re all close and they share stories. I—I—would never tell my mom a story; that’s what’s weird to me.⁴

These interactions coupled with Jeremy’s service learning experiences were the catalysts for a major shift in biographicity as he moved toward a career in social work.

While only five participants (including Leon) mentioned that they were married or in a long-term relationship and even these provided few details of their relationships, certain interesting patterns of interaction emerged in these stories as well. Monica, for example, described the father of her children as “a hot mess” when he was dealing drugs or unemployed for long periods of time. Yet, she emphasized the fact that he stayed with their children, making it possible for her to attend school through various iterations of her postsecondary experience. Julia also provided few details about her relationship with her husband but stressed how supportive he was of her formal education, even taking care of

⁴ In light of this comment, it is interesting to note that Jeremy’s interview was challenging for me as he displayed very little narrative competence in telling his story. He shared few details and showed little enthusiasm or emotion for his life story. I hesitated to be intrusive in asking him follow-up questions.

their child so that she could study abroad on two occasions as an older undergraduate. He also supported the family's move to California to fulfill her dream of a degree and a career in fashion design, while delaying his own plan for further education. And perhaps most importantly, the birth of children was a very significant influence on biographicity for Anna, Leon, Julia, Monica, and Rebecca (the only parent currently raising children alone), who all described a firm desire to avoid letting their children down.

It is interesting to note that many of the micro-level interactions discussed above also had a strong connection to participatory sensemaking, which is considered later in this chapter.

Institutions or community-based organizations (meso level). Schools are, of course, the primary meso-level institutions that have a profound impact on the exercise of biographicity, but often their influence is eclipsed by the positive effects of other social structures (and people within those structures as noted above). The failure of schools to provide an education that allowed the participants in this study to feel prepared has already been explored. In fact, the well-documented weak performance of urban schools in the United States was one of the motivations for this study and a major reason that the target population was described as *marginalized* young adults. Statistics for the graduating class of 2008 (a graduation year within the target sample) for participants' school district confirmed that of the 6,381 students who began high school in ninth grade, only 2,175 (or fewer than 35%) graduated 4 years later. This number compares to a graduation rate of 74.3% in the entire state and 71.7% in the country as a whole (Bryant, 2011). A number of participants themselves referred to these dismal statistics, such as Erica who said, "My freshman class was almost 900 kids. It was the largest freshman

class to date, and we graduated less than 300.” And when Thomas dropped out of this same school during his senior year, no one from the school even tried to encourage him to stay. In fact, the participants seemed to confirm an underlying assertion of the study that participants shaped their lives (exercised biographicity) simply by completing school and moving to higher levels of educational attainment.

The dropout statistics are well known, but less well documented or analyzed are the outcomes for the strongest students who graduated from the school district, a number of whom were participants in this study. In a chapter on the impact of social institutions on marginalized youth, Bourdieu (1993) noted, “Destined by their lack of cultural capital to almost certain academic failure, these young people are nevertheless placed in conditions likely to raise their aspirations” (p. 185). That was true for many participants who believed that their inclusion in honors or gifted education programs assured them a path to college and beyond. According to a school district report, fewer than half of 2013 graduates who enrolled in the colleges and universities (already a small percentage) most attended by graduates made it to a second year. On the one hand, these statistics suggest the need for caution in drawing conclusions based on the participants in this study since they are clearly exceptions to these shocking statistics. On the other hand, the purpose of this study was to understand how it is that those who feel they have been able to shape their lives (those who participated) have succeeded in doing so in alignment with their own needs and desires.

While it might be tempting to dismiss the schools as a positive influence on biographicity based on the statistics and the 100% self-described lack of preparedness for postsecondary formal education, that would ignore the stories that participants told of

positive support they gained from the schools. Angela, for example, described her profound disappointment that she was not challenged (or even noticed) as an average student in the schools, and based on her experiences, one might have assumed that she would have fallen into the story the statistics tell. But her high school had a work/study program that gave her the opportunity to work in the guidance office, doing work that she valued and that was affirmed by the counselor who developed a supporting relationship with Angela that led her to college. In a similar way, Erica attributed her academic success to her extracurricular involvement with the director of the drama club, who gave her responsibilities that advanced her confidence and her skills, and Brandon, a student in an equally challenged school district, was fully supported by the sports program, including an influential coach and one teacher who connected him to life-changing opportunities.

It would appear that opportunities exist even within the current structure of schools to support biographicity, but too few of even this unusually successful group of graduates described this kind of effective support from their schools directly. In actuality, the school stories they described seemed to reflect micro-level interactions with caring adults rather than social structures within schools that enhanced biographicity. More commonly, participants opted out of their high schools by attending community college classes while still in high school, or they opted out of high school completely like Thomas and Julia.

The colleges and universities that participants attended also provided widely varied levels of support for biographicity. Most participants did not emphasize formal programs as the way they overcame their academic obstacles. Rather, more often it was

individual professors who took on a deeper (micro-level) mentoring role that seemed to influence participants' ability to shape their lives. Formal advisory programs played a role at key transition points, but participants emphasized relationships that were more individualized (even if brief) as the ones that really mattered. Leon and Monica did describe their reliance on financial aid that was provided through special programs for students who had been out of secondary education for more than a year through the college access organization. Anna retained her prestigious national fellowship throughout college, ensuring her completion of both B.A. and M.A. degrees. And Monica relied on a program that links community colleges and state universities, that supported her as she made the difficult transition to college after her long, challenging hiatus; she said, "It is a program they funded. It helps for low-income families to keep you motivated to go to school, and that's what I enrolled in and they set me up." College-level extracurricular programs, such as service learning, the arts, and student government, also provided key experiences that supported biographicity.

Perhaps the most significant meso-level support came not from schools, but from community-based organizations and institutions: the college access organization that helped with gathering the sample for this study, a wide variety of organizations that provided internships at various levels of learning, and special programs that sought to improve outcomes for minority students. In all three of the thematic horizons, it was clear that such meso-level interventions had a powerful impact on biographicity. The stories of internships described how they encouraged participants to take on greater responsibility, sometimes beginning in the early years of high school, with a resulting boost in confidence. The structured feedback given to those who had internships helped them to

develop valuable soft skills such as networking, leadership skills, organizational skills, and even as Angela said, helping her to become more “personable.” These organizations, some of which were high-profile community resources, provided a level of expectations and a sense of belonging for those who had internships that were well beyond what many experienced in their families or their schools. They introduced participants to possible life trajectories they were incapable of imagining.

Such experiences of participation in activities within the community are often closely linked to specific life decisions, especially the decision to pursue work that involves caring for others. In a variation of internships, those who participated in volunteer work, service learning, or other formal service programs also described similar experiences that enhanced their exercise of biographicity. This connection to meso-level resources that build community seemed closely connected to the surprising outcome that nearly all participants referred to the positive impact of volunteerism or service on the decisions that they made.

It is important to note that a significant minority of participants mentioned their church and/or their belief in God as a powerful influence on their ability to shape their lives. Rosa and Thomas, in particular, emphasized the role of the church and spent a good portion of their stories describing their experiences within that social structure. It is interesting to note that their pastor, a retired U.S. Marine, targeted his ministry to young people between 18 and 32 in one of the most distressed communities in the metropolitan area. Thomas described in chapter 4 how the pastor helped him through and after his incarceration, but in addition, both he and Rosa emphasized the importance of the peer example and supports they experienced in the structured context of the church.

The social affiliation that they described in their church stands in counterpoint to the mixed experiences of Brandon and Leon in gang activity, another meso-level structure present in marginalized urban communities. Brandon credited his development of leadership skills in large part to the deep sense of brotherhood and safety he experienced through the self-organized local gang and through sports. Certainly Leon, too, was drawn to the strong social connection he found in the neighborhood gang, but experienced intense ambivalence in the actual activities that kept him from shaping his life in other ways that he desired.

Societal interactions/structures (macro level). Deep structural issues within society that impact the exercise of biographicity emerged from the life stories as told. Poverty was the most obvious of these. While the study did not ask for information regarding financial circumstances, all participants described varying degrees of financial hardship. Poverty statistics for this particular urban center are clear: In 2009, over half of all children under 18 were living below the federal poverty line and 75% lived in households with earnings less than \$43,500 for a family of four. In addition, in 2007, 58% lived in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment (Bryant, 2011). A number of participants described parents with steady employment, but often in low-paying jobs such as housekeepers or nursing assistants. All indicated that their parents were able to contribute little, if anything, to postsecondary education.

It is clear that such financial limitations place significant barriers in the path of shaping one's life, and all participants referred specifically to these challenges. Many indicated that their college choices were made strictly based on financial aid opportunities, and most lost some or all of that aid when they did not perform well

enough once they started college. At least part of the reason for low performance for some may have been the heavy workload they carried in addition to school (often beginning in high school) and the requirement that they contribute to their family's finances. While I did not ask about student loan debt, several told of loans in the tens of thousands of dollars, with one participant reporting a total of \$58,000 of student loan debt. After the interview, Rosa, who is about to start graduate school, commented that she probably would be paying back student loan debt when she is sending her [future] children to college. Societal policies regarding how individuals finance education were one of the most frequently identified barriers to biographicity.

An interesting subgroup of participants told stories about their attendance at for-profit colleges that uncovered a challenge within the existing societal structures of higher education. Either because of limited financial resources, limited access to traditional institutions, or targeted advertising to such individuals, three participants attended these programs where they accumulated large loan debt, completed degree programs, and then found that none of the credits would transfer to traditional institutions they hoped to attend for further education.

A number of participants also talked about another societal structure almost certainly related to poverty, i.e., bias based on race and/or socioeconomic status. Constance actually introduced this subject at the very end of the interview when I asked her (as I did all participants) if there was anything she hadn't discussed that she believed to be important. Her in-depth remarks about bias are quoted extensively below, because they serve as a summary of what was told in less complete ways by many others. Her

emphasis on a sense of *isolation* is notable in her description and in the stories many other participants told.

There is one thing that I want to say, but I'm not sure how to say it. I do think that part of the problem that I had, especially connecting at a university, was that I didn't feel like I was a part of a community and I also think that especially kids are—the smart kids because I really am. I'm against using that word *smart* because I think that a lot of people that were smarter than me didn't even finish school. They didn't finish school and they didn't finish college—it's all a conundrum. But I don't think I felt connected to the university I was at with students, you know. . . . I had people that I knew that were in graduate school that were . . . supporting me in different ways, even if it was helping me work out homework problems, like really supporting me—but I wasn't *connected* to the university.

And across the board, I felt like a *lot* of the people that were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, *regardless* of ethnicity And I, don't think that a lot of kids from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. . . feel welcome at a school like [mine]. Now a lot of our students are not necessarily affluent, but they've never been poor, you know. They never went to school with students that were poor. They don't have those experiences It's so isolating. I think a lot of people don't understand that, and it's isolating in some ways.

I'm not sure how to fix that but it's just like—like I said, the smarter students get pushed certain places. They also get pushed into school where there will be many less people that look at them in every way, including economically—probably *especially* economically more than anything else. I don't know how to fix that, but I feel like it's really something that shaped a lot of my experiences, a lot of my interactions with the rest of the student population and a lot of decisions I've made for good and bad.

Some of them *were* good. I worked because I needed to, but it also gave me a lot of experiences that I could use to further my goals. But—some of me wished that I didn't have to work as much or that there was more—we could have more *understanding* with each other or there were more people that understood . . . that financial aid is not a handout and that I'm not somehow in this school on a pass when, in fact, I had to work really hard to get here.

I mean I had people in my classes that believe that affirmative action was discrimination against white people and would actually *say* it. . . . I have people that really just thought that somehow affirmative action meant that I was taking space of another better white student and would say things like that. These are just big barriers and it's hard to feel like you're a part of a campus—when you feel like the other students don't really want you there or are convinced that all Black people are on welfare.

I don't think that it's people aren't aware and I don't think it's that people aren't trying—I just think that they haven't found a way to engage the students that are causing the issue.

Many of Constance's points are addressed in the implications of this study, but her thoughts on poverty and race serve as important findings related to biographicity, as described by nearly all participants in the study. Lest the focus appears to be rooted solely in racial issues, it is interesting to hear Erica's comments as a white college student in a predominantly white university:

[College] was the first time in my life I'd been around mostly white people. I kind of hated it from the first couple weeks, because I would be sitting in like one of our little orientation groups and they're like, "Oh, my God, I've never seen this many Black people in one spot"—and there were like 10 Black people. I am immensely uncomfortable being in that kind of a setting. I did not like the social aspect at all. I didn't enjoy my time there in that way. I mean, I grew up in the city proper. Our income was low. I was definitely the most poor out of my group of friends. I'm so glad that I lived poor because I mean people just spend money on stuff and I can't understand it.

But [the classes] were very social justice oriented, so I was doing service all through college. I started doing service in middle school with the Junior Honor Society all the way through high school. And college educated me a lot about the—you know coming from not having a lot of money—but then learning about like systematic oppression and kind of worldwide issues like that. You kind of understand it a lot more, and so I really enjoy doing service and going out to help people that were probably in situations semi-close to mine when I was growing up.

While Erica (who is white) did not herself experience racism, she found it challenging to be in a university setting where she witnessed racist attitudes. In a sense, Erica verified the experience of racism described by African American participants in the study. She did experience bias regarding her socioeconomic status that was important enough to her life story to talk about it with strong emotion during the interview.

These comments on poverty and race underscore social structures on a systemic, macro level that had a profound impact on nearly all the participants in this study as they

sought to exercise biographicity. In addition to these systemic issues, more specific government policies and practices also had an impact in many of the life stories. The justice system, for example, had significant impact in a variety of ways: Rosa at a very young age was not protected by the police when she faced serious threats to her safety and was even terrorized by the police themselves when they came to her home; Thomas received a 1-year sentence under mandatory sentencing guidelines even though it was a first offense; Monica, while caring for her premature infant, was put in jail for 20 days because she could not pay for an outstanding traffic ticket or provide bail for her warrant. Leon, on the other hand, received favorable treatment during his gang activity, because police in the neighborhood and school officials knew that he was a good student. Monica and Anna reported that access to government-supported housing and other programs that support people with low incomes helped them to continue with their education. When Monica returned to college, she said, “I was able to maintain myself through the grace of [the government housing authority] and I thank them to this day because I don’t think I would be where I’m at now if it wasn’t for that program and that motivation because I could have stopped.” (Note: Monica noted that the program is underfunded and has a lottery for available spots. Few eligible citizens are able to receive this housing support.) Monica’s comment provides a link to the notion that social structures at the micro, meso, and macro levels also are closely linked to the participants’ descriptions of life experiences that demonstrate autonomy and heteronomy.

Patterns of Autonomy/Heteronomy

The notions of autonomy and heteronomy clearly unfolded throughout the abductive interpretation of the life stories. Autonomy was defined in chapter 1 as freedom

from constraints that allows for the satisfaction of internal requirements (Di Paolo et al., 2010), and this freedom was evident in the interviews in descriptions of independence or personal empowerment. In my experience, teachers and others often assert that people who do not manage to shape their lives lack the necessary ambition to excel in school or in the workplace. It is, of course, impossible to separate autonomy from heteronomy (freedom within constraints) or “the positive freedom to do things one could not do, that one could not even imagine doing, if one were to remain in pure autonomy” (Steiner & Stewart, 2009, p. 531). The interplay between autonomy and heteronomy was apparent in all of the life stories as participants sought to overcome barriers in order to act according to their own needs and desires.

Perhaps the most notable example of *autonomy* is Constance, who developed an unusual degree of independence during the years she was homeschooled. Through pursuing her own interests while being held to high standards of performance, she described growing confidence in her ability to shape her own life. This was evident when she got to high school and was assertive in demanding alternatives from the school district that would help her meet her expectations and goals for her own education. And in a significant way, she exercised autonomy when she pushed back on the pressure to take a socially encouraged path in science and engineering through college and, after a period of reflection, determined that her own intellectual path should be in English and social science.

In a related way, Brandon attributed his “success” to experiences of autonomy when his mother gave him family responsibilities at an early age, when he became a school crossing guard, or when his uncle included him in teamwork experiences. Brandon

described these experiences as a result of others seeing innate *leadership traits* in him that they nurtured. And yet Brandon also described the interplay between autonomy and heteronomy throughout his story, emphasizing with strong emotion the ways in which he overcame barriers to shape his life. Brandon, too, was unprepared academically for the private university he attended, and he described how heteronomy helped him to overcome this significant barrier:

My freshman year I gave my first speech in English—everybody is laughing at me, he-he-ha-ha. I'm like "What is going on?" You know, I like to be funny and the jokester, but I'm *trying* to get an A. I'm like there's nothing funny—it was not a humor speech I was giving. They were laughing because I couldn't articulate well. I couldn't articulate so I was the laughing stock. Yeah—so now years later I get *paid* to speak. It was like—I can be somewhat devastated, but I'm not one who wallows in depression, though. I just use it as motivation. I was disappointed in myself, I would say, and I just used it as motivation for me to succeed.

And then another thing, when I interned on Capitol Hill—speaking about weaknesses and deficiencies—one of my mentors knew that I wanted to go to law school so towards the end of the internship he asked me what was my goals? I said I wanted to go to law school and . . . he said, "I want you to go to community college when you get back [home] and take an English class to work on your writing skills." So I was like, "Wow. I must be a really poor writer." I never went to the community college—I just learned what my weaknesses were. So from that day forward he identified a weakness and I would simply work hard to address it. So I simply listened. And then after a while you start to pick up on success tips including the hints and you see a pattern—you just stick with it. When I get wisdom I listen—and then I implement.

Julia described a variation of autonomy and heteronomy in her long struggle with the bias and bullying she experienced in her schools because of her light skin color. In many ways she seemed to let this bullying defeat her desires to shape her own life, as when she said, "I know I could have been a better student. I know I had the ability to be a better student, but I just didn't like my surroundings. I didn't like being picked on." In order to overcome what she described as this barrier to her learning, Julia became very aggressive and *tough* and even got into physical fights when she or others were treated

poorly; however, eventually that toughness helped her to move away to a new city, redefine herself in a new context, and persevere through many significant barriers to complete college, begin graduate school, and define her desired life path.

In a similar way, all of the stories that were told under the thematic horizon of suffering demonstrated heteronomy when participants overcame startling barriers to biographicity. Rebecca, among other challenges, had an abusive husband who tried to keep her from graduating from high school, and she became the sole support for three sons, but she said, “So there’s things that I know what I don’t want and then I kinda know what I want but if another barrier or something comes in life that I can’t help—just gotta work around it.” After Marcus’s mother died, it seemed that all of the conditions in his life worked against his exercise of biographicity. He had no family support or structure, untreated health problems, little guidance in school, and extremely limited financial resources, and yet he managed to become a licensed practical nurse and continues to have future aspirations. He said, “I always say like I want to make my mother proud. I couldn’t call myself an older brother or a role model and have my [sister and brother] do better than me.”

Anna, like many other participants, observed her parents’ decisions and developed a strong sense of her ability to overcome barriers to avoid the lives her parents had led. Her mother taught her, “If you’re put in a position, you’re not trapped—because that was her downfall.” Her mother’s life also taught her to

Run for your life, because no one is going to take care of you. This is you. Do it. . . . And then like—because of my strategy [of observing other people and learning from their actions, what she called her *copying method*], I am able to adapt very quickly. I’m very flexible where other people aren’t comfortable in that setting. And always like my threshold for pain, I would say, is very high and

you know because there's been a lot of like trauma and dysfunction and abuse, and so I find that I'm able to continue on when others can't.

In this way, Anna, like other participants, portrayed barriers as “a gift and a curse” since the barriers themselves led to strengths that support biographicity. Returning to the theoretical explanation of autonomy and heteronomy in chapter 2, the participants described the “interplay of macro and micro change processes” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 41) that allow individuals to shape their lives in spite of the social and physical constraints that serve as limitations to their biographical actions.

Patterns of Sensemaking

Chapter 2 asserted that autonomy and heteronomy actually serve as catalysts for sensemaking activities that encourage individuals to exercise biographicity and that sensemaking is at the core of living. This notion appeared strongly in analysis of the life stories, as participants frequently used words like Rebecca did when she said, “That *makes sense* to me now” to describe how they were shaping their lives. Many participants described in detail the way in which they identified meanings in their experiences that led to personal growth and change (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Schwandt, 2005). These descriptions support the notion that sensemaking is an individual *common-sense-making device* that is grounded in individual storytelling activities (Colville et al., 2012) and the participants' life experiences for all of the participants in this study. As seen above, sensemaking is also a social, interactive activity.

Kayla provided the fullest description of what the literature referred to as *participatory sensemaking* (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, 2008) when she described the work she did during an internship that included formal work with a career coach:

She really helped me through a lot of the—I guess like the soul searching parts of, like, so who do you want to be and where do you want your life to be? And I was so not interested in that when I first met her. I was like: Here's my resume. Somehow we're going to clean this up and then where am I going to apply for jobs. She really forced me to take a step back and think about what, you know, what's your overall purpose in life, like what's your mission statement, what are your values, you know, where is it that you want to be, what's important to you in a work environment—like questions that I never really— Of all the things that I learned about how to move my career ahead, those weren't things that I had really thought about up until this point. So really to take a step back and try to redefine or really define for the first time “So where are you going?” like “Where is all this leading you to?” and “What's important for you along this journey?”

Kayla, unlike most of the participants, was exposed to such formal processes of sensemaking in a variety of experiences with effective community supports, but sensemaking was also evident in those who had little exposure to formal sensemaking exercises. Continual sensemaking was a key force for Jeremy, one of the most socially isolated participants in the study. His most significant experience of biographicity came when he processed his early experiences within the context of service learning:

I signed up for the [service learning] class. Went on the trip. Met a lot of people. Had a lot of fun. We worked with homeless in Memphis, and I'd say that's where I became who I am. I just got back from my tenth trip. [On one trip] we worked with kids in Boys and Girls Clubs and schools and tutoring them and just playing with them at the shelters and stuff like that. And just seeing how easy it is to help a kid who doesn't have it. You know, that's what kind of got me switching to social work from computer engineering.

Ah...probably—it was—the first time to Atlanta was the—about third year into engineering and then I took time off and right when I came back I switched to social work. So yes, and then . . . Then it's funny too because going into social work everyone is like “How are you going to make money?” [said mockingly], you know, “What do you want to do with your life?” And you can make any salary livable I think—you know, I'm not worried about that. I'd rather enjoy it, so. Yes, you meet a lot of cool people through that. My closest friends now are all from there. Well, I mean, first of all we all kind of—we're all in the volunteer group for a reason. . . . You all feel the same way about a goal. . . . The people that it attracts I can't think of anything negative about most of them.

After the interview was complete, Jeremy unexpectedly described his own sensemaking processes even more:

In terms of helping to understand . . . I think the biggest part of may be I'm doing this because I don't want to end up like my family, if that makes sense. I don't want to live the way they have to, you know. I mean my mom's had money issues, so I don't want that to be a thing. And I know going to school helps that, or having a good job helps that. Like I want everything to make sense—I don't like to plan things, but I still at the same time want it all to work and be okay when it happens. . . . Just money things and not being able to manage your life the right way—that's not what I want. Without planning specifics, I still want to be able to manage my life.

In a similar way, Rebecca summarized a clear approach to the sensemaking she used:

I've cried. Some days I just want to scream out and some days I want to give up, but I cannot do that. I know better than that. I definitely think I'm constantly having to reshape or rearrange things according to what keeps popping up. . . . I'm always thinking about the future and how I can make things better and improve on areas in my life to make it better for my kids.

When something has not gone the way I wanted it to go because of either barriers that are out of my control or decisions that I make myself, then I have to readjust and I have to say: Okay, this is where I'm at now, so what are my options? What do I need to do to get to where I want to go? Then I decide from there. . . . I just have to sit down and figure out what I need to do.

Rebecca's description of sensemaking echoes Weick's (2010) characterization: *I don't want it. I didn't anticipate it. I don't understand it.* Rebecca often reached new understanding and the ability to act from unexpected social interactions that could be described as participatory sensemaking, such as when a realtor helped her figure out how she could purchase a reliable home for her family. As described earlier as well, such chance processes had a powerful impact on Rebecca's ability "to address the challenges of contemporary life" (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 527), or sensemaking in the service of

action (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). In part, she attributed her ability to shape her life to some of the people who were paying attention and helped her in this way.

Angela provided another vivid example of sensemaking within her experience as a self-described introvert:

I've always been like an observant person even when I was like younger. I would just always observe things differently from most people. So just like observing people around me and how they were living and realizing I didn't want to live like that or I did want to live like that. And just thinking about—okay, how did they get there? And what am I going to [do to] be there—or not be there?

Many other participants described similar processes they went through when faced with challenges to their exercise of biographicity. The steps they took to make sense of their experiences corresponded to theoretical understandings of sensemaking and are summarized in Figure 7.

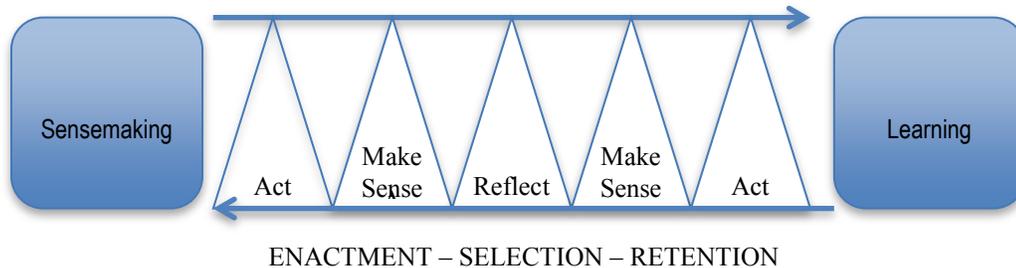


Figure 7. Experiences of sensemaking.

The elements of enactment, selection, and retention (Weick, 1979) aligned well with participants' descriptions of how they used experiences, events, or life circumstances as the starting place for sensemaking (enactment) that led to exploring and selecting alternative options (selection) and determining which alternatives would become part of their reshaped life going forward (retention). Participants described such cycles of action, followed by active attempts to make sense of their experience and varying degrees of

reflection on their biographical decisions (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, 2008). These iterative cycles (act, make sense, reflect) seemed to establish a clear link between learning and sensemaking as processes that supported biographicity.

In the literature review, such sensemaking processes were described as reflexivity that moves the individual from personal concerns to courses of action to shaping sustainable ways of living (Archer, 2007). It is important to note that some participants expressed frustration at the way they struggled to practice sensemaking in this way, as when Rosa said,

Some days I would wake feeling like I wanted to change a part of myself—not knowing why I wanted to change that part of myself. I just knew it would be a better decision than the decisions I had been making all along. Because along the course of life you see the results of the poor decisions that you make over and over and over again. It's kind of like you just go into a repetitive cycle.

. . . You're presented with different options every single day of how you want to go about the course of life and based off of experience, based off of influence—whether it be people, whether it be your past, whether it be an environment, whether it be a job—based off of that will have greater influence on which choice you choose to make. It's kind of like the heart is shaped for you. . . . I don't see it that I shaped my life by myself.

My survival ended up coming when I came here [her church community]. I just think if it wasn't for this place, I wouldn't have been able to overcome. . . . I just feel like some things probably would have never changed. I probably would have still been unhappy, still been unfulfilled. . . . We understand that when we first come into this *walk*. . . . We have been molded or shaped by the world. Growing up, the world just in general teaches you to be *self*-motivated, *self*-empowered, *self*-this, *self*-that. Maybe it's a more cultural thing. . . . You don't really need anybody else, and so there are different things out there that mold you and shape you. . . . So when you come in here you have to have that time for people to just truly observe and look and see . . . and that's not an easy thing to do, especially with the younger generation, because we've experienced so much, there's so much that we see, there's so much that we're exposed to—different hurt and different pain and different situations. If you talk to any of those people upstairs [in the church service taking place at the time of the interview], they can all give you more powerful stories than the one that I have. . . .

You don't have to get so angry or so upset, or practice something such as patience—you don't see too much in the world anymore—you know, having joy in the midst of any situation, being diligent, being accountable. . . . But of course you have people around you who have examples right before you that show you that it is possible. . . . You couldn't tell me [a lot of changes] were possible until I'd seen someone else do it, . . . but the belief comes in and the action. Do you know what I mean?

Rosa emphasized the religious elements of this sensemaking process, but her powerful story of dramatic change in her life suggested that participatory sensemaking, particularly in an environment that promotes active engagement with others, supports and promotes the individual's exercise of biographicity.

Patterns of Recognition

All of these patterns of meaning have created an increasingly complex picture of how participants managed to shape and reshape their lives according to their own needs and desires, and important new questions emerged for me from the layers of abductive analysis. The first was how *free* were these individuals to shape their lives? To consider this question, I explored the literature anew and returned to Dewey's (1922) chapter entitled "What Is Freedom?" In it, Dewey wrote what could be considered a definition of biographicity as well as freedom: "To foresee future objective alternatives and to be able by deliberation to choose one of them and thereby weight its chances in the struggle for future existence, measures our freedom" (Kindle Edition, 2688). Dewey connected his notion of freedom to Hegel's metaphor of the ox and the yoke and concluded that if individuals do not identify with the barriers they face (the yoke) but rather with the possibilities of the harvest (biographicity), they act freely and, in fact, are no longer pushed from behind, but rather "walk in the light" (2688). The participants certainly demonstrated the capacity to shape their lives in this way, as shown by their emotional

resilience, their practice of autonomy/heteronomy, and their sensemaking in spite of the considerable challenges they faced.

But a second question also emerged: Are there overarching factors that allow individuals to engage in these practices and, thus, exercise biographicity? While the factors already explored in this chapter are strongly connected to this notion of freedom (and the conceptual framework of this study), the abductive analysis kept returning to a question of why these patterns of biographicity matter and whether there are preconditions required for them to support biographicity. As the abductive analysis evolved, the way in which participants shaped their lives seemed to depend “on the quality of the relational process combining human dignity and self-respect with reciprocal respect and recognition” (Formenti, 2014, p. 22).

I kept returning to the fact that so many participants attributed their ability to shape their lives based on what they knew they *did not* want in their lives—they *did not* want to be like their parents. Honneth (1995, 2014a) explored Hegel’s philosophy and Mead’s emphasis on intersubjectivity to assert that such negativity is important because it allows the individual to look more critically at his or her own social context in order to be open to change, and Honneth’s work suggests a potential link to biographicity through the theory of recognition that he developed in depth.

Honneth’s theory of recognition is particularly applicable to the participants in this study, who experienced broad and complex challenges to their ability to shape their lives. Anderson (1995), the translator of Honneth’s work, summarized the theory in this way:

The possibility of sensing, interpreting, and realizing one’s needs and desires [exercising biographicity] . . . depends crucially on the development of self-

confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself can only be acquired and maintained intersubjectively, through being granted recognition by others whom one also recognizes. As a result, the conditions for self-realization turn out to be dependent on the establishment of relationships of mutual recognition. These relationships go beyond (a) close relations of love and friendship to include (b) legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, and (c) networks of solidarity and shared values within which the particular worth of individual members of a community can be acknowledged. (pp. xi-xii)

The experiences described in participants' life stories link to this theory of recognition to provide an overarching way to consider all of the other factors described above that had an impact on the exercise of biographicity for participants in this study. Honneth (1995) explored the particular challenges of what the study has described as a marginalized population when he referred to

the specific vulnerability resulting from the internal interdependence of individualization and recognition, which both Hegel and Mead helped to illuminate. Because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being—his or her 'me,' as Mead put it—is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others. (p. 131)

Forms of recognition. This notion of recognition, indeed, seems to provide a practical way to draw together the various thematic horizons and patterns of meaning that have emerged through the life stories under an organizing theoretical umbrella. Houston and Dolan (2008) provided a table that further defined the three primary elements of recognition: primary relationships of positive regard, legal rights, and acknowledgment from the community (Table 10). These three levels of recognition also correspond to the micro, meso, and macro levels of social interaction described above, but they are viewed as specific influences on the way that individuals see themselves and operate in their own world.

Table 10
Honneth's Three Forms of Recognition Linked to Social Supports

Forms of recognition	(1) Primary relationships of positive regard	(2) Legal rights	(3) Acknowledgment by the community
Mode of recognition	Providing emotional care through friendship or supportive relationships	Granting and upholding a person's legal rights	Social validation of a person's talents, interests, strengths, and contributions to the community
Potential outcomes	Enhanced resilience and self-confidence	Rights can be developed and universalised in law, enhancing a person's self-respect	Enhanced self-efficacy and self-esteem
Forms of misrecognition	All forms of abuse: physical, emotional, sexual	Denial of rights and exclusion	Denigration and insult
Threats to self from misrecognition	Threat to physical and emotional integrity	Threat to social integrity	Threat to social standing and dignity amongst peers
Linked aspects of social support	Perceived and available emotional and therapeutic support	Perceived and available concrete, material, and advice support	Perceived and available esteem support

Note. From Houston & Dolan, 2008, p. 463.

Examples from the life stories illustrate each of these categories. The use of the words *positive regard*, for example, describes experiences of participants across vastly different life events. Brandon described the unfailingly positive sense of regard or recognition he experienced from his large extended family. He said, "When we came together, it was all love." At the other extreme, Thomas described a mother who was devoted to working hard to provide for his physical needs, but was almost entirely absent from any supportive interaction with him. Marcus experienced confusing combinations of regard and neglect: his mother gave him a solid foundation of regard until her death when he was 13, but he did not know who his father was until he was 11 years old. After his

mother's death he experienced severe neglect of his emotional and physical needs, including inattention to a serious health problem. Anna described her repeated attempts to connect with her extended family in Asia. They rejected her and actively humiliated her over and over again until she finally had to accept that she could not find the level of regard that she sought from them, eventually finding positive regard in her marriage and her professional relationships.

The life stories of "legal rights," as described in the section on social interactions at the macro level, highlighted the ways in which racism created societal misrecognition but also extended into personal and community-level social interactions. Honneth (1995) noted,

With the appropriation of the social norms regulating the cooperative nexus of the community, maturing individuals not only realize what obligations they have vis-à-vis members of society; they also become aware of the rights that are accorded to them in such a way that they can legitimately count on certain demands of theirs being respected. (p. 79)

The voices of participants asserted this same understanding of societal or legal recognition, not only through their descriptions of racism or socioeconomic bias, but also through the stories of the failures of the schools, of the system of financial aid for postsecondary education, and of supportive community responses to address their most basic needs for safety and fundamental human respect. They frequently expressed dismay and even outrage when they felt their basic rights were not respected (misrecognition), as when Angela complained, "Like the average kid, . . . there's really nobody there that's paying attention because they're either looking at the kids that rise above it or that have already dropped out."

For many participants in the study, the third form of recognition, acknowledgment by the community, seemed to provide the most powerful support for biographicity. The importance of mentorships and internships has already been explored, and it is clear that they provided high levels of community recognition for many participants. Participation in the arts and service learning also contributed experiences of recognition that had a close connection to belonging, as explored in chapter 4. As noted, for example, Jeremy was perhaps the most isolated participant in the study, with negligible personal recognition from his parents or extended family and weak institutional recognition (except in his grades) from schools; he said, “There was nothing there.” As a white male, he did not experience societal racism, but he did lack access to resources that could support college costs plus living expenses since he was wholly independent from his family. The dramatic change in his exercise of biographicity came when he became engaged with service learning activities that helped him develop “the positive attitude towards oneself that one is capable of taking if one is recognized by the members of one’s community as being a particular kind of person” (Honneth, 1995, p. 79). Jeremy said,

From the groups that we work with down there that organize us—you know, the appreciation that they have. My most recent was like my fourth Habitat trip that I’ve done, and meeting the families and how appreciative they are that you’re coming for a week to help work on their home. Stuff like that is what really—you know, it was significant about me and just during that week that I’m gone every time I’ve done it—like it’s one of the best weeks ever and the week after, this past week, sucks because you miss it so much.

Constance provided a unique but informative synthesizing example of how the three forms of recognition contributed to her exercise of biographicity throughout her life story:

- Constance’s parents contributed to her ability to see herself as a particular kind of valued person when they entrusted her with taking major responsibility for her own homeschooling beginning when she was only 8 years old. Her mother interacted with her in a supportive manner, but she was given the freedom (autonomy) to pursue her own interests. She said, “I had a really close family that kind of let me find my own way but also supported me.” (Primary relationship of positive regard)
- When she started traditional high school, she quickly recognized that she had a right to a better education than the one offered by the district. With a small bit of support from some older students, she insisted on her right to a junior college program, and eventually the district supported her to complete an associate’s degree while still in high school. (Legal rights)
- She began volunteering at a hospice when she was only 12 years old and was given responsibility and was valued as part of the team all through high school. She continued in a variety of what she called “explorations” in community programs that expanded her networks of recognition and important social supports. (Acknowledgment by the community)
- At a key juncture in her college career, she decided to take a semester off to care for her dying grandmother. She described the mutually beneficial time they shared. After the encouragement of her grandmother and the time of reflection, she said, “By that point I felt like a different person. I felt I had changed a lot.” (Personal regard)

- She struggled to overcome the assumptions related to recognition that people held for her: “Because people felt I was a smart kid, they pushed me in a direction and I had interesting experiences. But it also gets in the way of what you really might want to do with your life. . . . A lot of people think smart black kids need to be a doctor or maybe an engineer. . . . Then they can say, oh, they helped this kid become this amazing thing and they kind of think the other things which aren’t as cool aren’t as amazing and aren’t as challenging.” These experiences actually became a form of misrecognition that she had to make sense of in order to shape her life according to her own needs and desires. (Acknowledgment by the community)

Links between recognition and other patterns of meaning. The theory of recognition also aligned with the previously discussed patterns of meaning, since Honneth (1995) stressed that recognition must link cognition and emotion with social interaction. He asserted that structures that lead to recognition include family and other experiences of love, in which “our inner nature is set free by mutual confirmation” (Honneth, 2014b, Kindle Edition 2596 of 11807); civil society, where the individual gains formal autonomy and respect through basic rights that “allow one to stand up and look another in the eye and to feel in a basic way that one is equal to everyone else” (Houston & Dolan, 2008, p. 461); and the community, which validates the unique contribution each person can make. In short, the theory of recognition provides a way to reformulate the patterns of meaning that this chapter has explored and becomes a sensemaking device for synthesizing the ways in which these individuals have shaped and reshaped their lives. Using this notion, Table 11 (adapted from Houston & Dolan,

2008) presents a combined profile of elements of the participants' life stories that relate to experiences of recognition or misrecognition.

Table 11
Summary of Recognition/Misrecognition Experiences Described in the Life Stories

Forms of recognition	Primary relationships of positive regard	Legal/universal rights	Acknowledgement by the community
Experiences of recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental love, stability, and support • High parental expectations • Love and/or support from extended family • Friends • Caring teachers • Mentors • Other individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate education, including high expectations for individual performance • Right to a respectful environment, free from racial/ SES bias • Access to safety net services • Public safety • Health care, including mental health services and addiction care • Financial support for post-secondary education • Questions regarding the importance of pay for internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighborhood • Positive school experiences — validation for performance; personal interests encouraged • Acceptance in social contexts; opportunities for social affiliation • Church experiences • Gang as “brotherhood” • Meaningful work available (including internships) • Community service • Experiences in the arts • Leadership opportunities • Merit scholarships
Examples of recognition related to biographicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Within my immediate surroundings it was nothing but love and positivity” (Brandon). • “Constance and I were each other’s backbones” (Shawnika). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I got fortunate to have some great professors who . . . said we’re going to work with you” (Kayla). • “I don’t think I’d be where I am now if it wasn’t for [free government housing]” (Monica). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I just think if it wasn’t for this place [her church] I wouldn’t have been able to overcome” (Rosa). • “This job has connected me with a lot of people who network and who really do care about you” (Sara).

Forms of recognition	Primary relationships of positive regard	Legal/universal rights	Acknowledgement by the community
Experiences of misrecognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental/guardian neglect • Other types of rejection within family structure • Lack of basic safety • Childhood experiences of poverty • Sexual, physical abuse/bullying • Alcohol/drug abuse in family or self • Indifference from teachers • Untreated physical/psychological problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% inadequately prepared for postsecondary learning • Unavailable, burdensome (loans), or fraudulent financial support for education • Barriers to safety net support • Experiences of bias • Health services unavailable (including mental health and addiction); lack of health services for their children • Judicial issues—mandatory incarceration; lack of police protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure of community to provide protection from bullying/bias/humiliation • Experiences of negative bias (racism, classism) in social contexts • Workplaces that did not provide validation or opportunities for growth • Lack of support from classroom teachers
Examples of misrecognition related to barriers to biographicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You’re going to be just like every other pregnant teen girl in here; you’re just going to drop out” (Rebecca). • “I thought I was going crazy and I asked my mom to see a counselor. . . . She said no” (Patricia). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I knew that one pill was a felony, but I didn’t know that 10 pills is automatically a year in jail” (Thomas). • “Even if I have to pay the government for the rest of my life [for loans], I’ll figure it out” (Julia). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I got involved back into the environmental factors of the neighborhood and with the gang banging” (Leon). • “I got into a [school of practical nursing], but I was sick one day. I missed a test which threw my GPA off. I got kicked out” (Marcus).

It is important to note that in the life stories of participants, recognition did not stem from praise or superficial affirmation, but rather was the result of meaningful

experiences that demonstrated a person's ability to contribute in a unique and substantive way to the family, the school, or the community. Important questions about justice also became evident through this lens. One such example described earlier was that only four participants were paid for their work in internships, and the money they earned contributed to their ability to continue their education, while others who participated in internships saw them as helpful, but did not gain any financial support.

Configurations of recognition. Another way of looking at the life stories in relation to experiences of recognition is to develop a snapshot or configuration as described in Chapter 3 of each participant's story in *relation to* primary relationships of positive regard, legal rights, and acknowledgment by community. I attempted to develop an inter-subjective interpretation of each participant's experiences of recognition in these three forms based on the abductive analysis of each life story. Using the accumulated interpretations I had made throughout the abductive process, I asserted the level of recognition in each of these categories that each participant seemed to experience relative to other participants in the study. For each form of recognition, I asked myself how much of each form of recognition each participant experienced, if recognition could be measured on a scale of 1 to 10. The danger of this approach is that it is a quantitative assessment of something that was not measured through a quantitative instrument in this study; and yet it seemed essential to develop an intersubjective sense of how much personal, societal, and community recognition had influenced each person's exercise of biographicity based on the understanding I had accumulated. While these profiles in no way suggest scientific accuracy, they do represent an informed interpretation that provides a comparative look at recognition as a factor in the life stories. As Alheit (2013)

said, “It is not the varying numerical distribution of the profiles . . . but rather their content-related relationship” (p. 5), grounded in the abductive interpretation of the interviews. The way that I explored this question with Thomas and Erica serves to illustrate how the process worked (Table 12).

Table 12
Sample Process for Configuration of Recognition

Form of recognition	Thomas	Erica
Personal regard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not know his father. • Mother focused on physical needs, but otherwise unengaged. • No connection with extended family except for two brief connections. • Negative influence of older brother. • Significant friend reached out to him repeatedly to invite him to church. • Recent, positive relationships with pastor and GED teacher in prison. Level of recognition: 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents together until age 12, when she experienced a disruption in support. • Father very supportive of her early learning. • Very positive relationships with individual teachers beginning at a young age; “people always took a liking to me.” • Consistent network of close friends in neighborhood schools. Level of recognition: 8
Legal rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Except for 1 year, <i>invisible</i> in school system; led to very weak academic skills. • Dropped out of high school in senior year because he could not pass state graduation test; no support provided. • Mandatory sentence for first-time offense for possession of just over 10 pills; received GED while in prison. • No support for post-incarceration return to community. Level of recognition—1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More prepared for postsecondary education than other participants; positive experiences in gifted education. • Early access to financial aid opportunities and college access support. • Experiences of violence in middle school. • Awareness of social justice/rights through school experiences; awareness of racism in university life. Level of recognition: 9
Community acknowledgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kept the same fast food job 3+ years beginning at age 16; held the same warehouse job since released from prison. • Valued member of church community; invited to live with group of young men from church. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent validation of her role in the school community, including academic success. • Leadership opportunities from young age; president of drama club. • Frequent high-quality internships. • Positive job experiences.

Level of recognition: 5

• Involvement in the arts and service.

Level of recognition: 10

This process was repeated for each of the participants, and the results were compiled in Figure 8 to provide a very preliminary configuration of biographicity as it can be seen relative to experiences of recognition.

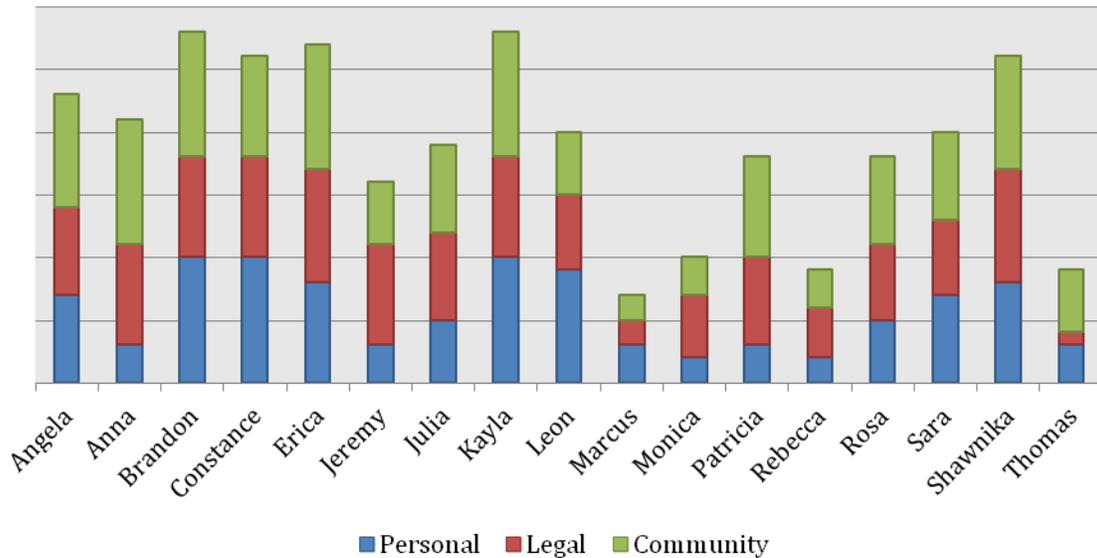


Figure 8. Recognition profiles of participants.

Participants who described more experiences of recognition in their lives (Angela, Brandon, Constance, Erica, Kayla, and Shawnika) seemed to tell stories that emphasized greater satisfaction with their life outcomes, and perhaps more adept exercise of biographicity. Those with the least recognition in their lives (Marcus, Monica, Rebecca, and Thomas) struggled more to get to where they are today and described the least satisfaction with how their current situation matches their own needs and desires. Each of them still described significant barriers to their exercise of biographicity. Those in the middle group of recognition (Anna, Jeremy, Julia, Leon, Patricia, Rosa, and Sara) were satisfied with their progress (all but Jeremy held an undergraduate degree), but the path to

meeting their needs and desires was more problematic and they described a number of unresolved issues that seemed to be related to their ongoing need for recognition.

This exploration of a shared qualitative and quantitative configuration provided a thinking space to achieve additional abductive interpretation according to the view described in Chapter 3. More than anything, the theory of recognition, which was not part of the original conceptual framework for this study, presented an important dimension that merits further study to determine how it might affect the exercise of biographicity.

Patterns of Emergence

A clear pattern of meaning was evident in the life stories that aligned with the notion of emergence, defined in chapter 1 as self-constituting behavior (Adams, 2010). Emergence (like autonomy, heteronomy, emotion, and sensemaking) is part of enaction, which was defined in chapter 1 as “an emerging paradigm in cognitive science” (Di Paolo et al., 2010) that asserts that human beings enact their lives in the “daily business of living” (Stewart, 2010, p. 27), just as the participants in this study enacted their lives to achieve their own needs and desires. In fact, the various views of emergence embedded in the participants’ stories seem to support Kohli’s (1981) and Alheit’s (1992) use of the term *emergence* to describe how individuals move toward future actions and actually enact their world, using biographical resources. Theoretical understandings of emergence align particularly well with the ways in which people increase their capacity to imagine a different life through their life experiences and the way they come to relate their life narratives (Caracciolo, 2012), as the abductive analysis of this study revealed in the lives of participants.

Shawnika's story provides a synthesizing example of how emergence and biographicity are linked. As described in chapter 4, while Shawnika had strong support for education in her early childhood, that support diminished drastically when her mother died and she went to live as an unwelcome addition to her father's large family. She said that she had little, if any, sense of what was possible for her life path ahead. She managed to attend community college while in high school, but it wasn't until she participated in a research program at a major university that she had any idea what was possible for her. Even though that possibility was kindled, she still might not have gone on to a doctoral program in advanced engineering without supports that led her to increasing levels of emergence:

- She engaged in hands-on research as a high school student and was listed as a coauthor on a peer-reviewed article before she graduated from high school.
- Because of poor academic preparation, her classroom performance in college was weak, but she engaged in lab research that allowed her to see herself as a successful problem solver.
- She developed skills that allowed her to overcome her academic weaknesses by using experiential learning to reinforce theoretical learning.
- She developed social networks that not only supported her progress in her field, but also introduced her to engagement in service to support other minority students.
- Growing awareness of her story and her own ability to relate that story led to her acceptance into a fully funded doctoral program and opportunities to be connected at the national level in her field.

In short, Shawnika, like other participants in the study, was the embodiment of emergence in which “we enact a world of significance (on the production side)—or we imaginatively enact the ‘storyworlds’ generated by other human beings (on the reception side)” (Caracciolo, 2012, p. 368). After considering the processes of the life course, the thematic horizons, and the patterns of meaning of all participants, the connection to the conceptual framework of this study becomes increasingly clear through the notion of emergence. In all of the stories, in fact, participants described how organic combinations of the elements of the framework supported them to shape and reshape their lives according to their own needs and desires or to illustrate *how they have exercised biographicity*.

Relationship of Findings to Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Configurations

The conceptual framework that was asserted in chapters 1 and 2 (Figure 9) gradually seemed more and more accurate in the unfolding life story data. First, the framework suggested that biographicity is “a learning ground” (Alheit, 1992, p. 187), defined in part as learning projects and processes that relate directly to the learner’s own experiences and promote the individual’s own needs and desires (Alheit, 1994b), and its meaning is linked to views that see each individual as a genuine lifelong learner (Alheit & Dausien, 2002a and b). It appears from the analysis of data that such processes of *learning* have, in fact, played a role in the exercise of biographicity, particularly in the combination of cognition, emotion, and social interaction analyzed as patterns of meaning in this chapter. Second, the elements of *enaction* (defined earlier as an emerging paradigm of cognitive science)—emotion, sensemaking, autonomy/heteronomy, and

emergence—have also emerged as strong patterns of experience and meaning in the data. The theoretical framework, then, needs to be examined in more detail in order to answer the research questions and reach conclusions. It might be said that the conceptual framework actually provided the *tertium comparationis* or that Alheit (2013) suggested is needed in order to establish a comparative understanding of the life experiences of participants within the biographical methodology of this study.

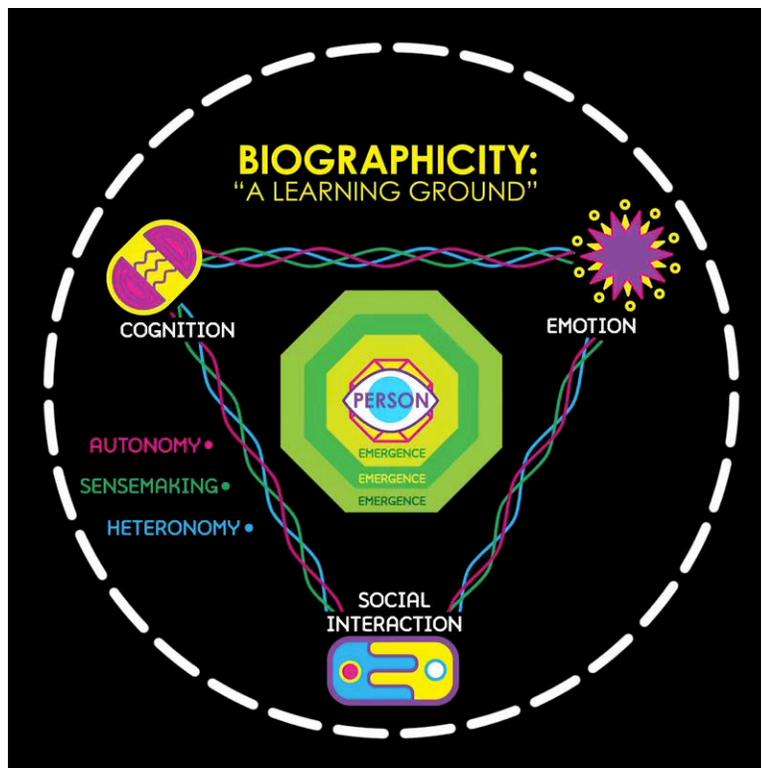


Figure 9. Conceptual framework revisited.

Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Domains of Learning

The relationship among the three domains of learning was explored in the literature review, and the problem statement suggested that *holistic* learning might be the

way to describe how these three domains work together to support biographicity. Chapter 2 asserted that biographical learning may happen at the *intersection* of these three domains, and they were presented as equal sides of a triangle. The stories themselves, however, presented a somewhat different picture of how learning and biographicity are related and may require a different way of describing biographical learning, a picture that shows shifting patterns of learning in the three domains with greater emphasis on emotion and social interaction.

Cognition in its traditional meaning of knowledge and skills rooted in content was not a dominant factor in the stories. Even seriously deficient experiences of cognition *limited* biographicity, but did not *prevent* it. The emotional domain, on the other hand, was described in much more detail in the stories, particularly when participants encountered normative *disruptions* that were described in the patterns of emotional meaning revealed in the abductive analysis. It appears that the greater the emotional disruptions in their lives, the more difficult it was for participants to exercise biographicity. While positive and ambivalent emotions also influenced biographicity and could be mobilized to overcome negative emotions, the extent of disruptions best captured the relative importance of this domain for this group of individuals. Finally, those participants who described the most comprehensive and effective social interactions, linked to recognition, also described the greatest ease in exercising biographicity and appeared to be most satisfied with the outcomes of shaping their lives.

Rather than presenting a picture of learning happening in all domains at the same time or at the intersection of cognition, emotion, and social interaction as depicted in the framework, the stories told by the participants in this study suggest that while all three

domains are at work within each life story, the experience of each domain varies quite dramatically and biographical outcomes are impacted by these varied experiences within and across individuals.

It appears that the notion of *holistic* learning is not precise enough in the way suggested at the outset of the study. Rather, it appears that the enactive paradigm contributes important additional understanding to the way participants describe their learning, demonstrating that biographicity has developed across domains as described in chapter 1:

The mind is inherent in the precarious, active, normative, and worldly process of animation, that the body is not a puppet controlled by the brain but a whole animate system with many autonomous layers of self-constitution, self-coordination, and self-organization and varying degrees of openness to the world that create its sense-making activity. (Di Paolo, Rohde, & De Jaegher, 2010, p. 42)

Rather than holistic learning, the learning that supports biographicity in these participants might better be named *enactive* learning, and biographicity might actually be called an *enactive learning ground*. The notion of enaction puts appropriate emphasis on the fact that action is at the heart of biographicity and that learning guides each person's biographical actions within her or his particular life context (Varela et al., 1993). As the life stories have revealed, the participants in this study were the authors of their own evolving biography in spite of the complex challenges of living in a so-called marginalized space. Over and over again, their learning within and from their life experiences led to action, indeed to *enaction* of new ways of being in the world (Caracciolo, 2012).

The interpreted lives that emerged in the study reflect the varying ease with which participants learned cognitively, affectively, and socially in ways that supported the

process of shaping their lives. Close examination of the patterns of learning that emerged in the abductive analysis indeed suggests that these patterns are another important configuration of biographicity that helps to answer the research questions. These patterns involved three domains:

- *Cognition*. While all participants said they were not prepared for college, they described varying degrees of knowledge and skills they had developed. In effect, each provided a sense of how strong their cognitive experiences were and to what extent their cognitive situation supported the ease with which they exercised biographicity.
- *Emotional disruption*. All participants described positive, negative, and ambivalent emotions, and all described emotional disruptions of varying kinds. As described in the patterns of meaning, these emotions contributed to their learning in ways that supported or limited their exercise of biographicity. In analyzing these patterns in detail, it seemed that the ease of shaping one's life was affected by the extent of emotional disruptions that the person faced.
- *Social interaction/recognition*. The social domain of learning was an important factor in the exercise of biographicity for all participants. The extent of social support was explored in the configuration of recognition above and was also evident in the extent to which social structures and individuals contributed to learning that promoted biographicity in the participants.

In order to understand the relationships among these three domains of learning, I used a comparative, interpretive exercise similar to the one described above for the configurations of recognition. Using the repeated individual and group condensations

developed throughout the abductive analysis of data, I first made an intersubjective judgment of the ease (high, medium, or low) with which each individual had reshaped her/his life. Then I considered how the individuals in each of these groups of participants experienced the three domains of learning (cognition, emotional disruptions, social interaction/recognition) as told in their life stories. In this way, intersubjective configurations emerged that suggested how each of the domains of learning varied in relationship to the ease of exercising biographicity (Figure 10).

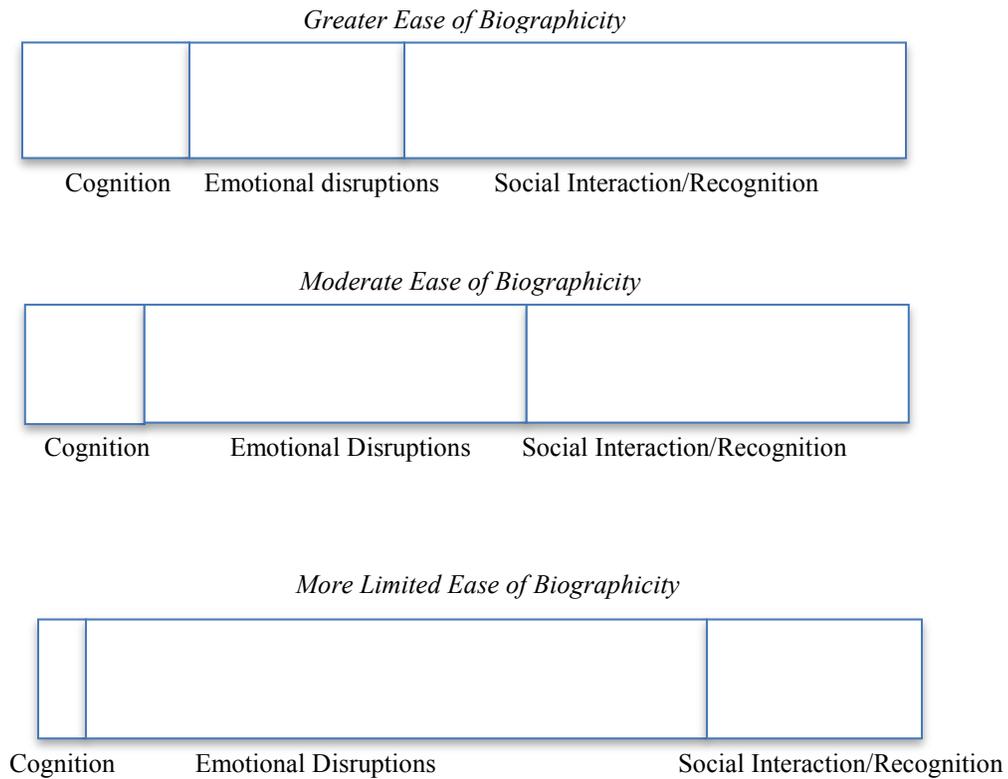


Figure 10. Configurations of learning and biographicity.

By grouping participants according to their ease of exercising biographicity and their satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with the way they have shaped their lives, the

differences in patterns of learning across these domains became clearer. Analyzing the life stories in this way supports the notion that different configurations of learning support biographicity more or less effectively. The resulting configurations of learning describe the variable combination of learning processes that interact with life experience and are then integrated into behavior that *constitutes* shaping or reshaping one's life. For example, fewer emotional disruptions, coupled with greater traditional cognition and more experiences of social interaction/recognition are related to greater ease of biographicity as opposed to the high level of emotional disruptions coupled with weak cognitive and social experiences for those with the most limited ease of biographicity.

This very preliminary representation of the impact of the three domains of learning on biographicity may serve as a foundation for further quantitative or qualitative research in order to understand these effects more fully.

The Role of the Enactive Paradigm in Biographicity

The reformulated view of biographicity as an enactive learning ground provides a richer understanding of how learning within the three domains supports the capacity for biographical action, but nevertheless it remains an incomplete theoretical lens for what actually led to the exercise of biographicity for the participants in this study. The abductive analysis revealed that elements of the enactive paradigm as described in chapter 2 (autonomy, heteronomy, and sensemaking) were required for individuals to move into new life paths. The study of this paradigm has primarily focused on the science of the mind and body, but it also suggests that more can be done to link recent learnings in cognitive science to more practical applications in sociology, education, and psychology (Voros, 2014). While the conceptual framework proposed for the study

represented these factors as supportive to the learning process, the life stories actually emphasized them as equally important factors in the exercise of biographicity.

Experience. The life stories made me realize that *experience* was one element of the enactive paradigm (Varela et al., 1991; Stewart, 2010) that I did not stress in the literature review, assuming that the biographical focus of the study demonstrated its importance. The stories I heard, however, underscored the central, ongoing importance of the life experiences and contexts that each person encountered as essential contributors to enaction as “we go about our daily business of living” (Stewart, 2010, p. 27). Each participant described the “continuous use of common sense or background know-how” (Varela et al., 1991, p. 147) they employed based on their life experiences. Even when overall learning contexts and events seemed to be similar, outcomes were not the same because particular life experiences had a profound impact on biographicity.

Shawnika and Marcus provide a good example: they grew up in the same household and were on a similar track in gifted education programs, but after their change in context upon their mother’s death, their divergent experiences and their ensuing processing of those experiences led them to shape their lives in dramatically different ways. In a related example, Thomas seemed headed for a life without even a high school education, dealing drugs, but with a notion of wanting something better until his arrest and unexpected connection to a welcoming church community provided similarly life-changing experiences. It isn’t enough to consider the assumptions that are held for the life experiences of a particular group of people; it is essential to take into account the *specific* life experiences of each individual. In short, each person’s unique

experiences need to be an essential element of any framework describing how people exercise biographicity.

Participatory sensemaking. Participatory sensemaking has been described as an essential element in all of the stories as participants engaged in reflexive activities through which they examined their circumstances, understood options, and chose new circumstances that better met their needs and desires (Archer, 2007; Rustin, 2000).

Participatory sensemaking appeared in the life stories as a “process of ‘self and social questioning (reflexivity)’ that allows individuals to work together to address the challenges of contemporary life” (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 527). The stories confirmed that the need for support to *make sense* of one’s life is another essential element of how people exercise biographicity.

While the original framework for this study relegated sensemaking to an activity that supported learning, it became clear in the abductive analysis that sensemaking contributes more directly to learning and needs to be seen as an ongoing, specifying activity that is essential to the exercise of biographicity. The life stories were filled with examples of the participants making sense of their lives:

- Anna continually interacted with others to make sense of her place in the confusing cultural components of her life. She worked through her need to belong in a variety of contexts in which she observed and interacted with others, experimented with how she wanted to be in the world, and shaped her life to satisfy her needs and desires. She used some of her biggest cultural challenges to shape her current path of creating a school that is grounded in the exploration of cultures.

- Angela, a self-described introvert, interacted with individuals at key points of transition who helped her consider her options and shape her professional and personal path.
- Monica moved beyond the chaos of her life experiences and engaged in sensemaking activities, first to address the problems of her premature child who had special needs and later to address issues in her own life, shaping it to support her own needs and desires.

Through these examples, it becomes evident that while learning is related to sensemaking, it is also a particular kind of activity that does not simply support learning, but rather interacts with complex learning processes that lead to the reshaped or redesigned life.

Autonomy/heteronomy. Autonomy and heteronomy also played a supporting role to learning in the original framework for this study. Even after the full course of abductive analysis in this study, *autonomy/heteronomy* remained the most intangible, and even elusive, element of a theoretical understanding of biographicity, and yet nearly all of the participants described instances in which they exercised surprising freedom to enact their lives within the constraints or barriers they faced. The target group for this study was individuals who believe they have shaped their own lives, and it is clear that everyone who participated believed they were capable of acting to change their lives (autonomy) at some point. Even those with the greatest ongoing challenges still asserted that they hoped to overcome continuing barriers to freedom, which confirms that autonomy/heteronomy is a specifying factor in the process of biographicity that has equal

status with learning, experience, and sensemaking in a theoretical framework of *how people reshape and redesign their lives* and in the notion of an ecology of learning.

Emergence. Finally, the notion of *emergence* provides an accurate depiction of the reshaped or redesigned life as it has been described by participants. It describes the ways in which the individuals in this study not only reshaped the details of their lives, but also engaged in “self-constituting behavior” (Adams, 2010) that formed a new version of *living* for each individual. In alignment with the lens provided by the enactive paradigm, emergence is the description of how people *enact* a new, redesigned life. Emergence may actually provide a description of the outcome of biographicity and in fact of the evolving, repetitive outcomes when people “redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of [their] life within the specific contexts in which [they] (have to) spend it, and that they experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and ‘designable’” (Alheit & Dausien, 2007, p. 66).

In many ways, emergence as the final element of this reexamination of the conceptual framework returns the study to its introduction, which suggested that biographicity is a complex phenomenon that cannot be parsed in a linear manner, but rather requires a system of observation and description that can be used to understand how particular individuals can repeatedly reshape their lives in the unique contexts in which they live. Varela (1999) suggested these findings when he noted that each step in the life path of individuals “is neither simply determined nor simply planned. Instead, its constitution is a matter of the common-sensical emergence of an appropriate stance from the entire history of the agent’s life” (p. 11).

Biographicity: A Theoretical Reconfiguration

Thus, the study concludes that much of the conceptual framework initially asserted was, in fact, related to biographicity, but we have seen that important variations in the way that biographicity occurs emerged as well (including in the configurations of recognition and learning described above). These new understandings of *how young adults repeatedly engage in reshaping and redesigning their lives* are depicted in a new theoretical configuration (Figure 11) that seeks to capture the findings of this study, maintaining a strongly nonlinear theoretical view of the phenomenon of biographicity. It aligns with Alheit's (2013) description of qualitative results that "appear to be a configuration made up of a wealth of influencing factors" (p. 8) that in this case create the conditions that support biographicity.

In this way, the study has returned to Alheit's (1994b) notion of a *learning ecology* that supports individuals engaged in "reshaping structures and conditional frameworks" (p. 293) in order to promote their own needs and desires or the way in which individuals interact with their environment. In other words, biographicity requires conditions and processes within which the individual imagines and enacts a new way of being in the world. Rather than an approach that can be described as a clear set of actions and outcomes or a method to be deployed in a stepwise fashion, the results of the abductive analysis conclude that biographicity is a highly individualized and complex process that joins learning with key elements of the enactive paradigm to create an *enactive learning ecology* supportive of the evolving life of each person.

As depicted in this configuration (Figure 11), the essential elements of that ecology are (1) the unique life experiences of each person, (2) learning (cognition,

emotion, and social interaction), (3) participatory sensemaking, and (4) autonomy/heteronomy. The varied interactions of these elements happen for particular individuals, in particular ways, at particular times, and produce particular results or varied patterns of (5) emergence. Within this enactive learning ecology or configuration of biographicity, each person affirms his or her unique place in the world (recognition) and repeatedly reshapes the contours of his or her life. Biographicity happens as people engage in *living*

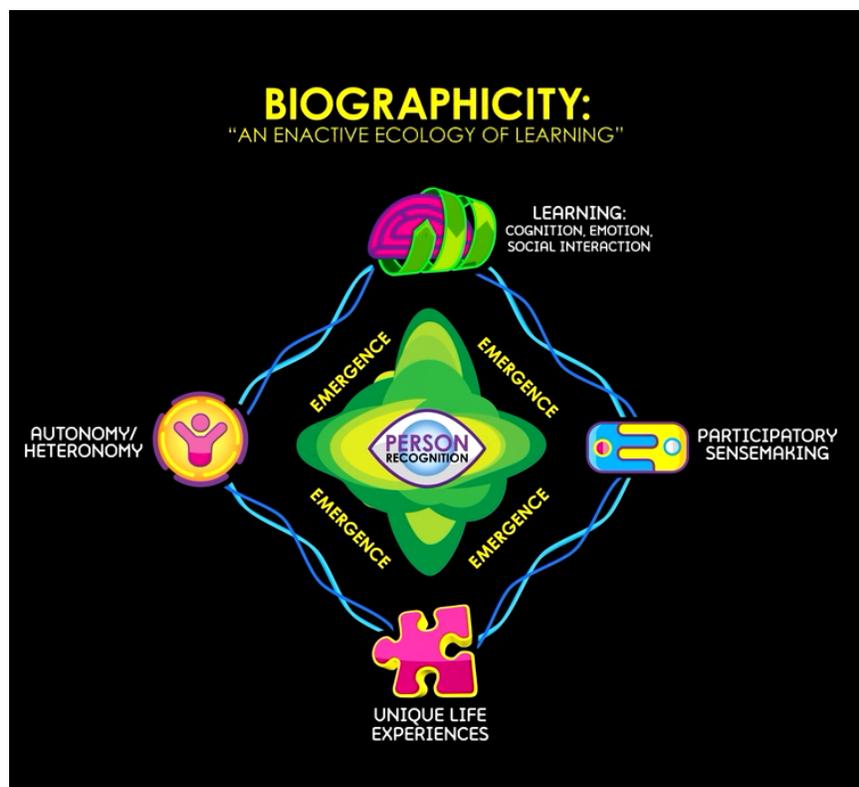


Figure 11. Reconfigured framework of biographicity.⁵ An animated version is available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/fhvun27axi8v0mg/Biographicity%20Configuration.mov?dl=0>

their lives in the material and social contexts in which they “have to” live them, *learning* while engaged in the contexts and circumstances of their lives, *making sense* of the

⁵ Stephen H. Fishman (macandcheez.com) supported the researcher to develop the design and animation of this configuration.

challenges and opportunities they experience, and *exercising freedom* to shape their lives, taking into account their own needs and desires. The people in this study, in fact, described varied patterns of living, learning, making sense, and exercising freedom as the description of *how* they produced emergence in their lives that aligned with the organic, animated nature of this configuration of biographicity that emerged from this study.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was motivated by concern for the challenges faced by young adults in the United States who live in communities where people have historically found themselves on the margins of society economically, socially, and educationally. It has become a taken-for-granted assumption, often promoted in popular media and among policymakers, that one of the biggest societal challenges of the day is the problem that too many people in such communities are not adapting to contemporary life demands. Yet little research has sought to understand what happens in the lives of people who *do* succeed in shaping their own lives in spite of contemporary challenges in order to satisfy their own needs and desires. This study sought to “uncover the real dynamic between structures and actors, between individual and society” (Alheit, 2013, p. 3) in order to link scholarship and practice to improve outcomes for others. The research methodology was designed to listen to the life stories of marginalized young adults who believed that they had redesigned their lives to meet their needs and desires and who believed they were capable of continuing to shape their lives into the future.

The primary research question, *How do young adults (particularly those from so-called marginalized populations) repeatedly engage in redesigning or reshaping their lives?*, has been answered throughout the abductive analysis of the life stories, supported by the two related questions: *What patterns of meaning and experiences of learning emerge in the stories of biographicity told by individuals?* and *In what ways do social structures support or limit the exercise of biographicity?* The answers to these questions have unfolded in the layers of analysis that included structural descriptions, process

structures of the life course, thematic horizons, patterns of meaning, and theoretical comparisons. This chapter synthesizes these unfolded findings by identifying conclusions and exploring implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. In alignment with the subjective/constitutive ontology asserted for this study, the chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the research process and results.

Conclusions

The overarching conclusion of the research is that the young adults who participated in this study all told stories about *beating the odds* in a community where barely half of young people graduate from high school and where multigenerational poverty serves a common norm. The abductive analysis uncovered increased understanding of how the participants managed to shape their lives according to their own needs and desires in spite of the many barriers they faced. The conclusions of the study reveal why that is and describe broad understandings of biographicity, as it emerged in the actual lives of participants.

Conclusion 1

Biographicity is a complex, organic process that cannot be reduced to simple characteristics, a clear, linear set of variables, or a simple guide to practice.

While the goal of the research methodology was to uncover configurations or types of biographicity, it became clear that a typology of biographicity did not, in fact, emerge. Rather, certain consistent elements became apparent that were essential to every participant's exercise of biographicity. The thematic horizons (expectations/imagining, suffering, belonging) provided patterns of experience and meaning but did not reveal

specific *types* of biographicity. Within each thematic horizon, however, varying combinations of factors contributed to participants' descriptions of how they shaped and reshaped their lives. Even within each of these similar themes, every participant described a continually moving interplay of elements that contributed to biographicity as it occurred over time and in changing contexts. While the research did not lead to a precise map of how young adults exercise biographicity, it did provide a configuration (Figure 11) that allows scholars and practitioners to understand biographicity as a complex phenomenon of human experience "in all its complexity and weave it as a unity with its many dimensions" (Varela & DePraz, 2003, p. 195).

This configuration, presented as an animated graphic, may provide an important new way to look at biographicity not as a noun, but as a verb. It is interesting that throughout the design, implementation, and reporting of this study, I used the phrase *exercise biographicity*, thus eschewing the word biographicity alone as a static label for what is a moving, organic phenomenon. This depiction may support scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think about this active process as an enactive ecology of learning, parts or the whole of which they can use to create conditions that support the biographical potential of individuals in a variety of ways.

Conclusion 2

Learning and biographicity are inseparably linked and involve an enactive ecology of learning in which individuals engage in learning processes that allow them to interact with their environment across the learning domains of cognition, emotion, and social interaction.

The study (motivated in part by a concern for how formal, informal, and incidental learning support biographicity) suggests that the ease with which individuals exercise biographicity is related to how adequately these domains are supported in the process of learning experiences. It is the interplay among the domains, rather than any specific domain by itself, which contributes to the exercise of biographicity (Figure 10).

The cognitive domain is often assumed to be the key to shaping one's future prospects. Several participants themselves noted that you *have to get an education* in order to be successful. The lack of cognitive preparedness certainly was a significant barrier to biographicity for the study's participants who were from an educationally marginalized community. In fact, their right to an adequate education was in all cases compromised to varying degrees. On the other hand, this barrier did not preclude biographicity, as enactive learning emerged in the interplay between cognition and the emotional and social domains of learning, compensating in many ways for cognitive deficits. The life stories even suggest that the emotional and social domains serve to improve cognitive outcomes, since emotions and social supports often enhanced or diminished academic learning.

The life stories also revealed that learning within the emotional domain plays a significant role in the capacity to shape one's life. It appears that more burdensome levels of negative, unresolved emotions make the exercise of biographicity more difficult (Figure 10), although even those participants with the most extreme experiences of emotional suffering have shaped their lives according to their own needs and desires. Within this domain, learning took place that ameliorated emotional disruptions, clarified ambivalent emotions, and promoted positive attitudes, motivation, and feelings. It is

sometimes assumed that the ability to deal with emotional disruptions is an individual trait, but the results of this study suggest that social supports play a strong role in moderating the effects of emotional challenges and promoting biographicity.

The importance of the social interaction domain cannot be minimized. Social interactions and social structures contributed greatly to how participants learned and shaped their lives. Participants told stories of key social interactions that mattered at the micro, meso, and macro levels in ways that helped them make sense of their experiences and understand their opportunities. Many assumptions about what social supports are required for success were challenged by the results of this study. Parental (or extended family) love and support certainly helped some participants exercise biographicity, but even those with limited or no familial support have done so. Meaningful support from other adults was often a strong catalyst for biographicity, but this support was not always institutionally organized or sustained over long periods of time. Sometimes essential support came from near strangers who reached out with kindness and help. Societal structures (e.g., bias, economic inequality) presented some of the strongest barriers to biographicity, while formal safety net structures occasionally provided services that facilitated the exercise of biographicity.

Conclusion 3

Experiences of recognition are essential to the exercise of biographicity.

The life stories themselves uncovered the importance of particular types of recognition that support biographicity: personal, legal, and community. While closely related to social interaction in general, the importance of recognition (and misrecognition) should be seen as a separate conclusion, because the notion seems to be

rarely addressed in precisely the way described by participants or as developed in the theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995, 2014a and b). The concept of recognition also seems particularly important in any consideration of biographicity in marginalized populations, who by definition “may not be full members of a potential group and stand on the margins between differing social spaces, wondering at some level where they belong” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 69). Table 11 highlighted some examples of how participants experienced recognition and misrecognition in close personal relationships, from the legal rights they had (or did not have) that ensured their equal value, and from the communities in which they operated, which recognized (or didn’t) the unique gifts they enacted in the everyday contributions they made in real-world activities.

The theory of recognition casts a strong light on issues of justice illuminated in this research. One example of recognition that merits particular focus at the legal or societal level is the role of poverty and racism in the stories told by participants in the study. Participants often linked race and socioeconomic status in the way they described their need to *belong* in the settings that would allow them to shape their lives according to their needs and desires. Higher education, often their first direct experience of majority populations, presented particular challenges to their feeling recognized as worthy members of the college/university community. Those who experienced participation in internships, the arts, or community service activities often described these as contexts that did recognize the meaningful contributions they made in ways that were not affirmed by the larger institutions or in individual social interactions within those institutions. Many participants valued aspects of their experience of financial hardship, but were dismayed by the challenges that were nearly insurmountable as they sought to find the financial

resources to shape their lives through postsecondary education. In ways also related to race and poverty, the quality of their academic preparation presented a major challenge to their experiences of just legal recognition.

Conclusion 4

Biographicity is not a finite process that ends at some point or that goes dormant for extended periods of time before a new need to redesign one's life arises, but is a continual process of learning from one's life experiences and enacting a desired future as a form of lifelong learning.

The participants knew that this study focused on how people reshaped and redesigned their lives, and yet none of them structured their story around discrete cycles of change. Rather, they told their stories as whole cloth in which the experiences of redesign were embedded in the warp and weft of everyday living. The changes they emphasized were often structured within the standard, even predictable narratives related to families and schools, but the details of their stories of biographicity transcended these discrete narrative units. In this way, they described the ongoing, continual nature of biographicity that suggests the notion of lifelong learning as a biographical enactive process.

Lifelong learning was explored quite extensively in the literature review in chapter 2, but was not mentioned at all in the abductive analysis of the data. Not one participant referred to herself or himself as a lifelong learner, in spite of the use of this term in so many of the mission statements and other descriptions of formal education. And yet they told stories of learning across learning domains and social structures and over time, suggesting that biographicity has already been a lifelong process for them, a

process that began when during their years in K-12 education and a process that they foresee will continue into the future. These stories also suggested that support from a variety of resources is essential to all forms of education beginning in childhood if more people are to exercise biographicity throughout their lives. In particular, the stories revealed situations in which an enactive ecology of learning across the K-16+ continuum contributed to imagining a different future and implementing the resources to enact that imagined future. The stories suggest that a biographical view of lifelong learning across the lifespan is needed in order maximize the exercise of biographicity.

Conclusion 5

The life experiences of the individuals who participated in this study (at a particular time, in a particular context, in interaction with a particular researcher) reveal insights that must be acknowledged in order to privilege the contribution they have made to a more robust understanding of biographicity.

The previous conclusions have been theoretical in nature, but it is impossible to ignore the conclusions that also emerged as highly personal insights provided in the narrated lives as told by participants. Many of these have been implied in the abductive analysis of the life stories, but they also need to be highlighted as particularly salient conclusions that may serve as a bridge between scholarship and practice with so-called marginalized young adults and others across the lifespan, beginning particularly in adolescence and applying to participants' current life experiences. One of the limitations of this qualitative study is that the findings are not formally generalizable. On the other hand, the findings, coupled with decades of work in settings such as the ones described in this study, do suggest that certain patterns of behavior and insights provided by

participants may contribute to a more *useable* understanding of how biographicity happens:

- Internship programs made a significant contribution to participants' exercise of biographicity in a variety of ways. Seven participants engaged in such programs, some several times, and six of these seven completed an undergraduate degree in the standard 4 years (one took an extra year to care for her grandmother). They provided rich details of how these experiences heightened their connection to the broader world, provided a sense of responsibility, expanded their worldview beyond their previously limited life experience, and/or gave them valuable personal and interpersonal skills. The affect displayed in their descriptions of internships illustrated how much they gained confidence about the future from these experiences. Four of the seven were paid in their internships, which gave them time (otherwise spent in paid employment) to learn fully from these experiences while also providing additional financial resources to advance their exercise of biographicity.
- The arts contributed, in a similar way, to the exercise of biographicity. Seven participants stressed that experiences in the arts (dance, marching band, drama, visual arts, writing) were significant pieces of their life stories. All stressed the benefits from the actual engagement with the art form, and some also stressed the importance of the social component of their involvement in the arts. For two of the six, the arts were the only way they described a sense of belonging and community-based recognition in their formative years.

- All of the participants told stories of the positive outcomes they gained from experiences of caring about others through personal volunteerism, service learning programs, internships, or opportunities to care for people in their families or churches. The emotional domain of learning was very evident in the enthusiasm with which they described such experiences. As noted earlier, nearly all of the participants were connected in some way to so-called caring professions and/or community service.
- Social affiliation with peers contributed positively (and in some cases negatively) to the exercise of biographicity. This is an outgrowth of the previous insights about internships, the arts, and volunteerism, but emphasizes the interaction with peers as an important aspect of the experiences. In a similar way, descriptions of church affiliation also stressed the interaction with peers as much as the particularly religious nature of the experience. The contrasting stories of gang affiliation described in chapter 4, for example, underscored the importance of peer affiliation as a contributor or detriment (recognition or misrecognition) to shaping one's life.
- Individual, even time-limited, kindness and attention from others had a significant impact on the way participants described their lives. It is impossible to listen to the remarkable life stories told by the participants and not hear the consistent message of the huge impact we have on each other. The stories revealed how people who might not have been expected to overcome extreme life challenges actually did manage to shape their own lives often because of small interventions that do not seem that significant: a friend in the workplace helps someone write a

letter; a teacher spends a few hours helping someone complete an art portfolio; a band director suggests that a bullied middle school student go to the high school's band practice; a young man, completely separated from his own family, is invited by a friend to stay in his family's basement; a coworker suggests to an intern that she might want to let people see that she is more *personable*; someone calls not once, but a few times, to invite a young drug dealer to come to church with her. Each of these is an example from the study of a key intervention that influenced biographicity. Of course, this is especially true for people in positions designed to promote the growth of the individual (teachers, counselors, etc.), but even incidental awareness and support was important enough to be stressed in the participants' life stories.

- The stories that participants told about their schooling highlight the importance of the social and emotional components of learning as described in chapter 5. They underscore the importance of paying attention to individual students, their strengths as well as their needs, and the powerful impact that occurs when all three domains of learning are addressed.
- It is important to note that all the participants were eager to tell their stories and nearly all expressed that they had appreciated the experience. Even in the preliminary telephone interview, a number of them said they wanted to participate in the study in the hope that their story might help someone else. I did not ask specific questions and only encouraged them to tell their life story ("any way they wanted to tell it") without interruption for an hour or more, and they all were very trusting in the way they shared intimate details of their life stories. Their

generosity in telling their stories seems to provide an additional insight that these particular people were happy to explore their own biography in participation with another person. Some actually described it as a means for them to make sense of their life experiences. One said, “I never thought of it [a particular interpretation she voiced about something in her story] this way until now—but I think it’s right.” After an emotionally charged narration, another asked to have a copy of the recording, saying, “I have never told my whole story to anyone, and I don’t know if I ever will again. But maybe some day I can give the recording to my children and they will understand me better.” The positive response to the research interview suggests that the narrated life story has a place as a sensemaking tool to assist people who are attempting to shape and reshape their lives.

The life stories revealed that many life challenges that are too often considered to be insurmountable barriers to biographicity became manageable when the various elements of the configuration of biographicity (Figure 11) were solidly in place. Several participants told powerful stories of abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, family neglect or even rejection, incarceration, dropping out of school, and extreme poverty—and yet all of the participants have shaped their lives according to their own needs and desires and also according to educational and career expectations of society in spite of the challenges that contemporary life put in their path. It is only by experiencing their stories in the way described above as a “whole cloth” that we see how they managed to exercise the *sociological imagination* described by Mills (1959) and set themselves on a path of shaping and reshaping their lives in the future.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research

Educational goals in the United States continually focus on the need for higher levels of educational attainment. The government and private philanthropy have devoted vast attention and resources to ensuring that groups, like the participants in this study, achieve stronger life outcomes, but continue to lament, “Left unabated, [current] trends will leave the U.S. economy without the skilled workforce it needs to remain competitive and will likely increase the education gap between those from low-income backgrounds and the rest of the population” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). A brief review of the U.S. Department of Education (2013) website reveals that the department’s priority goals all focus on quantitatively driven plans to change student outcomes that do not make any reference to the life experiences of those who are discussed, their human needs or their desires.

Perhaps the most important practice-focused implication of this research study is that the fundamental separation of outcomes from human experience remains a key element of the intractable challenges faced by so many in marginalized populations. The results of this study point to the effects of this separation on biographicity as early as elementary school and continuing throughout formal education. The Gates Foundation (2014) has suggested that the most promising solutions are technology (including technology related to student advising) and systems of data collection and analysis, and it asserted its interest in available research that supports effective solutions. This study, on the other hand, suggests that understanding the experience of learners themselves may actually provide front-loaded information that could be used to shape a broader array of goals that might, in the end, help to produce the stated desired outcomes. The following

recommendations explore ways that the lived experiences of individuals as expressed in this study might serve as a guide to refined policy and practice.

Policy Recommendations

*Policymakers should devise strategies that employ a more complete view of what constitutes evidence-based research. They should promote methodologies that explore quantitative, measurable outcomes of learning and performance **and** use qualitative research that explores how the voices and the lived experience of today's learners can inform policy decisions.* Policy decisions should reflect the value placed on both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure that inputs as well as outcomes are considered when determining which evidence-based strategies work in actual practice across the K-16+ continuum. Instead of determining effectiveness only by outcomes on tests that reflect an overemphasis on traditional cognition, the research agenda should seek to explore more fully the elements of the enactive ecology of learning proposed in this study, which requires research designs that use a variety of biographical resources and outcomes. Kayla may have provided input into the questions that should drive such a shift when she said, "How is it possible that I have a 4-plus GPA but I can't pass the science or math portion of a [high-stakes] test? So that is always wrong for me. . . . I was salutatorian of my class." Policymakers should be asking similar questions: What are the underlying reasons why students are not achieving their own or the system's desired outcomes? How can we find *evidence* to help us understand what human factors would lead to stronger results?

Listening to the voices of those from marginalized populations also would uncover other ways to evaluate specific government policies and programs that serve the

safety net needs of marginalized populations like the one in this study. In one specific example, two participants indicated that without government housing help, they would not have been able to pursue higher education and break out of the poverty they had always experienced, and yet this service is only obtained through a lottery that serves a small percentage of those who are eligible. This study also casts a strong light on policies regarding financial aid for postsecondary education, highlighted by all participants as one of the biggest barriers to shaping their lives according to their own needs and desires. Effective creation and dissemination of biographical research might create more opportunities to consider how people's actual lives are affected by financial aid and other access policies (e.g., child care, health care, even the way classes are scheduled) that make it difficult (and sometimes impossible) for marginalized individuals to complete the educational programs they need and desire.

Accrediting agencies (e.g., Teacher Education Accreditation Council, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) and teacher education programs in colleges and universities should likewise advocate for a shift in the balance of research methods as well as a change in policies and curricula that ground K-12 teaching and learning in more complete conceptions of learning that address not only the formal acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also the emotional and social domains. While educational institutions introduce preservice and in-service teachers at all levels to a variety of theories that assert more complete views of learning, they often fail to ground learning theory, and the ensuing practice, in the varied biographical experiences of the students themselves. The teacher education establishment has a powerful voice that could advocate for policies that ensure that not only academic learning, but biographical

learning, informed by research on the lived experience of contemporary students, is supported fully at every level of the education system.

Philanthropy should use its influence to advocate for and support innovative programming, grounded in quantitative and qualitative evidence, which seeks to address the biographical needs and desires of learners at every age. Philanthropy exerts a strong policy-level influence on schooling in the United States as well as on community-based educational programming, and yet foundations' monetary contribution is small in overall efforts to change the education system (Ravitch, 2011). Their resources could be more effectively utilized if they exerted leadership to deploy initiatives that support individuals to engage in enactive learning that promotes the exercise of biographicity. One example might be to link college access initiatives for adult learners (described by participants in this study) to skills-based programming in workplace settings, both of which are currently supported by philanthropy. If philanthropy supported such collaboration, outcomes might not only promote instrumental skills, but also provide sensemaking activities that would promote more effective ongoing biographicity for participants.

Practice Recommendations

Lifelong learning should be reconceptualized as a biographical learning practice that supports individuals to reshape and redesign their lives through a variety of formal, informal, and incidental learning opportunities. Lifelong learning seems to stand on the edge between theory and practice and could be considered both a theoretical as well as a practice recommendation. As discussed in the literature review, lifelong learning has been formulated in a wide variety of ways, from personal transformation to instrumental training for specific skills. The results of this study suggest that lifelong learning in a

variety of contexts can contribute to an enactive ecology of learning that promotes biographicity as a direct or indirect focus of learning initiatives. Rather than seeing biographicity as something that is addressed as one embarks on adulthood, it should be seen as a lifelong process that begins in childhood and continues throughout adulthood. The study even suggests that specific participatory sensemaking activities (including the use of the life history) related to biographicity should become curricular techniques used regularly in lifelong learning programs (early childhood to death). Such specific strategies, used in settings that promote lifelong learning, might become part of an ongoing curriculum of life skills that promote the ongoing exercise of biographicity.

All sites of learning in K-16+ schools and in community-based programming should incorporate models of recognition into the design and implementation of learning opportunities at all ages. One of the strongest findings of this study was the role that experiences of recognition play as individuals shape and reshape their lives. Just as learning programs assert knowledge and skills as specified goals, practitioners should devise goals and strategies that promote recognition at the personal, community, and societal levels, as addressed in chapter 5. The study has illustrated the powerful ways in which individuals and community-level programs have provided a sense of belonging and recognition that supported the exercise of biographicity, as well as the results when participants were misrecognized. In particular, the study highlighted the value of the arts, community service, and hands-on work (internships) as a means for individuals to develop a sense of the unique contribution they make to the world.

At the societal level, too many of the participants in this study experienced misrecognition (especially regarding race and socioeconomic status) that was ignored

within a variety of social structures, particularly in higher education, where they did not feel they deserved a place. While these broad, systemic issues are deeply ingrained in culture, it is possible to create communities where basic equality is embraced and valued when institutions and individuals commit to strategies that promote recognition for all participants rather than a direct focus on diversity programming only for its own sake.

Individuals who are engaged in programming for marginalized populations should understand the ways in which their work supports (or limits) the biographical needs and desires of those they serve. If the study has concluded anything, it is that people are able to shape their lives, no matter how challenging, as a result of social interactions that happen in the everyday course of living. Those who are in close contact with children, adolescents and adults (teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, coworkers, ministers, nonprofit workers, government employees, health care workers, etc.) have opportunities to help individuals make sense of their lives in a wide variety of ways. Professional development practices can and should raise awareness of the importance of formal and informal sensemaking activities, delivered with positive emotional support, as a way to create environments in which people can exercise biographicity. In particular, the study suggests that interventions of all kinds, whether large or small, are most effective when they build from individuals' strengths rather than emphasizing their weaknesses or their limitations.

Opportunities to engage in life history activities can support individuals to actively engage with their life stories as biographical resources that will help them to shape their future direction. As stated above, it became clear in the interviews that the participants gained insights into their own experience by participating in the research

interview. The use of the educational biography (Dominicé, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2009), as well as other possible innovative uses of life history in practice settings, has the potential to be a powerful technique to support the exercise of biographicity.

Research Recommendations

Further qualitative research should explore biographicity as a lifelong phenomenon that is needed in order for people to adapt to the intense demands of life in late modernity and qualitative researchers should seek alternative ways to report and disseminate their research findings. The importance of research on biographicity became clear first from people who heard what I was studying for my dissertation. The reaction was almost always “That’s really interesting; I’d love to know more about that” or “I’d like to be able to do it better.” People seem to understand that the ability to reshape one’s life is important, but they don’t really know how people do it and they often think you can either do it or you can’t. Certainly the study has pointed out the many ways that the phenomenon of biographicity could be part of an ongoing research agenda:

- The experience of biographicity may be very different at various ages throughout life. The participants in this study were young adults who have only recently embarked on their life path. Most of the stories involved shaping one’s life through the stage of formal **K-16+** education, but not deeply into their working lives. Longitudinal studies would be of particular value in tracing changes in biographicity over time. Further biographical research should seek to understand what, if any, differences occur in biographicity as people get older and encounter a variety of challenges or contexts. One particular area of interest is the aging population that will be the first generation likely to live many years beyond the

traditional retirement age. This phenomenon will produce personal, community, and societal challenges, and it may be important to understand how individuals can continue to reshape and redesign their lives during these years.

- Case studies of specific contexts that seem to promote biographicity would help illuminate to what extent the various elements of the configuration of biographicity affect individual experiences. One example that comes to mind is the church that had such a big influence on Rosa and Thomas, two participants who experienced significant barriers to biographicity. They described the church vividly as a social context that has had a profound impact on the lives of many of the 18- to 32-year-old young adults who attend. An ethnographic study of such a setting might provide a deeper understanding of biographicity. Other possible contexts might include lifelong learning efforts in the community or the workplace, schools that foster work or service components, or a particular retirement community.
- Specific aspects of biographicity should also be explored in more depth, such as the relationship between volunteerism and/or the arts and the exercise of biographicity. It also would be interesting to attempt to engage with this group (or a similar group) in a longitudinal study to see if these or other aspects of their biographicity are maintained over time.
- Action research may be particularly helpful in gaining deeper understanding of processes that can support biographicity. A variety of learning contexts could be the site of interventions designed to support biographical learning. Scholars and practitioners might work together to design programs that include the elements of

biographicity in an enactive ecology of learning as described in Figure 11 and then engage in action research to determine what happens as a result of those programs. This might be particularly effective as a way to determine how formal participatory sensemaking activities (including use of the life history itself) contribute to biographicity. It might be possible to use action research as a way to understand biographicity in particularly challenging environments, like the GED program in prison that was described in this study, in order to see if greater attention to the elements of biographicity might lead to stronger outcomes for participants. In addition to providing qualitative research results, action research would be a means to involve adult educators in a fuller engagement with the notion of biographicity and to enhance their professional practice through the process of becoming a researcher.

Qualitative researchers should seek alternative ways to present and disseminate the results of their work to make it more accessible to practitioners and lay people.

Formal approaches to research reporting in the academy too often serve as a barrier to bridging the gap between scholarship and practice. In the attempt to present research in a scientific manner so as to give greater legitimacy to qualitative research, often the richness of meaning within qualitative data is lost. The powerful voices of participants in research need to be heard in practice settings where professionals link those voices to quantitative data about needs and outcomes and discuss meaningful ways to achieve genuine praxis in their work with marginalized populations. It can be effective to incorporate dramatic presentations of biographical data to professionals in order to achieve greater understanding of the life experiences of the people they serve (Storz &

Nestor, 2007). Lay audiences as well could benefit from opportunities to experience the results of qualitative research that applies to their own lives or to their communities through a variety of writing or other media presentations that convey the meaning discovered through research.

Personal Reflection and Conclusion

Very early in my doctoral studies, I was introduced to Peter Alheit's notion of biographicity and to his assertion that when people shape and reshape their lives it can exert "socially explosive force" (Alheit, 1994b, p. 289). As my studies progressed many other ideas caught my interest, but I kept returning to the idea that our own biographies can be a force for change that is bigger than we are in a variety of social contexts. I realized I had believed exactly this for nearly five decades, and that belief had motivated much of my personal and professional life through those many years in K-16 education. But even after all my time and effort, I had little evidence to support my taken-for-granted assumption, and during the design phase of my study, my professors and colleagues in the doctoral program continually challenged that and other assumptions I held. Perhaps for the first time, I truly understood the value of engaging in research to explore questions that I wanted or needed to understand more fully—how the young people that have been the focus of my professional work actually do manage to shape their lives and to what extent it matters when they do.

At the end of this work, I recognize the limitations of what I have accomplished, but the process of confronting those questions has taken me on a profound intellectual journey:

- Defining the problem was more difficult than I expected, as I sought to delimit this huge topic in ways that were manageable for research. Even at the end, some have suggested that I have tackled too big of a problem, but my own biographical experiences compelled me to try to understand biography as “whole cloth” rather than as isolated variables or discrete components, and the concept of biographicity allowed me to do that.
- Reviewing the far-ranging literature related to biographicity also opened up unlimited possibilities, since biography includes the whole of human experience. My particular passion for lifelong learning (as a birth to death process) allowed me to explore how learning and biographicity are related in ways that are far more complex than simple acquisition of knowledge and skills. Explorations of philosophical traditions expanded my view of how people shape their lives. Contemporary research around the enactive paradigm challenged me to consider new scientific perspectives on how we constitute ourselves as human beings. Ultimately, I committed to a conceptual framework that synthesized my best guess at how people design and redesign their lives.
- Qualitative research was always the path I saw for myself to understand human experience. Determining an exact methodology, however, proved another interesting adventure. The doctoral program introduced me to a variety of approaches that had their appeals. Among others, I considered grounded theory, case study, narrative inquiry, biographical research, and even action research before meeting Peter Alheit in Berlin and discussing his methodology that became the methodological framework for this study (Figure 3). In effect, this approach

allowed me to use biographical research as well as certain parts of a number of other methodological approaches and combine them into the abductive approach that guided the study.

- The most important methodological decision, however, was to use life history as the *data* for the study. Based on the insights of many qualitative researchers (Alheit, Denzin, Kvale, Olesen, Brinkmann, Charmaz, and others), I asked participants to tell me their life stories however they wanted to tell them and listened to them without interruption for an extended time. This proved to be one of the richest experiences of my professional career as they generously shared the details of their lives. Perhaps the most important outcome of the study for me is that I had thought, after many years of working with this particular population, that I understood what their lives were like. I was wrong. The facts that I have known about the lives of young people in this community, or even the anecdotes that I have heard about their life experiences, do not compare to hearing them describe their lives as they have lived them or as they decided to describe them to me that day.
- The abductive analysis of the stories required me to put aside all of the work I had done prior to beginning the interviews and engage with the data over and over again using a variety of tools, but more importantly, reflect on the *data* over several months. Engaging with other scholars in this process enriched the analysis as I slowly scaffolded my understanding of the stories I had heard and considered what conclusions I could draw from them.

- Perhaps the most difficult challenge for me was to turn the powerful details of the participants' experiences into the language of scholarship. Afraid that I would disrespect their stories, I resisted any interpretation, wanting to include every part of each story in some way, until my chair and others assured me that I could only convey the richness of their voices if my interpretations produced *new cloth* that advanced the understanding of how the way they have shaped their lives matters.

And so my research journey returns to my own question of whether biographicity exerts *socially explosive force*. I realize that the way that I shaped and implemented my study will not allow me to make that claim in any formal sense. The phrase itself implies too many possibilities that were never explored about the effects on the social world from the way that these individuals shaped their lives. And yet, these stories of biographicity have assured me that when individuals, who have faced severe challenges of contemporary life, manage to move beyond current conditions to design their own lives, it matters to them, their families, their communities, and even the world:

- As noted above, all of the participants have *beaten the odds* in their community by completing high school and participating in postsecondary education. They, in fact, were the ones who defined, in the course of the study, the problematic notion of *success* as they described their experiences in the context of their own needs and desires. Thirteen had a bachelor's degree (two had a bachelor's degree in progress); five of these had completed a master's degree or a Ph.D. (two more have a master's degree or Ph.D. in progress). Two did not stay in high school, but obtained a GED, and one of those has a community college certificate and one is working on a master's degree. Two others did not have the financial resources to

complete a bachelor's but received certificates from for-profit programs and had satisfying careers in health care. All of them expressed pride and satisfaction in their educational accomplishment. While formal education is only one manifestation of biographicity, each of these outcomes has a significant impact on the possible life trajectory of these individuals. It also has an important impact on the community since each of them has an increased potential to be self-sufficient and, in fact, to contribute in positive ways.

- The study has focused a number of times on the way that participants emphasized caring for others in their life stories. A number specifically indicated that their own struggles to shape their lives led them to develop a deep commitment to helping others accomplish what they have. All are currently engaged in some way in service to the community, and this is certainly a positive force for change. Some held positions with influence on policies and practices in nonprofit organizations that have the potential to exert positive community impact as well.
- Many participants expressed a heightened awareness of injustice and a desire to address issues of racism, bias, or economic inequality. The awareness itself has moved them beyond acceptance of the circumstances of their lives and allowed them to challenge assumptions that are held for them. Their own struggles to shape their lives have contributed to this awareness, and it remains to be seen to what extent they will actively seek to address such injustice.
- The four participants who have children of their own expressed powerful commitment to bettering the lives of their children. One story described a powerful example of how one person's biographicity can have a big social

impact. Monica's child was born prematurely and doctors told her that he was permanently delayed and that she should apply for SSI (government support for his care). She was in community college when the doctors told her this, so she used the school's resources to learn as much as she could about his challenges. She worked with him continually and now he is progressing in normal classes and does not require social services.

These examples suggest ways in which the biographical actions (Alheit, 1996) of these participants have already had a social impact, and perhaps even socially explosive force. Lingering doubts remain for me, however, as I have considered to what extent my optimistic nature as a teacher and as an American has been stronger than my skepticism about the extent to which the successes that each participant described will endure within the very real constraints their lives may continue to pose. The often surprising outcomes these individuals have described compel me to continue research and practice in biographicity to see if the potential for social impact persists and might be even greater if the notion of biographicity and support to exercise it becomes more broadly known and accepted within existing social structures. If government, schools, colleges, social programs, and the community as a whole were to focus more on the stories of those who have shaped their lives according to their own needs and desires, they might be able to support many more individuals to do the same. If that were to happen, biographicity within marginalized populations and beyond might, indeed, exert *socially explosive force* (Alheit, 1994b).

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APPENDIX A:
PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

(To be completed by the researcher during and/or after the introductory meeting)

Name: _____

Gender: _____

Year of Birth: _____

Place of birth; other places you have lived including now: _____

Education:

Schools: _____

Colleges/universities: _____

Other post-secondary education: _____

On-the-job learning: _____

Military service: _____

Types of employment: _____

APPENDIX B:

GUIDE FOR THE NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

(Alheit, 1982, pp. 5-6)

Guide to the General Orientation of the Narrative Interview
Rule 1: "Prepare an interview carefully"; meet prior to the actual interview to clarify intentions, establish expectations, etc.
Rule 2: "Interview only people who really interest you on account of their own person or their particular problem"; "feigned interest is dangerous."
Rule 3: "State openly the purpose of the interview"; remember that the participants, not you as the researcher, are the experts; they have the right to know what will happen to the interview data—but never promise too much.
Rule 4: "Say something about yourself as well"—preferably at an initial, preinterview meeting.
Rule 5: "You need time and a steadfast interest"; remember that there is nothing in particular you should be trying to hear; do not be led by a "secret guiding thread."
Rule 6: "Make sure that the rules of telling the story are really 'ratified' at the beginning of the interview"; be clear that you are interested in the person's life story; review issues of confidentiality; have a sense from the initial meeting that the participant understands what the study is all about.
Rule 7: "When the interview has begun, remain in the background as far as possible"; allow pauses; don't be easily drawn into the conversation; don't comment on the story; "say 'hmmm' and 'yes?' but barely more than that."
Rule 8: "It is important in the initial phase of the interview that you avoid questions such as 'why?' or 'what for?"; save how and what happened questions until the end of the interview.
Rule 9: "Postpone concrete questions to a 'follow-up phase"; remember gaps that you can return to; don't ask specific leading questions to get desired information.
Rule 10: "Do not be afraid of making mistakes."

APPENDIX C:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/GUIDE

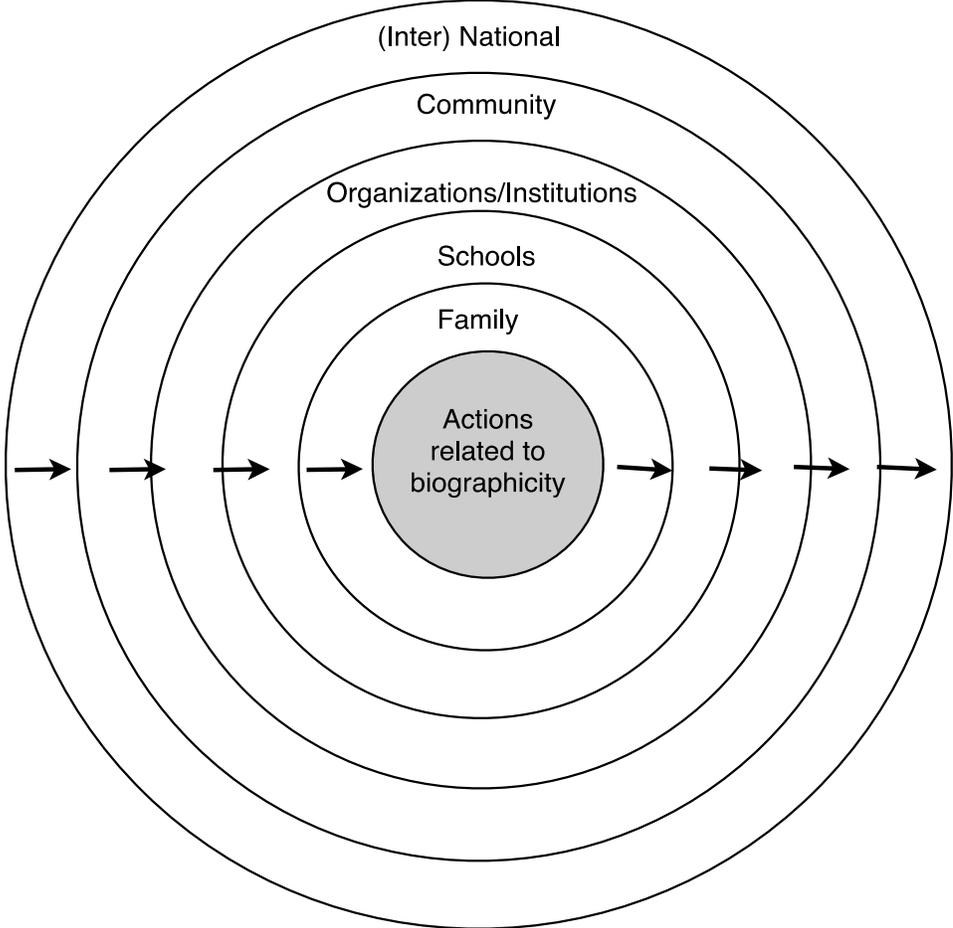
Interview	Focusing question(s)	Follow-up questions/topics
<p>Part 1: Life history focused on experiences of biographicity – First 60-90 minutes of interview</p>	<p>I would like to hear your life story with special emphasis on the things you have learned in life, the things that are important to you, and the changes that have occurred in your life up to now.</p> <p>I will listen and try not to interrupt you. Instead, I'll take some notes for after you have finished telling me your story.</p> <p>When the life history has ended, offer a break to the participant.</p>	<p>This is the most self-directed part of the interview with attentive listening by researcher.</p> <p>Follow up might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particular time gaps in life story. • Particular topics, e.g., family, other significant people, schooling, personal interests, work experience for more detail. • Emotions, feelings, attitudes about events/experiences. <p>Did you feel you were actively shaping your life in any of these experiences?</p> <p>Explore the participants' own words.</p> <p>Follow-up on learning inside or outside school.</p> <p>Highlight references to emotions, feelings, attitudes toward life change and/or learning.</p> <p>Relationships that affected learning.</p> <p>Constraints on learning.</p>
<p>Part 2: Details of the experience</p>	<p>Perhaps we could go back to your life history as you have told it and focus on one period of time when your life changed or evolved in a way that mattered to you. Could you talk in a little more detail about what was going on when those changes occurred?</p>	<p>Follow up on social structures or conditions that have influenced shaping your life.</p> <p>Role of emotions, feelings, attitudes in shaping your life.</p> <p>Relationships that are particularly important to shaping your life.</p>
<p>Part 3: Reflection on the meaning</p>	<p>Given what you have said, what do you think has helped you to shape your life up to this time?</p> <p>Are there things that you had to overcome to shape your life?</p> <p>Are there things that have kept you from shaping your life in ways you would have liked?</p> <p>How do you think you will continue to shape your life in the future?</p>	<p>Follow up on social structures or conditions that have influenced shaping your life.</p> <p>Role of emotions, feelings, attitudes in shaping your life.</p> <p>Relationships that are particularly important to shaping your life.</p>

APPENDIX D:

TEMPLATE OF QUESTIONS FOR PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF DATA

What was the sequence of time and action/events?	
What are the places and/or contexts described? What (if any) life constraints were described?	
Who were key characters in the learning life story? What interactions were described with these characters?	
What examples of biographicity or challenges to biographicity were described?	
What learning experiences were described?	
What did body language and/or emotion contribute to understanding the story?	
Short summary or abstract of the interview	

APPENDIX E:
CONTEXT/SOCIAL STRUCTURE MATRIX



APPENDIX F:

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Greetings from [college access program]. Since you are a valued member of the [college access program] community, we would like to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study that will attempt to understand what factors contributed to the ability of people like you to begin college and shape your lives as you have moved into adulthood. We hope that you will read the description of this study below and respond to the person conducting the research if you would like to participate in the study. The results of this study may help other students in the future to reach their own goals. [College access program] is not directly involved in this research, so please feel no obligation or pressure to respond to this invitation. It is strictly voluntary.

Description of the study: This study will attempt to understand how young adults have shaped and reshaped their own lives in ways that support their own needs and desires. The study will try to understand how young people have learned things that help them respond to the challenges of modern life and successfully make their way into the future. In order to understand your experience, you will be asked to tell your *life history* during an open-ended interview that focuses on your own life experiences with special emphasis on things that you have learned not only in school but also in every other part of your life. The interview will last at least 90 minutes. Any information you share, as well as your biographical information, will be anonymous and confidential. In appreciation for participation in the study, each person who completes the full interview will receive a \$25.00 gift card from Dave's Markets.

Who can participate? The people who will be part of the study are men and women between 23 and 32 years of age, who attended high school in [city] and who were the first in their family to attend college. It is not necessary that you attended college for more than the first year.

Who is the researcher? The researcher who is doing the study is a lifelong teacher from our community who is studying for a doctorate at George Washington University in Washington, DC. This research is conducted in order to fulfill the requirements for her degree. She hopes to use the results of the study to help other educators support future students to shape their lives.

How can I participate? Participation in the study is limited. If you think you might like to be part of the study, please send an email to krnestor@gwu.edu. In that email, please include some very basic information: age, gender, and whether or not you graduated from college or other postsecondary education. The researcher will use this information to reach out to a variety of people with a variety of these characteristics. She will begin to contact people who have expressed an interest in the study via return email to set up a telephone conversation in which she will explain the study more completely, answer your questions, and see if you want to participate. The researcher will notify everyone who has expressed an interest in participation once she has completed identifying the final participants. Once you have agreed to participate, the researcher will arrange an in-person meeting in a location that is acceptable to you for the life history interview.

APPENDIX G:
INFORMATION SHEET ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY AND INFORMED
CONSENT

**Understanding Biographicity:
Redesigning and Reshaping Lives in Young Adulthood
IRB #021411**

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Ellen Scully-Russ of the Department of Human and Organizational Learning, George Washington University (GWU). Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary, and you can end your participation at any time.

The purpose of the study is to better understand how individuals repeatedly shape and reshape their lives to meet their own changing needs and desires in response to the conditions of life in our time.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will meet one-on-one with a researcher to tell your life history using an unstructured format. After an initial phone conversation (15-30 minutes) to explain the study and answer your questions, you will meet with the researcher for a 90-minute interview (or longer if you are willing to continue). The researcher may request an additional interview at a later date. You may refuse to answer any questions that the researcher may ask, and you may stop your participation in this study at any time.

Possible risks or discomforts you could experience during this study include psychological stress or discomfort in relating your life history and/or concern about the confidentiality of your life history (addressed below). You will not benefit directly from your participation in the study, but society may benefit from your participation due to a better understanding of how people shape their lives. At the end of your interview session(s), you will receive a \$25.00 gift card to compensate you for any travel expenses incurred and as a token of appreciation for your time and effort.

Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed. The researcher will protect your name by using a different name in all written materials throughout the research process. Only these altered names will be used in the research report and, in addition, particular details (e.g., actual names of schools attended, precise occupation or place of employment, etc.) that might reveal your identity will be eliminated or changed so as not to compromise your privacy. If you agree, your exact words may be used in reporting on the research either in the original research report or in journal articles, other publications, and/or presentations at professional meetings about this study. Your interview will be recorded and transcribed, and the audio recordings will be kept in a locked container when they are not in use for the research and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

The Office of Human Research of George Washington University, at telephone number 202-994-2715, can provide further information about your rights as a research participant. You may obtain further information regarding this study by contacting Ellen Scully-Russ at 703-726-3768 or scullyru@gwu.edu, or Karen R. Nestor, doctoral candidate and researcher, at 216-956-1467 or krnestor@gwu.edu

At the beginning of the first in-person interview, you will review this consent document and verbally agree to participate in the study and to use (or not use) exact quotations of your words. Your ongoing participation indicates your willingness to participate in the study.

APPENDIX H:

SAMPLE STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS

Note: Pink highlights narrative units; blue, how the narrator weighted the material; green, the participant's evaluation and stocktaking; yellow, changes in the self; and red, emotions. The numbers in parentheses indicate the page number and line number from the transcript.

Kayla's Structural Description

Born 1983

"I always want to have some sense of where I'm going or what's interesting to me."

1. "I guess it would be appropriate to start with my family makeup because thinking about your title in terms of how, you know, people shape their lives—that dynamic of how my family came together played a big role in kind of shaping my life" (1-13). Interesting variation in why it is important to start with **family story**. (Note: focus on audience in way that others did not.)
 - Mother came from small town in Mississippi by herself at age 16 (interesting example of biographicity); finished high school; started [college], but left to become a welder; met Kayla's father, short marriage ended when she was 2; Kayla sent to live with grandparents in Mississippi for about a year because mom "couldn't afford it, like it was just too tough for her at the time" (2-3).
 - When Kayla was 6, mom met a white man from South Carolina at work; after 3-week "whirlwind romance . . . they were married for 22 years until he died like 2 years ago" (2-15).
 - "Seeing them together and then having really he and my mom, as like **parents, were like such a grounding force for me coming up** because my mom was very clear about some things pretty early in my life and I think a lot of it probably stemmed from her upbringing and my stepfather's upbringing and one was that like going to college was never a question. **Like I was going to do well in school. I was going to college. Education was very important**" (2-18). It was also "made clear . . . that I would never work at McDonald's. I would never work at that kind of odd job. If I were to have summer employment, it would be something meaningful" [first job volunteering at YWCA in summer program] (3-12).
 - Described parents' deep engagement with her schoolwork (unlike any other participant): checking her work, urging her to "go back and rethink" some part of what she had done—"back-and-forth negotiations and just a lot of dialogue around like writing and learning and reading and all those things in my home" (3-2). **Repeatedly expressed her frustration with the level of their involvement;** comes back to this being her only real exposure to critical thinking.
2. Switches narrative unit to focus on her **schooling** ("I did really well in school just because, **one, it was easy for me and, two, I just knew it was expected,** like this was what I was supposed to do" (3-11) but started it with information on summer internship.

- High school summer internship with [prominent nonprofit organization]; “that was a pretty pivotal internship just because it introduced me to the law and the civics and so many different topics and interests that obviously [they] really take a big stance on around . . . civil liberties . . . and I was getting paid to do it” (3-21). Met influential people in the community—“people that were doing great things” (4-6).
- On the “honors and gifted track pretty much from like the third grade on” (4-13); changed schools every year from first to fifth grade; stable for middle school and high school; last 2 years took most of her classes at community college (same as two other participants).
- Interesting college decision process: “Even though I knew that I was going to college, like it was something that was just you were going to do it, I don’t think I really had a strong view about where” [almost sounded indifferent in describing it] (5-5); school counselor recommended a very mediocre college she had attended; government education counselor put her name into [a private college] database; piqued her interest; needed financial aid (“having parents that were going to pay for college was out of the question”); she focused on “merit scholarships . . . and I got quite a few. I was able to get through [private college] for 3 years before I needed to take out a loan” (5-17).
- Interesting aside re: high school performance: describes the beginning of high-stakes testing and she didn’t pass all the tests. “That always kind of stuck with me to say that for as high as my GPA was, and even now I look back and say those GPA’s were so inflated. Like they didn’t mean anything in high school, right. Like how is it possible that I have a 4-plus GPA but I can’t pass the science or math portion of a [state] graduation test. So that is always wrong for me. . . . I was salutatorian of my class . . . think about the quality of the education I was even getting” (6-7).

3. College experience.

- The private college “was an eye-opening experience for me, one because it was culture shock”; the only white person she saw in her neighborhood was her stepfather, “but then to go to [private college] and not only be faced with the difference of not just race but then also socioeconomic status, like so many other things that came into play” (6-14).
- “I got really fortunate to have some great professors that kind of saw enough in me to say like, all right, buckle down—we’re going to work with you” (6-7); sociology professor (ended up being her major) “really worked with me that semester in his class around my writing, around pushing me to be more expressive about my ideas and thoughts and things, and I was really grateful to have that from him because that really helped me just kind of get grounded in [that college] and the way they taught and the way they expect the students to engage in learning. . . . I really began to find my own way in terms of studying and engaging in things that I was interested in” (7-14). Started because she went to office hours for help. “He didn’t really like babysit me through a lot of it, but there was—he took enough time just to kind of push me to get it and every once in a while I can recall in class where he would call me out on purpose, like just to get me to talk. . . . It was scary at first but I got used to that, to be in a class of peers where we

would begin to challenge and dialogue with each other, but it was helpful because it kind of **set the stage for me to feel very comfortable**—that, you know, **I got into this school because I am smart, right—I’m not a charity case**” (8-15).

- “I was **struggling** academically and largely it was the level of conversations we were having in class was very different from what I was used to in high school. I mean, high school was mostly worksheets and to some degree [community college was too], so there wasn’t a lot of dialogue and pushing and testing on ideas. Like that only happened for me at home with my parents. . . . You know, going from writing a page or two . . . to like 10-page, 15-page, 30-page papers—it was a big jump from anything that I was used to” (7-4).
- See study/research section below.
- Heavy involvement in student organizations: national civic engagement/ community service organization; dance was particularly interesting since she had never danced before and became head of the organization; “helped me begin to hone an **interest** in like how organizations work and like, you know, how do you lead them, how are you effective with them, and that led to an interest in nonprofit management”; applied to master’s program in nonprofit management; master’s program wanted her to work first, but she convinced them that her college organizational work had prepared her.

4. In the middle of the previous unit she broke off and explored the **subject of race and SES** as a separate narrative unit.

- Just a handful of Black students, all from similar backgrounds, all on scholarship, some with lots of loans, “but we were here, but there was always this dynamic of **we didn’t feel privileged** the way that a lot of our counterparts did. You know, we needed to be able to prove our work and **prove that we were able to be here competing just as well as anyone else**. . . . The other reality that we had, and I kind of was beginning to sense this coming out of high school, is that this is the world, like the world is so much bigger than just [my neighborhood] and, you know, you’re so used to just kind of what happens [there] but there’s a lot that’s moving and **we’re going to get left behind if we’re not aware and able to understand and be a part of it**” (9-8).
- Recalls early experience attending a program for gifted students at [large public university]; was one of the few black students: “These kids were coming from all different walks of life, and they had been exposed to so much, and I had not at that point. . . . It was overwhelming” (10-10). She wanted to come home but mom made her stay; “that was an early moment of like, okay, this is the world. Like I’m going to meet people like this at some point in my life anyways, so like, let’s get started. . . . **So that was an early sign for me to know that life is so much bigger than where I grew up, right, like there’s just so much out here that I want to see and want to be exposed to that I won’t if I stay here kind of thing**” (10-19).
- Majored in sociology. “A key focus for me became research around just identity and . . . hip-hop culture” (11-5); significant detail on what she studied; presented at conferences.

5. Longest section of life history is **internships and career path**. All going on while she was pursuing her master’s degree in nonprofit management.

- The [city's] summer intern program—applied junior year, “because I have a, just a strong heart and love for philanthropy and my dream job is to be in a foundation as a program director running a foundation at some point before my career is over with. . . . How you can through grant making help build community and move things forward” (13-2). Didn't get in, reapplied, and was accepted for after graduation. “Great connections”; assigned to [an organization] to help “launch the women's leadership initiative” (14-5). Executive director became “a mentor and like a guide in my life to this day. . . . That internship played a big role because everything at that age and learning about how to negotiate your salary. How do you think about your career path? What's your 3-year plan? Like all that kind of came from that summer of like being around very successful women that were doing that, and I happened to be like supporting them and helping them in doing things like that” (14-6). Later mentioned, “How do you create mentors or a personal board of directors or people in your life that you know you can call on and talk to if you're interested.”
- The government education program counselor (still in touch) who put her name in at [private college], suggested she think about getting a job in fundraising because of opportunities it might open up. She was hired by a city arts organization as a development associate; developed an entirely new skill set; opportunities (some came her way, some she initiated with skills she learned at prior internship) to network with very high-profile individuals; met with executive director of the arts organization and asked him “questions about his career and how he got ahead and just—so he would have some recognition of who I was and then I could also learn like—so how did you become the executive director of the [arts organization]. Like how does that work?” (16-13). “I've noticed that I think I have a **personality that draws people** to me, just naturally have developed some relationships and things that way with people that I wasn't expecting to” (17-1).
- Networking: Meeting high-profile individuals through her internships made her realize “that this isn't something that you should be afraid of because we were exposed to executive directors of all the different nonprofits where the interns were working, so I think by the time that summer was over with, I was very used to walking up to someone that was influential and say that “This is who I am—I'm interested in getting to know you. Do you have a business card? I'd love to follow up with you” (18-2).
- Finished her master's and accepted in a 2-year fellows program at another large, private foundation; another powerful learning experience, rotating through various programmatic areas; part of program was to assign you to a career coach: “They're very much interested in making sure that we feel **comfortable** with what that path looks like for us out of the foundation. No words can express how I feel about [career coach] either. She's just—she's been very supportive in my life, but she really helped me through a lot of the—I guess, like the **soul searching parts** of like—“So who do you want to be and where do you want your life to be?” (19-13+). Made her **think about her overall purpose in life, personal mission statement, values, what matters in the work environment.**
- Successful job search led to job as chief of staff to the CEO of a \$40 million nonprofit organization. “Supported her in terms of managing her assistants and

- her day-to-day in her office, board governance so that became a whole new area that I dive into and then somehow still did government relations” (21-18). “What I learned about myself through the process is that not really sure if I want to be a CEO of that kind of organization. I have the type of personality and passion where I would still need to be very much out-facing in my job. I want to be external. I want to be exposed and being very much internal and behind the scenes didn’t make me happy after a while” (22-6).
- MAKING (as if it isn’t all sensemaking!): “I’m very interested in strategy, like how do things work? And I think that may be the sociology degree coming out in a sense, but people in institutions and just how things move and if I’m trying to get this person from A to B, how do I do that strategically? Or if this is the big goal of the organization, what does the plan look like to develop us to get there? I’ve always been very **interested** in those things and **intrigued** by it” (23-9).
 - Returned to career coach and other mentors to make her next career move; another deep learning experience; now moved to entrepreneurial, but influential nonprofit in the public policy space; “this organization is smaller, so it’s much more nimble. . . . There’s, you know, a \$7 million budget versus \$45 million. There’s a big difference in how things operate” (25-19).
 - “Now I’m much more aware of it in my 30s than I was in my 20s is that **I will create as much of a plan that makes sense for me in my life and try to execute it, but then be very open to how life is just going to happen to me despite all of my plans. But I always want to have some sense of where I’m going or what’s interesting to me so I don’t stray too far out of those boundaries** because I think that’s probably the lesson I learned from **watching my parents in their careers and their aspirations. They were big dreamers. There was always so much that they wanted to do and talked about doing but they never really did it—and even my mom, she’s been in the same job now for more than a decade. . . . I think part of kind of watching her never really be sure where she wanted life to go. . . . I just was always pretty much aware of ‘I don’t want to do that’ so but then I also knew that I had her support to say like, ‘I don’t want you to do what I did. You need to do something dramatically different.’ . . . So that has always also been kind of a push for me to be aware of just what drives you, what makes you happy, what are you passionate about and pursue those things. Then when the thing that you’re doing no longer fulfills that for you, it’s time to find something else to do” (26-13+).**

6. Reflections near end of interview, some based on questions:

- Parents were always engaged learners themselves: “informal learning and being intrigued by things . . . and the conversations they would have with each other just around topics of interest. . . . They would discuss it around me and sometime’s I’d get, ‘Well, what do you think about it?’” (31-5+).
- Mother tried to limit her exposure to dysfunction in the extended family and in the neighborhood. “I think sometimes the thing that we overlook is how those stressors [in the neighborhood], while they can negatively impact kids, there has to be a lot of resiliency to those kids—for kids that learn how to navigate that kind of environment” (32-8). Explained her own exposure to this: “I’ve been at parties to where somebody pulled a gun and started shooting and we all had to run home

- or whatever—or someone pulls a gun at school, you know that, [neighborhood] at the height of like when gang activity was still happening, fights in the parking lot and those are scary moments and you get through it. But I don't think I was ever unaware for as much as my mom tried to shelter me that this was also the environment in which I lived. So I learned how to navigate that just as much as I had to learn how to navigate in [universities] or any other environment that I was in, but I think because I had such a strong home environment there was no option—like I knew better than to think I was going to stay out late with friends or get in a car and go somewhere like that. I was more afraid of what was going to happen at home than any fear of what would have happened to me hanging out on the streets” (32-10+).
- I returned to a comment she had made about “balancing emotions” and asked her what she meant. “A lot of it came from very close-knit trusted circles of people that just began to build around me, and a lot of it were other students of color but that would become our outlet to kind of express what we were feeling around, you know, that moment in class when that white student said something really racist and the professor didn't address it. . . . But we always knew get it out here because we still have to show up the next day in class and be prepared to learn and be the other—you know and now we talk about it in terms of being like the utmost professional. . . . It was always that sense of you have to be calm and reserved and you have to just kind of always show up and be your absolute best, and it's even that way in my career now to where I think because of the racial dynamic it's very easy to get labeled as like the angry Black woman if you show up with too much emotion, right. . . . And so those are very real things that people of color still feel and that I even still feel in a sense in my career. . . . So being able to balance emotion in the sense of being able to respond to things in a professional way even if the comment that was made was inappropriate or even if the environment itself . . . bothers you in a way because it just kind of hits at the core of morally something you don't believe in—you still have to show up in a way that sets you apart from other people and doesn't make it seem like you can't handle this because you're reacting so emotionally around it” (34-21+).
 - Remembering her time in high school: “School in general is that if you're quiet and you just do what you're told, you'll get by. You will pass. You'll be fine. And I did that I think. That—that didn't help me in the long run because I think the fear around engaging with someone in debate and discussion, I missed the whole learning around that because I wasn't called on or pulled out for like disengaging in class and in a very quiet way. I did my work. I turned it in. I'm sitting here. For all intents and purposes I'm sitting listening, but maybe I'm not but maybe as a teacher at times you don't really care because that's one less student that I have to tell to sit down or stop talking” (38-10).
 - Question about barriers: “I think I've been aware of barriers but also not, if that makes sense. . . . I was just going to do it, so if there's a challenge as with most challenges, you figure out what are the solutions, which one works best for the situation and you move forward” (44-6).
 - “My faith also plays a very big role in my life, and that was something that was also kind of instilled in my home as well. . . . You're always going to get knocked

down, like nobody's perfect, you're going to get knocked down. What matters is how quickly you can get back up and do what you do next.

Erica's Structural Description

1. Began with descriptions of **early learning**, beginning with preschool
 - “School was a big part of my life because my parents worked.” Remembers teacher's name; Erica was her favorite student; already more advanced than other children (tying shoes); “as you would expect, not everyone was happy about it, you know, my status in the classroom” (1-19).
 - First experience in elementary: Principal really liked her because she was advanced; attributes this to her **father's interest in her early education**; frequent trips to library—“we'd all go to the library and hang out for a few hours”; he worked on teaching her to read and write; “if I didn't know something he wouldn't tell me the answer. He would say go look it up. . . . **I think a lot of the way I learn was how my dad kind of prepped me for it**” (2-6). “I feel like it [the ability to shape my life] was probably the emphasis on learning from early on. I feel like it was really like that discovery thing. I feel like it really was started by my dad and then I kind of took over and yes. **I mean that's probably my—my identities for that I would say**” (47-14).
 - At the same time, got in trouble for being more advanced than other kids; teacher wrote parents to have them tell her to stop writing in cursive; “**I was so upset** about it, but that was one of those moments where . . . you kind of get that glimmer . . . that **when you're ahead of other people, the school wasn't necessarily made to encourage that as much as you would hope. Especially in my later years I kind of thought about it more and I'm like that's weird that they didn't appreciate that**” (2-20).
 - Tested for gifted/talented and **transferred to g/t school for grades 3-5**; more challenging work; no longer the smartest. “So it was really cool not to be like the odd one out and kind of I fit in more and was even like less intelligent than some of them and happy about it” (3-10). Describes a very friendly, supportive environment with “some amazing teacher”; met people who are still close friends—many have done well in life. [Note: This was one of the few all-white schools that did not integrate under the desegregation order for the school district.] “[Town] **was really insular, like this perfect almost little community school. . . . It was a very happy place**” (4-20).
 - In the school district, “**the basis is there for a good education. It's just that I think if you're not trained to want that from a young age you don't know how to use the resources that are available well enough**” (4-1).
2. **Middle school—definitely the low point in her education.**
 - In first week saw a girl cut in the face with a razor blade—“It was **almost traumatic** to see that” (5-11).
 - “I don't really remember as much from [middle school] because it was kind of—I just remember it was kind of a **dark place** and there was **a lot of fighting** and I mean we had one situation I think it made the news that this girl was attacked on

- May Day for—because the school at that point was, majority minority groups, it wasn't really—and May Day was the day that you beat up the white kids and it turned out that one of the girls that had—ended up being I think in juvenile detention for beating up this other girl. **She was somebody I rode the bus with everyday, and it was very scary to me that—I mean I was literally one seat away from this girl every morning**" (8-8).
- “The teachers, I could tell a lot of them didn't care nearly as much” (5-14); reduced quality of instruction compared to elementary.
 - First experience of community activism (parents protesting uniforms they couldn't afford): parents won and “it was pretty cool” (4-17).
 - Involvement with [city] scholarship program began in sixth grade and went through high school; best thing about middle school; went on summer trips: “I think part of the strategy for that might have been to see that there was stuff beyond [city] in the most basic sense. They weren't trying to drill into our head yet about going to college at these places, but it was like *you can get there*. It's not that far and that was really the first time I had traveled” (15-9).
3. **Parents divorced** during transition period between middle school and high school; “that was a big change” (5-3).
- By high school, parents couldn't even talk to each other; she became “the person between and it's annoying and I became very vocal about my situation at the time” (8-21); had a “smart mouth” (8-22).
 - Mother started going out all the time; “**I kind of became 'the adult' in the household** to take care of my sister because she was old enough that she wasn't a huge problem for me, but I mean I was like 15 years old taking care of an 8-year-old. So **I was angry**” (9-1).
 - Long description of dad's characteristics and the job loss that led to the divorce; serious financial problems that led to the divorce; period of depression.
4. “**High school was kind of my best time**” (8-19); central involvement in drama club, including serving as president.
- Strong emphasis on **relationships**: male homeroom teacher; “he kind of replaced my dad for me for a while” (10-16); **head of English department and drama coach** who “reinforced the idea that the teachers are great but they need students, great students who really push them to do everything that they can do” (11-23).
 - Helped to revitalize the drama program; took on responsibility for the “creative side of it and getting the people to come and be in the plays and everything” (11-12).
 - “The thing I am **proudest** of was the fact that during the time I was in the drama club we had a lot of troubled students come in and by giving them something like that to do—building a set—they were really proud of it and they'd come in and they'd be like, ‘Yes, I want to be in the play now and build this thing. I want to be here.’ And it was really cool to see kids do that. . . . We even had a situation where a kid wasn't doing well in school [and his parents] were saying, ‘You're spending too much time on drama, you have to do better in school.’ So we said we were going to help tutor you and stuff so that you can still be here. . . . And he got to stay and it was really cool” (12-6+).

- In all honors classes. Described some excellent teachers, but very analytical about weak teachers in the non-honors classes: “These other kids were not getting the best education and I mean it was—it was like two worlds within the one school really” (14-12). Even physically separated into separate wing of building; her freshman class had 900 students and only 300 graduated; “we probably were lucky that most kids skipped because there wouldn’t have been room. . . . The first class we had [foreign language] one year, there were 50 students enrolled and there were 25 chairs and by the end there were 10 of us that came regularly” (17-12).
- In language classes, “it was like starting over every year because they never had a consistent teacher or syllabus, and it was just kind of sad that I spent so much time in a class that never really ended up benefiting me, but, yes, and it’s—I mean I don’t know if disillusionment is the right word, but I mean by high school I knew what mattered and what didn’t, and so the things that didn’t matter I was more than happy to kind of [blow off]” (17-23+).
- College access program guidance became much more intense in high school; all targeted to honors students; test prep, followup on paper work; wouldn’t have been able to navigate the process without them
- “I was third in my class in high school and I mean looking back probably it didn’t mean much coming from [city]. Like knowing I’m third best in [city], . . . that doesn’t mean much.”
- Expressed high value for diversity of the student body in high school.

5. College experience

- Chose [university] only because they gave her the most money; also part of access initiative that provided assistance (now discontinued); “it was culture shock for me.”
- Majored in English with two minors in Asian studies and philosophy; heavy emphasis on feminism. Big change in her attitude: “Feminism has been a big deal because I think it also changed the way that—not just dealing with the world—but the way I deal with my mom and sister and the women in my family.”
- Didn’t know it was a Catholic university until she arrived; not from a religious family; appalled by the approach to right/wrong she saw based on rote learning alone; ended up minoring in philosophy.
- Significant change to all-white environment (though she herself is white); “I kind of hated it from the first couple weeks because I would be sitting in one of our little intro orientation groups and they’re saying, ‘Oh my God, I’ve never seen this many Black people in one spot and there were like 10 Black people and I’m like—I am immensely uncomfortable being in that kind of setting” (19-22).
- Did not like social aspect of the university at all; also described lack of understanding of students in poverty; lack of sensitivity to this. “I’m so glad that I lived poor because I mean people just spend money on stuff and I can’t understand it. I mean, as bad as people want to say the [city] schools are, I mean you can come out of there fine” (27-22).
- Sensemaking: “I think it’s reading the professor and learning what they want and then just writing it that way” (24-2). “I had so many good professors there.

- They're definitely my favorite part of college" (25-11). "I learn people very quickly" (40-1) (applies to her current job in a toxic environment).
- Financial aid job in the **call center at the university**; she loved working there; good boss last 3 years who created a positive work environment—"She was just this personality and she got me very excited about everything" (26-7). **She became a manager and her boss taught her how to create a good workplace**; the call center became like her sorority (which she couldn't afford to join); unlike most classmates, she worked a lot.
 - "[Private university] is very **social justice oriented**, so I was doing service all through college. I started doing service in middle school with the Junior Honor Society, all the way through college, and so that educated me a lot about . . . systematic-like oppression and kind of world issues. So I really enjoy doing service and going out to help people that were probably in situations semi-close to mine when I was growing up, for you know like my middle school, high school years" (30-11). Led to her interest in fundraising; first job after college graduation with legal aid society.

6. Reflections during follow-up questions:

- "(Sigh) I feel like [my parents] both have a very strong sense of injustice. I think it's inward for them, like they think a lot of things have happened *to* them and so in a lot of ways **I feel like traits that I see in my parents I try to go the opposite way.**"
- Re: Luck: "I tell people something and they're like, 'No, you did that,' and I'm like, 'But people helped me.' Like it's the worst analogy, but it's like Harry Potter where he's like, you know, he's the one, but all these people created the support system, so I don't always feel comfortable being like, 'I did this'" (39-2).
- Didn't always have a choice: "Like the decision for [the university] was purely based on money. If I had all the money in the world, I never would have went there, ever, and so that's kind of—it was—I was pushed into that" (39-16).
- Has \$23,000 in student loan debt, but considers that a small amount.
- On personal strength: "I would say that's the big difference between me—especially me and my mom. Like she is like the victim always, and it bothers me because I see that and I'm like, God, **I could never be like that**" (41-1). "I would say that neither of my parents really have that personal strength" (41-10).
- On voice: "I think it comes from maybe writing, you know, and like all the teachers that I've had."
- At very end talked about dad's friend Evelina—Frenchwoman who became a role model when she was under 7 years old. "She was very proper. . . . Everything with her like you're reading, you're creating something, you're doing something, so that was probably a huge part that I left out" (43-13).
- Final question: Grandparents all died before she was born; no good relationships in extended family; lots of family drama; helped to support her father financially.

AFTER RECORDING STOPPED: Internships: housing authority (junior in high school); college access program; city foundation; literacy cooperative.

Thomas' Structural Description

25 years old

"I'm just always quiet. You don't really notice me as much, do you know what I mean?" (11-8).

1. **Emphasis on location** in relating his story—no mention of schooling until I asked; even after, little detail offered.
 - Started with "I've got two other brothers [6 years older; 4 years younger]. We all got different fathers. We all lived with our mother. My little brother's father died. My older brother's father is still alive, but he's nowhere in sight and I don't know my father at all" (1-8+).
 - **"Moved around quite a bit."**
 - Grew up in [Neighboring City 1]—multiple locations; lived here because mom "always wanted to have a better life than what she had"
 - **Mom worked two jobs** "to make sure we lived in a better place. . . . By working two jobs, though, she wasn't home a lot to—you know, be with us and when she would be home—you've got to sleep" **no one there to care for them from a young age.**
 - Moved to [Main City]: that was "kind of different for me. . . . No offense or anything, but you know [Neighboring City 1's] predominantly white people and then going to [Main City] schools, now it's going with Black people, so it's just a different culture, do you know what I mean (smiling)?" (2-1).
 - Moved three more times during transition from elementary to middle schools: [Neighboring City 1] again, [Neighboring City 2], [Neighboring City 3] (lived with his aunt there); moved back to [Neighboring City 1] but went to [name] high school "because I liked the [Main City] environment better than the [Neighboring City 1] environment" (4-15).
 - I asked him to tell me about school—only mentioned social until I asked about academics; no detail provided.
 - **"I'm naturally a quiet-to-myself type person anyway,** so each time I moved I always gathered maybe two or three friends maybe and that's how I like it anyway—but **maybe because I moved around so much, maybe that is why I like it. I don't know.** . . . So it wasn't too bad for me" (5-3+).
 - Never had good grades (mom at work; never did homework) except **the one year he was in [Neighboring City 3] schools.** His family had been evicted [said this much later with no affect], and he went to live with an aunt in suburban district. **"My auntie was determined to make sure I got good grades. . . . By my auntie talking to my teachers, they pushed me to do better. They spent that extra little time with me. Yes, that's pretty nice"** (6-1).
 - Went back to live with his mother; didn't care one way or the other: "Honestly, I really didn't care. I guess I'm kind of like a 'it is what it is' type of person. . . . Life's going to go on, and it really didn't make too much of a difference" (6-12).
 - **Never got in trouble in school; just didn't do his work:** "I guess one of the main reasons why I wouldn't do work was because I didn't understand it as quick as

everybody else, and I would feel ashamed to ask the question because it might be a silly question to them. I wouldn't want to sound silly" (6-17).

2. **High school at large comprehensive high school**; in regular track except held back in math; "I really didn't want to be there" (8-2).
 - "I knew that you need school to help you be successful in life, but I guess there's still that shame of asking questions—that nature, it would still hold me back" (8-9).
 - **Wanted to play basketball in 10th grade**, so was working hard for the first time so that he would be eligible. "[My biology teacher] was a mean teacher, but I wanted to be on the basketball team real bad so I'm trying real hard to get good grades. . . . She told me I had an F in her class, so I just stopped going. I mean, there ain't no point in doing all these drills and doing all this if I've got a F in the class, so I can't play basketball. I got my report card and I had a B and I was like—Oh, man!" (11/12-18+).
 - Started "smoking weed."
 - At 16 started **work at fast food restaurant**; kept the job for 3 years. "A lot of people don't like working fast food. I liked the fast pace and the moving and all my coworkers was pretty cool too." Liked earning money: "Buying clothes and weed, taking girls out on dates and stuff like that. That's pretty much my high school" (13-17).
 - **Dropped out near middle of senior year**; could not pass the state graduation test so decided there was no point to continuing—just stopped going; no one from the school ever reached out to find out why or to encourage him to stay [only offered this in response to my question]; mother figured it out quite some time later and said "it was pretty much my decision" (15-13).
3. After dropping out of high school became a **drug dealer**: "**So next, after high school, I started selling weed**" (16-5).
 - "I'd already dropped out of school, so I wanted to make some extra money. I always wanted to do real estate or something—so my mindset was if I can get enough money to buy a couple houses and then flip some houses, then I can be legit, but still not have an education. . . . So that was my whole mindset. I always wanted to be successful, but I just didn't have the brains behind it" (16-11+).
 - Wasn't afraid even though robbed a few times: "I didn't feel danger because it wasn't at gunpoint or anything, [except] maybe a little fear from the cops" (18-20).
 - Good relationships with people: "I did become pretty friendly with the people I connected with, but not all of them. I pretty much go off of how you do [takes his cues from the other person]. For an example, no offense or anything, but I notice that older white people, they would be more friendly, so I would be more friendly with them" (18-1).
 - Decided to sell ecstasy to get bigger profit: "At the time, I knew one pill was a felony, but I didn't know like 10 pills is automatically a year in jail" (17-18).
 - "**My friends I had, nobody around me pushing me at all. Nobody really let me know what's the right and wrong** . . . and even if there was somebody telling me right and wrong, they were still the wrong things. So like somebody telling me

- how to sell drugs, the proper way, but it's still the wrong thing to do, do you know what I mean?" (38-3).
- A female friend from high school [a study participant] "called me one day out of the blue talking about going to church. I'm like, I'm not about to go to church. I sell drugs. I'm a drug dealer. I'm not going to church (laughter). . . . I'm cool but eventually she talked me into it so I'm like all right, I'll go see what it's about" (20-6+). Found it pretty boring but went with her occasionally.
 - Mom had quit working for the first time and "that was my and my mom's first real conversation. Like I'd come home and just talked to my mom. . . . We kind of started building a relationship so I thought that was cool. That was real cool" (19-18). They were together when the house was raided and he was arrested; mother used his ATM card to get the [drug] money for his bond.

4. Post-arrest/prison time period

- When out on bond, the young woman changed churches and "I started coming pretty much almost every Sunday and Wednesday [for the 4 months till he went to prison]. I started knowing more about God and trying really to get my life on track. So then when I went to jail the two things mainly on my mind [were] getting closer to God and getting my GED. I was pretty focused." Church is a ministry to 18- to 30-year-olds in very distressed urban neighborhood; pastor is a U.S. Marine.
- Sentenced to a year in minimum security prison mostly for first offenders; "it was pretty laid back" (22-23).
- Got his GED—prison required classes for those under 23 without a high school diploma; teacher was nice; he was "real serious" about it and attributes it to church experience described above; when he found out he passed, "Oh, I cried! I did, honestly I did! I did. I did. Yes, that was one of my biggest accomplishments at that point. Yes." (29-1). Started reading business books (*Rich Dad, Poor Dad* and *The Success Principles*).
- Transition back to community—"I got out February 23, 2012." (only exact detail in his story).
 - Started hearing about more profits in drug dealing before he left prison: "In jail, there's no real temptation. There's no money, there's no girls, so there's no real temptation in there, but when I got out it was hard, like everything hits you all at one time" (29-10). Went back to mom's house.
 - "I was around the same people, but at the same time started looking a little different, too, because nobody was really there for me when I was locked up" (29-21).
 - Still thinking about selling drugs, but his supplier was in county jail for 4 months so he didn't have access. "But I'm still coming [planning to go back to dealing] the whole time he in there. I'm still coming so the more and more I'm coming, the more I'm waiting for him. My heart is starting to change more and more towards God, do you know what I mean?" (31-1).

5. Transformation: "So then by the time he did get out it was kind of like, man, I don't even want to do it no more" (31-1).

- At this church, “Everybody just wasn’t after money. People wasn’t stealing from their best friends. It’s hard to explain. It’s just a complete difference. Here I’m seeing people, everybody going to school, everybody trying to get some type of education, everybody bettering themselves in some type of way” (25-1).
 - Talked to pastor a few times; gave him “real practical” input—with a second felony you would have to wait 7 years to get it expunged.
 - The church “kept me focused. It kept me focused on life. It kept me focused on what’s really important. Yet, it let me know like the right and the wrong ways to live” (37-21).
 - “Now I’ve got good friends. I know I do” (39-18).
 - Positive environment: “If you’ve got more negativity coming your way then you’re going to lean more towards negativity. If you’ve got more positive coming your way, you’re going to lean towards positive. If somebody is pushing you to do positive, then you’re going to do positive more. If someone is pushing you to do negative, you’re going to do negative more. I think that’s pretty much what it boils down to” (40-19+).
 - Returned to education
 - Uncle encouraged him to go to school. He went “because my uncle told me—I mean, I knew I wanted to get into school but my uncle told me, ‘I want you to be enrolled in school by September.’ . . . He told me to go for electrical maintenance because I didn’t know what to go for” (32-19).
 - Supportive admissions system, coursework: “They try to make it kind of relevant to real life so it’s pretty simple” (33-6). “The classes were a lot smaller so the teachers more know you. At this point we’re all grown, so if I’ve got a question, I’m not ashamed to ask because I mean I’m paying for these classes. I’ve got to get it. So now I’m not ashamed to ask questions” (35-12).
 - Worked a full-time warehouse job (still has it) while attending school.
 - Received a certificate a couple of weeks ago—ongoing challenges, however, in terms of possible employment: “A lot of jobs ask for 2 years’ work experience, so now I’m trying to find some type of experience.” He went to see about the union, but “I needed one class in algebra in order to go and in high school I never passed a math class. I never passed a math class, so I didn’t have no algebra under my belt so I kind of just put that to the wayside” (36-12).
 - Lack of understanding even after finishing program: “See at first I thought . . . I would be a certified electrician, but now I’m starting to think an electrician and electrical maintenance is two different things. I didn’t know that at first though. I wish I would have known that at first though, but I didn’t know it, but now I do know it. I do want to be an electrician. . . . I’m thinking maybe this can still be a step to get me in through that door and begin again, yes, because that’s what I want to do, electrician.”
6. Important addendum: At end of interview, when I asked if there was anything important that he wanted to add to his story: “I don’t think it really accomplishes anything, but my uncle who had pushed me to go to school, he had cancer and he passed away a couple months ago. But yes, yes, he was my favorite uncle. . . . My family is kind of weird because we’re not that close, but when we come together it’s

all love. We don't call each other all the time but . . . I'd see him every couple of years but every time I seen him—like he always knew he was my favorite uncle and I was his favorite nephew too, for real. . . . It's kind of weird because he always lived down the street from me pretty much my whole life, but my life is so busy I really wouldn't take the time out and just go over there, but at this point in my life—you know, **when I get out of jail and my life has slowed down a lot** because I'm not selling drugs or anything. So my life's slowed down a lot and I would just stop over there every now and then. I'd stop over just to talk to him and watch TV with him. . . . He pretty much said you've got to do it. He knew I wanted to go to school but he knew I didn't know what to go for, so he just told me he was watching the commercials for [community college] to be an electrician and he was telling me to go for that" (41/42).

APPENDIX I:

INDIVIDUAL PROFILES OF PROCESS STRUCTURES OF THE LIFE COURSE

Name	Biographical action schemes	Institutional patterns (see Table 5 for family makeup)	Life trajectories/ Processes of suffering	Transformation processes/ enaction
Angela—F	<p>Always wanted to go to college—first to be a lawyer.</p> <p>Involvement in the arts became an important coping mechanism and she kept it part of her life—led to career path.</p> <p>Feedback from internships led to her proactive shaping of her demeanor and her experiences going forward.</p>	<p>Small schools: HS and private college.</p> <p>Importance of work-study experience in HS.</p> <p>Involvement in the arts.</p> <p>College had very supportive academic environment.</p> <p>Internships.</p> <p>Importance of financial aid.</p>	<p>Moved frequently as young child; kept out of school part of one year.</p> <p>Father absent; stepfather beginning age 8; he had heart transplant (age 11) and died when she was 15; extra responsibility.</p> <p>Talked about her very quiet demeanor as a barrier, which she actively sought to overcome.</p>	<p>Never saw her mother give up; mother always stressed education.</p> <p>Key people at significant moments: counselor she worked for who gave her college guidance; two college professors who encouraged graduate school; constructive feedback during internships.</p>
Anna—F	<p>Majority of story is around fundamental cultural issues within family; complicated story of the many steps she took to resolve this conflict within herself and among family members; very proactive action schemes, but ultimately thwarted.</p> <p>Related action schemes to study/work in Asia, Africa.</p> <p>Remarkable strategy she developed for learning how to fit into various contexts: her “copying method.”</p> <p>Proactive problem solving to stay in college through change of major; completion of graduate degree in nonprofit management.</p> <p>Husband, two children.</p>	<p>Immigration-related issues: father illegal Asian immigrant; mother Eastern European who still speaks no English/no HS education.</p> <p>She spoke no English/couldn’t read when she began second grade in suburban school; ESL program put her on track.</p> <p>Completely unprepared for college in spite of being near top of HS class; tried to get in honors classes, but school refused.</p> <p>Important national scholarship that she was able to keep; included leadership development program.</p> <p>Race/culture: “minority among</p>	<p>Constant struggle around family secrets, lies, cultural barriers—never sure what is “true”; “it’s all a mystery to me.”</p> <p>Intense issues of identity.</p> <p>Great responsibility in family, including supporting mother, sister, sister’s child.</p> <p>Never felt she belonged anywhere—vivid detail on this subject.</p> <p>Made to feel “like a mistake or an embarrassment from that side of the family.”</p> <p>Developed a very high “threshold for pain, because there’s been a lot of like trauma and dysfunction and abuse.</p>	<p>Counselor who “saved me” by encouraging college.</p> <p>Sensemaking experiences: “this was all me kind of making sense of things as a grownup now, . . . interpreting things.”</p> <p>Developing a coping strategy she called her “copying method,” which became her chief mechanism for moving her life forward.</p> <p>Lessons she learned from her mother: “Run for your life” and “Never be trapped by a man.”</p>

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	Currently working to found charter school to continue her “life story in a healthy, productive, formal way.”	minorities” during HS; challenges regarding stereotypes during college; saw as a plus in that she wouldn’t have opportunities she had if she wasn’t a minority. Poverty.		
Brandon—M	Always planned to go to college: “Always had the drive to just be someone bigger.” Felt that he was identified (first by his mother) as a “leader” at a very young age; seized those opportunities throughout his life. Responded to encouragement and proactively sought and experienced very high level internships; has written a book on how to make that happen based on his experience. Emphasizes his curiosity as a factor in his life course; ultimately led to his doctoral studies. Note: high level of narrative competence that is almost a biographical action scheme.	Unusually strong support from mother and extended family. Poorly prepared by school system; put into trade track in junior/senior year; a few teachers provided significant encouragement for internship opportunities. Strong social affiliations: sports, self-created “gang.” Strong internships/mentorships beginning in HS and extending throughout college; formal and informal mentoring, including from his mother’s employer (including financial support for education).	Long introductory story about his mother’s life, including challenges as a single mom, physical abuse from men, poor employment options, but determination and courage. Period of homelessness. Poverty. Humiliation at first college: led to his motto “I listen. I learn. I implement.”	“Listen. Learn. Implement”; sensemaking strategies throughout. Gang provided safety and status that was important in shaping who he is. Leadership opportunities, especially sports: “discipline, confidence, courage.” Many significant individuals, some deep mentorships/coaching, some chance encounters that led to transformative experiences. Key professors who recommended academic direction.
Constance—F	Always planned to attend college. Homeschooled; independent learning. Proactively gained associate’s degree while in HS. Financial aid–driven plans. Involvement in service. Change in academic and career	Homeschooled until HS. Unprepared for college in spite of associate’s degree at HS graduation. Private, top-tier university. Describes racism, classism—”culture shock.” Significant internships.	Illness and death of grandmother; took a year off from school to care for her. Moderate financial barriers to education.	Homeschooling developed strong goal-setting and independence; love of learning. Period of reflection while caring for her grandmother led to significant exercise of biographicity. Internships had positive

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	direction after period of reflection.			influence.
Erica—F	Always planned to attend college. Involvement in the arts. College path determined by best financial aid package. Work/study program provided career advancement. Involvement in service programs; led to career path.	Unprepared for college in spite of being near top of HS class. Financial aid influenced college decisions. Private 4-year college. Strong, supportive relationships in neighborhood schools. Organized HS arts program provided important skills. Institutional bias re: race, SES that she saw as a barrier.	Problematic family dynamic, including divorce; weak support for education.	Sure of what she didn't want—to be like her parents. Supportive relationships with teachers her whole life. Mentorship from drama teacher; gave her skills, confidence, opportunities. Work/study responsibility and mentorship for career. College's focus on social justice helped shape her career path.
Jeremy—M	Took proactive steps to get to know his father shortly before his death; led to break with mother. Attended Catholic elementary, fairly good, small HS (30% drop out rate); workmanlike/indifferent attitude toward school; did well. Began college with full scholarship but had to work 3 jobs to maintain himself and lost scholarship. Inadvertently attended service trip, but then actively planned a life in service to others. Note: difficult interview; more limited narrative competency which he himself described/	Financial aid; difficulties of completing college. Social affiliation: service organization.	Complicated/challenging relationships with parents—"hates" mother; reunited with father shortly before his death. Moved out on his own at 17 years old; independent since; at one point had nowhere to go—taken in by friend's family. Described his shock when he was exposed to families that got along, told each other stories, ate together. Difficult relationships with women.	Didn't want to "end up like my family." Frequent descriptions of sensemaking processes; "I'm kind of using what I went through for my own research to kind of change what happened." Service trip most significant transformation process—led to change in relationships, college major, general attitude toward life. Generosity of friends and their families (living with them).
Julia—F	Unusual action scheme to protect herself from bullying; became "tough," aggressive, and strong on justice. Participation in marching band;	School system that failed in many ways: providing safe environment; administrative structures to monitor student behavior that led to her dropping	Overarching story of intense bullying regarding race from other African Americans because of her light skin—pervasive throughout her schooling; the most powerful	Marching band experience; winning art contest in the sixth grade. Knew what she didn't want. Job experience with

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	<p>proactive involvement in the arts. In spite of dropping out of HS, managed to begin community college for short time. Left home to find a different life across the country; started school again, began working in pharmacy; encouraged to go back to school. Began pre-pharmacy program, but eventually stepped back for a period of reflection and experimentation with various courses—led her back to a major in the arts. Once majoring in art, began a clear path to gain the experiences she wanted to shape her life, including studying abroad, etc.</p>	<p>out; inflexible bureaucracy. Encouragement for education within the workplace. Strong support from husband after birth of their daughter. Financial barriers for higher education; ongoing issue of student loans.</p>	<p>element of her story. Felt little support or guidance from family; no encouragement for college. Dropped out of HS due to administrative negligence.</p>	<p>encouragement from coworkers. Period of reflection/exploration of options led her back to involvement in the arts. Study abroad led to her long-term career goals.</p>
Kayla—F	<p>Always planned to attend college; high parental expectations. Mother insisted she have meaningful work as adolescent; led to participation in several high-quality programs, internships, etc. in HS and college. Early College program in HS. Attended top-tier liberal arts college; active in student organizations, especially community service. Proactive at seeking help; developing her academic life. Internships led to carefully</p>	<p>Strong family support, especially regarding critical thinking, lifelong learning. Unprepared for college, though second in HS class and part of early college program. College support systems for minority students; first-tier private college. Financial aid system. Unusually strong support from internship/mentorship system. Strong social networks/social affiliations; church affiliation. Community service. Strong support into workforce.</p>	<p>Frequent moves during early childhood. Lack of preparation for college. Limited financial resources for education.</p>	<p>Knew what she didn't want based on parents' experiences. Support from professor who guided her in college, but didn't "baby" her. College organizations, especially service experiences and arts involvement. Internships, especially high-level programming on leadership, etc. for participants; high-level mentorship.</p>

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	planned academic and career trajectory; formal career coaching.	Racism, SES bias.		
Leon—M	<p>Very positive action schemes throughout childhood: mother moved him to school for gifted; high level of stability, success, and involvement.</p> <p>Always planned to go to college. Beginning in HS, went on two alternating action tracks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Scheme to continue as a “scholarly individual,” a college-bound student; 2. Scheme to gain social status in school, neighborhood, gang activity, “foolish things.” <p>Repeated decisions to “get my life together” for Scheme 1, but “at the end of the day” it didn’t happen.</p> <p>Dropped out of college and wanted a “quick success” –for-profit programs; worked full time and finished in record time.</p>	<p>Strong, supportive family; seventh of 11 children.</p> <p>Positive experiences with school system.</p> <p>Neighborhood as negative influence.</p> <p>Gang as powerful institutional structure.</p> <p>Financial aid structures; aid for adult learners.</p> <p>For-profit colleges limited academic options for future.</p>	<p>Death of younger sister when he was 7; recent death of mother.</p> <p>Very positive childhood; on a clear path to success.</p> <p>Intense peer pressure in neighborhood; beginning of drug use.</p> <p>Intense ambivalence about the two lives he was living leading to growing isolation, anxiety, and depression.</p> <p>Had to “fill the void in my heart.”</p>	<p>Described the advent of adolescence as a negative transformation: sex, drugs, and, later, growing gang involvement.</p> <p>Injury in violent attack during gang fight.</p> <p>Death of uncle led to his leaving 4-year college with full scholarship—“I had to evaluate myself”; stopped using drugs—”I stopped all of that.”</p> <p>Birth of daughter; stable relationship with mother.</p> <p>Significant change of physical context.</p>
Marcus—M	<p>Action to gain quick success/ make money led to career path.</p> <p>Repeated foiled intentions to make significant change.</p> <p>Financial aid–driven action plans.</p> <p>Gradual moves forward in nursing education/career; partly proactive, partly expediency.</p>	<p>Poor school supports, especially after death of mother—lack of academic guidance.</p> <p>Early entry into trade school track.</p> <p>For-profit educational system limited his options.</p> <p>Poverty.</p> <p>Lack of financial aid for further education.</p>	<p>No father figure; confusion over who his father was.</p> <p>Death of mother at age 13; separated from sister.</p> <p>Aunt gained custody; chaotic household; neglect: no guidance, inadequate health care, poverty.</p> <p>“Fragile standstill” (Alheit, 1994).</p>	<p>Knew what he didn’t want out of life.</p> <p>Mother emphasized education before her death.</p> <p>Dedication to the nursing profession after early entry as a nursing assistant.</p>

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Monica—F	<p>Move to suburb that led to intense bullying moved her to create a plan to improve her level of learning, become involved in the school, and make friends—she made it happen, but then moved back to housing projects in city where pattern of bullying repeated.</p> <p>Motivated by desire for material things, led to employment as soon as possible—also led to relationships where males would give her things.</p> <p>Birth of first child, led to repeated action plans, often thwarted.</p> <p>Powerful action plan to learn about her son’s disabilities and to find methods to address them; stuck with this until he was no longer considered disabled.</p> <p>After daughter’s birth, plan to resume her education; in spite of many obstacles completed BA.</p> <p>Started a successful business when she couldn’t find satisfying work after college.</p>	<p>Institutional racism/bullying.</p> <p>School system failures on many levels—inadequate preparation; lack of safety; absence of guidance.</p> <p>Poverty.</p> <p>Justice system—use of warrant to incarcerate new mother for minor offense; no counseling for severe depression while in jail.</p> <p>Trade school.</p> <p>Importance of safety net services, especially Section 8 housing—could not have moved forward without it; limited access.</p> <p>Special support services for minority adults returning to school (TRIO).</p> <p>Formal financial aid services.</p> <p>Lack of workforce placement services.</p> <p>Community service opportunities in community.</p>	<p>Sexual assault at very young age (no parental action); early sexual activity/promiscuity; “never saw anything but pain.”</p> <p>Neglect. Chaotic family dynamics.</p> <p>Frequent moves with strong element of racism.</p> <p>Alcohol/drug abuse beginning at age 11; relationship with drug dealer(s); parental drug abuse.</p> <p>Depression; suicide attempts.</p> <p>“Fragile standstill” during HS.</p> <p>Poverty. Paid her mother’s rent as adolescent.</p> <p>Encounters with legal system, including brief incarceration over unpaid traffic violation; separated from her infant son.</p> <p>Infant son diagnosed with developmental disability.</p> <p>Frequent evictions, repossessions of auto.</p> <p>Periods of homelessness; change with stable public housing.</p> <p>After graduating from college, still could not find work.</p>	<p>Decision to stop drug/alcohol use due to first pregnancy.</p> <p>Birth of first child: determination to overcome his developmental delays.</p> <p>Birth of daughter—determination to be a positive role model for her; knew what she didn’t want for her children.</p> <p>Used the word “learning” more than most participants—seemed to link knowledge and emotion very directly.</p> <p>Recognition that she had some talent.</p>
Patricia—F	<p>Involvement in the arts beginning in middle school: powerful influence of marching band and ongoing participation in musical activities throughout college.</p> <p>Dedication to work from age 16; early financial independence, consistent employment/</p>	<p>More prepared than other participants for college—suburban HS; positive guidance counseling experiences.</p> <p>Poor college guidance—relied on peers.</p> <p>Stable financial aid for college.</p> <p>Social affiliations: service</p>	<p>Great instability in family life: single mom, frequent moves, erratic relationship with father, mother frequently ill/hospitalized; “turbulent atmosphere that family thing.”</p> <p>Often neglected/unattended.</p> <p>Experienced “crippling” anxiety</p>	<p>Mother taught her “good life lessons.”</p> <p>Marching band.</p> <p>Individual peers had significant impact, particularly in getting her involved in service and student government.</p> <p>Employment as resident</p>

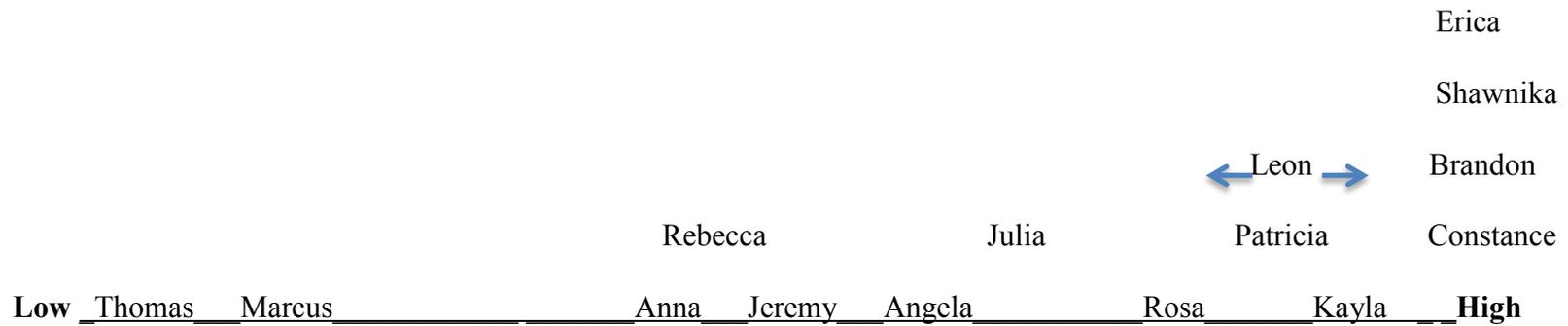
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	responsibility as resident assistant in college. Changed major to math (due to love of calculus in HS) and nonprofit management (due to community service).	organization, student government.	throughout elementary school. Supported mom financially while in HS through fast-food job. Concern regarding enabling her mother. Problematic relationships with men.	assistant at college. Co-op opportunity as math major made for easy transition to workforce.
Rebecca—F	Left home at 15 to marry. Worked hard to finish HS; took a great deal of planning and execution in spite of barriers; sustained goal of completing college. Started community college; forced to quit due to abusive husband; not in good standing. Positive career path in health care; many promotions; workplace learning. Attended for-profit college for expediency/quick success; completed “associate’s degree.” Three children; single mom; owns home; consistent planning to support her children.	Unprepared by school system; little support/active discouragement for her situation. Victim of for-profit education system: loans; credits that will not transfer; etc. Government safety net services—had to fight for them. Work—found a good job path with only HS; workforce training and advancement; networks within workplace.	Sexual assault at young age; early sexual activity. Chaotic family dynamics. Physical/emotional abuse—parents, husband, others. Three sons, three different fathers; single mother. Poverty. Talked about her own poor choices that caused hardship in her life. Normal work challenges magnified by personal circumstances.	Knew what she didn’t want from watching parents as well as early experiences of her own. Birth of her children and dedication to their future. Courage gained from leaving abusive husband. Confidence gained from success in workplace. Awareness of her own voice in encounters with institutional barriers. Incidental encouragement from coworkers and clients. Changes in environment/context.
Rosa—F	School was the one good thing she had—always wanted to do well there. Decided to take college courses while still in HS. Church involvement led to her action plan for a different life, return to college, career in social work; graduate school.	Unprepared for college. Financial aid shaped decisions. Justice system failed to protect her from fear/violence in childhood. Positive experiences with internships. Work as adolescent. Church as powerful influence; opportunities for ministry.	Sexual assault at young age; early sexual activity/promiscuity. Fear of violence throughout childhood; serious trauma. Alcohol/drug abuse: parents and self. Neglect. Chaotic family dynamics. Death of father in HS led to “psychotic episode.” Poverty.	Sure of what she didn’t want in her life. Boyfriend and family who “saved my life”; showed her another way to live. Death of father—eventually remembering his early positive lessons. Powerful influence of church community: role models,

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Sara—F	<p>Gifted education all the way through—dedication to her learning; high expectations from mother.</p> <p>Loved science; planned a premed program at private college (not adequately prepared—changed major to biology, then sociology). Thread of emphasis on the importance of being “self-sufficient.”</p> <p>Decided to make the best of things and become a medical assistant; 6 years in this career; encouraged.</p>	<p>Neighborhood—only participant to mention the positive influence of her neighborhood; sharp contrast to school’s neighborhood—metaphor.</p> <p>Gifted program; honors HS; still unprepared for college.</p> <p>Forced to leave private college junior year for financial reasons.</p> <p>For-profit college certificate; defended these schools from critics; unclear if she was aware how this may limit future options.</p>	<p>Unclear relationship with father—near end said, “I’m sure you noticed I haven’t mentioned my father”; he refused to pay for college expenses required based on his income, which caused her to leave college.</p> <p>Very sheltered by mother.</p> <p>Felt like a failure in first years of college; led to unexpected fear when entering workforce.</p>	<p>mentoring, beliefs, ministry opportunities.</p> <p>HS class about college planning; realized “your life is at stake.”</p> <p>Hands-on learning in medical assistant program satisfying; positive experience in internship led to long-term career path.</p> <p>“It’s all about your attitude. That in itself can take you somewhere”; emotion and sensemaking key to her inner changes.</p> <p>Motivated by what people in her family didn’t do with their lives.</p>
Shawnika—F	<p>Always planned to go to college due to mother’s influence; saved money for college; high expectations.</p> <p>Through close friend, sought and received associate’s degree while in HS.</p> <p>Sought internship in engineering; introduced to research activities at early age; put her on a consistent action plan to become a research engineer.</p> <p>Became involved in trying to support other (minority) students who face same challenges; has shaped her career path.</p>	<p>Unprepared by school system (even though she obtained associate’s degree while in HS); physics and calculus not even offered by her HS.</p> <p>Powerful influence of high-quality internships and deep, lasting mentoring.</p> <p>Financial aid.</p> <p>High-level research has provided opportunities that are unusual and career-shaping.</p>	<p>Born with cleft palate; ongoing speech issues; diagnosed with learning disability in college (ADHD).</p> <p>Death of mother at age 11; separated from brothers.</p> <p>Move to father’s family (with seven other children) where she was unwelcome; little encouragement for higher education.</p> <p>Very challenging transition to college due to poor preparation; feelings of inadequacy.</p> <p>Lack of support from some professors.</p>	<p>“How can people not learn to tell me that something can’t be done”—intense determination.</p> <p>Mother’s death convinced her to be a forgiving person.</p> <p>Engineering internship established her sense of herself as a researcher in spite of academic difficulties.</p> <p>Strength of mentorship; consistent ongoing support.</p> <p>Role in mentoring other students has influenced her future career direction.</p>

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Thomas—M	Just drifted through childhood, staying below the radar. Got job at 15 years; kept same job until 19; good worker; got along well at work; liked work. Always wanted to “be successful”; hoped to buy and sell real estate; started dealing drugs to make the money to start, but didn’t really save money. Began seeing different possibilities when he started attending church before he went to prison—didn’t want to go back to dealing. Uncle steered him into community college program in electrical maintenance which he just finished.	School system failed him completely—e.g., can’t become electrician without algebra and he “never passed a math class.” Community college gave inadequate information/counseling—just finished certificate but unlikely to get a job in the field. Difficulty of financing college. Justice system—required enrollment in GED program. Poverty.	Parental neglect; single mother who always worked 16 hours/day. Frequent moves, including to all-white school district. Lived with aunt for 1 year because of homelessness/poverty. Ashamed to ask for help in school; became invisible. Drug abuse. Dropped out of HS in senior year because he couldn’t pass graduation test; no one from school intervened. “Fragile standstill” (Alheit, 1994). Became drug dealer; went to prison for 1 year. Uncle who helped him after prison died recently.	Persistent invitations from friend from HS to start attending church—started shortly before he was arrested. GED in prison. Things “slowed down” when he got out and had time to assess. Deep involvement in church: “I’ve got friends”; “It kept me focused on what’s really important.” Uncle encouraged community college certificate program.

HS indicates high school; SES, socioeconomic.

SELF (Note: all were poorly prepared for post-secondary education and had doubts about what they could accomplish)



Monica (low until birth
of daughter)
Sara (fell after forced
to leave college for
financial reasons)