THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION

AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
July, 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to thank the seven remarkable students who willingly shared their personal experiences with me. Their selflessness inspired as they explained their participation in this study was motivated by their desire to help others who have had a parent incarcerated. The days I spent with these seven individuals were the highlights of this research process. This work is dedicated to them.

I would like to thank Dr. Alex Bishop for his tireless guidance. From the first day of conceptualizing what this study could become, throughout the months of development, to the final days of edits and revisions, his kindness and resolve were what I needed to see this to completion. It has been a true honor to learn from him. Additionally, I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Bindewald, Dr. Gardner, and Dr. Johnson for their attention, time, and support of this work.

The phrase 'it takes a village' has been exemplified in my life throughout this process by friends who have offered words of encouragement, prayers, fed my cat, fed me, and celebrated with excitement upon each milestone completed. Thank you to Dr. Zach Giano for fielding my many crises of confidence and providing a critical eye to my writing. Also, Tessa, Trey, Andee Jo, Joy, Alissa, Alisha, Brent, Chris, Mallory, and Brad, thank you for showing up for me.

I acknowledge my family for their constant support. For the unmatched selflessness of my parents, Clyde and Candace, my sister Tabitha, and my brother Clint, I remain ever grateful. It was your unconditional acceptance of me, regardless of my emotional state, that elevated my belief in myself. A special thanks is also offered to my Aunt Wonda who provided a consistent stream of encouragement and Starbucks gift cards which often kept me upright. I am ever grateful for her exquisite timing and generous spirit. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to the life of my Uncle Bud. The man whose life changing accident changed all of ours and is the single most important reason for the work I do every day. Finally, I want to acknowledge and honor my grandmother, Alta Mae Cothern, who passed away before this work was done. Her words, "you must finish what you start," have remained on my board and in my heart since the day she spoke them to me. Thank you, I am me, because of you.

Acknowledgements reflect the views of the author and are not endorsed by committee members or Oklahoma State University.

Name: AMANDA S. COTHERN

Date of Degree: MAY, 2019

Title of Study: THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Major Field: HUMAN SCIENCES

Abstract: Incarceration is one of the single most important issues in Oklahoma. Incarceration rates of both men and women have exceeded all other states (Carson, 2017). Although research has explored the effects of parental incarceration among children, little effort has been dedicated toward understanding the impact of parental incarceration on the emerging adult child (Luther, 2015; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The developmental stage of emerging adulthood includes the ages from 18-25 and is one of identity development and increased adult responsibility (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences of emerging adults attending college with a parent(s) currently or previously incarcerated.

Parental incarceration leads to the loss of a parent, temporarily or indefinitely, thus ambiguous loss theory served as a primary theoretical framework for this study (Boss, 2006). Ambiguous loss theory posits that a loss without closure is a complicated and ongoing grief process (Boss, 2006). Thus, the experiences of emerging adults, who normatively encounter increased responsibilities, commitments, and social experiences while attending college and adjusting to the ambiguous loss of an incarcerated parent are worthy of examination.

Using a qualitative case study research design, seven college students with a parent currently, or previously, incarcerated were interviewed. Focus groups and individual interviews were used and all sessions were audio recorded. Data was then transcribed verbatim and member checked for accuracy. Results included unique evidence of ambiguous loss across all seven cases along with high indications of self-efficacy. Conclusions from the findings highlighted five primary themes and four sub-themes. Primary themes included: childhood adversity, post-traumatic stress, ambiguous loss, social connectedness, and personal motivation. Furthermore, four underlying sub-themes were identified: adaptive capacity, economic emancipation, parentification, and savoring. Findings are further discussed in the framework of a newly proposed model of self-efficacy. Overall, the results have implications relative to informing educational administrators, instructors, and school or clinical counselors how best to build and sustain self-efficacy among emerging adults who may be seeking a college degree, while attending to a past or current relationship with an incarcerated parent.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Oklahoma has become the country's second leading state for incarceration of men and women (Carson, 2017). The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported 149 of every 100,000 Oklahoma women are behind bars, double the national rate of 64 per 100,000 (Carson, 2018). Since 1998, Oklahoma has had the highest proportional rate of incarcerated women with census of approximately 3,000 adult female inmates (Carson, 2017). According to a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation from April 2016, one in ten children in Oklahoma have had a parent incarcerated at some point during their childhood. One explanation for the high numbers of children impacted by parental incarceration may be due to the state's strict enforcement of criminal drug legislation. In Oklahoma, most drug offenders must serve 85 percent of their sentence before being considered eligible for release or parole (Sharp, 2014). In the book *Mean Lives, Mean Laws: Oklahoma's Women Prisoners,* Sharp (2014) listed drug trafficking and possession as the two most significant reasons why women are imprisoned in the state of Oklahoma. The average penalty for drug trafficking in Oklahoma is 10.3 years whereas the national average is six years (Sharp, 2014) In effect, many children in Oklahoma are at-risk for being left behind in a home absent of their birth mother.

One in every 28 children in the United States has a parent who is incarcerated (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). This translates into 2.7 million children under the age of 18, or more than 3.6 percent of the population who have a parent behind bars. Approximately 46% of these

parents in prison reported living with their children prior to admission. Among mothers in prison, 28% identified the child's current caregiver as the father. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016) reported that approximately 10% of children with a parent incarcerated in Oklahoma are in the foster care system. Those incarcerated across state prison facilities have at least monthly contact with their children by phone, mail or personal visits (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016). However, less than one percent of fathers and mothers reported ever having personal face-to-face visits with a child after admission to prison (Mumola, 2000). One possible explanation for the lack of visitation involves geographical dispersion. Over half of all prison inmates are held within correctional facilities that are over 100 miles from their family-of-origin (Mumola, 2000). Thus, the opportunity for a child to sustain an on-going attachment bond and personal relationship with an incarcerated parent tends to be limited.

There has been a growing interest among investigators to examine the social and psychological effects of parental incarceration during childhood. Increased anxiety, depression, and delinquent behavior are commonly reported outcomes among children under the age of 18 with an incarcerated parent (Dallaire et al., 2010). Furthermore, experts studying familial bonds and parental attachment have been examining the traumatic effects of parental incarceration on children. Such empirical work has identified common post-traumatic stress symptoms experienced by children while their parent serves time, especially isolation from peers and anxiety and fear of other's opinions of their family (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Although these effects of parental incarceration on childhood has been well-documented among children under the age of 18, there remains a gap in the research literature relative to how parental incarceration may or may not continue to impact children in emerging adulthood.

Unlike the formative years of childhood and adolescence, emerging adulthood involves a notable developmental transition or a "coming-of-age" period in which children launch from their parental homes. Many young adults choose college as a way to facilitate this transition (Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & LaValle, 2010). For some, college is viewed as a step toward success, or an alternative resource to further launch one's developmental trajectory as a working adult. The complexities of being an emerging adult impacted by parental incarceration, yet managing college, has not been extensively investigated (Luther, 2015). Some emerging adults may find college as a means of escapism or avoidance of family stress, whereas others may view it as a chance to achieve personal and financial autonomy through education (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Regardless of why an emerging adult chooses to go to college, a successful collegiate experience is likely to enhance self-efficacy (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Self-efficacy is best defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 408). It can be assumed, that college students impacted by parental incarceration may question their own ability to succeed and thus struggle to navigate the resources and demands needed to strengthens their efficacy.

Emerging adulthood is a dynamic and transitionary developmental period, in which the individual slowly detaches from those they relied on in childhood and begins to establish their own autonomy in the adult world (Beck, Taylor, & Robbins, 2003). Research has indicated that this transition can be delayed given that most emerging adults remain emotionally and financially dependent on their parents well into adulthood (Wolf, Sax and Harper, 2009). The balance between personal autonomy and dependence is assumed to be more difficult when the emerging adult has a parent in prison. The "incarcerated family" endures many complex

challenges, such as financial strain, strained familial relationships, and social stigmas surrounding past criminal acts (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Meanwhile, the children of incarcerated parents tend to experience a wide array of emotions from loneliness, sadness, and anger to disappointment and worry about their parent (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Such emotional stressors can slow developmental progression toward being a self-sufficient adult.

The purpose of this study is to expand the body of research on emerging adult children affected by parental incarceration. Using Martin and Martin's (2010) developmental adaption model as a conceptual lens by which to study emerging adults impacted by parental incarceration, this study cross-blended theoretical assumptions proposed within ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2006) and life course theory (Elder, 1998) . Qualitative methods using individual and focus group interviews were employed to conduct in-depth singular case studies and identify key thematic content in order to better understand how college students with an incarcerated parent perceive their life experiences, as well as how such experiences contribute to or distract from the achievement of self-efficacy. Based on the literature it was hypothesized that emerging adults who attended college and were affected by parental incarceration would express high ambiguous loss while exhibiting high indications of self-efficacy.

Results from this study have implications relative to expanding current literature on key developmental processes and markers in emerging adulthood, particularly with regard to the impact of parental incarceration. Such information can be used by educators, clinicians, counselors, and teachers to improve awareness and create programs, services, and policies to improve autonomy and quality-of-life for emerging adults with a history of being impacted by parental incarceration. Additionally, future generations of children whose parents are arrested may benefit from knowing how this current generation has cultivated their self-efficacy in the

midst of family disruption. It is hoped that results from this study might contribute to efforts in breaking the cycle of parental incarceration in Oklahoma, as well as the nation in a way that allows for successful developmental transition and self-efficacy in emerging adulthood.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following is a review of existing literature about emerging adults and factors contributing to, or impeding, the self-efficacy of young adults affected by parental incarceration. It is vital to first answer the question: What is emerging adulthood? Emerging adulthood represents a vital developmental transition. Transitions are those events in which relationships, routines, roles and assumptions are changed (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). The adjustment to a transition may be a process through which individuals must move in, move through, and move out, to emerge on the other side from where they began (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). College age students are in a process of transition from childhood to adulthood and current research refers to this population as emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is defined as the period of life when developmental tasks, skills, and experiences are obtained by young people as they transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Although this developmental phase has long been characterized as puberty to the late teens as identified by Erik Erickson in the 1950's, Arnett (2000) more recently posited that this stage may be more dynamic and consist of a longer time-span. Arnett (2000) encouraged scholars to consider this developmental stage as a distinct period in which change and exploration are common, yet may last from 18-25. As the age for full time employment as well as the average age of first marriages continues to rise, the emergence of adulthood slows (Arnett, 2007). Having left childhood and adolescence behind, these individuals are not yet considered adults, but are caught within a transitionary developmental period of life.

This transitional period includes a wide variety of activities with fewer defined role requirements than other developmental stages (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is commonly referred to as the "novice phase" of human development (Levison, 1978) due, in part, to the ambiguity of the role requirements. In other words, these individuals are attempting various, unknown steps such as entering romantic relationships, working in new careers, pursuing postsecondary education, various living arrangements, etc. as they establish their livelihoods. Arnett's theoretical approach to this period of time in lifespan development is similar to Erik Erickson's descriptions of role experimentation, in which he identifies as part of the psychosocial moratorium (Arnett, 2000).

Arnett identified five developmental processes which occur during emerging adulthood: identity explorations, instability, possibilities, self-focus, and a feeling of in-between (2004). It is important to note, these are not finite processes through which individuals move from one to the next linearly, rather, each individual's experience dictates the gradual beginning and ending of each process. These features are markers of the transition from adolescence to adulthood and

establish emerging adulthood as a distinct stage in the life course, with some gradual overlap with the previous and later stages (Arnett, 2007).

Schlossberg et al. (2006) found an individual's ability to cope with transitions depends on the resources available to them in four specific areas: situation, self, support and strategies. Known as the "Four S's," the various assets and liabilities one has in each area may help to explain why different individuals respond differently to the same experiences. The timing of the situation, the duration, and the amount of control over the situation are considered important contextual factors. The personal characteristics, and demographics, of the self, as well as the self-efficacy and psychological resources are contributing factors to the second "s": self. The support in this research refers to the relationships among families, friends, communities and institutions one has available to them. Strategies, the fourth "s," include the actions one may take, such as information seeking and attempts to modify the situation, and manage their own stress level (Schlossberg et al., 2006).

Identity explorations are often attributed to the adolescent developmental stage, but emerging adulthood initiates a greater sense of independence from parents (Arnett, 2004). This may result in more opportunities for the individual's discovery of identity. Emerging adulthood also brings with it a sense of infinite possibilities (Arnett, 2004). Many individuals have surpassed the milestone of completing high school and begin navigating the responsibilities of adulthood. The independence asserted in the decision-making process signifies the development of autonomy. The exploration of potentials for work, where to live, and who to love is prominent during this stage as emerging adults are no longer dependent on their parents and are not yet in their fully assumed adult roles (Arnett, 2004). The word instability is often used accurately to describe this time as most emerging adults are working toward establishing their 'plan' for life

amid constantly revising those plans due to their explorations (Arnett, 2004). These revisions are evidenced by the college student who changes majors, experiences romantic break ups, moves residential living places, and more, which are all common for most in their early twenties.

Emerging adulthood tends to be one of the most self-focused times during individual human development, essentially because the emerging adult must deal with the consequences of their choices and decisions without parental supervision. These decisions may have repercussions which further assist the emerging adult in cultivating their own decision-making skills. Panagakis (2015) asked a group of 30-year old adults to reflect on their transition to adulthood. Results showed young adults consider their peers as a resource, assisting with the adulthood status by a means of support, yet furthering the notion of the individualized focus. The same study showed more evidence of the individualization included peer selection, such that the young adult chooses who they spend time with as opposed to being surrounded by peers for circumstantial reasons. Participants in Panagakis' (2015) study mentioned their achievement of milestones in relation to their peers, often suggesting they were ahead, or behind, others on their status as adults. This comparison and relation to others their age further exacerbates the self-focus Arnett (2004) described in his second tenet of emerging adulthood as these individuals essentially ranked themselves based on others' accomplishments and failures. According to Arnett (2004), this is applicable to both individuals who live at home with their parents and those who are on their own and/or on a college campus, suggesting the self-focus fuels a constant measuring of how they perceive they are doing in life.

The age of feeling in between childhood and adulthood is a concept Arnett (2004) has supported by identifying the criteria most used to determine if they feel like an adult or not. The criteria include a feeling of responsibility for oneself, being financially independent, and making

decisions on their own. Each of these criteria are achieved gradually and can be intimidating when one still identifies themselves as a child rather than an adult. Individuals in this stage of development have a sense of becoming adults but not actually identifying themselves as such (Arnett, 2004).

An in-depth look at the self-perception of emerging adults revealed notable factors regarding how their behavior impacts their perception of adulthood. Nelson and Barry (2005) evaluated 232 college students to identify key perceptions of becoming an adult. The criteria the students used to perceive adulthood resulted in a distinct difference between what they considered as “emerging” and being “adults.” For instance, participants who considered themselves to have reached adulthood (25%) indicated they had met all necessary criteria, while 69% of those surveyed reported having had reached adulthood in some areas but not all, with 6% indicating they had not reached adulthood. There were no significant differences found in the criteria used for distinguishing between an adult and an emerging adult. Those who identified themselves as emerging adults had criteria they did not yet match but are often considered milestones of adulthood, such as owning a home, committing to a long-term romantic relationship as well as some risk-taking behaviors including increased amounts of alcohol consumption (Nelson & Barry, 2005).

The final feature of emerging adulthood involves the age of possibilities (Arnett, 2004). Supported by the notion of feeling not yet adult but no longer a child, emerging adults report high rates of optimism (Arnett, 2004). This time of possibility can be filled with high expectations of the future as well as a sense of relief for those with a troublesome background. An opportunity to transform one’s life from the livelihood they shared with their parents brings a sense of new possibilities to this population (Arnett, 2004). This is of particular interest to the

current study as the college student participants may be seeking a lifestyle much different than their own upbringing, in particular those with a high level of exposure to childhood adversity.

A rising universal trend among emerging adults is the choice to live at home with their parents for longer periods of time and at older ages (Kin, Del Mol & Beyers, 2013). A prolonged period in which indecisions regarding careers, personal identities and relationships allows young adults a moratorium on many of their adult responsibilities. Comparing current trends with previous generations has led researchers to refer to this time period as the "quarter life crisis" (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). One significant factor of the quarter life crisis involves the instability of where one lives. As previously mentioned, the majority of young adults initially move out at age 19, however, 40% of the current generation of emerging adults move in and out of their parents' home repeatedly (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). This delay in autonomous living can further delay the overall adulthood status for this generation. A closer look into the role of the parents on the life of an emerging adult may offer insight into why this trend is occurring.

Parental Involvement in Emerging Adulthood. One question of particular interest among researchers is: Are parents assisting in the perceived success of their college age children? A study conducted in Canada looked at the impact of the relationship between college students and their parents as well as the students' perceived adaptation to university and academic achievement (Wintre & Yaffe, 2016). Students between the ages of 17-27 reported 79% of their nuclear families were intact, 75.6% of those students still lived at home with their parents and 17% lived on campus. Results of this study indicated the relationships of the students and parents significantly predicted the students' perceived adaptation to their university experience. However, there was no significant contribution made toward the academic achievement level of the students by the parent-student relationship (Wintre & Yaffe, 2016).

Based on these results, students with dysfunctional relationships with their parents may have more difficulty in adjusting to college, however their academic achievement is not at risk.

With substantial research supporting the concept of college students benefiting from consistent contact with their parents (Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011; Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman & Nadorff, 2011), one study examined which students and parents are in touch most frequently. Wolf, Sax and Harper (2009) examined data from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), a longitudinal study covering nine campuses. Results showed Caucasian students from a socio-economic status of upper/middle class have significantly higher levels of parental involvement than those with less affluence as well as those students from other ethnicities. One rationale the authors note is it is most likely these parents also have college education experience and therefore felt their children were more accessible than those without college experience and/or language barriers (Wolf et al., 2009). The converse rationale has been presented in other studies, wherein parents without college education are strongly related to those young adults not pursuing a postsecondary education (Nichols, Loper & Meyer, 2016, Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Thus, parental education may serve as a predisposing protective factor for their emerging adult children.

Erikson's developmental stages. Erik Erikson is considered the original theorist to identify emerging adulthood as a developmental stage. Erikson (1950) noted individuals' progress developmentally through various tasks across differential stages of life and he created a framework of eight psychosocial stages to explain this development. The associated developmental tasks accompanying the stages of development will play a critical role in understanding the complexities of the relationship among a young adult child and their incarcerated parent. These stages occur at specific ages for the individuals and his theory

suggests, when pushed to move through a stage quicker than the natural evolution, individuals may risk healthy ego development (Erikson, 1950).

Emerging adulthood signifies a time in life when many young adults are establishing their independence away from their parents. Erikson defines this as autonomy and has labeled this stage of development as intimacy vs. isolation (Erikson, 1968). Simultaneously, this stage of development is when adolescents are expected to forge intimate close relationships with their peers and romantic partners. Therefore, the emerging adult develops a more autonomous relationship with parents while negotiating closeness and intimacy with peers. This balance is most evident in those young adults who maintain a positive view of themselves and a capacity for trust in others (Allen & Land, 1999). When a secure attachment to a parent has been disrupted, such as criminal arrest and incarceration, the emerging adult may find it difficult to develop healthy intimate relationships deemed typical by their age and stage in development.

Marcia (2002), refers to the events that may delay next developmental stage, in this case identity, as circumstances contributing to a state of disequilibrium for the individual. In order to manage the disrupted family dynamics resulting from incarceration, individual family members often experience identity reconstruction (Marcia, 2002). This reconstruction is unique to each individual but is a response to the specific circumstances occurring in their lives as they enter the psychosocial stage of young adulthood.

Emerging adults are generally optimistic about their own personal lives and future but not necessarily about the world around them. A general belief in their own potential to create a good life contrasts with their collective view of the world being grim (Arnett, 2007). Current literature repetitively describes emerging adulthood as a time when developmental tasks, skills and

experiences are obtained by young people as they transition to adulthood. This transition is smoother for some than others.

Emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25 experience a significant amount of change, and for some who do not have a well-established support system, the transitional period may present obstacles in their development. Current research reflects the significance of contextual circumstances relative to a successful transition of assumed adult responsibilities for emerging adults (Fowler, Toro & Miles, 2011). One subgroup of the population representing the complexities of accepting adult responsibilities without a structured support system are those who have previously been in foster care and aged out.

Cultural Considerations. One approach to studying this population is to consider those who have come from circumstances proven to result in difficult transitions and uncover the resilience of the individuals involved. Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) did just that as they conducted a study of foster care alumni attending college. This study seemed relevant to the current study as the contextual similarities of this study's sample and their sample are similar with possible overlap. To discover factors contributing to the academic success of this subgroup, this study used a dynamic process model to qualitatively assess a sample of four men and ten women. A shared experience of adversity, this study's sample included academically successful individuals who had been raised in the foster care system and were an average age of 23.4 years of age. Results indicated the individual's own unique attributes, including but not limited to persistence, adaptable self-image, and assertiveness are the most significant factors for academic success. Additionally, high school, college, and the foster system, have provided an opportunity to cultivate new, healthy relationships with peers and adults. However, the researchers noted it is the individual's attributes that allow them to be open to the positively influential adults and

subsequent academic opportunities that followed these relationships. The young adults interviewed had capitalized on the resources and support available to them in order to exceed expectations of foster care alumni (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005).

In a study of African American young men and women from a predominantly White southern university, socioeconomic status and racial discrimination were reported to moderate mental health (Neblett, Jr., Bernard & Banks, 2016). Young men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and young women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported higher levels of mental health issues because of racial discrimination. Their socioeconomic status was found to moderate mental health issues along with racial discrimination (Neblett, Jr., Bernard & Banks, 2016). It is suggested perhaps young African American men contend with a variety of high stress, chronic factors such as financial expectations, negative stigmas from the neighborhoods they are from and pressure to be working that are not the same for young African American women (Neblett, Jr., Bernard & Banks, 2016). Though parental incarceration was not specifically considered in this study, the high rates of African Americans from low socioeconomic backgrounds made this study applicable to this review of literature.

Having established the concept of emerging adulthood, as well as the significant impact incarceration has on families in Oklahoma, it is important to consider theoretically how parental incarceration may impact self-efficacy and human agency in college students.

Theoretical Framework

Life Course Theory

Life course theory encapsulates the entire lifespan as interrelated and considers no singular developmental stage independent of another (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2011). Some experts suggest the life course approach to emerging adulthood goes beyond the developmental

stages expected for the age of the individual and allows for a broader approach of pathways and trajectories (Bynner, 2005). One way of allowing for the broader approach is to consider the impact of a stressful life change, such as parental incarceration, the history of the experience, the tools used to adapt to the change, and the context of the event/change in relation to the life course of the individual or family (Elder & Rockwell, 1978).

Life course theory posits choices in life are contingent on the social structure and culture of the individuals making the choices (Elder, 1998). Emerging adults have many choices to make on a consistent basis, including but not limited to choices about how to earn money, where to spend money, with whom to spend their free time, and how to manage their time. The complex social structure of college in addition to atypical family dynamics may compile the stress. This layered stress may make it difficult to manage the responsibilities of achieving the academic and personal goals for the emerging adult. Life course theory also highlights the specific time and place of the individual as they experience the significant life event may shape the direction of the lives and choices made (Elder, 1998). The meanings associated with the age and stage of development in which life events occur may influence the direction toward future outcomes. This means an emerging adult who had a parent incarcerated as an infant or toddler may have different developmental outcomes, and perspective of their experiences, relative to an emerging adult whose parent is incarcerated.

Age and Stage Principle. Elder's (1998) work also points to the timing of a major life event as a significant impact on the development of life transitions. In his study of children of the Great Depression, Elder reported the degree of instability and stark economic hardships experienced were contingent on their age and the stage in development in their lifespan. Those who experienced the Great Depression in childhood exhibited more negative impact in their life

transitions than those who experienced the same conditions at an older age in life (Elder, 1998). Thus, it is significant to consider the time, age, and place of the individual at the time their parent became incarcerated as this may influence their developmental transitions of attending and/or completing college.

Another tenet of life course theory is human agency, which suggests individuals make decisions within the constraints of specific circumstances, to guide their own individual lives (Elder, 1998). Other scholars have defined human agency as an exploration in search of connectedness (Koepke and Denissen, 2012). A structured social environment is one critical resource by which personal identity and human agency develop. College campuses may facilitate a needed resource by providing scheduled activities in which emerging adults participate in a regulated, social environment (Hiester, Nordstrom, & Swenson, 2009). Navigating changes and evaluating options during life events are principles of human agency (Elder, 1998). Thus, the autonomy and relatedness of individuals, in addition to choices they make within the specific time and place in which events occur, comprise the elements of life course theory. The fluidity of this approach allows for responses to change and for creating new opportunities, referred to as turning points in life course theory (Elder, 1998). In addition to the importance of the timing of life events, Elder (1998) used the term "linked-lives" to explain the interdependence of shared relationships (Elder, 1998). As these external influences increase or decrease, individuals may begin taking actions toward creating their own course in life. This factor was specifically considered in the proposed study.

Social Connectedness. The life of the incarcerated parent is linked to the college-aged child, even if only on a subconscious level and not physically, as Boss (2006) explains in ambiguous loss theory. When considering emerging adults with parental incarceration, it is

assumed the linked-lives may be a result of the proximal influences on their lives, such as who their parents associated with that lead to their breaking the law. Whether in foster care, raised by an extended family member, or raised by a single parent, it is likely the dynamics of incarceration have led to interactions with others living in adversity. As the life course of a young adult develops, the individual will have choices of how to respond to others who come in and out of their life. Choosing to link to those on a positive trajectory may be a catalyst for going to college. Conversely, with the high rates of drug related incarceration, it can be assumed if the children are closely linked to those with whom their incarcerated parent was with during the time surrounding their arrest, they may have a different course than college. Thus, the activation of one's choice of who they allow in and out of their lives is important. College serves as an ideal place to meet new people and emerging adults decide for themselves where and with whom to spend their lives. Deciding who will be included within one's close inner circle of friends may be one of the most important decisions the young adults will make during the transition to adulthood. Thus, it is no surprise that studies have shown college peers can influence both the behaviors and beliefs of individuals (Quinn & Fromme, 2011; Chia, 2006; Borsari & Carey, 2001). This can be an integral part of coping with the family adversity and accompanying parental incarceration as many young adults find mentors, friends and romantic partnerships while in college.

The linked lives of family, work, or school can be a catalyst for growth or a developmental constraint. One possible constraint of being linked to the lives of others, particularly for those families with a parent incarcerated, is the significant loss the incarceration brings to the family members at home. This type of loss is unique in that the individual may be gone from the family but not completely or permanently. The day-to-day lives of the family

members are profoundly impacted but the connection to the parent in prison can take on various forms. This type of loss has been explored in other populations who have experienced complex loss by the scholar Pauline Boss and is known as ambiguous loss theory.

Ambiguous Loss Theory

Boss (2009) defined ambiguous loss as a situation of unclear and unresolved loss. The loss is ambiguous in that there is no closure and no definitive answers of what to expect next. Ambiguous loss theory is a relational theory as it assumes the individuals have an attachment to the loved one perceived as lost (Boss, 2016). According to Boss, there are two types of ambiguous loss: physical and psychological. In the first type of loss, a loved one may be physically present, yet psychologically absent, as is the case with individuals with dementia. Type two of ambiguous loss is a physically absent, yet psychologically present person and is common when there is no concrete, permanent loss, such as when a parent is in prison. Both types of loss lead to boundary ambiguity, defined by Boss (2016) an unclear understanding of who is in and who is out of the family. The individuals experiencing the loss create their own meaning from the experience and their perception of family, as well as their perception of the family members. Thus, in this proposed study, ambiguous loss surrounds parental incarceration and boundary ambiguity is the participant's perception of who is in the family and who is not. Boss (2009) hypothesized this grief as a normal reaction to a complicated situation, and this proposed study assumes parental incarceration as a complicated situation.

Arditti (2005) agrees with Boss' theory and has used ambiguous loss theory to frame her work with incarceration. Arditti (2005) suggested the visitation process for families contributes to the boundary ambiguity for the children at home. When the child of a parent incarcerated visits their parent in prison, it can evoke confusion of what that parent's role is in the child's life.

These complicated family dynamics often result in ambivalent feelings, such as feeling angry yet missing the loved one incarcerated. Arditti (2003) noted that ambivalence created more tension within the family. For example, the non-incarcerated parent remaining at home commonly uses the name of the incarcerated parent to enforce disciplinary rules with the children, further exacerbating the psychological present while physically absent type of ambiguous loss (Arditti, 2005). This is further assumed to be influenced by the stigma surrounding incarceration, family members report concurrent feelings attracted to and repelled from visiting prison. This ambivalence adds to the emotional complexities of parental incarceration for the children and accentuates the ambiguity of loss. Visitation may extend the psychological presence of the physically absent incarcerated parent, in the home as the family members bring home their thoughts and feelings from the visitation process. Conversely, the actual visitation may be with a physically present individual who is psychologically absent as prisoners often consider themselves as "behind the fence" and admit to difficulties connecting emotionally with people on the outside (Arditti, 2003). Research is inconclusive regarding the benefits and costs of visiting a loved one in jail, however, it is clear visitation perpetuates the boundary ambiguity within the family.

Disenfranchised grief. Some losses are felt but not openly disclosed due to perceived stigma surrounding the events of the loss (Arditti, 2005). Incarceration is an example of a loss that is not socially supported, nor seriously considered by those who interact with grieving family members. Stigma associated with imprisonment may compound the effects of the family members and may contribute to the emotional tolls felt by all involved. Single parents are often regarded with sympathy and support in other contexts, but when a spouse is absent due to incarceration, the "prison widow" is often regarded differently by society (Arditti, 2005).

However, research is moving toward a collective approach suggesting families and individuals handle adversity better when well-connected and feeling supported, thus the negative stigma and isolation of a parent incarcerated may further exacerbate the grief (Ungar, 2015). Considering resilience within families who have experienced a major life event, Ungar (2015) has reported family members positively adapt when interacting with systems that provide consistent support. The systems of consistent support present in college students with a parent currently or previously incarcerated may be easiest to identify when considering the entire lifespan of an individual, including proximal and distal influences.

Developmental Adaptation Model. The model of developmental adaptation was created with the intent to conceptualize and synthesize previous research examinations involving the impact of distal and proximal individual and family life experience on long-term developmental outcomes (Martin and Martin, 2002). This model aims to consider one's early life experiences, proximal influences, as well as current life resources, distal influences, and their interactions, as significant to one's developmental outcome. The creators of the developmental adaptation model, Martin and Martin (2002), found the importance of the relationship of previous life experiences (distal influences) and current life experiences (proximal influences). The closer related the distal and proximal influences, the more the proximal influences, or resources, may serve to mediate the influence of the past (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Developmental Adaptation Model (Martin & Martin, 2002)

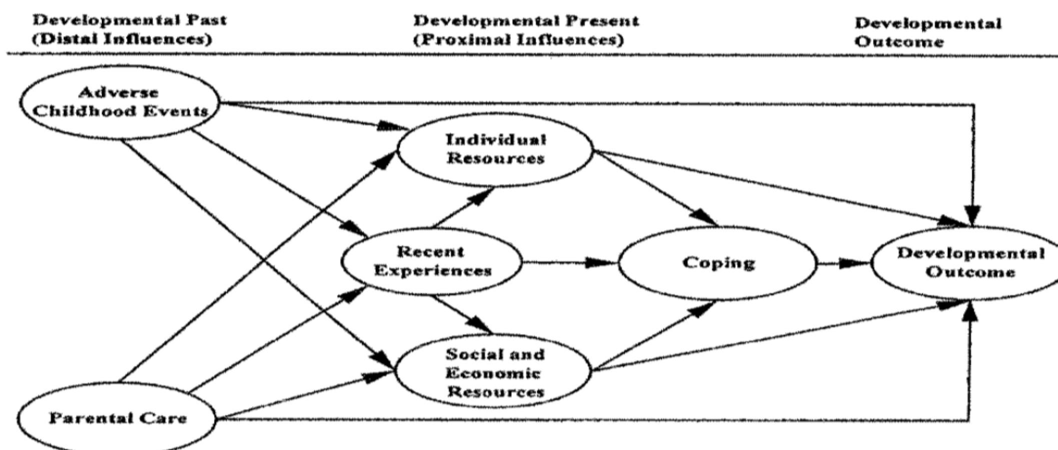


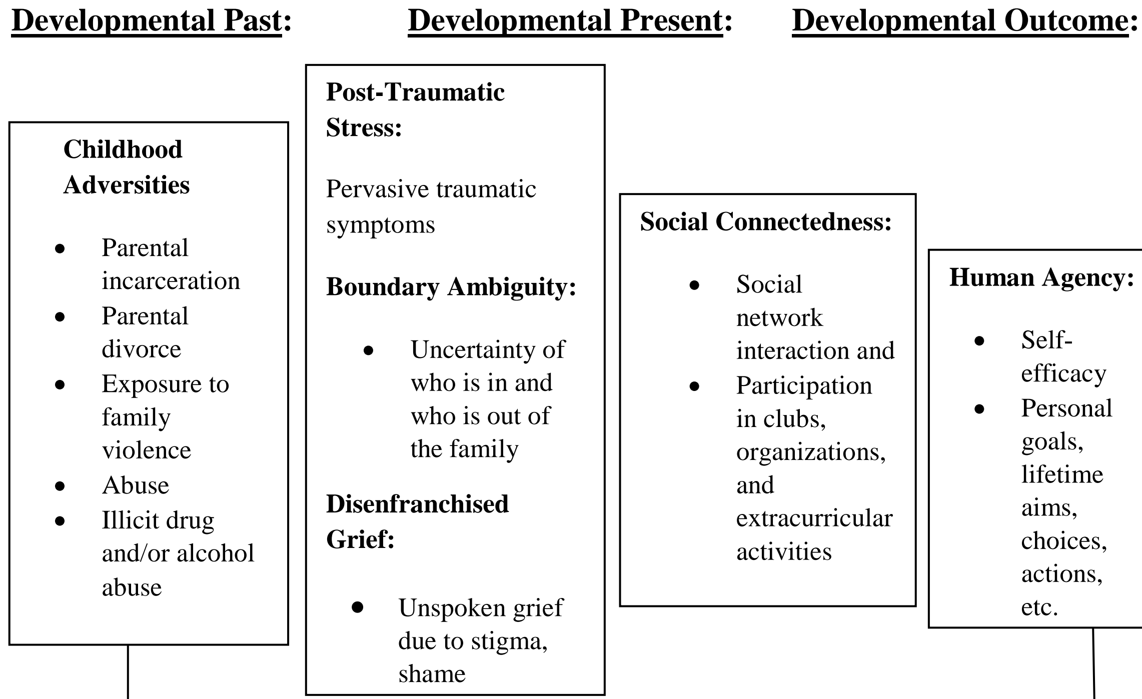
FIG. 1. Model of developmental adaptation.

Reprinted with permission from Developmental Review, *Proximal and distal influences on development: The model of developmental adaptation* by Martin and Martin (2002), p. 5.

Based on the review of literature, this model has been adapted to facilitate the interaction of influences that have led to the self-efficacy of college students with a parent incarcerated (see Figure 2). Parental incarceration and adverse childhood experiences represent the distal influences on the lives of emerging adults. Combined, these distal influences contributed to ambiguous loss by creating boundary ambiguity, promoting disenfranchised grief and exacerbating symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The proximal influences such as the boundary ambiguity and disenfranchised grief influenced by symptoms of post-traumatic stress impacted the amount of social connectedness of the students. The social connectedness, including the environments in which they live, work and spend their leisure time, contributed to the perceived level of self-efficacy.

Figure 2.

Conceptual Model of Self-Efficacy



Individual Adaptation. Not only does parental incarceration disrupt family dynamics, one's individual development is also affected. Any type of loss of a parent significantly impacts the child. Compiled with the stigma surrounding single parent households as well as the stereotype of those incarcerated, these children are vulnerable to making choices resulting in incarceration, themselves. This life changing event can influence the level of human agency one uses, with factors to consider such as the age of the individual when the parent is taken to jail, the timing in the lifespan of when the event occurs, and the level of attachment the individual had with the specific parent being removed from daily life. It is the intent of this study to show the agentic qualities of the individual can lead to positive behavioral responses to the incarceration event. The decision to determine their own level of self-efficacy, establishing goals for themselves and identifying what individual success is for them, while not limited by their

parental choices or society's expectations, comes from a sense of autonomy from one's parents. Identifying oneself as an individual with a future not necessarily predicted by their parental circumstances may lead young adult children to clarify their own goals in life.

Adverse childhood experiences, such as poverty, neglect, and abuse can impact the social development of individuals (Hillis, Anda, Dube, Felitti, Marchbanks, & Marks, 2004). Collectively, these experiences lead to a loss felt by those children missing out on the necessary attachment for healthy relationships later in life. When the nuclear family system is disrupted by adversity, the family members are often linked to others for support, companionship, and even assistance with child rearing. The lives with whom one is linked, as a result of the adverse childhood experiences, may significantly impact the development of their social lives (Hillis et al., 2004). Lower socioeconomic status leads to living in neighborhoods with others in similar economic situations and these neighborhoods typically have high rates of crime (Wilson, Kirtland, Ainsworth & Addy, 2004). Little to no supervision of children and adolescents often leads to behaviors associated with crime and possible incarceration. The young adult whose parent is incarcerated must consider who they are linked with and choose behavioral responses carefully. The loss of the parent in jail, combined with the lives of those with whom their parents and themselves are linked with, are contributing factors to their choices moving forward. Depending on the age and time in life of when lives are linked, peer pressure and a desire to be accepted may lead to choices that impede one's steps toward self-efficacy.

Many children with a parent in jail are placed in the foster care system. This system links lives to many other children, adults, and families in which success or recidivism may be facilitated. This system also links lives to those relationships that facilitate growth, adaptation and subsequent success. Linked lives play a significant role in the adaptation of adverse

childhood experiences as these links may lead to influential people on the path toward college, or a life of crime and intergenerational recidivism in the criminal justice system. The adaptation occurs as the symptoms of post-traumatic stress contribute to the boundary ambiguity and disenfranchised grief. The interaction of those three components results in the emerging adult choosing with whom their lives are linked with in order to increase their self-efficacy.

Post-Traumatic Stress. Losing a parent to prison can be a traumatic event for a child. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a diagnosis given to those who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event and exhibit symptoms which frequently disrupt their typical daily lives (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Symptoms of PTSD include, but are not limited to, intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to the event either experienced firsthand or witnessed secondarily, and often last long after the event has occurred as well as intentional avoidance of anything reminding one of the event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Within the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), symptoms of PTSD are placed in to one or more of the following four categories: (1) intrusive thoughts, which can include recurrent memories and/or dreams of the traumatic event, occurring without warning and intrude on the daily life of the person experiencing them., (2) avoiding reminders which is essentially a decision one makes to avoid anything that may remind the individual of the traumatic experience, such as people, places, activities, situations, etc., (3) negative thoughts and feelings about the incident and often about oneself, consistent and persistent negativity as a result of the event as well as noticeably disinterested in participating in typical daily life activities, and (4) arousal and reactive symptoms such as exaggerated irritability, reckless behavior, problems with concentration and seemingly unprovoked angry outbursts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many individuals develop symptoms within three months of the traumatic

event occurring and those with PTSD continue to experience pervasive symptoms, often lasting months or years following the event. Still other symptoms show up much later in life and are considered delayed onset of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Current research has begun to examine incarceration of a parent as a traumatic event for a child. Using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW), Phillips and Zhao (2010) analyzed self-reports of children ages eight and above in child protective services (CPS). The researchers measured elevated post-traumatic stress (PTS) symptoms, the children's reports of witnessing a household member arrested as well as a recent arrest of their parent, exposure to violence, risk factors involving a parent and/or family, depression, case specifics such as alleged maltreatment of the child, and demographics. Frequencies of the data revealed one in three children, eight years old and above and in CPS due to alleged maltreatment, have seen someone with whom they live arrested. Bivariate and multivariate models were used to uncover several key differences in children who have witnessed an arrest and those who have not. Those who witnessed an arrest of a household member had higher rates of exposure to violence, higher rates of exposure to nonviolent crimes, and were likely to be placed in homes in which their daily basic needs were not always met (due to poverty) (Phillips & Zhao, 2010).

Further results from this study revealed increased PTS symptoms (57%) in children who had witnessed an arrest when compared with those who have never witnessed an arrest (Phillips & Zhao, 2010). Additionally, those children who had both witnessed an arrest of a household member and have a parent recently arrested were 73% more likely to report PTS symptoms. Their study concluded that the witness of an arrest of any household member significantly predicts increased PTS symptoms (Phillips & Zhao, 2010). Based on findings such as these, it is

anticipated the college students with a parent currently or previously incarcerated have experienced PTS symptoms. Further research regarding the ambiguity of loss, which often accompanies parental incarceration and its connection to post-traumatic stress symptoms, will lend further understanding of college student experiences.

A study considering the relationship of post-traumatic stress symptoms and ambiguous loss was conducted with combat veterans (Ruderman, Ehrlich, Roy, Pietrzak, Harpaz-Rotem, & Levy, 2016). Participants included 30 combat veterans with PTSD and 27 without PTSD and their attitudes toward ambiguous gains and losses were measured through a behavioral economic approach in which the veterans were asked to make 320 binary choices. A "model of decision making under uncertainty" (Ruderman et al., 2016, p.4) was used to estimate the ambiguity and risk attitudes of each participant. The results on this unique study revealed a causal relationship, confirming those with PTSD are reluctant to ambiguity. This aversion to the uncertainty in life can complicate one's experience of ambiguous loss. Thus, for those with PTSD or PTS symptoms, the ambiguous loss felt in parental incarceration may create further frustrations. How individuals cope with the symptoms of PTSD may be related to the people and the environment in which they live.

Research Questions

Based on previous research and theoretical background, there remained a need to explore the process of adaptation and the cultivation of self-efficacy among emerging adults, particularly college students, who have been impacted by parental incarceration. This exploration was an attempt to shed more light on the impact of adverse childhood experiences and parental incarceration on the self-efficacy of college students. To examine this influence, consideration of variables that contributed to, or impeded, the adaptation of the individual college student

impacted by parental incarceration was essential. This included a consideration for post-traumatic stress disorder, boundary ambiguity, disenfranchised grief, and social connectedness and their associations with each other through the developmental adaptation model. In consideration of the previously described research, one would expect the event of parental incarceration, in addition to the general adverse childhood experiences, to have begun the individuals' path toward self-efficacy.

The research questions for this study have evolved and been refined throughout the exploration and reflect the overarching purpose of the study. These questions have provided guidance to the recruitment of participants, data collection, and analyses (Patton, 2002).

1. How do college students with a parent incarcerated perceive their experiences?
2. What factors are contributing to, or distracting from, the development of self-efficacy among the participants?

Based on these questions, it was hypothesized that emerging adults impacted by parental incarceration will perceive their experience as complicated yet influential toward their identity development. In addition, it was hypothesized that a developmental adaptation process including positive emotional and social supports would serve to promote self-efficacy among emerging adults impacted by incarceration, whereas ambiguous loss, exposure to illegal activities, and post-traumatic stress stemming from the events of parental incarceration would impede the development of self-efficacy.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Procedure

This research design is framed by the theoretical premise that ambiguous loss exists within families and is often marked by a psychologically present family member who is physically absent (Boss, 2009). Based on this framework, it is assumed that parental incarceration can lead to this type of loss in their children. As emerging adults make decisions to enter college, the work force, or an alternative path after high school, this loss can have an impact on the decisions they make. Behavioral responses to parental incarceration may assist in establishing and maintaining higher levels of self-efficacy for these emerging adults.

The proposed study examined the cultivation of self-efficacy of emerging adults who are attending college with a parent who was previously or currently incarcerated. Qualitative case studies (Patton, 2002) were employed to explore the experiences of emerging adults who are attending college with a parent incarcerated. "As a research strategy, the distinguishing characteristic of the case study is that it attempts to examine: (a) a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1981, p. 59). Epistemological construction of this study relied on social constructivism. This qualitative approach allows for study participant perceptions of social

constructs to be well established for analysis and interpretation (Crotty, 1998). Thus, meaning was derived from the perspectives of their lives within the social constructs relative to school, family, work, and their social lives. Each case represented an initial unit of analysis. A cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002) was conducted through a format in which the participants' accounts of similar experiences were analyzed. The themes which emerged from the cases were substantiated through constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To strengthen the validity of the study, triangulation of data sources, follow up interviews, and member checking were used (Patton, 2002).

Sampling and Recruitment Procedures

Sample recruitment efforts were focused toward undergraduate students currently enrolled at Oklahoma State University (OSU). OSU's student population for the fall semester of 2017 was 25,254 including 20,978 undergraduate students and 4276 graduate students according to the Institutional Research and Information Management. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met the criteria of participants currently enrolled in OSU, are between the ages of 18 and 25, and have a parent currently or previously incarcerated. This sampling method is the appropriate method for this study as the intended participants were recruited for a specific purpose of exploring the experiences of a college student with a parent currently or formerly incarcerated (Patton, 2002).

Upon receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), a mass email to a randomly selected 5,000 undergraduate students was distributed along with a link to a Qualtrics survey. Additional focused recruitment efforts included an email sent directly to undergraduates in Human Development Family Sciences as well as various faculty members for them to distribute to students in their class. Given such a delicate topic, it was a concern that

students would not feel comfortable disclosing their family dynamic to an impersonal email address, thus a video of the primary investigator explaining the purpose of the survey was also included. The video and a clickable link to the Qualtrics survey was sent to the Panhellenic board for Greek life and the tutoring department for student athletes for distribution to their student populations in further attempts to recruit more participants. In person classroom presentations explaining the study were also conducted to various undergraduate classes within the Human Development Family Sciences department (this department to which the dissertation is proposed). A total of 78 students responded to the Qualtrics survey were received. This amounted to a 1.5 percent response rate. The online survey was distributed with an incentive for each student to be entered in to a drawing for $100 Amazon gift card. Demographics collected through this questionnaire included, but were not limited to, age of the participant at the time of the survey, their year in college, and their nuclear family dynamics including parental divorce, incarceration, death, marriage (see Appendix B).

Among the 78 students who responded to the survey, twenty-four respondents (31%) met the criteria for this study. Of these respondents, nine have a parent currently incarcerated and 17 have a parent previously incarcerated, with two respondents reporting both their mother and father have been incarcerated previously. Respondents who met criteria were emailed and invited to participate in a focus group, beginning with a specific date and time in a study room in the campus library. A total of 12 students (50%) indicated a willingness to participate, however the day of the first scheduled group, only two people attended. A second focus group was held a few days later with three more students present. Each of these two groups met three times and individual interviews were conducted with the other two students who emailed their interest, with follow up interviews with two of the participants. Thus, data was collected through multiple

focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews, each one hour in duration. For best results, qualitative researchers Kruger and Casey (2009) recommend the length each group to be at least one hour, depending on participants' attention spans and no longer than two hours.

At the beginning of each group, the participants signed a consent form agreeing to the confidentiality ensured among the group participants. The format of the focus groups included a welcoming introduction by the researcher and the purpose of the study while encouraging each participant to introduce themselves. The researcher took a non-biased approach, with little to no assumption of previous knowledge of the participants' individual experiences beyond what they shared in the questionnaire. Within each group and interview, all seven participants openly shared their personal experiences about their home life growing up, their parent incarcerated, their parent not incarcerated, their path to college, their current college experiences, and what motivated them to succeed academically, socially, cognitively, and psychologically. Proposed focus group questions are located for viewing in Appendix A.

The participants' willingness to approach this sensitive topic required a broad approach to the conversations as well as an awareness of the researcher to the participants' reactions to fellow focus group members. The researcher is a licensed professional counselor with six years' experience in facilitating therapeutic group discussions. Observation and facilitation skills, such as open-ended questions followed by prompts, were utilized to generate in depth discussions. Each participant shared their general life story in the initial interview and these stories were organized and analyzed individually to identify further questions or details possibly missed in the first interview.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative Analytic Procedures. Due to the small response rate, the proposed analytic procedures evolved to a multiple case study approach. All interview data was transcribed by the researcher, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and all identifying data were removed. Nvivo software was used to assist with the transcription process. A key was created for the use of transcribing and pseudonyms were created to use throughout the analyses process. Field notes were taken throughout the data collection process and participants were encouraged to bring artifacts to contribute to their stories. One participant brought letters her mother wrote her from jail, another brought photos of her father and sisters, and one participant spoke of his father's high school letter jacket but repeatedly forgot to bring it to the group meetings.

Consistent with Stake's (2006) multi case method, the transcripts were read with a consideration of a common focus, or quintain, shared by each case. In this study, the quintain is parental incarceration, thus the cases were analyzed with an assumption that commonalities and differences would emerge when cross analyzed. Before cross analysis could begin, however, each transcript was read, and re-read, by the researcher with relevant words and phrases highlighted. Throughout the first round of coding, the researcher identified phrases and words which were repeated by multiple participants and a list of possible coding categories was created. This was done through simple content coding (Patton, 2002) by underlining, highlighting and making comments in the margins of the transcripts. However, in order to create a case for each participant's individual story, the coding was narrowed to finding repetitive patterns in each personal narrative. Thus, constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used and the researcher studied each transcript with a focus on one participant at a time in order to establish their distinct perspectives. The same simple content coding was used to highlight repetitive patterns in one transcript and those patterns contributed to the development of each

individual case. Eventually some of those unique perspectives proved to be common among participants but those weren't uncovered until the autonomy of the cases were established.

Once each participant's case was created, the researcher applied the individual cases to the conceptualized model of self-efficacy, previously mentioned in chapter two (see Figure 2). The organization of cases for coding for the model included creating categories of data. Each variable in the model was a category and data from each case was extracted and placed in the appropriate category. For this round of coding, the individual outcomes of the cases were not important while the data supporting the model variables were highlighted. Once the model was supported (see chapter five), cross-case analysis and conclusion began.

The purpose of cross-case analysis is to demonstrate and further conclude how similar experiences of a phenomenon, such as parental incarceration, may contribute to situational generalizations (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Once again, the researcher organized the data into categories supporting the overall research questions. Thus, the categories included the participants' perceptions of their experience of parental incarceration as well as factors contributing to self-efficacy. The organization of categories were constructed such that the compilation included data from all seven participants. This data was not difficult to find as each case held salient themes consistent with the experiences of the other participants. Additional themes were extracted beyond those in the model and are discussed separately from the adaptation process (see chapter five).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Using pseudonyms, seven stories contextualize the experiences of parental incarceration among college students. Exploration of the individual narratives created seven single units of analysis. The seven cases included $n = 4$ women and $n = 3$ men with an average age of 20 years. Race/ethnic composition of participants included $n = 5$ White/Caucasian, $n = 1$ African-American, and n = one Asian-American. Participants reported their age at the time a parent was incarcerated as ranging from less than one year to 17 years. Reported crimes for which a parent was incarcerated included sexual acts with a minor ($n = 2$), drug related charges ($n = 4$), and governmental fraud ($n = 1$). A summary of the participants' family dynamics is provided in Table 4.1. Participants tended to represent families of divorce while some experienced the incarceration of a father serving time for theft, illegal possession of substances, or a sex crime; and were primarily pursing a degree in engineering and aviation. Furthermore, five of the seven participants reported they had previously received counseling.

Table 4.1

Summary of Participant Family Dynamics

Name	Age	Race	Age at Parental Incarceration	Parent Currently Incarcerated?	Parent Incarc-erated	Parental Crime	Counseling Received	College Major
Jackie	20	Caucasian	Seventeen	Yes	Father	Government Fraud	No	Hospitality and Tourism Mgmt.
Deion	21	African American	Two	No	Father	Theft and Possession of Illegal Substances	No	Aviation Mgmt.
Mike	21	Caucasian	"six or seven years old"	Yes	Father	Sexual Acts with a Minor	Yes	Mechanical Engineering
Joe	18	Caucasian	Infant	Unknown	Father	Illegal Substances	Yes	Pro-pilot Aviation
Sally	20	Caucasian	Two years old	Yes	Father	Sexual Acts with a Minor	Yes	Mechanical & Aerospace Engineering
Grace	20	Asian American	Childhood and off and on throughout adolescence	Yes	Father	Theft and Possession of Illegal Substances	Yes	Secondary Education, English
Madelene	21	Caucasian	Less than one year of age	Yes	Mother	Theft and Possession of Illegal Substances	Yes	Electrical Engineering

As noted in chapter three, each singular participant case was constructed through focus groups and individual interviews. Each case record was then reviewed in-depth, and member checked with each participant to ensure accurate representation of their case narrative. This resulted in seven singular narrative cases based on the individual self-appraisal of life experiences with parental incarceration. Results of narrative cases have been presented in no significant order below.

Case One: Mike

Mike's father went to prison when Mike was "six or seven?" years old, as he described, "it's been a long time". He did not remember much about that time other than he knew his father was charged with "something sexual with a minor" and was sentenced to prison for 20 years. Mike relayed he only has vague memories of being told about his father's incarceration: "I was going to a counselor once a week and there was one day when my mom came in with me and I don't really remember much of it." Mike grew up in a small town where he felt everyone knew his father. Reflecting on what he remembered about his father, Mike explained:

> We lived in a town with 1500 people. He worked at a car dealership in town, he was the head mechanic. People loved him there. He was born there, raised there, so they were friends with him. And my mom was the outsider so people just sort of blamed her when everything happened.

His father's incarceration created a lack of trust among Mike and his father's friends. He described this mistrust when he explained how his father's friends attempted to remain involved in his life: "He had friends who would try to do nice things and helped me out with things, which was great, but also, it was weird because I knew I couldn't do anything without it getting back to him somehow." Mike attempted to separate himself from his father by choosing to attend a

university in a different state than where he had been raised. Furthermore, he intentionally decided to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering instead of working as a mechanic like his father. Mike further acknowledged:

> When I was younger I wanted to be a mechanic because my dad was a mechanic. I grew up in the shop and I still love cars. I still love that smell actually, there's nothing that compares. But that kind of made me later on realize that I didn't want to be a mechanic. Which I'm happy about that now because I've got a better, more easier on the body, job and a chance of retirement.

Perhaps due to his own frustration toward his father, or the stigma surrounding him, Mike began to take steps toward establishing autonomy. He explained: "a lot of people in my hometown told me I am identical to him and that bothered me. . . that really bothered me".

Mike and his two older sisters were also dependent on their single mother, who had very little money. He stated that he blamed his father for their family economic situation. Mike explained that when his father was incarcerated, his half-brother was given power of attorney over his finances. This restricted his mother's access to his father's money. Without his father's financial contributions, Mike's mother eventually lost the family home after failing to make the monthly mortgage payments. Mike quipped: "he wasn't just hurting her, obviously that hurt all of us". Mike's resentment toward his father grew while reading letters sent from prison:

> From his letters, I think he has a pretty cushy set up. There were times when he'd ask me about football games he watched, tell me things about them because he could watch. And when I was at home, we couldn't afford cable, so I couldn't watch them but he could. That was just like a very annoying thing to me.

As an adolescent, Mike focused on sports and extracurricular activities, including involvement in Future Farmers of America. He admitted he did not care much about his grades and described himself as “the student with his head down on the desk” during most classes. Unlike Mike, his mother remained an extremely hard worker: “When I was probably 10 years old, she had three jobs. She worked nights as a dispatcher at a trucking company and then delivered magazines for another company, sometimes she waitressed on the side, and she sold make up”. He contributed much of his motivation for working hard in college to not wanting to have to work as hard as his mother later in life.

With his mother at work most of the time and his father’s absence, Mike allowed himself to consider what his father would want if he were there:

> . . . I knew that even though he wasn’t there, he would want me to play football, to be very active in sports. I think. I definitely felt that like throughout high school, not so much in college because I was doing my own thing and it doesn’t really have any bearing now. But I definitely had just sort of like a nagging thought of like I know he would want me to do this.

As outlined by Dr. Pauline Boss (2006) in Ambiguous Loss Theory, the “nagging thought” Mike described exemplified the psychological presence of a physically absent parent. Contributing to this presence of an absent father were the letters Mike received from his father. Although he said he had thought about visiting his father in prison, Mike never responded to his father’s letters, nor he feel it was convenient to do so. Thus, Mike felt a psychological presence of his father, but maintaining a relationship was not a priority for Mike.

The ambiguity of familial roles, such as who is in and who is out of the family, is also represented in ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2006). Role ambiguity can be accompanied with

feelings of anxiety (Boss, 2006). Mike noted, “I don’t know exactly when he’ll get released but they denied him for sure for another two years, last year. . . I’m not looking forward to it.” Conversely, Mike added: “I think I’ve come to terms with it and forgiven him. I don’t want him to be there any longer or like suffer or any of that, I just don’t want to have him in my life.”

One step Mike has taken to ensure his father remains absent from his life involves careful intentionality toward social media. Mike explained he has curated a social media profile which omits most personal details and he checks his followers frequently to make sure his father’s friends and family cannot see his pages, commenting: “I don’t want anyone just randomly checking up on me.” His desire to keep his father from knowing about his life could be derived from distrust. He spoke of not wanting his father to know anything about him. He took ownership of his life by filtering what is shared. This type of ownership was also evident in his college experience and future goals.

As an engineering major, Mike stated he “had to learn how to actually put effort in.” At the time of the study, Mike was working three jobs and was engaged to be married to his high school sweetheart. He spoke of his fiancé with great respect and credited her for being a consistent basis of support. One of Mike’s part time jobs was at the company where he has already secured full time employment where he will utilize his engineering degree after graduation. He pursued this career by applying for an internship for which he felt under qualified for but was hired anyway. Since then, he has proven himself to the company and was excited about a future with them, one that includes the company paying for him to complete a master’s degree. He plans to begin pursuing graduate school as early as next year. When comparing his former upbringing to his current life situation, Mike stated, “I’m doing all that I can now so

hopefully it's easier later. I don't want to work three jobs. I don't want to be in that same situation [as my mother]."

Case Two: Sally

When Sally was an infant, her father was arrested and found guilty of multiple counts of sexual acts with a minor, including her two older sisters. Sally described her childhood as one with many extremes including a shift from living comfortably with wealth to a life of poverty. Some of Sally's earliest memories included being impoverished and living in a tiny apartment with no bedroom of her own. One of her sisters was placed under protective custody with the state due to her father's abusive behavior. Meanwhile, Sally, her mother, two brothers, and one sister moved to a small, rural town across the state. Reflecting on her childhood, Sally stated:

> I can recall sometimes I would have really bad nightmares, I actually still do. I don't know why I have really bad night terrors all the time, but when I was a kid I didn't know how to deal with it. So I would just wake up crying my eyes out, bawling.

Her statement was an admission of Sally to her poor coping behaviors she felt she had as a child and evidence of the lingering effects of the adverse experiences of her childhood. The nightmares and emotional outbursts are consistent with symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as defined by the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

During the interview, Sally referred to her incarcerated father as "a stranger whom she never thinks about." However, Sally demonstrated ambivalent feelings of having none for her father while simultaneously wishing he were dead:

> I have absolutely no feelings for him because all I've known about him is just what he's done. So, part of me is like every now and then, I'd check, like once a year to see if he's still alive. Just to be like, oh, he's not dead yet. Darn. Can't party yet. My mom like she

> wishes he wasn't even around anymore. We're just waiting for the day when we can be like, yeah, he's finally gone!

Although she claimed to not think about him, and having no feelings toward him, Sally used the limited information she had about her father to explore her own identity. She explained:

> The first thing whenever I found out like who he was and I could look him up and see pictures of him, I was like, I want to see if I look like this guy and I hate it because I got his nose. I hate my nose but that's it.

She went on to relay her mother's comparison of Sally's lower back pain to symptoms her father complained about when he was younger. Sally blamed her poor eyesight on her paternal genetics as well. Thus, throughout her identity exploration, which is common among emerging adults (Arnett, 2004), she was willing to accept physical similarities to her father while maintaining her identity as nothing like him. This allowed her to separate the physical form from the psychological.

After her father's incarceration, Sally's mother was in and out of various tumultuous romantic relationships and eventually remarried. As a young child, Sally admitted feeling fearful of her stepfather, elaborating he was not physically abusive but she felt he was mentally, as he was often mean to her as a child. Her mother eventually left him but Sally acknowledged that this brought very little immediately relief:

> I was 16 and that was a pretty weird part of my life because you know, it was high school. It's already kind of crazy. There's already drama at school, drama at home, there's not anywhere fun. And we didn't have a place to stay after we left him.

Sally also noted feeling disgusted by her mother, who had pursued a romantic dating relationship with a minor and childhood peer. From Sally's perspective, her mother's actions

were the very reason her father was incarcerated. At the same time, her mother exhibited suicidal behavior. Sally described an event in which she found a suicide note from her mother and was able to intervene in as much as having "talked her down from it." This dramatic shift in roles positioned Sally to be in a parental role of her parent, which contributed to boundary ambiguity within the family.

Eventually, Sally's mother met an older man and remarried. This created some stability in Sally's home life which allowed her to actively pursue varsity sports and excel academically. "I loved soccer that was my big thing", she reflected, and went on to relay a story of almost losing her big thing due to her marijuana habit:

> One day in high school, I got randomly drug tested because I was in sports and I was smoking pot like every single day just because like high school was so stressful and like my mom going on and the divorce and shitty people in high school.

Sally went to her coach before the results were reported and confessed she had been smoking and the results would be positive. Because of her confession, she was not removed from the team but was suspended for a while and directed to a substance abuse counselor. Sally explained this counselor was instrumental for her as she was finally able to open up to someone about her family life. Sally valued counseling for assistance with managing her stress levels and said she has continued to go during the summers while in college.

Sally brought her love of sport with her to college and joined students at OSU in the Harry Potter inspired sport, Quidditch. The team aspect not only provided a physical outlet of stress relief but became a way for her to make friends with others who share her love of fantasy fiction. This team held organized practices twice a week and competed with other universities. A

self-described “independent” person, Sally grew to value her friendships, noting: “I noticed that like getting into college, I need to have friends or else you go crazy without people”.

Although socially engaged, Sally explained she would often withhold details about her family situation when among friends. She described her thought process about what to share with her first college boyfriend:

> I didn’t tell him whatsoever. . . it came up sometimes and I was just like he doesn’t need to know because he had such a perfect life, nice family, like I think his parents were divorced but nothing crazy like that.

Sally also admitted lying about her family by telling friends she did not know where her biological father was. Her decision to withhold information about her family was indicative of her awareness of the stigma of incarceration and her experience of disenfranchised grief (Boss, 2014). The denial, or lack of acknowledgement of her family’s dynamics, is representative of Sally’s loss and the disenfranchisement of it as she is not willing to communicate it publicly.

During the interview, Sally discussed her focus on having a more financially stable future than her past provided. She appeared dedicated to her school work and at the time of the study, was pursuing an engineering degree while working part time. Sally explained “college was kind of my ticket out” and was capitalizing on opportunities to pursue professional success. At the time of the study, she was in a committed monogamous dating relationship and lived with friends she has made from work. Sally’s goal is to work for NASA after graduation. She explained her mother has voiced alternative ideas for her but Sally’s high level of self-efficacy rang louder for her, as she explained:

> My mom's always telling me. . . she's like you should have a baby. You should have a kid. You know you get discounts and stuff like. And I’m like, No! I don't want to have a

> kid unless I have an excess of money to spend on the child because I want to have a nice house and I mean currently I don't, I can't foresee myself having a child in the next like five years. But eventually I do want one because I want to pass on my legacy and teach them things and what not.

Case Three: Madelene

Madelene's mother never married and was only sixteen when she gave birth to her. She disappeared when Madelene was only 18 months old. Her mother has been in and out of jail and in and out of Madelene's life ever since. Reflecting about her family's unique dynamics with her mother's pregnancy and her father's desire for marriage, Madelene remarked:

> She actually pawned his engagement ring. He was like madly in love with her – he's ten years older than her. She was only 16 when she had me, she turned 17 like two weeks after I was born, so I guess he was 26 when I was born.

Madelene was aware that she was a product of a teenage pregnancy but made no comment about her parents' age difference or that her mother was a minor at the time.

Raised by her father, he remained single until she left home to attend college. Madelene felt that her father's willingness to delay dating was intentional so he could be completely focused on her upbringing. Interestingly, Madelene has maintained a relationship with her mother's parents throughout her life. This was at the encouragement of her father. Madelene was made aware that her mother has since had two more children. Thus, one sibling is a half-brother whom she has never met and the other child is a ten-year-old half-sister with whom Madelene has remained very close. Madelene explained her mother's absence:

> And then she would leave again, and that was really hard for me. I didn't know she was leaving and no one would ever tell me why. I would work with her at the hotels and stuff

> and she would just put me in some unsafe situations. So she was in and out but then after the ten years, I hadn't really heard from her until about two years ago.

Madelene clarified there was an eight-year absence in which she never heard from her mother. She relayed a story of her mother showing up at her elementary school unannounced and taking Madelene with her and a strange man. Madelene's memories of that day included riding around in the back of the stranger's car for most of the day until finally taken back home with strict orders to not tell her father. Madelene told her father and he gave her a cell phone to keep on her in case it ever happened again.

Her mother has been incarcerated multiple times, Madelene is uncertain how many, but each time has been related to theft, forging signatures, and other charges associated with stealing. Madelene believes her mother's behaviors are the result of illegal substance use and "hanging around the wrong kind of people." She went on to say it is very difficult for felons to find employment once out of prison, and Madelene felt this contributed to her mother's subsequent offenses. Madelene was not defending her mother's actions but provided many rationalizations.

Madelene has taken on a protective role relative to the raising of her younger half-sister admitting:

> I just saw her once a week and I would get really frustrated because I couldn't raise her how she should be – where my grandparents weren't doing what I thought they should have done for her.

Even while away at college, Madelene said she speaks with her sister at least once a week. She described her relationship with her maternal grandparents as complex, indicating they have love for their daughter but have established firm boundaries with her. Madelene showed respect for her maternal grandparents' established boundaries by referring to their daughter, her mother, by

her first name, yet when with her father, she simply calls her mom. The attention toward what name to use when mentioning her mother accentuates the ambiguity of boundaries and familial roles within Madelene's family.

In high school, Madelene joined the varsity color guard squad and enjoyed the support and friendships of her female peers. She has continued to view her color guard director as an influential female role model for her life. During her sophomore year, she excelled academically and attended a Vocational Technology Center. This gave her opportunities to explore her professional interests.

> I got to try four different programs: electrician, heat and air, graphic design, and something else. They let me go to the engineering one for two days. I wasn't sure I was smart enough to do that but I was like, oh well, I'll give it a shot. I'd never made a B before in school and they were like 'well, you're not going to get an A' and I was like, ok, do I really want to do this? But I decided to and I got in.

Upon entering college Madelene joined a professional sorority and declared engineering as her major. At the time of this study, she was in her senior year with a post-graduation job confirmed at a company for which she already works part time. At the same time, she was engaged to be married. In fact, her graduation and wedding ceremony were scheduled to occur on the same weekend. When describing what motivates her, Madelene laughed when she said: "I think it's a self-goal. I think. It's just how I'm wired. I have to work as hard as I can and choose the most challenging thing possible and then kill myself while doing it."

Madelene's mother is currently incarcerated and Madelene has recently begun receiving letters from her mother. Madelene brought copies of the letters to her interviews and many included questions about Madelene's life, descriptions of life inside prison, and a request for

Madelene to ask others to send money. Madelene expressed confusion stemming from her mother's reemergence into her life:

> The hard part is like I don't know if I want to step in and help because I feel like that's a never-ending thing. If I give her money now, where does that stop? If I talk to her now, where does that stop? Because I don't really want her in my sister's life because I think old and stable is better than young and chaotic. My sister doesn't get to do the things normal kids get to but I think that's got to be better than moving around with someone who can't settle down in life. So I kind of want to keep her out of my sister's life but I don't know. I'd still like to keep in contact with her because I love her but, I don't know.

The ambivalence Madelene expressed is something she has come to accept in her life. She no longer felt the need to explain why she loves her mother, yet was worried about her mother's presence in her life. Thus, Madelene is able to communicate with her mother without feeling overwhelmed. Similar to what Boss and Yeats (2014) posited regarding the interplay between ambiguous loss and mixed emotions, Madelene normalized her feelings of ambivalence as a way to maximize a sense of resilience.

Case Four: Deion

When Deion was two years old, his parents separated and his father went to prison on charges of theft and possession of an illegal substance. As a young mother of two little boys, Deion's mother signed over custody of him and his brother to his paternal grandparents. Deion explained his situation succinctly:

> Technically, my parents are still together on paper but they split when I was two – and that was about the same age as when my dad went in for theft, drugs, constantly being caught by the law in Virginia. Currently, I live with my grandparents, I moved with them

> when my parents split and my mom was having trouble taking care of two kids, while she was under the age of 21. So I moved here when my grandfather's business moved [here].

Deion has two other half-brothers who live in Virginia. Deion spoke of his curiosity about his father when he was young. However, he acknowledged that his grandparents did not disclose much information:

> I was really asking questions like why is he always calling here and all that but like I'd always hear at family reunions, because you know, you always hear rumors going so, so like there was always people talking about him in the back, but we didn't really talk about it.

He refers to his paternal grandparents as "mom and dad," and claimed he was raised in a strict household. However, he credited this strict upbringing by his grandparents for helping him choose a different path in life than his biological parents noting, "I just had more adults around me, compared to them." He added that while raised by the same two people, when his biological father was young, both of his parents were in graduate school and building their businesses. Deion feels the timing of his life, with his grandparents well established in their careers, allowed them to be more present in his upbringing than they were in his father's life when he was younger. However, Deion noted his grandfather's decision to move his business to Oklahoma was not easy for Deion:

> The hard part was moving away from everybody. Like there's nobody in Oklahoma I'm related to, except my grandparents and my brother. . . it's hard because I'm away from everyone I know and losing my friends when I was younger. I mean, moving away when I was six was like I had to start over.

By the age of eight, Deion's father was out of jail. He and his brother were reacquainted with their father. Deion relayed the story of this reunion:

> I was surprised . . . I mean, we were young so we were happy to see him, but at the same time we were young so we didn't know much because everyone was keeping so much information from us. I guess that was kind of the annoying part for us because I always heard different stories and I always wanted to know like the real story that was going on, but after that, I guess your main question was, yes, he was ok with us living with our grandparents.

Deion eventually explained that he and his father had bonded. He admitted that he viewed his father-son relationship more like a sibling bond with a brother and implied that this parent-child relationship was a reflection of his past childhood experiences. Most notably, Deion described moments of being left at ball fields waiting for his father to pick him up from practice, only to realize that his father had forgotten to come get him. Deion felt most of his peers assumed his grandparents were his parents, noting that "I just made up stories that he was away on business trips because that's what my grandparents told me when I was younger." Deion knew he could convince his peers of his story because it was one he believed when he was younger.

His grandparents' decision to withhold information about his parents from Deion as a child likely derived from the stigma they associated with their son. When communication is reduced due to a stigma, insecure attachment styles may develop (Murray & Murray, 2010). Deion created narratives to tell his friends because he needed a story to tell himself. Resistance to telling the truth about his father's absence seemed to stem from Deion's inability to publicly admit the loss of his father in his daily life, which was modeled for him by his caregivers. It was complicated because Deion and his grandparents were not grieving the death of his father, rather

they were grieving the physical loss of him in their lives. When speaking of his current feelings toward his father, Deion reported:

> I've forgiven my dad to a certain extent. Like, because I grew up with my grandparents, there was always this huge age gap, so I was never able to like, connect. Or like when I needed help for certain things, like my teenage years were not always easy but I've forgiven him, now he tries to be more involved and stuff.

As a way to cope with his sense of loss, Deion established a sense of agency relative to his biological parents' behavior:

> I just really don't want to think about my dad as crazy doing those things because he was just being young and dumb – but that's what make me like try to work hard in school because I just don't want to end up being like 'oh he's just like his dad and his mom'. I never want to hear that because that just kills my ego.

Deion credited his grandfather as being a motivating factor in his life and someone to whom he goes to for advice about school. Deion disclosed that his grandfather often drinks a lot but has remained a very successful business man. He said his father will offer advice on occasion but he prefers to seek guidance from his grandfather. This quick discard of his father's opinions toward his life illustrated the lingering ambiguity of familial roles from his childhood. Additionally, while his parents have been historically unreliable, his grandparents' have offered a compensatory contribution toward Deion's life, which allowed him to substitute his attachment from his biological parents to his grandparents (Keller & Stricker, 2003).

Deion chose to attend college in pursuit of a degree in Aviation Management. He explained he grew up attending OSU's flight camps and knew they have a great aviation program. His grandfather is retired from the Air Force and Deion relayed: "He always pushes

like, you should try Air Force, but I want to go to UPS and fly cargo and just see the world instead of fighting and seeing the world." Thus, while respecting his grandfather, his decision to not pursue the Air Force is an indication of Deion's establishment of his own self-efficacy. He utilized agentic qualities to make decisions about his future even when it differed from his grandfather's plans for him. At the time of the study, in addition to taking classes, he was spending multiple hours each week learning to fly planes and was already working toward flight hours required to obtain a job at UPS after he graduates next year. Deion spoke of his grades and appeared disciplined regarding his studies with a focused goal he wanted to hit for his end of semester grade point average.

Case Five: Joe

When Joe was an infant, his father was incarcerated on charges for possession of illegal substances. By the age of four, Joe's mother was diagnosed with cancer. Joe is the only child of his parents and has four older half-siblings. His father was released from prison when Joe was six years old but was not active in Joe's daily life. Once his mother's terminal illness progressed, Joe noted:

> when she was really sick, I saw him about three times a week, but since then, I've seen him a lot less. I've probably only seen him like 17 times total in my life. I don't even know, it might be 50.

Unfortunately, Joe's mother passed away when he was eight years old. Joe's half-sister was 20 years of age at the time and took over legal guardianship. He mentioned that his sister dropped out of college to care for his mom, while working two jobs. By the time Joe reached the fifth grade, his sister married. Joe reflected on the ambiguity surrounding his sister and brother in law and their roles in his life:

> I don’t know, I always had trouble acting – they would try to be like my mom and dad and I just had issues with that – I didn’t like that. So good? Yeah, it was good, he could have been like a father figure to me, but I just didn’t want that. It just felt too weird to me.

Joe’s sister eventually had a baby. He admitted that he felt his relationship with his nephew was more like a brother rather than an uncle-nephew relationship. This appears to be connected with boundary ambiguity processes that have persisted in his family. In fact, Joe went to counseling after his mother passed away and recalled mixed feelings about the process. He explained the counselor told him to stop her if he felt she was pushing him to talk too much about his mother. “So anytime she’d be like, ok, let’s talk about your mom, I’d be like, no, I’m good. So, it was probably my fault, we mostly just played Scrabble, but . . . I mean, I ended up ok, so maybe it did help.” The resistance to opening up, along with his ambivalent feelings toward counseling, could be an indication of an insecure attachment style in Joe, given the instability of caregivers in his life as a child (Ainsworth, 1990).

When Joe entered high school, he focused on varsity swimming as well as extracurricular activities including Student Council and disc golf club. Upon entering college, Joe pledged a fraternity, and spoke excitedly about his plans to move in to the fraternity house next semester. Joe intentionally cultivated many friendships, noting: “once I realized it was kind of weird, like growing up without a dad or mom, I just kind of filled the void with like friends – I have too many.” Not only does this speak toward Joe’s agentic qualities, it signifies his identity reconstruction after losing both parents (Marcia, 2002). Instead of the orphan in his own family, Joe created an identity of one surrounded by classmates, colleagues, and friends.

At the time of the study, Joe remained unsure of where his father was located. Reflecting on the frustrations of completing mandatory legal paperwork without his father, Joe stated:

> Anytime we look for him, like we need him for something, like when I was getting my license and I needed a parent, it was hard to find him. It was hard getting a contact number because he never answers his phone. My aunt had to find him on Facebook and message him through there and be like 'we need you'.

Although Joe was a successful varsity swimmer, he chose not to compete athletically on a collegiate level. Instead, he immersed himself in college course work, Greek life, and part time employment off campus. Relative to social comparisons, Joe reflected, "I don't think my situation is different than other people." However, he qualified this statement when considering his financial situation noting: "I grew up pretty broke and like on the swim team, me and my buddy were like the two broke dudes on the team." He elaborated most of his teammates were children of doctors or other high paying careers and had swimming pools in their own backyards while he had to practice at the local YMCA.

Joe had already declared a major as a freshman and had a career plan to be a pilot and fly cargo plans. Reflecting on what motivates him to excel in school, Joe explained that it was his focus on economic security:

> I thought it would be easier, honestly. The one thing that keeps me going is just being afraid of poverty. I don't like taking risks. I mean being a pilot is guaranteed good money, pretty much. Going to trade school, I don't know how good of money that would be so that's why I went to college.

Joe does not see himself as a victim of his circumstances, losing a mother to cancer and a father to drugs, however, he admits he is not fearless. “I’m afraid of poverty. Deathly afraid of poverty. So I think that’s everything – all of my work ethic comes from that.”

Case Six: Grace

Grace’s mother was just 17 when she gave birth to her. Two years later, Grace’s parents divorced. Her father was incarcerated for charges related to selling and distributing illegal substances both when she was a young child and again recently. Grace lived with her mother until she turned 15 and then moved in with her maternal grandmother. Grace’s decision to reside with her grandmother resulted in a change in school districts and entry into a new high school. By the age of 16, Grace dropped out of high school and moved to California with her grandmother. She explained:

> I wouldn’t say I was on drugs, but I was definitely doing drugs and I was around the wrong people. I had good grades, I didn’t let my grades slip in school, I mean I dropped out with like three As and two B’s or something like that.

There, they lived with her mother and new stepfather. This was a crucial time in her life and impacted her future decision-making as the social construct supporting her interacted with her age and developmental stage, which is consistent with life course theory (Elder, 1998). Given the age she was, she was able to drop out of school and those around her supported her decision. She explained:

> I went to California and it was kind of like my eyes were kind of opened and I realized I had been doing all the wrong things. I was hanging out with the wrong people and not doing the right things. I dropped out of high school, not because I am dumb or anything. I took my ACT in like my sophomore year in high school. And like I always planned on

like going to school, I like school, but I was working and it was so much stress. So I just dropped out. And I was I just I wanted to hang out with my friends and stuff.

Grace elaborated on what she meant by “not doing the right things” by stating she and her friends often did recreational drugs and that getting high was a bigger priority for her than attending school. She relayed a story of her stepfather doing “hard drugs” with one of her friends and that this was upsetting to her as she noted he was able to do this freely while her father was serving a prison sentence for drugs. Grace’s casual approach to drugs and her apathy toward school as a teenager are representative of the weakened societal bonds discussed in interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987). Interactional theory suggests the perceived freedom one has from their lack of connection to conventional society leads to delinquent behaviors (Thornberry, 1987). Thus the interaction of the individual, such as Grace, with those in unconventional societies, such as drug trafficking, is the learning ground through which behaviors are reinforced. The social structure of her home and peer group environments exposed her to illegal activities with poor learning environments, thus facilitating delinquent behavior such as recreational drugs and eventually dropping out of high school (Thornberry, 1987).

She and her grandmother eventually moved back to her hometown where Grace obtained a General Education Diploma (GED) so she could attend college. The decision to obtain a GED was another integral choice for Grace as this gave her opportunities for her future. At the time of the study, as a full time college student with a part time job, she was consistently assisting her mother with the raising three younger siblings. When not attending class, Grace provided instrumental support in the form of transportation to and from school and other activities. Meanwhile, she also worked part-time at a fast food restaurant.

As an emerging adult, Grace has remained in close contact with her father. She reflected on growing up in a small town and feeling the stigma of incarceration. When asked about her parents as a child, Grace stated "I would get like really embarrassed. I would lie a lot – like he's my dad, I don't know why he's not here." The inability for Grace to express the loss she felt of her father, coupled with the embarrassment and shame she felt for his reasons of not being there, represented the disenfranchised grief she experienced.

Grace's father was recently sentenced to 30 years. She expressed feelings of frustration and sadness about this situation: "I mean I wish he would make different choices, like every time he gets out of jail, I think maybe this time is different." She added: "That's my biggest fear - that my dad will die while he's in jail." She described phone calls with her father as being through cell phones his fellow inmates keep hidden. She laughed as she described often having to speak with another inmate and asking for her father by his prison nickname, "Tiger."

Grace and her father recently discovered that she has two half-sisters. She connected with one of her half-siblings through social media, texts, and phone calls and has developed a close relationship with her. Meanwhile, she has reached out to the other half-sibling but had not yet developed a bond. In fact, Grace spoke of organizing a future road trip so she could take her new sisters to meet their father in prison. However, Grace did qualify, "I'd like to get a DNA test just to know for sure because you never know."

While reflecting on her upbringing, Grace acknowledged being exposed to her dad's drug activity:

> I've never seen him do drugs, but I've seen him have drugs. I've never seen him, like, messed up on drugs but I've seen him doing sales and stuff. . so I believe he's addicted to like the fast money lifestyle, because he's a journeyman, he could go make $40/hour

> right now – he’s went through all of school in jail and everything but he doesn’t want to use it. It’s ridiculous.

Grace explained she continues to experience ambivalent feelings about her father and his life of crime. Most notable were Grace’s expression of mixed emotions of her future and the uncertainty of her father’s presence in her life:

> My dad was out of jail whenever I got my GED and my family had a huge dinner downtown. He got to go and that’s the ONLY thing he has ever been able to really participate in with me. Like I've always been so scared, like will my dad be able to walk me down the aisle? You know it was just like typical stuff, like graduate high school, graduate college, like he won’t see it – now he definitely won’t since he’s back in jail so it was really nice to have him there.

Grace refers to her concerns as “just like typical stuff” yet the ambiguity of her father’s involvement in her life, and in the family in general, is worth considering. The blur of the relational roles in her family are not just surrounding her father. Grace reflected on her feelings about her mother:

> She's always acted like a teenager and I didn't notice that until I was like, whenever I was in high school. When she finally divorced my stepdad, that's whenever she stopped being mom and she started being like another teenager that I had to deal with. And so I started having to be like adulting at 16 - not because she couldn't take care of me - but just like to have some sort of sense of right and wrong.

The ambivalence surrounding the incarceration of Grace’s father has appeared to spill-over into her romantic attachments. Grace is currently a junior in college. She lives alone and recently broke up with her boyfriend, whom she has had in and out of her life repeatedly over the

last few years. Grace finally told her boyfriend: "you need to work on yourself, dude. I'm trying to be single. You can't just jump from relationship to relationship." Grace's dating life exemplified the identity exploration associated with emerging adulthood as she continued to revise her status from in a relationship to being single (Arnett, 2004). Additionally, the instability of her boyfriend's presence in her life is similar to the instability of her father's presence in her life growing up. Grace's allowance of her boyfriend to come back repeatedly, after leaving, is likely attributed emotional inconsistency surrounding parental responses to her needs as a child, (Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005). When talking about dating, Grace bluntly stated: "I don't like men, like in general. I don't know, but like, I've never really had a supportive man in my life."

She has secured plans to study abroad in Costa Rica next year as part of her education major and explained her love of travel is a motivating factor for her education. Grace would like to live overseas and teach once she graduates. Grace expressed a sense of pride when she runs in to people she grew up with and they seem surprised she's doing well in college. She indicated she always felt it was unexpected of her to be an educated successful young woman because she held a reputation of the party girl who dropped out of high school. On what is driving her toward success, Grace quipped: "I feel like I would be such a disappointment to my grandma – either of my grandmas – if I dropped out. Both of my grandma's help me and I'm here because of them, I can't mess up." Grace would seem to be motivated by her grandmothers' emotional contentment, which is a form on interdependence to the effect of one generation supporting the other.

Case Seven: Jackie

One of Jackie's childhood memories included sitting around the dining room table at eight years old, with her siblings, when her mother informed them her father would be gone for a

while. Eight months later, her father returned and she learned he'd been in prison. She never asked why and continued to live a childhood filled with sports, activities with her two siblings, and extracurricular activities.

With her mother as her personal athletic coach, she felt supported. Meanwhile, she described her relationship with her father as distant: "trying to connect with him was like trying to connect with a brick wall." At age 14, Jackie had her first experience with peers drinking alcohol at a party. She recalled experiencing an immediate sense of familiarity at the smell of alcohol noting, "one of my brother's friends had a beer and I was like 'that's what my dad smells like'." This was a turning point in Jackie's life as she began to associate her father as an alcoholic. Soon after, Jackie assumed a more parental and instrumental role for her younger siblings by transporting them to and from their sporting events "because if he was intoxicated I didn't want him driving my siblings."

Jackie's mother encouraged her to focus on her athletic prowess. It was during her junior year in high school, just as she began entertaining college athletic scholarship offers, when as she described it: "our lives were being totally flipped upside down". Her father was arrested on multiple counts of governmental fraud. Jackie explained: "We had no idea he was even in trouble, so when he didn't come home from work one night, his friend was like hey this happened, and we were like what are you talking about?" Her family felt blindsided and embarrassed as they discovered many people in their hometown knew he was involved with illegal activities but no one had ever mentioned to her family.

> No one said anything because it's kind of like a subject of how do you bring that up? Like, 'oh are you doing ok? I hear your husband's on trial – or your dad's on trial again' and I'm like what?

Jackie continued to excel in her sport and spoke of it being something beneficial for her family as it provided them an alternative place to focus rather than her father's legal issues. She went on to win a state championship and was offered an athletic scholarship at a university that put her a long distance away from her father and the prison where he is detained. Jackie referred to her father as a sociopath, even elaborating that he received that diagnosis clinically as a young child although she was not aware of that until recently. At the time of the study, Jackie reported living in fear of him trying to contact her for money:

> I have put myself on the no call list from his prison. It's annoying because he will try to contact me. He knows when I'm at my grandma's so he knows he can call there and I'm like, no, leave me alone, like I don't want to talk to you, I don't want you to hear anything about me or like have any idea what I'm doing.

Jackie's proactive steps to establish firm boundaries with her father seem to reflect of the timing of his incarceration. As an emerging adult, away in college, she has the ability to construct her autonomous identity, separate from her family. However, as a Division I college athlete, often highlighted before a national audience or within national media, it likely easier for her father to read about her accomplishments in media newspaper or magazine. Even the act of entering college with a father in prison was not without frustrations as she relayed:

> The application like, I had to call my mom and we had a special. . . it was like a special circumstance meeting to explain like 'ok, well she can't fill out this section on the application because he's in prison', none of these applies.

A sophomore at the time of the study, the college experience for Jackie had already become an emotional one. She felt compelled to share with her coaches and teammates the fact that her father is incarcerated within her first year on the team. Jackie implied that the impact of

her father's incarceration did not fully hit her until she was away at school and it began to distract her from focusing on her sport. She elaborated on her feelings: "nobody knew and I had a hard time telling my coaches and I think last year especially was really difficult for me to deal with just because I was on my own and I don't have any family here." Since disclosing her situation to her coaches and a few friends, she said she felt tremendous support and was actively enjoying her life as a Division I athlete with plans to pursue a master's degree after graduation.

When considering what her biggest motivation in pursuing her academic and professional goals, Jackie noted:

> I'd say watching my mom struggle is a motivation because I just want to be able to help her when I get out of school, because it's not her fault my dad screwed her over, took everything from her, and it's not my brother's fault he had to pull out of school. Like I just want to be able to help them because I think they're the reason I got to come [to college].

Jackie admitted she had never been close with her father's extended family until after he was incarcerated yet hears from his brother weekly since her father is gone. She could not explain why she is so open with his family while at the same time, not wanting him to know anything about her current life. This may be a symptom of an insecure attachment style for Jackie, whereas she may be attempting to substitute her father's family for her father, although it is most likely a coping skill for her feelings of grief. Ambiguous loss theory lists revising attachment as a key component to resilience (Boss & Yeats, 2014). By Jackie allowing herself to seek new relationships with her father's family, she has provided a way to relieve the pressure to let go of her father completely while being present with those who can be fully present.

Jackie summarized her complex feelings toward her father as such:

> Forgiveness is there. But there's also there's, there's still anger and there's still times where I catch myself saying things like you know I wish like he was in longer or sometimes it's like I wonder you know if he gets out, if he'd do something stupid to get back in. But at the end of the day, I just really want him to stay out of my life and I don't care how. But yeah, I forgave him because that's just how I was raised.

The acceptance of her feelings of anger coupled with forgiveness are significant as ambiguous loss theory suggests normalizing ambivalence is another key element toward resilience (Boss & Yeats, 2014).

Summary

As each participant reflected on their past experiences, spoke of their current situations, and projected their futures, an adaptation process emerged within each case. The individual adaptations revealed unique circumstances and individuals with whom participants were linked to in their lives and the importance of the decisions made by parents of the participants as well as the participants themselves. Choices of with whom to engage, whom to ignore, what to study in school, and what extracurricular activities in which to participate all seemed to influence the participants' abilities to adapt. An analytic conclusion relative to the commonalities among participants will be explored in the next chapter through cross-case analysis.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This investigation was originally guided by two key research questions:

1. How do college students with a parent incarcerated perceive their experiences?
2. What factors are contributing to, or distracting from, the development of self-efficacy among the participants.

Based on these questions, it was originally hypothesized that emerging adults who attended college and were affected by parental incarceration would express ambiguous loss while exhibiting a strong preference for self-efficacy. The single-case analyses helped expose the qualitative commonalities and uniqueness of individual perceptions and experiences of ambiguity and self-efficacy stemming from parental incarceration. In turn, overall findings supported the hypothesis. Study participants elaborated on a shared experience of maintaining a psychological presence of a physically absent parent, which contributed to an ambiguity in familial roles. Furthermore, participants demonstrated commonality in their expression of self-confidence relative to individual ability to succeed in college as well as life. This shared efficacious nature among participants was most evident relative to narrative descriptions

surrounding a sense of faith in self. This seemed to be a contributing characteristic of individual flourishing and success in college. This was in spite of noted childhood adversities within one's past life course. Thus, overall singular case results confirmed evidence of developmental adaptation within the emerging adult years. Beyond single-case analysis, several emergent cross-comparative themes did emerge. These themes were extrapolated to formulate a conclusion regarding the phenomenon of adaptive capacity and how it led toward self-efficacy. The concluding themes that evolved seemed to support a shared identity among emerging adults regarding what it means to be a child of incarceration.

Based on qualitative extrapolation, five key themes and four sub-themes emerged. These themes were aligned in support of concepts within Martin and Martin's (2002) Developmental Adaptation Model (see Figure 1). Of particular thematic importance was the emergence of five primary themes including distal exposure to childhood adversity, a lingering and on-going experience of post-traumatic stress, individual attention to addressing ambiguous loss via disenfranchised grief and boundary ambiguity, evidence of seeking social resources through connectedness, and reliance on personal motivation as an adaptive and responsive behavior. Within these overall extrapolated themes, four additional sub-themes were identified as an integrated part of developmental adaption among emerging adults impacted by parental incarceration. These sub-themes included developmental adaptive processes involving adaptive capacity, economic emancipation, parentification, and personal savoring.

Theme One: Childhood Adversities

The disclosure of childhood adversities by emerging adult participants within this study was abundant. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants recounted similar stories of scarcity within their childhood homes. This theme is integral to the study participants'

development as experts contend that social development in emerging adulthood closely reflects childhood experiences (Hillis, Anda, Dube, Felitti, Marchbanks, & Marks, 2004).

Childhood adversity was an evident primary theme across singular cases (see Table 5.1)

Table 5.1

Thematic Summary of Childhood Adversity

Theme One	**Adversity Type(s)**	**Evidence**
Childhood Adversity	Exposure to illicit substance use	• "I've never seen him like messed up on drugs but I've seen him doing sells and stuff." • "He had a big old pot farm and a meth lab"
	Parental absence	• "When I was four my mom was diagnosed with cancer. I think when she was diagnosed my dad was in prison." • "I pretty much always had to take care of myself, all the time, growing up." • "I just hung out with my brothers for a while and was kind of raised by them, mostly." • "…technically my parents are together on paper but they split when I was two."
	Economic hardship	• "We lost the house after she struggled for a couple of years trying to pay for it." • "I didn't really have a room, it was just kind of like a little open area that's just where I stayed."

Financial insecurity was one key adversity commonly recalled among study participants. According to results from the National Adverse Childhood Experience Survey (ACES) living in poverty increases the stress of parenting (Steele, Bate, Steele, Miriam, Danskin, & Knafo, 2016). This would seemed to be the case within study participant families. Each study participant not only had one parent incarcerated but most noted a real physical absence of the non-incarcerated parent. This was due to outside work demands, as well as parental problems surrounding addiction, relationship problems, and other life stressors. During the majority of childhood, participants admitted to being uncertain of how basic daily needs would be met by their non-incarcerated parent. Maslow (1943) theorized that basic needs such as food, shelter, and warmth

form the foundation by which individuals later develop socially productive and meaningful lives. It is plausible to assume that the appraisal of childhood impacted by parental incarceration is a time of survival. This is particularly salient when the child experiences an event in close association with a non-incarcerated parent, sibling, or grandparent. As concluded in his research, Maslow suggested one cannot progress to the next level of self-actualization until the basic needs are met (Maslow, 1943). Relative to participants in this study, there was notable developmental continuity linking one's past uncertainty regarding parental ability to meet ends financially for the family and the individual ability to remain economically secure in the present as an emerging adult.

Some participant cases eluded to exposure of illegal activities of the parent, which seemed to also negatively impact the financial security of the family system. Whether a participant recalled witnessing a parent selling or doing drugs or being exposed to "the wrong kinds of people" within a parent's social network, such exposure represented risk factors that might potentially impede developmental growth relative to what Maslow designated as the hierarchy of needs involving emotional feelings of security, stability, and autonomy from fear (Maslow, 1943).

Many of the participants revealed that as children they had limited information about their absent parent because either, they were too young to remember them before they were incarcerated or their custodial parent did not disclose much about the absent parent. Thus, when reflecting on their childhood upbringing, study participants did not place much emphasis on specific events, rather they emphasized memories and feelings of stress stemming from parental risk behaviors. Their parents' choices ultimately created potential for economic disadvantage and financial instability, which limited an ability to provide the basics to sustain life: food, clothing,

and shelter thus complicating the developmental adaptation. Some participants even expressed a pre-occupation of being “terrified of poverty.” However, such anxiety seemed to be substituted in favor of maintaining a strong work ethic as emerging adults in order to avoid any possibility of experiencing poverty later in life.

Although many noted not having thought about those events in a long time, the adverse childhood experiences have left lasting impacts on the participants as evidenced by the choices they continue to make to separate themselves from lifestyles reminiscent of their childhoods.

Theme Two: Post-Traumatic Stress

Individual responses toward childhood adversities can impact individual capacity for developmental adaptation (Koenen, Moffitt, Poulton, Martin, & Caspi, 2007). As emerging adults, many of the study participants appeared to be actively appraising and regulating mixed-emotions from childhood. Emotional regulation relative to events of the past was consistent with post-traumatic stress symptoms (van der Kolk, 1996). Therefore, post-traumatic stress stemming from the childhood memory of parental incarceration represented a second key theme within this study (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2

Thematic Summary of Post-Traumatic Stress

Theme 2	Symptom	Evidence
Post-Traumatic Stress	Anxiety/Worry	• “Will I have to worry about him camping out here somewhere to try to find me or something like that?” • “I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense but I was like worried . . . both my parents are like this, what does that say about me?

	Paranoia/Fear	• "It makes me a little paranoid. . .what happens if he gets out and someone tells him hey he's in [name of town] going to school? • "I am afraid that will happen – he'll try and form a relationship and then just steal our money, or he will try and kill my mom because he just never liked her." • ". . . I feel like he's going to try to reach out to me" "I'm going to get a restraining order as soon as he gets out"

Criteria for diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are provided by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) in the DSM-V. These criteria include intrusive and recurrent memories of a traumatic event, avoidance of reminders associated with the traumatic event, negative moods and thoughts relative to the traumatic event, and pervasive psychological distress ((American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many of these symptoms were present across the cases. Although many participants expressed residual feelings of fear, frustration, and avoidance of the reminders of their parent's incarceration others indicated delayed onset of symptoms. The delayed onset of symptoms is often the result of an emotional trigger which reminds one of the traumatic event(s) that was previously experienced or witnessed (Andrews, Brewin, Philpott, & Stewart, 2007).

Furthermore, there was thematic evidence of lingering symptoms involving post-traumatic stress. In other words, emotional expression of post-traumatic symptoms in the immediate aftermath of traumatic stress exposure may dissipate, yet such underlying symptoms never fully disappear and remain constant across the life-course (Weems et al., 2010). Experts refer to this as the "lingering effect hypothesis." This hypothesis suggests that underlying emotional triggers of stress appear different than the typical symptoms of PTSD, and therefore do not ever subside for those who have been exposed to a traumatic experience (Bryant,

McFarlane, Silove, O'Donnell, Forbes, & Creamer, 2016). In other words, PTSD is a lifetime experience.

Based on results from this study, it can be argued that the proximal impact of parental incarceration on the everyday life of the emerging adults complicated adaptation. Despite being in college and working toward a degree, many of the study participants seemed to express an underlying fear of reliving the past. Emerging adulthood is a developmental period of identity exploration (Arnett, 2006). Yet, emerging adults exposed to incarceration of a parent seemed to remain confronted by disturbing futuristic thoughts of eventually repeating the very behaviors that contributed their parent's incarceration.

Many of the participants described a desire to forget about their incarcerated parent. This is most indicative of an avoidant coping strategy used to regulate and suppress negative emotions (Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman, 1990). The employment of such coping response among this group of emerging adults was most likely a way to disassociate feelings of emotional discomfort and anxiety triggered by the past memory of the parent or current reality of a the parent's situation.

As these emerging adult children of parental incarceration continue to age, some symptoms stemming from the stress of early traumatic exposure will likely be revealed as late onset stress symptomology (LOSS). LOSS has been defined as a process of managing the stress symptoms rather than an outcome for those who experience it (Potter et al., 2013). Most people report experiencing a LOSS episode when they encounter a life course transition. Relative to emerging adults impacted by parental incarceration, this seems to be most evident relative to the prospect of wondering what an incarcerated parent might think of life choices made to better oneself (Davison, Kaiser, Spiro III, Moye, King, & King, 2015). The process of LOSS may be provoked by re-engaging with experiences previously avoided. Thus, participation in this study

may have left some participants with feeling of LOSS than they typically would not otherwise experience currently in life (Davison et al., 2015). However, LOSS is considered a normative aging process, and one the participants will seemingly have to manage with varying levels of success (Potter et al., 2013). Based on results from this study, participants seem to be dealing with LOSS rather successfully.

Theme Three: Ambiguous Loss

Another important theme within the cross-comparison of singular cases confirmed the over-arching role of ambiguous loss. Most notably, this overarching theme reflected two separate but simultaneous processes surrounding the emerging adult narrative on parental incarceration: (1) Boundary ambiguity and; (2) Disenfranchised grief (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3

Thematic Summary of Ambiguous Loss Processes

Theme Three	Process	Evidence
Ambiguous Loss	Boundary Ambiguity	• "If I'm talking to my grandparents, I would call her [by her name] or just in front of my sister, maybe, because I don't know how they're going to handle that situation. But if I'm talking to my dad, I call her mom." • ". . . she would leave again, and that was really hard for me. I didn't know she was leaving and no one would ever tell me why.. . . So she was in and out but then after the ten years, I hadn't really heard from her until about two years ago." • "there were a couple years in high school where I just couldn't trust her. . . So I was like, well, I don't have a parent to talk to anymore." • "I've always been so scared, like will my dad be able to walk me down the aisle? You know it was just like typical stuff, like graduate high school, graduate college, like, he won't see it – now he definitely won't since he's back in jail."

	Disenfranchised Grief	• "I would lie a lot – like he's my dad. I don't know why he's not here" • "When I came here no one here knew. . I had a hard time telling my coaches and I think last year especially it was difficult for me to deal with just because I was on my own and I don't have any family here." • "I wish he would make different choices, like every time he gets out of jail, I think 'maybe this time is different'." • "When I talk about my sister, they think about it like I'm talking about my mom because she raised me." • "That's why with some people I think, if I even think they are going to look at me differently, even a little bit, I just won't tell them [about my parents]."

Boundary Ambiguity. This was most evident relative to the issue of boundary ambiguity within family roles. Most participants relayed various experiential stories of parental separation. Some without divorce, some with divorce of a biological parent followed by the introduction of a step-parent, and others with the introduction of a custodial parent or in-law to substitute and fulfill the role of a family attachment figure. For most participants within this study, such experiences left them with a sense of uncertainty of who to consider "in" or "out" of the family. In some instances, study participants expressed difficulty regarding how to best refer to an incarcerated parent without upsetting other non-incarcerated family members, such as custodial grandparents, who had taken over parenting roles.

As Boss (2006) noted in her work on ambiguous loss theory, ambivalence toward the absent loved one is common and coupled with anxiety. Conflicting feelings of apathy and curiosity existed among the participants when they discussed their incarcerated parent. For example, some study participants reported checking online on occasion to make sure their incarcerated parent had not been relocated, as well as to determine whether there had been any changes in criminal sentencing. Researching their parent seemed to provide a sense of control and served as coping technique used to manage anxious thoughts and feelings in the parent's

absence (Kennedy, Deane, & Chan, 2019). In fact, it was common for participants in this study to admit not wanting their parent physically present in their life, yet they remained curious of parent. This way of thinking has been described as “both, and” which contributes to emotional ambivalence or a mixed-emotion of wanting versus not wanting an attachment figure to remain a part of one’s life (Boss & Yeats, 2014). Such conflicted feelings pertaining to one’s parents seemed to be relayed by participants as though normal and typical. Acceptance of the ambivalent thoughts and normalizing conflicted feelings is considered a step toward resilience in ambiguous loss theory (Boss & Yeats, 2014). Thus the study participants appeared to be adjusting well in this manner.

Disenfranchised grief. In addition to boundary ambiguity in family relationships, participants also expressed disenfranchisement of grief stemming from ambiguous loss. Disenfranchised grief represented a third pervasive theme. Disenfranchised grief occurs when there is a loss experienced individually but not acknowledged in society and not socially supported (Doka, 1999). Displaced grief among the participants often looked like fear of being perceived as different or separate from their peers.

With no literal death to grieve, those experiencing ambiguous loss may feel denied a right to grieve the loss of their parent (Boss & Yeats, 2014). Loved ones and friends of the child of a parent incarcerated may not know how to support them, or even if it is ok to speak of the parent incarcerated. This can result in ineffective communication or even denial of their experiences, as evidenced when participants disclosed they lied about their parent incarcerated (Boss & Yeats, 2014). This is not just an indication of the participant feeling unwelcome to express their sadness, but also a fear of the stigma surrounding incarceration. Many study participants relayed perceptions of their peers’ families as “normal” and they felt they were be pitied or judged if

they explained their own complicated familial dynamics thus they often chose to not disclose details of their families to their friends. Additionally, emerging adults in college often rely on their peers for support, thus the concept of a disenfranchised grief, experiencing a loss but not open to discussing it, may be painful and awkward for this age group (Panagakis, 2015).

Common across the cases, however, was a relief when participants relayed experiences of truthfully sharing their experiences of parental incarceration with their friends. Self-disclosure has been proven to alleviate feelings of loneliness (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). Additionally, study participants spoke of fearing judgment from others yet when shared with romantic partners and friends about their family dynamics, they were consistently met with acceptance and compassion.

The positive reception promoted the participants to take more pro-active steps in their social lives by participating in groups such as Future Farmers of America, intramural sports, and Greek life.

Theme Four: Social Connectedness

The formation and maintenance of social relations also emerged as a key relational process within the thematic content of social connectedness findings. Many participants referred to their past, current, and on-going social and professional connections. Whether through sports as children, clubs in high school, or intramural and Greek life activities in college, the formation of social life provided a sense of safety, security and belonging (see Table 5.4).

Table 5.4

Thematic Summary of Social Connectedness

Theme Four	Relational Process	Evidence

Social Connectedness	Formation	• "When my mom first died and my dad wasn't around, I had like no friends but once I realized it was kind of weird, like growing up without a dad or mom, I just kind of filled the void with friends." • "And I noticed that getting in to college I need to have friends or else you go crazy without people."
	Maintenance	• "So that's been a big, I don't know, like transition or something, but having to focus on not pushing absolutely everyone away and to try to keep people somewhat close. Even though I like being alone a lot. So I have to like schedule times and be like I can't stay home and play video games, I have to go talk to people. I can't just stay home all the time." • "The sorority I'm in has been supportive. And I had a ton of support in high school, too – the color guard, all of those people were good."

The persons with whom one spends time, the choice to engage in extracurricular social activities, and the decision to pursue a romantic relationship help inform how individual worldviews about the world (Quinn & Fromme, 2011; Chia, 2006; Borsari & Carey, 2001). Study participants frequently referred to their friends and social networks in a positive manner suggesting their connections enhanced their high school and collegiate experiences. Some explained how their decision of which university to attend were influenced by the connections to others already attending college. Knowing others prior to arriving on campus seemed to facilitate a less stressful transition to college from high school. Others noted agentic qualities through which they made themselves go out and meet new people once in college, something they referred to as necessary for their mental well-being. The isolation of studying and doing homework appeared to be a catalyst for some study participants to intentionally connect with others.

Relative to the adaptive capacity of the participants in this study, the social formations they reported throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood offered a new hope. Friendships,

romantic partners, sports teams and membership clubs gave the participants something to look forward to engaging with alternate to the stress surrounding their families. Beyond the social aspect, the professional organizations and extracurricular activities expanded the participants' resources needed for their professional careers. The structured support of member driven organizations seemed to increase the study participants' confidence in their own decision making, such that they met others with similar professional goals and others who are currently working in their careers of interest.

Discovering new hope, socially and professionally, is critical to reconciling the experiences of ambiguous loss (Boss & Yeats, 2014). The social connections provided new hope for the study participants and created the space for greater clarity on how the individual intends their future lives. Such clarity gave way for specific goal setting which would not occur without significant motivational factors.

Theme Five: Personal Motivation

A final primary theme surrounding one's individual capacity to developmentally adapt involved personal motivation. This thematic finding appeared to represent the outcome of both distal and proximal experiences in the lives of participants. Participants reported feeling intrinsically motivated as well as extrinsically motivated to achieve more than their parents for purpose of creating a more stable future.

The decision to attend college seemed to exemplify the motivation in oneself to seek academic achievement, while also helping to establish independence from their family. Across all seven cases presented in this study, each individual specifically noted a set of goals by which to direct motivation and future intent to better one's self. Personal motivation seemed to operate in tandem with self-knowledge. In other words, one may not be willing to set goals for

themselves if they do not fully believe they possess the inner drive or will to achieve them (see Table 5.5).

Table 5.5

Thematic Summary of Personal Motivation

Theme Five	Motive Type	Evidence
Personal Motivation	Primary Control	"I expected myself to be a champion" "I have to work as hard as I can and choose the most challenging thing possible and then kill myself while doing it." "I've never really cared what anyone thinks of me so I don't think it's another person that's pushed me. I think it's just learned. Just like I've always been this way and I keep it going." "I like being independent because it proves that I'm an adult and I can take care of myself."
	Secondary Control	"There's no other option, I'm going to succeed" "Going to trade school, I don't know how good of money that would be so that's why I went to college." "I'm doing all that I can now so hopefully it's easier later."

The motivational theory of life-span development posits developmental adaptation is based on the extent to which the individual realizes they can control their environment ((Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). Across the cases in this study, the participants demonstrated either an intentional change in their environment (primary control), or an adaptation of themselves to align with their current environment (secondary control), both of which are consistent with the motivational theory of life-span development (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). Primary control was exhibited through participants in their decisions to move out of their family homes and attend college as well as where and with whom they spend their time. Secondary control was evidenced through seeking part time jobs while in high school and college such that as they felt their home environment could not provide for them financially, they could earn their own money while maintaining academic responsibilities

necessary for college. This intentional positioning of themselves or their environment places the individual as the directors of their lives, exemplified their personal motivation and contributed to their perceived level of self-efficacy.

Sub-Themes

Interestingly, four sub-themes emerged from the overarching themes and highlighted the specificity of the factors involved in the cultivation of self-efficacy among the study participants. The four sub-themes are: adaptive capacity, economic emancipation, parentification, and savoring. Based on the primary themes, together these sub-themes provide a deeper explanation of the resilience observed across the cases.

Adaptive Capacity. An individual's typical development can be highly impacted by the exposure to childhood adversity (Luecken & Gress, 2010) and such exposure can leave young people feeling less prepared for adulthood (Luecken & Lemery, 2004; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). The participants in this study demonstrated a capacity for developmental adaptation in spite of the exposure to adverse experiences and this adaptive capacity emerged as a sub-theme. It would seem that such early risk factors surrounding childhood adversities, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and ambiguous loss would be detrimental to one's ability to bounce back and remain resilient as such experiences would wear down one's ability to adapt over time. However, participants in this study exhibited a capacity to adapt from their adversities and pivoted toward environments in which they could cultivate a sense of self-efficacy.

Emerging adulthood is the developmental time in the lifespan when individual trajectories are more firmly established and psychological issues are likely to increase (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). It is considered a time with elevated risk behaviors such as drinking and unprotected sex (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Conversely, the participants in this study relayed

experiences of their emerging adulthood as focused and disciplined and is likely a result of their capacity for adaptation from their previous adversities. The experiences of childhood adversity seemed to propel study participants to seek autonomy and security even while in emerging adulthood.

One explanation for their resilience could be the availability of adaptive resources. Adaptive capacity has been described as the extent to which resources are available (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003). It is believed to be determined by individual, family, and community protective factors accessible to the individuals (Olsson et al., 2003). Relative to the participants in this study, resources became available through family members, peers, coaches, teachers, and social organizations. Thus while each participants experienced childhood adversities in the past, they were also exposed to protective conditions within their present life. Engagement with those protective factors such as the social connectedness previously discussed, assisted the participants in their developmental adaptation process. To some extent, it allowed participants to gain a sense of autonomy and control within life by which to make decisions for future endeavors surrounding academics, career, marriage, and extra-curricular hobbies and activities. Additionally, it provided healthy, positive relationships through which participants learned to trust themselves and others again.

Economic Emancipation. The second sub-theme involved a perception of economic emancipation. In other words, participants maintained a strong desire and consistent plan-of-action to establish their own economic identities independent of their families as well as their past financial insecurities. Emerging adults have reported financial independence as the second most commonly mentioned factor in determining whether or not adulthood can be achieved (Andrew, Eggerling-Boeck, Sandefur & Smith, 2007). Thus, it is likely that participants in this

study are highly motivated to secure financial freedom in order to identify themselves as adults. At the same time, there is an effort to distance oneself from the financial failures of their family, which set them on a course of economic disadvantage starting in childhood. Consistently, across all cases, participants disclosed financial insecurity during childhood as something that continues to impact everyday decision-making in emerging adulthood. All seven participants spoke of the importance of money when recalling childhood experiences, as well as planning to meet future aspirations. Financial security has served as a motivating factor and a fear tactic in the lives of these participants.

While most participants recounted narratives involving childhood poverty, Jackie did not. She was not raised in poverty, yet as a teenager questioned the origins and security of her family finances. She admitted a sense of shame when she discovered her father had been committing fraud. In turn, this motivated her to question her own materialism, such as owning her own iPhone. Currently, Jackie does not feel financial insecure due to her father stealing all of her savings. However, she linked her on-going athletic accomplishments to providing for a secure financial future:

> I'm not on a full scholarship, but a partial one and without it, I probably wouldn't be here. So I knew I needed it in order to continue my education because I didn't want to just go straight to the workforce and I knew I want to do more than that.

Deion noted that his financial insecurity originated from his father stealing from his grandparents when he was a child. He spoke of the intentionality of his decision to major in aviation at his university due to this particular program being nationally ranked. While this decision is one he hopes will pay off financially later, he stated "the only thing that's really given me trouble is just trying to keep up with the money."

It appeared that all seven participants were pursuing career pathways to ensure future economic emancipation. Of the seven cases, five participants planned to pursue engineering-oriented careers, one envisioned teaching overseas, and one other noted plans to pursue a master's degree upon graduation. When asked how they decided upon such pursuits, each of them noted that their decision was financially motivated. Many recalled feeling financially instable as children as they watched their parents work multiple jobs to pay bills. Joe spoke of his sister dropping out of college to work two jobs to provide for them. Madelene became a plumber's apprentice to help her father with his business as a teenager and declared an engineering degree to ensure a more financially stable future. Sally explained her mother eventually went back to college and was able to provide more financially for her younger siblings than she could for her and Mike spoke of his family losing their home when his mother could not afford to pay the mortgage. Each of the cases provided examples to support their perception of a college degree as a guarantee for a more financially stable future.

Parentification. A third subtheme involved parentification. This is best defined as a phenomena in which participants assume a parental role toward a parent or sibling, and/or the assumption of a sibling role toward a parent (Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967). Parentification is considered as being delegated by a parent or due to total abandonment by the parent (Minuchin et al., 1967). Some researchers refer to parentification as "premature exposure to unrealistic expectations" which may result in a child's identity being formed out of the needs of their family members (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Others have identified two types: (a.) instrumental parentification in which one performs duties such as household chores, cooking, and providing financially for their family and (b.) emotional parentification which includes responding to the emotional needs of the parent and/or siblings

(Minuchin et al., 1967) Both types were present in this study and Table 6 illustrates the parentification across the cases.

Table 6

Summary of Parentification Experienced by Study Participants

Participant	Parentification	Instrumental or Emotional
Mike	Son > Mother	Emotional
Sally	Daughter > Mother	Instrumental and Emotional
Madelene	Daughter > Sister, Mother	Instrumental
Deion	Son > Father	Emotional
Joe	Brother > Sister, Brother in Law	Emotional
Grace	Sister/Daughter > Brothers, Mother	Instrumental
Jackie	Sister > Siblings	Instrumental

An example of emotional parentification was evident in Sally's narrative which entailed interfering with her mother's suicide attempt. At just 16 years of age, she responded to the emotional needs of her mother by convincing her there would be a reason to live. Instrumental parentification existed in Grace's family as she reported completion of instrumental tasks involving cooking meals for her younger brothers, doing their laundry, and assisting her mother with household chores when she is visiting.

Based on study participant narratives of parentification, the role of intergenerational transmission processes were evident. As parents of the participants exhibited unreliable behaviors whether emotionally, financially, or both, the act of parentification seemed to have interceded the intergenerational transmission. Intergenerational transmission of parentification can right the wrong of previous generations (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). This would appear to be the case with Jackie as she witnessed her father as an alcoholic and she stepped up to provide transportation for her younger siblings. This instrumental type of parentification corrected the wrongdoings of her father and provided a safer environment for her siblings.

Parentificaton should also be considered in relation to attachment styles present within the child-parent relationship within families. For instance, the Adult Attachment Interview (Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1997) has provided a coding system for identifying and understanding attachment styles and are based on the communication of emotions felt by those interviewed. This instrument had operationalized three three specific attachment styles common among adults: (a.) dismissing in which one emphasizes their independence and may downplay the effects of negative experiences from their past (b.) autonomous, which is similar to secure attachment styles in children, and is best demonstrated when one shows tremendous value in attachment and can speak objectively about their experiences, and (c.) preoccupied in which seems to actively ruminate about their past attachment experiences and is unable to articulate them well (Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1997).

Each of these styles were present in the seven cases. As such, Sally would appear to fall in the dismissing category as she declared her independence and stated, “Because I wasn’t really raised with a good father, so I was just like, I can be my own father.” An example of the autonomous category was Deion as he spoke of his brotherly relationship toward his biological father and appeared securely attached to his grandparents by whom he was raised. Grace represented the preoccupied category as she actively parented her younger siblings due to her perception of her mother as unreliable, while also visiting her incarcerated father and keeping in touch with him consistently by phone. She would seem to have insecure attachments with both parents yet defended each of them and repeatedly stated how much she loves them both.

The effects of parentification on the cases presented in this study would appear to be a sense of accomplishment, contribution, and an inspiration to create a more secure home for their own lives. These positive effects of parentification are supported by research when a child has

felt acknowledged for their initiative and contribution to the family (Hooper, 2011). The seven cases in this study have received validation for their parental roles through custodial parents, such as Madelene's father and Deion's grandparents, or through the social connections they have formed through sports and extracurricular activities. It is unclear if the positive effects witnessed in this study will be the outcome for the participants or a representation of the time in which they were interviewed.

Savoring. A fourth and final sub-theme uncovered across the cases involved a projection of a future self by way of savoring current or past experiences. Savoring is the term used to describe one's capacity to focus one's life in the present with an intention to optimize opportunities and expand positive experiences (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Savoring has been described as the process by which individuals draw upon positive emotions in the moment to cope with negative experiences of the past (Bryant, 2003). College appeared to be filled with positive experiences for most of the participants in this study. Those college experiences were held with high regard among study participants, and it is likely their decisions to become actively involved in college life helped them to move beyond the negativity surrounding their past child and familial experiences.

Savoring the college experiences may be vital to emotional regulation. Livingston and Srivastava (2012) identified three positive regulatory domains that persist within the savoring of life experience: (1). engagement, (2). betterment, and (3) indulgence. Engagement involves seeking out positive situations and engaging in the present moment while in the presence of other people. As previously noted, this has been a significant factor in the developmental adaptation of the participants in this study as each of them became socially connected through adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Betterment can simply be defined as goal pursuit in which individuals promote their own future well-being through goal-focused activities and highlighting their own unique strengths (Srivastava, 2012). Betterment has been abundant across the cases as participants focus on achieving the goals they've set for themselves. For instance, while choosing challenging majors at a competitive university, the participants have additionally laid out their career goals following graduation, including Joe who was just a freshman at the time of the study. The attention they have devoted to their future selves has provided an ongoing motivation for the past several years. As Grace openly admitted her adolescence included exposure to illegal activities, dropping out of high school, as well as her own recreational substance use, she realized the importance of obtaining a GED so she could attend college. Thus, considering her future self as a college student, provided her the push she needed to alter her lifestyle. Grace's experiences have been supported by research as one study found "when vividness of the future self is increased, individuals are less inclined to engage in delinquent behavior" (Van Gelder, Hershfield, Nordgren, 2013, p. 5). This means the idealization of who she may become deterred her from following in her father's path of selling drugs.

Indulgence is best defined as involving activities through which momentary pleasure can be facilitated (Livingston & Srivastava, 2012). Among the study participants, it would appear that focusing on the pleasantries within the moment created the capacity to move beyond relishing one's survival of past childhood or family trauma (Livingston & Srivastava, 2012). This would appear representative of the study participants as many openly mentioned not ever thinking, nor speaking much of their parental incarceration experiences until being asked and instead remained focused on their present circumstances. Thus indulgence relative to the definition of savoring was present across the study participants.

Coincidently, the participants in this study seemed to have assessed the long-term costs of behavior and have made decisions to turn their negative experiences into positive ones. For instance, Mike reflected on his mother's need to work at least three jobs throughout his upbringing so she could meet the basic needs of him and his sisters. This reflection led him to declare he "never wants to work that much" when he is an adult and thus chose to attend college to pursue a mechanical engineering degree instead of working as a car mechanic, which is something he reported he enjoys doing. Ironically, Mike has held three jobs throughout his college experience and has used his experience to relate to his mother's as he better understands the time and commitment it takes to manage such a full load of responsibilities. Mike understands that the discomfort he has felt in college will pay off later as he has secured a significantly larger salary he will receive his first year out of college as well as guaranteed funding for a master's degree as long as he continues to work for his employer. These outcomes are in part due to his application for a job he felt unqualified for but applied to anyway, which is again, evidence of his belief that his future self would learn what he needed to in order to succeed at the job he most desired.

Raised by a single father who owned his own plumbing business, Madelene's focus on her future led her to explore professional options through the local Vocational Technology Center. "Initially I thought I wanted to be an electrician but then I thought maybe I was smarter than that" Madelene explained. She added she was told there were limited options for women to work as electricians and realized she could pursue electrical engineering which she felt challenged by academically and motivated financially as she exclaimed "they make lots of money!"

In effect, the act of savoring provides a sense of control over positive emotions and thus strengthens individual commitment to appreciate what is positive, and possible, in life (Camgoz, 2014). This was particularly true during interviews with Jackie, who relayed memories of winning the state championship in high school, as well as Madelene who spoke of her positive experiences with color guard. Meanwhile, Joe relished his ability to have excelled in varsity swimming. Finally, many others highlighted academic achievements. With the majority of their positive events involving school-related activities, it was not surprising that participants were also motivated to pursue postsecondary education.

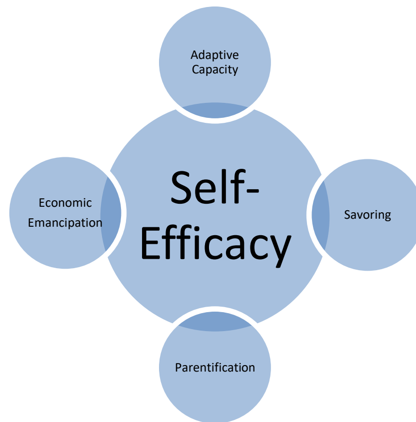
Discussion

Albert Bandura (1977) theorized self-efficacy as one's judgments regarding their abilities to achieve the goals they wish to accomplish. Concluding themes that evolved from the results of this study provided insight into the manner by which a sense of self-efficacy is derived among emerging adults impacted by parental incarceration. Self-efficacy appeared to be further cultivated through one's individual adaptive capacity, economic emancipation, parentification of parents and siblings, and savoring positive experiences.

The rich and detailed data generously shared by the participants led to in-depth analyses. This information was transformed into new conceptual model of self-efficacy in emerging adulthood. This model reflects the experiences of emerging adults impacted by parental incarceration. In particular, this model suggests that self-efficacy in emerging adulthood is best explained by four key markers evolving from the past and present development experiences of parental incarceration: (1) adaptive capacity; (2) economic emancipation; (3) savoring and; (4) parentification (See Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Model of Self-Efficacy Among Emerging Adults Impacted by Parental Incarceration



Based on the findings in this study, the participants in this study relayed experiences of taking control of their developmental trajectories. The study participants took actions toward creating their own personal lives to be more secure than the homes they were raised in before they had fully cultivated their own beliefs in themselves. The choices they made indicated a sense of self-efficacy but the unwavering belief in their inevitable success seemed to evolve after experiencing parentification, savoring, economic emancipation, and discovering their own adaptive capacity.

Participants demonstrated their adaptive capacity by activating their agentic qualities by making choices to better themselves. When exposed to people who were actively engaged in illegal activities, participants chose to separate themselves from those environments, even when that meant distancing themselves from their parents, as were the cases for Madelene and Grace. They replaced the ties to those with delinquent behaviors with those people who had positive influences on their lives which is indicative of the turning points in a life that can emerge through informal social ties as discussed in life course theory (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

The intention toward economic emancipation also required agency from the participants as they committed to majors and career goals that would provide better incomes than those of their parents. Attention toward academic achievements required an accurate appraisal of one's own capabilities which is again, representative of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Although both Mike and Madelene spoke of opportunities to secure blue collar jobs for which they felt qualified, auto mechanic for Mike and electrician for Madelene, they both chose to pursue engineering degrees so they could earn more money. Consequently, their decisions have allowed them to individually meet a life goal upon graduation: full time employment with engineering firms.

The phenomena of parentification, seemed to have activated self-efficacy through the adoption of parenting roles directed at both siblings and parent(s). Although parent(s) were considered unreliable at times, the participants discovered they were capable of growing up before their time and beyond their chronological age. Across all cases, participants recounted experiences of taking on family roles and responsibilities typically reserved for parents prior to reaching actual adulthood. Validation received from successfully protecting siblings from harm, as well as nurturing their parent(s) on an "as-needed" instrumental basis seemed to have increased their individual belief in self. The increased confidence allowed the study participants to make more autonomous choices, such as living apart from their families and obtaining part time work while in college, as they then knew they could provide for themselves as they had previously done for their loved ones.

Finally, savoring assisted in the cultivation of self-efficacy by providing participants with positive emotionality, rather than feeling trapped by emotional despair. By allowing themselves the opportunity to seek out and thoroughly enjoy positive experiences, and opening themselves

up to positive relationships, the study participants learned to regulate their negative emotions. Given their pasts, it would have been easy to remain pessimistic, or even apathetic, yet by savoring the safe, pleasant moments, they learned they had a choice in where they directed their focus. Actively choosing to expect better from themselves than the lives they observed of their parents was an important and powerful decision. Savoring was the integration of the positive experiences into each individual's lives and provided hope for more positive experiences to come. The choices they made to expect success and work toward goals which may have seemed out of reach when they were younger provided further indications of high self-efficacy.

Although the participants of this study experienced upbringings interrupted by parental incarceration, each of them believed they could have live lives with less adversities. This belief is the self-efficacy which emerged across all cases. As expected, the college students in this study demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy while experiencing ambiguous loss.

Study Limitations

The population of college students affected by parental incarceration is one difficult to identify. One limitation of this study was the small sample size. This was a result of having no formal mechanism, such as college admission records, to identify students with parental incarceration in their family. Additionally, students may not feel comfortable sharing their personal family details with a stranger conducting a research project and is likely one reason for the low response rate of emailed questionnaires. More participants would have increased the generalizability of the results and afforded greater insight into how to best serve this population on a college campus. Many of the participants in this study expressed relief in meeting others with similar circumstances and may benefit from a way of connecting with each other, while respecting their privacy.

Methodological implementation of an in-person interview process also created a barrier. In-person interviews may have eliminated a particular group of students who would have felt more comfortable conversing with complete and total anonymity. Furthermore, this may have contributed to a highly selective sample of students who were more socially involved on campus, more likely to be high achieving students, and more secure in themselves with little to no concern of the stigmas surrounding incarceration.

The scheduling of in-person focus groups and interview meetings was another limitation. The first focus group scheduled for this study anticipated twelve participants based on responses on email while only two showed up.

Additionally, sample identification methods were a limitation as many of the college students identified through the Qualtrics survey replied with their willingness to participate yet never responded to subsequent emails. Participants in the study relayed they do not check their email frequently, thus a more efficient way to communicate with students would have been beneficial.

Procedurally, the focus group format may have represented a final limitation. The process of conducted group formatted interviews may have inhibited participants from opening up for fear of judgment by other peers. With such a sensitive topic, students may feel more comfortable sharing personal details in a one on one forum or even through an encrypted digital format such that their identities are never revealed. Additionally, the focus group format may have introduced a process of social comparison, whereby a degree of positivity bias was introduced. Rather than sharing the real story, participants may have stuck with more positive reflective thoughts and narratives, particularly when discussing their current collegiate experiences.

Study Implications and Future Directions

The results of this study move the field of research forward by providing the experiences of the seven college students who were thriving in school after successfully adapting from childhoods of adversity. Professionals in academia, forensics, counseling, social work, and education can benefit from the findings as they seek to provide better support to those affected by parental incarceration. No longer does the fact that one has a parent incarcerated imply they themselves will be incarcerated.

The personal stories detailed throughout this study exemplified self-efficacy and provided insight toward what has worked to alter the intergenerational transmission in these particular families affected by incarceration. As previously discussed, the seven participants in this study have used their financial insecurity to motivate them toward strong work ethics and clarity for their future selves. The participants' willingness to look back on their lives and contemplate the inner workings of their families provides future researchers evidence of integral factors of the developmental adaptation process. Knowing what others have experienced, and what factors in their lives contributed to their self-efficacy, can empower professionals, family members, educators, and advocates of children of incarcerated parents to serve them better by providing positive social connections as well as fostering opportunities for individuals to discover their own self-efficacy. Furthermore, understanding the adaptive capacity of individuals may encourage professionals to cultivate more experiences through which individuals establish autonomy and activate their own agentic qualities. As the study participants modeled, the opportunities to make their own choices and capitalize on their individual successes encouraged them to believe in their own abilities and make choices to achieve more.

The experiences of the study participants provoke questions of how the intergenerational transmission of anti-social or criminal behavior may continue as the participants reach adulthood

and beyond. One relevant question remains: Will attempts made by emerging adult study participants to break the familial cycle of crime result in imposing new values on future offspring, such as establishing financial independence at a young age; or will emerging adult study participants revert back to the relying on the same parenting styles to which they were exposed in childhood? Future research should consider the long-term outgrowth of self-efficacy the students have established for themselves and how this might be transmitted to their own offspring. Other worthy topics to consider in the life course trajectory of study participants include relationship formation, courtship and marriage, and separation and divorce. With two of the seven participants engaged to be married at the time of this study, it is plausible to assume that marriage will directly either reflect current self-efficacious identities or the tumultuous parental relationships they previously observed as children. Such questions should guide future investigations with this unique population.

This study offers details of ambiguous loss which, once identified, can be used to better understand those grieving and promote resilience. As displayed in this study, complicated grief manifested itself in many ways, such as withholding one's truth about their families, ambivalent feelings toward loved ones, and blurred lines in the family roles. Identification of the ambiguous loss allowed those grieving to normalizing their feelings, discover new hope, and continue to move forward in their lives (Boss & Yeats, 2014).

Additionally, this study emphasized the strength of savoring the positive moments in life and allowing oneself to look forward. The focus on the possibilities of the future among participants strengthened their resolve to have better lives than the lives they perceived of their parents. Although participants were asked to reflect on their pasts, their stories proved the importance of taking control of one's life and making intentional choices to benefit their future.

Finally, this study included a look into a population not identified by the public eye. Research of hidden populations within colleges is beginning to emerge as valuable science through which universities may hear from those often considered voiceless. Students resistant to self-identifying due to fear of the stigma surrounding their families were able to share their stories through this case study. Thus, the findings are applicable to university services such as student affairs and student counseling as higher education can serve as an integral piece of the individual adaptation process. As found in this study, the social connectedness of those who are likely to feel isolated by social judgment was a key theme in their cultivation of self-efficacy.

It is the participants' and researcher's hope this study will encourage other researchers to study emerging adults of parents incarcerated and learn from their unique and common experiences. Understanding the benefits of social connectedness may assist universities with connecting these students to each other for further relationships. Other organizations may use this study to formulate mentorships of children with parents incarcerated as to protect them from growing up too quickly. Further exploration of the ambiguous grief experienced by this population equips professionals, educators, peers, and family members with more empathy by which to support emerging adults with parental incarceration.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A.

Focus Group Questions

Tell me about your collegiate experience so far.

Prompts: what year are you in school, do you live on campus or off campus, with whom?

Let's talk about a little about your family, explain where you call "home" and who lives there.

Reflect on your time as a child at home, what was it like growing up in your house?

Prompts: socioeconomic status, parents married/divorced? Siblings? What sports or other extracurricular activities were you involved in as a child?

Further prompts: do your current friends know about your childhood? (specifically if incarceration is mentioned, interview may ask if friends know about familial incarceration)

Based on what you've just shared about your childhood, would you say you are proud of where you came from? How much do your friends know about your life before college?

How involved is your family with your school experience?

Prompts: does your family visit you at college? How often do you go home to see them? If incarceration is mentioned, interviewer may ask about the frequency of contact with parent incarcerated.

Let’s discuss what motivated you to go to college – talk about how you made the decision to pursue higher education.

What level of influence would you say your childhood upbringing has on what you decided to do after high school?

Prompts: were there specific people in your life that influenced you to go to school?

While in college, what has been the most helpful for your success?

Prompts: the people you surround yourself with? Clubs/organizations? Your job? Family support? On campus resources?

While in college, what has been the most difficult issue to navigate?

Prompts: finances, school, family responsibilities, relationships?

What else would you like to share about your past and current life?

Appendix B.

Qualtrics Survey
Parental Incarceration and College Students

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 Name:

____

Q2 Age:____

Q3 Gender:

____

Q4 Ethnicity:

____

Q5 Year in College (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior):

____

Q6 Do you live on campus?

____

Q7 Are you employed? If yes, where and for how long?

____

Q8 Current GPA:

____

Q10 Are you a first generation college student? (has anyone in your immediate family besides you, attended college?)

____

Q11 How many people reside in your household?

____

Q12 Are you

- ○ Married (1)
- ○ Divorced (2)
- ○ Never Married (3)
- ○ Separated (4)
- ○ in a committed relationship, not married (5)
- ○ prefer not to answer (6)

Q13 If in a relationship, how would you rate the overall quality of your marital/romantic relationship?

- ○ Poor (1)
- ○ Fair (2)
- ○ Good (3)
- ○ Excellent (4)
- ○ prefer not to answer (5)

Q14 Do you have any children? If so, how many?

____

Q16 Are your parents

- ◯ Married (1)
- ◯ Divorced (2)
- ◯ Separated (3)
- ◯ Never Married (4)
- ◯ Don't know (5)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (6)

Q17 If your parents are divorced, how old were you when they separated?

____

Q18 Father

- ◯ Living (1)
- ◯ Deceased (2)
- ◯ Don't Know (3)
- ◯ Incarcerated, Currently (4)
- ◯ Incarcerated, Previously (5)
- ◯ Prefer not to answer (6)

Q19 Mother

- ◯ Living (1)
- ◯ Deceased (2)
- ◯ Don't Know (3)
- ◯ Incarcerated, Currently (4)
- ◯ Incarcerated, Previously (5)
- ◯ Prefer not to answer (6)

Q20 How many brothers and sisters do you have?

____

Q21 If you have a parent incarcerated, what is the approximate length of sentence they are serving?

____

Q22 If you have a parent incarcerated, what state are they serving time in?

____

Q23 If you have a parent who was previously incarcerated, what was the length of their sentence?

____

Q24 Who were your primary caregivers growing up?

- ○ Biological Mother (1)
- ○ Biological Father (2)
- ○ Both, Biological Mother and Father (3)
- ○ Grandparents (4)
- ○ Foster Care Parents (5)
- ○ other (6)
- ○ prefer not to answer (7)

Q25 Where did you graduate from High School?

____

Q26 Were you served on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Don't know (3)
- ○ Prefer not to answer (4)

Q27 Were you ever in trouble for behavioral issues while in school?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Prefer not to answer (3)

Q28 Have you ever been arrested?

- ◯ yes (1)
- ◯ no (2)
- ◯ Prefer not to answer (3)

Q29 If yes, have you ever been placed in jail?

- ◯ yes (1)
- ◯ no (2)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (3)

Q30 How often do you see your parents?

- ◯ once a week (1)
- ◯ once a month (2)
- ◯ every 3-6 months (3)
- ◯ once a year (4)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (5)
- ◯ other (6)

Q31 If you have siblings, how often do you see them?

- ◯ once a week (1)
- ◯ once a month (2)
- ◯ every 3-6 months (3)
- ◯ once a year (4)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (5)
- ◯ other (6)

Q32 Are you in a sorority or fraternity?

- ◯ yes (1)
- ◯ no (2)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (3)

Q33 Are you a member of any college or departmental clubs or organizations on campus?

- ◯ yes (1)
- ◯ no (2)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (3)

Q34 Please list any extra-curricular activities you are involved in on campus:

____

Q35 Are you currently enrolled in the honor college?

- ◯ yes (1)
- ◯ no (2)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (3)

Q36 Have you utilized University Health Services for medical treatment?

- ◯ yes (1)
- ◯ no (2)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (3)

Q37 Have you utilized University Counseling Services?

- yes (1)
- no (2)
- prefer not to answer (3)

Q38 Have you utilized University Writing Center?

- yes (1)
- no (2)
- prefer not to answer (3)

Q39 Have you utilized the Testing/Assessment Center?

- yes (1)
- no (2)
- prefer not to answer (3)
-

Q40 Have you utilized Student Disability Services?

- yes (1)
- no (2)
- prefer not to answer (3)

Q41 Have you utilized individual tutoring?

- yes (1)
- no (2)
- prefer not to answer (3)

Q42 Do you utilize the Colvin recreational center?

- yes (1)
- no (2)
- prefer not to answer (3)

Q43 Please list any other on campus services you have utilized but are not listed on this questionnaire:

____

Q44 How would you categorize your socioeconomic status?

- ◯ Impoverished (1)
- ◯ Middle Class (2)
- ◯ Upper Class (3)
- ◯ Don't Know (4)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (5)

Q45 Who is responsible for paying for your tuition?

- ◯ Student Loans (1)
- ◯ Scholarships/Grants (2)
- ◯ Parents (3)
- ◯ Other (4)
- ◯ prefer not to answer (5)

Q46 Please list what services and/or resources on and off campus that you have found most beneficial for a successful collegiate experience:

____

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Block 1

Appendix C.

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 09/28/2018

Application Number: HS-18-57

Proposal Title: Parental Incarceration and College Students

Principal Investigator: AMANDA COTHERN

Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Adviser: Alex Bishop Project Coordinator:

Research Assistant(s):

Processed as: Expedited

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s):

Approved Approval Date:

0

9/28/2018

Expiration Date: **09/27/2019**

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has

the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 223 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-3377, irb@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Hugh Crethar, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Amanda S. Cothern

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Major Field: Human Sciences

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Human Sciences at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Counseling Psychology at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK, 2002.

Experience:

Psychological Clinician at the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services from December 2017 to present.

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Licensed Professional Counselor, Outpatient Clinical Therapist at Creoks Behavioral Health from December 2013 to December 2017.