ABSTRACT

EDWARDS, ELIZABETH ANN. Pathways of Resilience in Low-Income Families: A Longitudinal Case Study. (Under the direction of Dr. Sarah Kirby and Dr. Annie Hardison-Moody).

Families play an important role in caring for and supporting the growth and development of their members as they progress through the family life cycle. When adversity arises, how do some families rise above their challenges and achieve positive adaptation in spite of difficult circumstances? The study of family resilience explores this process. Resilience is not a static trait that only occurs in some families. It is a dynamic process from which all families have the potential to benefit. A variety of promotive processes, protective processes, risks, and vulnerabilities interact at multiple levels of the ecosystem to shape a unique trajectory for each family. These pathways cannot be fully captured by merely noting the absence of psychopathology, viewing a single snapshot in time, or averaging the adaptive responses of multiple families. Using qualitative data from a large longitudinal analysis of interviews with 124 low-income families, this project takes a case study approach to examine in depth the trajectories of a few families from the study. Qualitative analysis of multiple interviews and observations of each family over an eight-year period provides an opportunity to explore the multilevel, interactive, and dynamic process of family resilience. Analysis suggests that a variety of resources such as job stability, affordable childcare, a robust social safety net, extended family support, creative problem-solving skills, flexibility, and a positive attitude contribute to resilience and that being able to utilize an array of these resilient processes enhances a family's ability to survive and thrive.

Pathways of Resilience in Low-Income Families: A Longitudinal Case Study

by
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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all families as they navigate their own pathways of resilience and to the professionals who support them on their journeys. May we continue seeking better ways to encourage and empower, so that all families have the opportunity to thrive.

BIOGRAPHY

Beth grew up in Rome, Georgia and went on to major in biology at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. After obtaining her M.D. from the Medical College of Georgia and completing a pediatrics residency program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Beth took a step back from her career to focus on raising her children. With three growing kids and changes to her husband's work schedule, what was intended to be a few years turned into almost twenty years as a stay-at-home mom and community volunteer! After her own unfortunate divorce, she was inspired to work with families to strengthen relationships and prevent some of the experiences that she and her family went through. She entered the Youth, Family, and Community Sciences program to further her education in the areas of family life education and coaching with the goal of encouraging and enabling families to thrive. Her professional interests include parenting, using education and coaching to strengthen relationships before they reach the point where one or both partners have given up hope, improving the experience of a family who is navigating the legal process of divorce and co-parenting, and of course, resilience.

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Thanks to all of my extended family, especially Mom, Scott, and Julie, for a lifetime of support and encouragement. Thanks to Sarah, Rachel, and Josh for your encouragement, tech support, insistence that I improve my typing skills, and all that I learned vicariously from each of you. Thanks to my network of friends who supported me through childrearing, a long divorce, and a crazy idea to go back to school.

Thanks to God for calling me to this path and continually leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for me to follow.

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INTRODUCTION

Families play an important role in caring for and nurturing the development of their members. Yet families face challenges as they pursue these goals. When families face difficulty, how are some able to rise above their challenging circumstances while others struggle? The answer lies in the study of family resilience.

Resilience is the process of positive adaptation when faced with adversity. In the past it was conceptualized as a trait, but more recently researchers have come to view it as a dynamic process that is influenced not only by individual qualities but also by reciprocal interactions within members of a family and between a family and its surrounding community and society (Henry et al., 2015; Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015; Walsh, 2012, 2016). Previous research has identified many of the key processes of resilience (Walsh, 2012, 2016), but there is a lack of research exploring how these processes interact for an individual family over time. To fill this gap, this study takes a qualitative longitudinal case study approach to explore in-depth the resilience process of three families.

Three research questions were addressed:

- How did life events, risks, and processes of resilience interact to shape overall functioning for these families?
- Which resilience processes were the most helpful for them?
- How did the processes of resilience vary from year to year?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Convergence of Individual Resilience and Family Systems

The science of family resilience has its roots in the studies of individual resilience and family systems theory and therapy. Consequently, it has grown out of a rich history of

perspectives including general systems theory, ecological theory, developmental systems theory, biology, family systems theory, developmental psychopathology, resilience theory, and family stress theory (Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015; Henry et al., 2015). In the early part of the twentieth century widespread suffering caused by the Great Depression and World War II provided fertile ground to examine the subsequent adjustment of individuals who had experienced traumatic events. Initial research focused on pathology- on the risks for negative outcomes and the vulnerabilities that gave rise to them (Masten, 2018). However, "positive adjustment in high-risk samples, as well as individual case studies, suggested that there must be important influences on coping and adapting that were not captured by focusing exclusively on risk and pathological processes" (Masten, 2018, p 13). Research shifted as scholars began to examine individuals and families who were doing better than expected in spite of the hardship they faced. They were labeled "stress resistant" or "invulnerable," terms that still defined the phenomena in terms of its relationship to adversity.

Evolving Study of Family Resilience

Researchers eventually came to use the term "resilience" to describe this positive adaptation following exposure to adverse circumstances. Over time the concept has continued to evolve, coming to be viewed through a strengths-based rather than a deficit-based lens and as a dynamic process rather than a static trait (Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015). The family has also come to be appreciated for the role it plays as a functioning system rather than merely a context for individual resilience (Masten & Monn, 2015). According to Walsh (2012), "this family resilience perspective fundamentally alter[ed] the deficit-based lens from viewing struggling families as *damaged* and beyond repair to seeing them as *challenged* by life's adversities, with potential for fostering healing and growth in family members" (p. 402).

Henry et al. (2015) note similarities to the progression of the study of individual resilience and characterize the evolution of family science as occurring in three waves. During the first wave, researchers built on the components of family stress theory by recognizing and describing the strengths that so-called resilient families used to adapt to high-risk circumstances (Henry et al., 2015). At this stage, resilience was viewed as a characteristic that some families had (Henry et al., 2015) and was defined as "the ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges" (Walsh, 2012, p. 399). With the increasing influence of developmental systems theory (Masten, 2016; Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015), the concept of family resilience entered what Henry et al. (2015) describe as a second wave, and came to be understood as a dynamic, ongoing, interactive process rather than a static trait. By this point, the definition of resilience had evolved into what Hawley and DeHaan (1996) described as:

> the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time. Resilient families respond positively to these conditions in unique ways, depending on the context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors, and the family's shared outlook. (p. 293)

As the study of family resilience enters its third wave (Henry et al., 1015; Masten, 2018), "multiple pathways of resilience theory and science are converging in conjunction with the emergence of developmental systems theory as an integrative framework in resilience science" (Masten, 2018, p. 14). There is an expanding examination of the interaction of multiple risks and protective factors at all levels of the ecosystem and a movement to further explore the multidisciplinary nature of resilience. Future definitions and concepts may be scalable not just to related fields such as individual resilience or child development but may also integrate with ideas of resilience in such diverse applications as ecology, economy, or computer systems (Masten &

Monn, 2015). The influence of developmental systems theory has furthered the recognition of the interwoven and mutually interactive relationship between a family's resilience and the surrounding societal structures and community resources.

Resilience Through a Developmental Systems Lens

Masten (2018) describes four key components of a developmental systems framework: 1) several multilevel interactive systems inform function and development 2) adaptation is dynamic 3) changes can spread to other interconnected systems 4) systems are interrelated. Viewing family resilience through a developmental systems lens enhances our understanding in important ways. Each of these four elements influences current approaches to family resilience and highlights that: 1) resilience for a family or individual depends on resilience at other systemic levels 2) resilience is a dynamic process 3) changes in one system can result in cascading resilience and spillover to other systems 4) resilience is based on processes found both within the family and as the family interacts with surrounding systems. Based on this developmental systems framework, Masten and Monn (2015) propose a structure for examining the systemic interactions involved with the process of family resilience. Their approach focuses on recognizing positive adaptation, identifying processes that promote positive adaptation or provide protection, identifying processes that are a risk to positive adaptation, and identifying pathways of adaptation over time.

Recognizing Positive Adaptation

In order to recognize positive adaptation, it is necessary to understand what family functioning was like both before and after an adverse event. In other words, we need to understand baseline functioning in order to determine if post-event adaptation was positive, negative, or neutral. This has been difficult to measure, and researchers have often relied on two

approaches that, although helpful, are limited in their assessment and can miss important elements of a family's situation (Bonanno et al., 2015). Bonanno et al. (2015) refer to these two approaches as the "limits of diagnoses" and the "problem of averages" (p. 143). The first approach focuses on the presence or absence of psychopathology and in so doing focuses more on risks than strengths and can miss much of the nuance about how well a family has adapted (Bonanno et al., 2015, Masten & Monn, 2015). It can minimize the effects of adversity in a well-functioning family and miss kernels of strength in a family that is struggling. The second approach averages the post-event adaptation response for multiple families. Bonanno et al. (2015) point out that this approach also overlooks the diversity of families and circumstances and "fail[s] to identify resilient trajectories or other longitudinal patterns that bear little resemblance to the average pattern of change" (p. 144).

An alternative approach to recognizing positive adaptation is based on assessing whether a family is functioning well in its key roles and expectations such as providing safety, belonging, emotional support, education, and financial stability for its members and surrounding systems (Masten & Monn, 2015). While some of these functions are universal, others may vary depending on cultural expectations, social context, historical time period, or the family's stage in the developmental life cycle (Masten & Monn, 2015).

A variety of tools have been developed to formally assess a family's level of functioning (Barker & Chang, 2013; Bonanno et al., 2015; Drumm et al., 2000). Drumm et al. (2000) found that the Circumplex model (Olson, 2000) was very effective at assessing family adaptation, especially in non-clinical situations. The Circumplex model assesses family function through a lens of three family systems processes: cohesion, flexibility, and communication (Barker & Chang, 2013; Bonanno et al., 2015; Drumm et al., 2000, Olson, 2000). MacPhee et al. (2015)

note that although the Circumplex approach is "more descriptive of family types than explanatory of resilience processes" (p. 157), it is useful for assessing a family's level of functioning since families in the balanced, mid-range of these scales have been shown to be more functional (Barker & Chang, 2013; MacPhee et al., 2015, Olson, 2000). The McMaster model uses similar factors to assess families but organizes them into slightly different categories: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective expression, and behavioral control (Barker & Chang, 2013; Drumm et al., 2000, Miller et al., 2000). Although there is significant overlap between the other processes examined in the Circumplex and McMaster models, considering "roles" as a distinct category could provide an opportunity to better assess how well a family is fulfilling its key roles.

Promotive and Protective Processes

Factors associated with positive adaptation can be separated into two types: promotive and protective. Promotive factors are resources that promote positive outcomes overall, for families at all levels of adversity. Protective factors are assets that are especially important for supporting better adaptation when families are facing significant risk (Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). Just as in the study of individual resilience, family promotive and protective processes are contextual; what is beneficial in one circumstance may be a risk in another (Henry, 2015; Ungar, 2003; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). Additionally, the accumulation of multiple promotive and protective factors has been shown to be beneficial (Vanderbilt-Adriance, et al., 2015).

Henry et al (2015) describe these key processes as functioning through systems that families use to regulate themselves, to adapt to stresses, and to grow and develop over time (2015, p. 31). These "family adaptive systems" (emotion system, control system, meaning

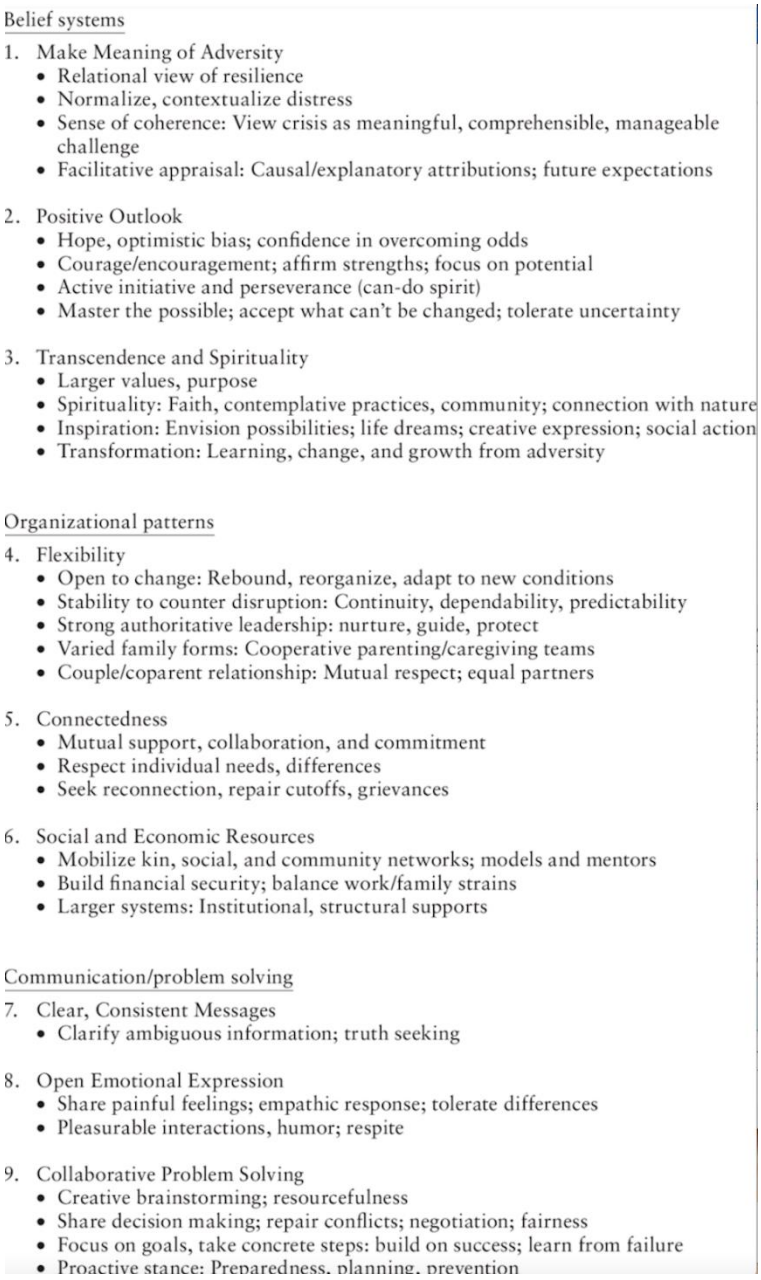
system, maintenance system, and stress response system) support important family functions and exist as a continuum from positive adaptation to negative or maladaptation (Henry et al., 2015, p. 31). These systems work synergistically to promote healthy everyday functioning and resilience in the face of adversity (Henry et al., 2015). Walsh organized these promotive and protective processes into nine "key processes" (Figure 1) that could be grouped into three general categories: shared belief systems, organizational processes, and communication and problem-solving processes (Walsh, 2012, 2106). Masten (2018) notes that these key processes of family resilience parallel the processes of individual resilience.

Shared Belief Systems.

Making Meaning of Adversity. Being able to contextualize stressors as understandable and to view them as opportunities for growth enhances resilience. Having a shared sense of coherence, or "see[ing] the world as manageable, meaningful, and comprehensible" (MacPhee et al., 2015, p. 159) can help a family grapple with adversity (Walsh, 2012). When families see difficulties as a normal part of life events and reframe them as manageable challenges rather than overwhelming crises, they can realistically assess their situation, evaluate potential causes and solutions, and develop a plan to move forward.

Positive Outlook. Having a sense of optimism, hope, and self-efficacy encourages resilience (Neppl et al., 2015; Walsh, 2012). Research has demonstrated "the strong neurophysical effects of a positive outlook in coping with stress, recovering from crisis, and overcoming barriers to success" (Walsh, 2012, p. 408) and that such an attitude can be passed from parents to children (Neppl, 2015). Even if circumstances cannot be changed, a positive outlook can help families persevere with a "can-do spirit" (Walsh, 2012, p. 406, 2016, p. 620), accept what they cannot control, and make the best of their situation.

Figure 1. Key processes in family resilience.



Belief systems

1. Make Meaning of Adversity
   - Relational view of resilience
   - Normalize, contextualize distress
   - Sense of coherence: View crisis as meaningful, comprehensible, manageable challenge
   - Facilitative appraisal: Causal/explanatory attributions; future expectations

2. Positive Outlook
   - Hope, optimistic bias; confidence in overcoming odds
   - Courage/encouragement; affirm strengths; focus on potential
   - Active initiative and perseverance (can-do spirit)
   - Master the possible; accept what can't be changed; tolerate uncertainty

3. Transcendence and Spirituality
   - Larger values, purpose
   - Spirituality: Faith, contemplative practices, community; connection with nature
   - Inspiration: Envision possibilities; life dreams; creative expression; social action
   - Transformation: Learning, change, and growth from adversity

Organizational patterns

4. Flexibility
   - Open to change: Rebound, reorganize, adapt to new conditions
   - Stability to counter disruption: Continuity, dependability, predictability
   - Strong authoritative leadership: nurture, guide, protect
   - Varied family forms: Cooperative parenting/caregiving teams
   - Couple/coparent relationship: Mutual respect; equal partners

5. Connectedness
   - Mutual support, collaboration, and commitment
   - Respect individual needs, differences
   - Seek reconnection, repair cutoffs, grievances

6. Social and Economic Resources
   - Mobilize kin, social, and community networks; models and mentors
   - Build financial security; balance work/family strains
   - Larger systems: Institutional, structural supports

Communication/problem solving

7. Clear, Consistent Messages
   - Clarify ambiguous information; truth seeking

8. Open Emotional Expression
   - Share painful feelings; empathic response; tolerate differences
   - Pleasurable interactions, humor; respite

9. Collaborative Problem Solving
   - Creative brainstorming; resourcefulness
   - Share decision making; repair conflicts; negotiation; fairness
   - Focus on goals, take concrete steps: build on success; learn from failure
   - Proactive stance: Preparedness, planning, prevention

Walsh, Froma. (2012) Family resilience: Strengths forged through adversity
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232567591_Family_resilience_Strengths_forged_through_adversity

Transcendence and Spirituality. Cultural and religious traditions can be a source of strength, comfort, and support during difficult situations. A spiritual connection can be found through formal religious faith and practices such as prayer, worship, or congregational outreach

as well as through informal sources like art, music, or nature. Walsh (2012) notes, “the paradox of resilience is that the worst of times can also bring out the best in the human spirit” (p. 409). Facing adversity with a spiritual outlook can be a time of inspiration that ultimately leads to transformation.

Organizational Processes.

Flexibility. Another core process that is associated with resilience is the ability to adapt to change, to “bounce forward” (Walsh, 2002), and reestablish equilibrium at a new normal. Families balance flexibility and stability by readjusting so that a sense of consistency remains even as circumstances change. A key means of accomplishing this, and a process that has been frequently observed in families facing disaster or more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, is through maintaining or establishing new routines and family rituals (Masten, 2021; Walsh, 2012; Walsh, 2016). Flexible families use an authoritative parenting style and cooperate with coparenting and/or caregiving.

Connectedness. Strong emotional bonds and a sense of connection between family members enhances resilience as families are “strengthened by mutual support, collaboration, and commitment to weather troubled times together” (Walsh, 2012, p. 411). Healthy families respect individual differences and balance cohesion and independence. They find ways to maintain connection even when separated physically and to work to repair connections that have been broken through misunderstanding or disagreement.

Mobilize Social and Economic Resources. Making use of surrounding multisystemic resources can be critical to family resilience. Financial security and stable employment provide a strong foundation (Walsh, 2012) and extended family networks and community supports are sources of social capital that can bolster resilience in a family (Doty et al., 2017; Walsh, 2012).

Some of these resources are beyond the control of an individual family. It is critical that larger institutional structures such as adequate healthcare and fair employment policies are in place so that the success of individual families is supported rather than undermined.

Communication/Problem-solving Processes.

Clarity. Clear communication and sharing of information support healthy family functioning. "When families can clarify and share crucial information about their situation and future expectations, it facilitates meaning making, informed decision making, and future planning" (Walsh, 2012, p. 413), illustrating the potential reciprocal interactions of resilience processes.

Open Emotional Sharing. Being able to express the full range of emotions, both positive and negative, enhances resilience. A safe environment for sharing negative feelings encourages cohesion and can help family members regulate their emotions (Henry et al., 2015). Additionally, family routines and predictability also aid in emotional regulation (MacPhee et al., 2015; Masten & Monn, 2015) and have been shown to be especially protective in the context of resilience following disaster (Masten, 2021). Positive emotional expression contributes to resilience as it rejuvenates families through connection and joy (Walsh, 2012). For this reason, it is beneficial to find some way to celebrate positive rituals such as birthdays, even during difficult times. (Masten & Monn, 2105; Walsh, 2012)

Collaborative Problem-solving. Resilience is strengthened when families can creatively work together to find solutions. Families benefit when they can make even small steps in the direction of their goals, learn from their setbacks, and become proactive in facing future hardships (Walsh, 2012). Facing difficulties with resourcefulness and a sense of teamwork can reframe even large problems into manageable challenges.

Risks and Vulnerabilities

Just as there are processes that can protect a family from adverse consequences or promote resilience, there are factors that can increase risk or make a family more vulnerable. Stressors vary in terms of intensity and duration of exposure; they may be an acute event or ongoing, chronic adversity (Bonanno et al, 2015). Many "forms of stress are not simply a short-term, single event, but a complex set of changing conditions with a past history and a future course" (Walsh, 2016, p. 618). Additionally, there are differences in when the consequences of adversity may occur. An effect that occurs immediately is referred to as a proximal exposure while consequences that continue to occur over time are termed distal exposures (Bonanno et al, 2015). It is possible for a single event to produce both proximal and distal exposures (Bonanno et al, 2015). At times risks may accumulate, or pile-up, and create family vulnerability (Henry et al., 2015). Research has shown that having a high degree of this cumulative risk is more predictive of maladaptation than is experiencing isolated risk factors (Masten & Monn, 2015; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). These stressors are often classified into two categories, vertical risks and horizontal risks (Henry et al., 2015), based on McGoldrick's model of the two types of stressors that act along different dimensions of time as a family moves through the course of its life cycle (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

Vertical Risks. Vertical stressors are ongoing historical patterns of functioning that are passed down through a family from generation to generation (Henry et al., 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). These may include the effects of family behaviors such as violence or addiction or of family status such as teenage parenthood (Henry et al., 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). Risks may also emerge from sociocultural influences such as the cumulative effects of racism or poverty (Henry et al., 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

Horizontal Risks. Horizontal stressors are forces that act on a family as it passes through the course of its own life cycle (Henry et al., 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). They may be caused by events such as developmental life cycle transitions, illness of a family member or a military deployment (Henry et al., 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). Some horizontal risks affect the larger society as well, such as an economic recession or a global pandemic (Henry et al., 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). Even if these stressors are acute events, the impacts and adjustments made by a family may be ongoing.

Pathways of Resilience

Multiple Trajectories. As families encounter a variety of both positive and negative life events, each family travels its own particular pathway that has often been depicted as a roller coaster (Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015). These trajectories may remain relatively stable, improve, or worsen over time (Bonanno et al., 2015; Masten, 2018) as they "reflect the combined net influence of all the interacting systems that shape the life course…, illustrating the ups and downs of adaptive success" (Masten & Monn, 2015, p. 8). Each family is affected by a unique combination of risks and vulnerabilities, promotive and protective factors, and resilience building processes (Henry et al., 2015; Masten & Monn, 2015; Walsh, 2016). A family's response to these factors is also influenced by their baseline functioning (Bonanno et al., 2015), interactions within the family (Masten, 2018), interactions with external ecosystems (Masten, 2018), the developmental timing in the life cycle of the family as a whole and its individual members (Hawley & Dehaan, 1996; Masten, 2018; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013), and even how these events are "perceived across age, context, and culture" (Bonanno et al., 2015, p. 142). Walsh (2016) notes that "stressful life events are more likely to affect functioning adversely

when they are untimely and unexpected, when a condition is severe or persistent, or when multiple stressors generate cumulative effects" (p. 618).

Bonanno et al. (2015) describe four general types of potential trajectories after an adverse event: chronic dysfunction, recovery, delayed reactions, and resilience. Within the category of resilience, they distinguish between two different subtypes of trajectories that ultimately result in positive adaptation following different patterns of adversity. "Minimal-impact resilience" follows an acute adverse event and demonstrates a relatively quick return to baseline functioning, while "emergent resilience" occurs in the context of chronic life stressors and possibly cascading negative consequences (Bonanno et al., 2015, p. 144). In this case resilience becomes visible over time as the individual is able to rise above their circumstances. (Bonanno et. al, 2015). Although these concepts were developed in the context of individual resilience, similar patterns of "minimal-impact family resilience" and "emergent family resilience" could be expected (Bonanno et al., 2015, p. 148).

As families deal with adversity, the complex multisystemic interactions of risk and resilience create a unique trajectory for each family (Henry et al., 2015). As the diversity of life events, risks, promotive and protective factors interact with a family and its surrounding ecosystem, the equifinality of resilience is apparent (Henry et al., 2015; MacPhee et al., 2015; Masten, 2018; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). Even among those families that are moving toward positive adaptation, there are multiple pathways of resilience (Masten & Monn, 2015).

Cascades. Another aspect of life trajectories is the capacity for events, either positive or negative, to set in motion a series of consequences. These cascades affect the future adaptation of the family itself and also may spillover to influence other individuals, families, or communities. (Doty et al., 2017; Macphee et al, 2015; Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015; Patterson et al.,

2010). Patterson et al (2010) demonstrated that even small positive changes in one family member can set in motion a ripple effect of positive change in other family members and in larger family patterns. Better understanding these cascades could improve the effectiveness and timing of interventions designed to decrease risk and promote resilience for families (Doty et al., 2017; Masten & Monn, 2015). Doty et al.'s (2017) Cascading Resilience Model proposes that the interactions of positive emotions with problem-solving abilities, coping skills and social capital resources serve as key steps in resilience cascades.

Gaps in the Literature

Previous research has identified many of the key processes that contribute to resilience but there is a lack of research exploring how these processes interact for individual families over time. Several researchers have noted a need for a better understanding of cascades and trajectories in order to enhance the promotion of positive cascades and to identify windows of opportunity for more efficient timing of interventions. (Doty et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2015; Masten & Monn, 2015)

Bonanno et al. (2015) note that "the process of being …resilient is fully understood only when examined over the course of time" (p.140). In other words, since resilience is an ongoing process, it cannot be fully captured by a single snapshot. Coyle et al. (2009) suggest that a longitudinal approach provides an opportunity to analyze the stability of family resilience over time, to examine the impact of earlier experiences of risk and protection on subsequent patterns, and to compare the resilience process across different phases of family development.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Case Study Approach

This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach using longitudinal qualitative interview data. Qualitative methods are ideally positioned to explore the process of resilience. Qualitative research takes an approach that explores the meaning of a social circumstance for the individuals or groups that are experiencing it, in order to more fully understand its complexities (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). A qualitative approach is especially well suited to studying resilience for a few reasons. First, it allows resilience to be examined with a rich description of both the process and its context (Ungar, 2003). Secondly, it can give voice to the experiences of those who are marginalized or in the minority (Ungar, 2003). Lastly, Ungar (2003) notes that qualitative methods can encourage tolerance for these voices by focusing on transferability rather than generalization of results.

Using a qualitative longitudinal design provides this rich description of a phenomenon as it changes over time and enhances our understanding of how individuals perceive and respond to this change (Hermanowicz, 2013). This approach allows a researcher to "craft characterizations of people and their situations" (Hermanowicz, 2013, p. 198) and then to "compare and contrast with characterizations [of these same people] at subsequent points in time" (Hermanowicz, 2013, p. 198). Taking a case study approach provides an opportunity to explore an issue in depth (Cresswell, 2013), in this case to better understand the process of resilience by examining the experiences of three families over time.

Data Collection

Data was initially obtained as part of a larger, mixed methods study, *Voices into Action: The Families, Food, and Health Project* (Bowen et al. 2019; Bowen et al., 2022; Elliot et al.,

2021), that followed families over a five-year period (spring 2012- spring 2017) and then a brief check-in during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (spring - summer 2020, year 8). It explored low-income families' experiences, beliefs, and practices, especially regarding food, and was funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Russell Sage Foundation. In order to better understand the resilience process over time and to draw on the rich longitudinal qualitative data that was collected for Voices into Action, I performed secondary analysis on part of this preexisting dataset. I will describe the collection of the Voices into Action data before discussing my selection of cases and my case study analysis.

Beginning in 2012 (year 1), 124 low-income female caregivers of young children were recruited from diverse social networks in three North Carolina counties (two rural and one urban), with a racial and ethnic makeup that reflected the low-income population of those counties (Bowen et al, 2022). To be eligible, each participant had to be the caregiver of at least one child aged two to nine and to identify as a woman (Bowen et al, 2022). Ten of the 124 participants were grandmothers who were primary caregivers for their grandchildren. Women were chosen as the focus of the initial data collection due to the important roles they have been noted to play in food preparation (Taille, 2018) and in minimizing food insecurity (Martin and Lippert, 2012) for their households. Participants were also screened based on income, with a goal to include only those whose household income was less than 200% of the poverty guideline ($22,350 for a family of four in 2011). Due to differences in how the screening questions were answered, six families had household incomes between 200 and 252% of the guideline in year 1 and several families' incomes varied from year to year (Bowen et al, 2022; Elliott & Bowen, 2018). Of the 124 households that began the study in year 1, 90% continued in year 3 (n=112), 73% participated in year 5 (n=90), and 44% (n=54) took part in year 8 (Bowen et al, 2022).

Mothers and grandmothers who were primary caregivers were interviewed in years 1, 3, and 5 and then had a short interview in year 8 to follow up during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bowen et al., 2022). A designated child from each household was also interviewed in year 5. There were approximately two semi-structured interviews per year; they typically lasted from one and a half to two hours and usually took place in participants' homes. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, based on the preference of participants (Elliott et al., 2021). Year 1 interviews focused primarily on caregivers' beliefs and practices regarding food and feeding their families. In subsequent years, questions were broadened to include other issues that affected families and their food practices, including parenting and relationship issues, experiences of discrimination, religious beliefs, job instability, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bowen et al., 2022; Elliott & Bowen, 2018). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, identifying details were removed, and pseudonyms chosen by the interviewer were applied for all household members and other incidental individuals (Bowen et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2021; Hardison-Moody et al., 2018).

Twelve of these families were observed in years 2 and 4, with twelve observations in year 2 and ten observations in year 4 for each family. Researchers attempted to conduct each family's observations over a five-week period, with approximately two to three observations occurring per week (Elliott et al., 2017). Each ethnographic observation lasted from one to four hours (average two and a half hours) and included a variety of family activities and routines such as grocery shopping, preparing and eating dinner, morning and evening routines, doctors' appointments, school assemblies, weekend outings, and birthday parties (Bowen et al., 2019; Elliott & Bowen, 2018). Researchers primarily observed families and their context but at times briefly interacted with participants, such as talking with adults or playing with children (Elliott &

Bowen, 2018). Researchers typically jotted observations in a notebook and at times audio recorded conversations (Bowen et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2017; Elliott & Bowen, 2018). To minimize being seen as experts making judgements about whether behavior was good or bad, researchers emphasized that their intention was to better understand the factors that influenced families and their food practices (Elliott & Bowen, 2018). Observers attempted to notice and describe participants, context, and interactions in as much detail as possible (Bowen et al., 2019) and generated rich fieldnotes were written and shared with the research team within 48 hours (Elliott et al, 2017).

The research team was composed of two principal investigators and five trained research assistants (Elliott et al., 2017; Hardison-Moody et al., 2018). The team reflected diverse social, economic, and racial backgrounds, with members identifying as Black, white, Latin/a/x, Asian-American, and nonbinary (Elliott et al., 2021). Researchers also had had a variety of life experiences. For example, some were parents of older children, some had young children, and some had chosen not to have children (Bowen et al., 2019). This diversity of perspectives enriched discussions, analysis, and protocol development (Bowen et al., 2019). In order to build rapport with families yet still enhance investigator triangulation (Patton, 2015), researchers were assigned to families in small teams. Each family had a primary researcher who performed the majority of the observations and two secondary researchers who performed two to three observations each (Bowen et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2017; Elliott & Bowen, 2018). The entire research team intentionally took part in continuing reflection and analysis regarding the research process, their own emotions and biases, and emerging themes (Bowen et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2017). Researchers wrote memos after each interview and fieldnotes after each observation and

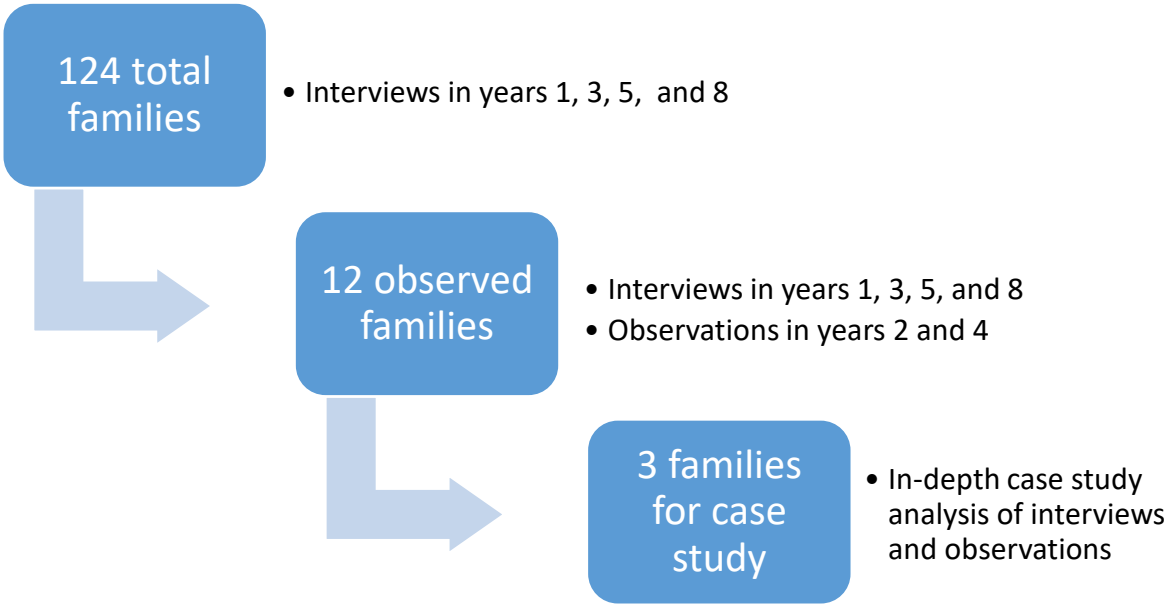
met weekly to discuss, share insights, and adjust future protocols based on this analysis (Elliott et al., 2017).

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University (Voices into Action: The Families, Food, and Health Project, IRB #1759; COVID-19 and Experiences of Food Insecurity in Three North Carolina Counties, IRB #20997). Prior to beginning my secondary analysis of the data, I read and signed the data use agreement. Additionally, since this is a longitudinal study with more risk for accidental participant identification, a principal investigator of the Voices into Action study reviewed the data presented to ensure that confidentiality was maintained.

Selection of Cases

For the current study, I selected data collected on three of these 124 families to analyze for an in-depth case-study approach (Figure 2). Families were purposefully selected (Cresswell, 2013; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018) based on two main factors: the robustness of the available

Figure 2. Selection of cases from the larger dataset.



data and similarity of the cases (Tight, 2021). Families were selected from the subset that had been observed (n=12) to increase both the quantity and quality of the data, since these families participated in all elements of the study. Doing so provided datapoints for each year of the study as well as allowing triangulation with multiple types of data and investigator triangulation from multiple researchers (Patton, 2015), both of which serve to strengthen validity (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Yin, 2018).

The twelve observational families were further narrowed down by eliminating some that did not fully participate in every year of the study. Another factor that impacted selection was how well the data related to the questions addressed in this study, specifically families and resilience. Since resilience is defined by response to adversity, thumbnail summaries of each family were reviewed to ensure that they had all faced adversity. The selected families were those whose summaries also showed data relating to family relationships and parenting, since this would provide more illumination of their family process than, for example, a participant whose activity had seemed to focus more on gardening. Since the resilience process can vary based on the developmental stage of the family (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012) and similarity is helpful in cross-case analysis (Tight, 2021), one family was excluded because it was headed by a grandparent rather than a parent. Ultimately two of the selected families (Ciara's and Becky's families) had participated in every year of the study. The only other two observed families who had participated in the brief COVID follow-up interview (year 8) were excluded for non-similarity (grandparent headed household) or other missing datapoints. A third family (Ashley's family) who did not participate in the COVID follow up interview was chosen based on the robustness of the rest of their data. Since the analysis was more focused on examining each family's resilience

process over time and not on comparing ultimate functioning or specific events from year 8, it was felt that the robust data over the original five years of the study still provided a valuable look at their resilience process.

Data Analysis

Code Development

I coded all interview transcripts and ethnographic fieldnotes using NVIVO software and a combination of inductive and deductive codes (Saldana, 2021). Most codes were deductively developed to examine the data for evidence of key resilience processes, risks, and role fulfillment, while a few were added as they inductively arose from the data (Saldana, 2021).

Within-case Analysis

Initially applying within-case analysis (Cresswell, 2013), I examined the data from each family individually, year by year and developed case profiles for each family (Henderson et al., 2012). Each encounter (an interview transcript or observation field notes) was coded and a memo detailing major themes was created (Groenewald, 2008). After all the encounters from a given year had been analyzed in this way, I generated a yearly summary that described the family's use of each of the key resilience processes, risks, and an assessment of overall functioning at that time. Overall functioning was estimated by examining the data for evidence of the themes found in two commonly used assessment models, the McMaster model (Barker & Chang, 2013; Miller et al., 2000) and the Circumplex model (Barker & Chang, 2013; Olson, 2000). The Circumplex model (Olson, 2000) looks for the dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and communication while the McMaster model (Miller et al., 2000) uses similar ideas but also includes roles (Barker & Chang, 2013). The assessment of role fulfillment included meeting basic needs, ensuring safety, providing a caring environment, and meeting family developmental tasks. After initially

analyzing the data and creating yearly summaries, I applied a longitudinal coding approach by generating a longitudinal qualitative data summary matrix (Saldana, 2021). This matrix helped visualize how each family's life events, risks, and resilience processes interacted to shape their trajectory of overall functioning over the course of the study.

Cross-case Analysis

Finally, I examined major themes in a cross-case analysis (Cresswell, 2013; Tight, 2021) of all three families. Although each family's pathway of resilience was unique, analyzing them together and looking for similarities in their experiences and processes revealed some common themes.

Positionality

As an individual with my own background and life experiences, I came to this research with my own inherent bias. Cresswell (2013) notes that a researcher's own position inherently shapes their interpretation of the data. Cultivating a sense of reflexivity, an awareness of my own experiences and biases and how these might influence my understanding of the data, is important both to minimize their impact and to inform the reader's interpretation of the analysis (Cresswell, 2013; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) note that honest self-reflection from the researcher contributes to overall validity.

As a White, heterosexual, cisgender, divorced mother in my mid-fifties, I have had a variety of life experiences. Although I have been lucky to have more than my share of privilege and good fortune, I have faced times of adversity as well, most significantly my own divorce which began about ten years ago. Additionally, my nephew and his girlfriend died unexpectedly in a car accident while I was in the midst of reviewing literature for this project, leading to a heightened awareness of resilience processes in action in the life of my own family. While I have

made use of all of Walsh's (2012) resilience processes at some point, I especially drew strength from my liberal Christian faith, a sense of hope, making meaning from adversity, and strong extended family support. Although these were the factors that I relied on most often myself, I appreciate the value of all the key resilience processes. I attempted to approach this research with an open mind and a curiosity about what these families found helpful, what made it harder for them, and what the resilience process was really like for these families.

RESULTS

Overall Themes

The analysis of the qualitative data for these three families indicated some general themes regarding the process of resilience. First, distinctive life events, risks, and key resilience processes interact to shape a unique trajectory of overall functioning for each family, with a potential for both positive and negative cascades. Each family employed a variety of resilience processes with some utilized fairly consistently and others used more prominently in some years than others, with the specific combinations changing over time. Having multiple processes available was beneficial, as this provided a larger toolkit of resources and skills that could be drawn from at any given time. The process of resilience involves individual qualities as well as interactions within a family and between a family and its multisystem environment (Masten & Monn, 2015).

Fundamental Factors for Financial Stability

In these three families a few of these processes seemed more influential, and even fundamental, for achieving financial stability and smooth functioning: better jobs, affordable housing, affordable childcare, and government assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP also known as food stamps) and the Special Supplemental

Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). These four critical factors would all fall under the process that Walsh (2016) referred to as "mobilize social and economic resources" (p. 620). The first three could be seen as essential to achieving financial independence, with the fourth providing an important support to families as they persevere towards that goal.

Mobilizing Resources: Extended Family Support

Another social resource that served as a key safety net for each of these families was extended family support. Families provided help most often with housing, but also for financial support, childcare, the sharing of other resources such as a car, mentoring, and emotional support. The specifics of which family members were helping or what type of support they were providing varied from year to year, but support from extended family was consistent throughout. To see how these resources played out in the lives of these families and to better understand the role of other resilience processes, we will examine the trajectory for each family more closely.

Ciara's Family: Moving Up, But Never Getting Ahead

When we first met Ciara in year 1, she was a 24-year-old Black woman who was living with her two-and-a-half-year-old son, her mother, her former sister-in-law and her young niece and nephew in a single-family home in a large southern city. She was enrolled full time as a student at a small for-profit college and was studying to become a medical assistant. She got by financially with funds from WorkFirst, SNAP, and WIC and her part-time work styling hair for friends and acquaintances. She had a plan for her future and was hopeful about it- "a positive attitude - that's my thing! I always like to be positive, even when there's stress." She was motivated to be healthy and defined this as eating healthy foods and not smoking or drinking. Additionally, she felt that a positive attitude was a cornerstone of a healthy lifestyle. Whether creating an ingenious makeshift space to cut vegetables in her tiny kitchen or finding community

supports like the WorkFirst program, she exhibited flexibility and problem-solving skills as she found creative ways to meet her needs. She epitomized resourcefulness as she sought out available resources and put them to use as stepping stones along a path toward her goals.

Over the next few years, she continued to draw on her problem-solving abilities and resourcefulness as she successfully obtained a driver's license and a car, graduated from school, and was navigating getting a job after finding out that the certification requirements to be a medical assistant no longer matched the degree that she had just received. It was a process that she found discouraging at times, especially with the high cost of her car insurance and student loan debt. She continued to benefit from family support and to give it back in return. In year 2, she helped care for her niece and nephew and noted that she and her mom were both trying to help teach her former sister-in-law how to be a more involved parent. By year 3, she had a new baby and was engaged to Max, a 27-year-old White man who was a father figure to both boys, and they were now living in a smaller town with Max's parents. Ciara was still looking for a job but was no longer styling hair due to the difficulty of watching her two young children and the cost of gas to get back to the larger city where her clients lived.

By year 4, Ciara was the family's primary breadwinner with a good job working in a medical facility, Max was starting a business in the building trade, and they were renting their own home. They lived near Max's parents who provided significant support with childcare due to Ciara's early morning work hours and long commute. It had been a long road to achieve this degree of success-a good job, her sons doing well and happy with school, an involved father figure, and supportive extended family. Unfortunately, Max was less engaged with his roles contributing financially to the household or supporting his relationship with Ciara and this turned out to be a peak in terms of how well their family was functioning overall.

By year 5 Ciara had divorced Max, although she was still heavily dependent on his parents for support. She considered herself the primary parent, but the boys were sleeping at Max's parents' house due to Ciara's work hours and she was only able to see them for a few hours each afternoon. She tried to further her education in medical laboratory technology at the local community college but had difficulty managing it with her schedule and had to drop out. She was proud that she had reached an income that was independent of SNAP, but because her earnings were barely above the threshold, she was actually eating less healthy and was more food insecure. Ciara's family was getting by, but the situation was somewhat precarious.

By year 8 (2020), Ciara's work hours had increased due to COVID-19, resulting in an increase in pay but even less time with her children. She was now in a custody battle with Max but still relying on his family to help with childcare as well as access to the internet that her sons needed for virtual school. She was not receiving SNAP and, especially with rising food costs, was still struggling to afford healthy foods and was relying on community food banks to supplement.

Ashley's Family: Aiming for Independence, But Stuck on a Merry-go-round of Low Wage Jobs

In year 1, Ashley and her husband Marquan were a young Black couple in their early twenties with two daughters, ages 2 years and 11 months. After previously living with extended family, they had recently moved into their own space, a mobile home they were renting in a rural neighborhood. Marquan was working at a fast food restaurant and Ashley had just begun a job at a warehouse while her mother provided childcare for their daughters after completing her own nightshift job. Ashley had had Type I Diabetes since childhood, but it was currently under good control.

In year 2 they were proud of the spacious mobile home they had just moved into in a neighborhood next to Ashley's sister and they were now both enjoying jobs at fast food establishments. They were not earning enough to cover their monthly expenses but were hopeful that this would change as Marquan was told he would be getting a promotion. Marquan's brother lived with them, and this helped in multiple ways: Anton contributed to rent, he and Marquan shared a ride to work, and as older siblings, Marquan and Ashley saw it as an opportunity "to teach him responsibility." Their home was a frequent gathering spot for friends and family to play video games, hang out, and drink. This resulted in an adult party atmosphere that was fun for the young men but was a challenging place to raise a family and left an aftermath of broken furniture and punched walls. Ashley was surprisingly successful at shielding her girls from much of this chaos, maintaining a kid-friendly bubble by monitoring television channels and keeping most of the drinking in the yard. However, there were still moments when the young girls' curiosity about video games or sounds outside the window resulted in the blending of these two worlds and an exposure to rowdy adult behavior.

Between years 2 and 3 a cousin who had been living with them was murdered. This traumatic event produced several lingering effects: the whole family was grieving his death, Ashley felt unsafe in their home since his keys had been stolen, and there were financial ramifications since he had been contributing to rent as a member of their household. By year 3, Ashley and the children had moved in with Ashley's mother. Although Ashley and Marquan had had marital difficulties in the past, this decision was more related to the grief and fear that Ashley felt in their former home. Although they were grateful for the help it was challenging as a couple and as parents to not be together in a space of their own. Ashley described this period:

> Then you know right now it's harder because I'm going through a lot right now then sometimes, I may take my frustrations out on (the kids). So, it's when we get back situated to where we want to be, and I'm back with my husband and get the help then I'll be the parent that I need to be to them. I'm not saying that I'm not now, it's just like, it's just harder—it's harder to do what I have to do. It's like sometimes the smallest thing will like frustrate me, or if they're doing something simple or they're arguing it gets to me and I'll make them go to time out. It's hard.

She also noted that sometimes getting help from family came with the price of "having it held over your head." In addition to housing, this large extended family also supported each other by sharing car rides, cell phones, and washing machines as those who had shared with those who did not at any given time. A few matriarchs of Marquan's family who were retired ministers also supported by advising and mentoring the young couple. Ashley found this helpful as she and Marquan tried to communicate better, appreciate personality differences, and be more patient with each other. She also found that praying with these women strengthened her faith and noted that praying helped ease her worry when she was stressed.

This couple had been on a merry-go-round of fast-food jobs, repeatedly being told that Marquan would be promoted to manager, yet never reaching that status or even being given enough hours to make a decent income. Ashley had not been working since she gave birth to their son 10 months ago but wanted to if she could find affordable childcare. Marquan and Ashley did not have health insurance, being told that they were earning "too much for Medicaid and not enough for Obamacare." This was especially significant since Ashley needed insulin that cost them $100-$120 per month in addition to about $80 worth of insulin that Ashley's mother shared from her own bulk supply. Even as this family experienced financial struggles, setting her

daughters up for future school success was a priority for Ashley. She was able to put her daughters into prekindergarten programs in their school district when they were two and three "so they could get used to being in school." Prior to that she frequently used teachable moments and activities like flashcards at home "to prepare them":

> Ashley: I've been teaching them because they've always with me, so I've been teaching them. They knew a lot when then went they scored above average on the test. I was proud.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah congratulations.
>
> Ashley: Thank you.
>
> Interviewer: What kind of things do you all do together to prepare for school? Well, like you're talking about teaching them things, so what does that look like?
>
> Ashley: You know I taught them their names, counting, when we go outside well, when they were young when they started walking, every time we walked down steps, I would count them. We would count the steps as we'd go down. If we were riding down the road, I'd ask them "what color was this?, what shape is this?", so I just, it was just like normal things and just teaching them as we go along. They learn.
>
> Interviewer: They probably didn't even realize it.
>
> Ashley: Yeah, they just thought it was a game or something, but they learned. Then my husband got into the habit of where he was doing it also. He said "yeah, I see you do so much" He said "I even got used to it myself." Now we got Markus [their young son] to teach.

Once they started school, she prioritized getting homework done right after school, even creating her own "homework" assignments when none was sent home from her younger daughter's pre-kindergarten class.

The family reached peak functioning between years 3 and 4. They were living with Marquan's great-grandmother, Miss Nellie, but Marquan had a good job as a forklift operator for a major company in a neighboring town. They were reaching for a middle-class dream- with family outings to Chuck E. Cheese, complete with photo documentation posted to social media,

and signing their daughters up for extracurricular cheerleading. Ashley still wanted to return to work but was unable to due to a lack of affordable childcare. Once again Ashley surrounded her children with a kid friendly bubble. She made use of children's television programming or an occasional toy as she strictly enforced not touching the breakable items that were displayed around the room.

> Each time I've been, the living room has been immaculate. Clean of all personal belongings and, crucially, toys. There is usually a small stool that is next to Ashley's "chair" that occasionally a child will have pulled out in front of the TV … but otherwise the room is bare and open. It gives the room a very spacious, clean, orderly feel, but it also is fully devoid of any of the family's things. Also, I noticed that the fridge in the shed had children's drawings and things on it. Even something as simple as this is a stark reminder that the family are guests in the house… In [their car] there were children's books and coloring books stored in the pouches on the backside of the front seats. This is a reminder, I think, that if it was up to Ashley, their belongings would be tidied up but within easy reach.

Extended family continued to be supportive in other ways as well. Several family members proudly came to watch a school awards ceremony for their oldest daughter and there was continued support for their marital relationship as well. This time it came in the form of a couple's weekend getaway paid for by Ashley's birth father, with whom she had recently reconnected. Various family members had mentored and encouraged them over the years and Ashley reflected on some of the lessons they had learned:

> Ashley then talked about how relationships take work because some things that one person thinks are big, the other thinks are little and the other way around. She said she

> recently had to explain this to Marquan because they "butt heads." She explained, "I was raised to be independent. So being on my own, I could do it. But then when we got married, I had to learn how to try to soften myself and let him be the provider for the family and it's hard. 'Cause he was raised to be the head and then I was raised to be the head. So, it's…. we butt heads so much. So much. But he's learning and I'm learning."

Unfortunately, between years 4 and 5, they experienced a "financial rut." Their car broke down, they were unable to afford the repair, and Marquan had to quit his good job due to a lack of transportation. He was able to find a low wage job that he could ride to with a coworker and was enjoying it so far. Both girls were doing well in school, but Ashley was still not working due to a lack of affordable childcare for their son. They also were not receiving SNAP or WIC benefits due to administrative glitches that they had been unable to resolve. The family was struggling with food security and Ashley was finding it harder to control her Type I diabetes as they relied more on food banks and had less control over what foods they ate. She was also showing symptoms of depression but noted that she found prayer helpful when she was stressed: "I was stressed. And I worried a lot but I really just- I had to pray more…. And it works. It works."

Becky's Family: Pets and A Sense of Purpose as a Family

When researchers met Becky in year 1, she was a 26-year-old divorced White woman living with her two biracial sons (ages 4 and 5) and her father in a rented home on a cul-de-sac in a rural county. She had been involved in an on-again, off-again relationship with Tyler, a 26-year-old Black man, for the past several months. She maintained a sense of humor and straightforwardness as she matter-of-factly discussed her obesity and other chronic medical conditions. She made ends meet through a combination of disability payments, SNAP, renting

rooms in her home to other friends and family members, and using her flexibility and problem-solving skills as she made the most of her financial resources by shopping for the cheapest calories she could find.

By year 2, Tyler had moved in with Becky, her father, and her sons and was actively participating as a parent. They faced several difficult events including a robbery and shooting in which Tyler was seriously injured followed by a relationship breakup which resulted in the loss of a father figure for the boys and a display of depressive symptoms for Becky. The energy and ideas for many of their family activities had seemed to originate with Tyler. As Becky struggled with her grief and without Tyler's presence, Becky was less engaged as a parent and even significant rituals such as a planned birthday party for the boys fell by the wayside. As she processed her grief and stress, Becky's functioning was at a low point. Interestingly, one major source of support was the family's pet dog. Even as she was less connected with her sons, Becky found comfort by interacting with and hugging this source of unconditional love.

By year 3, things had turned around significantly. Becky and Tyler had married and had a baby. They spoke emphatically of the importance of their Christian faith and were active volunteers in church community outreach programs and in coaching a local football team. They were still struggling financially and were somewhat food insecure, barely getting by on a combination of Becky's low wage job, SNAP, WIC, and community resources such as food banks. Inspired by their own experiences, Tyler was trying to start a non-profit, but he was not earning a salary. Despite these difficulties, they found strength in their family cohesion, sense of belonging, and of being in things together. The boys were expected to do chores, but this was embraced and understood as "everyone has a role" and part of helping the family to function. Interestingly, family cohesion seemed to be more influential to their resilience than the specifics

of how clearly they were communicating or their use of an authoritarian parenting style. They had a car breakdown, but unlike Ashley's experience, Becky's extended family was able to help pay for the repair, and it did not affect their overall trajectory. They were faced with more adversity during year 3 when their baby unexpectedly died. Despite this tragedy, they continued to function fairly well. Making meaning out of adversity and their spiritual faith seemed to help them through the grieving process as they created a memorial area in a local community garden, had a special plaque and mementos in their living room, and at times referred to their son as being in heaven. After the death of a new puppy they had just adopted, Becky used her faith as she comforted one of her sons:

> I told him, 'You know your brother is up there and he can take care of Brownie for us' [gut punch] (The observer) replied, 'I bet that was comforting to him.' I felt pretty bad. Becky seems to be dealing with so much and yet seems to just keep moving forward.

By year 4, they had continued to improve their overall functioning. Despite challenges such as low wage jobs, a miscarriage, and the death of two of their beloved pets, Becky and Tyler's family maintained their stability. Even though their jobs were low wage, they were both working, so with careful planning, the overall household income was enough to pay their bills. They continued to rely on problem-solving, resourcefulness and a positive outlook as they sought better paying jobs and spent time as a family playing at the park or going fishing. They loved their pets, and caring for their dogs, cat, turtle, and two tanks of fish was a family bonding activity.

In year 5, they were continuing their upward trajectory. Both Becky and Tyler had found better jobs and seemed to be somewhat financially stable - purchasing toys for Christmas and

celebrating the boys' school successes by going out for dinner together to a favorite restaurant. Becky described how this felt:

> I've become accustomed to not really, not being broke, but not being broke you know…. If we both continue to work, I just see it still being prosperous and everything being okay. If one of us decides to stop working, it may be a struggle.

They continued to be involved with church community outreach. They had just had another baby and Becky was on leave from work. Unfortunately, it was unpaid leave, so they were temporarily down to a single income and Becky felt a need to return to work as soon as possible. Ironically, a mild medical complication after her Cesarean section turned out to be beneficial as it made her eligible for short term disability which would help financially until she returned to work.

In year 8, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, and Becky's family was struggling. Since the last interview, they had moved to another small town. Tyler was a warehouse manager; Becky was not working and had started classes at the local community college in January of 2020. They had another baby in March and her two youngest were in daycare on her college campus. Their 15-year-old nephew had also come to live with them in March, increasing the total number of people in their household to seven. They were receiving SNAP and WIC, but their nephew was not included in their SNAP benefits. Since the pandemic started, it had been stressful. Tyler's work hours, and his paycheck, were reduced for six weeks. Everyone else had been cooped up together at home, resulting in boredom, frustration, and eating "all day long." Becky mitigated their food insecurity by making use of resources such as school lunch programs and food pantries, even finding a program in another city that sent them five boxes of food. She also used her problem-solving abilities as she talked with her landlord and convinced him to delay a rent increase due to the stresses they had experienced with the pandemic. She described

how difficult things had been for essential workers and noted that “the ones that are helpless aren’t getting any help.”

Key Resilience Processes in Action

Flexibility, Problem-solving, Resourcefulness

Two key processes that all three families relied on consistently were flexibility and problem-solving. Flexibility falls under the organizational patterns category (Walsh, 2016, p. 620) and problem-solving is in the communication and problem-solving category (Walsh, 2016, p. 620) but these skills were frequently used together as families made the most of the resources that were available to them as they navigated challenges often faced by low-income families. To make the most of bulk pricing and make sure that they had enough food for the whole month, they often used a method of a monthly “big shop” on the day their SNAP benefits became available. While grocery shopping on a limited budget, they based their meal planning and purchasing around what was on sale that day and what was covered within their SNAP and WIC guidelines. When they did not have a functioning car, they shopped when and where they could get a ride. Anticipating a WIC visit that would take a few hours, they planned ahead to bring snacks and another adult to help watch the young children so they could focus on the meeting with the nutritionist. Walsh refers to the idea of “collaborative problem-solving” (Walsh, 2016, p. 620) as a key process. At times there was collaboration between partners, for example, as they worked to fit a month’s supply of groceries into their freezer and cupboards after completing a “big shop”. Often though, problem-solving was more an individual or parallel activity; even if both partners were mostly in agreement about saving money while shopping, it was often the mother who worked out the specifics of what they were getting and how to stretch their dollars. Interestingly, although Walsh considers resourcefulness to be a part of problem-solving (Walsh,

2016, p. 620) and it is often defined in similar terms such as finding "clever ways to overcome difficulties" (Oxford Languages, n.d.) or "dealing with problems" (Collins Dictionary, n.d.), for Ciara it had its own strong and distinct characteristics. She was amazingly resourceful in the literal sense of assessing available resources and then finding ones that would help her meet her goals. She made use of the WorkFirst program to support her financially as she furthered her education and described programs such as SNAP and WIC as a "blessing in disguise" and emphasized that everyone who is eligible should make use of resources like this as they strive to achieve their goals.

Connectedness

Connectedness was another key process that frequently contributed to resilience. Each family had moments when a sense of being connected to a partner, a child, or other members of the extended family provided support and bonding. At times these moments occurred with special events or outings- birthday parties, family trips to the park or making cupcakes together. However, at times there were day-to-day opportunities for connection that were missed when families did not eat meals together or were distracted by the tv that was constantly on in the background.

Interestingly, for Becky's family a sense of cohesion was a defining process of resilience. Despite unclear communication at times and an overall authoritarian approach to parenting and to Becky and Tyler's relationship, a sense of belonging, cohesion, and being in things together helped them deal with life's challenges. Although there were strict expectations about the boys helping with daily chores, they happily embraced this and framed it as being part of a family where everyone has a role that contributes to helping the family function well overall. Pets also contributed to the resilience of Becky's family. They provided a safe space to share emotions and

receive unconditional love and were also a catalyst for family bonding. Despite having few typical toys to play with, the whole family had the opportunity to play together as they interacted with and cared for their many pets.

Meaning Making, Positive Outlook, Transcendence and Spirituality

All three families drew on resilience processes from the belief systems category. They made meaning of adversity, maintained a positive outlook, and drew strength from transcendence and spirituality, but the specifics differed for each family and varied from year to year. In year 1, Ciara identified a positive attitude as critical to her approach to life and linked it with being healthy. She was not as vocal about it in subsequent years, although it still seemed to play a role, however less so in years 5 and 8 when she was more overwhelmed and exhausted. A positive outlook, specifically a sense of hope, seemed to be a driving force for Ashley as she and Marquan continued to seek better paying jobs and to work on their relationship as a couple.

Ciara also seemed to use meaning making as she applied lessons learned from prior adversity. Her ideas of how to be healthy were shaped by positive and negative examples she had seen within her large extended family. She also embodied lessons learned from her mother's experience and advice to be financially independent enough that she didn't need to "depend on a man." Both Ashley's and Becky's families benefited from meaning making as well. For Becky's family it helped as they navigated grief and as they drew from their own experiences to inspire their community outreach. Additionally, Becky applied lessons that she had learned as a child to guide her parenting practices as she encouraged her sons to "stand up for yourself to be respected." For Ashley, meaning making played a role in understanding the intergenerational connections in their large extended family and in the importance of striving for independence.

Ashley and Becky both had periods of time when their religious faith played a major role and years when it was less significant. For Ashley, spirituality seemed less significant in the earlier years of the study and more important to her in the later years. For Becky, faith seemed very important in some years and less so in others, but there was not a clear temporal pattern. For Ciara, it seemed less important overall. She taught her children to say a mealtime grace, but this seemed to be more about teaching what might be considered good manners than about drawing on a spiritual faith.

Other Resilience Processes

It was difficult to assess the contribution of clear communication and open emotional expression. Each family had moments when emotions were expressed, or communication was clear, but they also had many moments when they were not. All of the families communicated through moderately authoritarian parenting styles, so sometimes clear communication was due to strict rules or harsh words. However, in each of the families, parenting was inconsistent. There were many moments of clarity, connection, and warmth, but there were also times when bids for attention were ignored or expectations were strict. At times parents were reluctant to share sad news or their own feelings of grief to try to protect their children from these emotions. There were moments when children were allowed to express emotions, but also times when it was discouraged. Ciara used a parenting technique that she had learned from her son's daycare teacher. If she said "bubble" her children were expected to pretend that they were holding a bubble in their mouth. There were times when this technique was used to ask for quiet in a creative, silly way. However, at other times it seemed to prevent whining or complaining and blunted the expression of the associated emotions. For Becky's family, hugging or interacting with pets provided a space to share feelings of sadness or discouragement.

Although there was some use of these processes, they did not seem to be used as frequently or consistently by these families as other factors were. It is possible that clear communication and a space to express emotions might have occurred at times when the families were not observed by the research team. Additionally, it is possible that greater use of these processes might have been beneficial to family functioning and emotional development in the long term.

Missed Opportunities

Overall families made use of a variety of resilience processes as they dealt with challenges. However, there were two areas that were significant for the missed opportunity to enhance resilience processes: formal interactions with professionals and the insidious influence of television.

Interactions with Professionals

Each of these adults was motivated to be a good parent, to help their children be successful and happy. At different points each family showed a willingness to learn from and use information that was shared by doctors, WIC nutritionists, and teachers. At times they went to great lengths to prepare for these visits and to manage their young children during long waits and blood draws. Unfortunately, many of these interactions missed the mark. For example, at one doctor's appointment, Ciara and Max were told that their son was anemic and given vague information about providing an iron-rich diet.

> Next, the doctor said that, according to the blood sample they'd just taken from MJ, his hemoglobin is a little low, which means he is anemic. This means that his iron is low, and the first thing that they should do is try to get his iron up with his diet. "You can give him leafy greens, or a little meat from your plate. Just look for things with iron," she said.

> "You can even get cereals fortified with iron." The doctor continued that they'd want to see him back in a month to check his iron again, and, if it's still not up, they will try an iron supplement.

Once at the store, they struggled to implement the suggestions and eventually purchased a product that was probably not the most cost-effective or sustainable way to provide more iron for their son.

> (Max) started to glance at the shelf, fingering through items every few seconds. First, he looked at the squeeze pouches, and then he moved toward the Gerber Graduates entrees that looked like little TV dinners. I stood by the cart and looked from a distance. Max looked confused, and I wasn't really sure what to look for either. I didn't see "high in iron" highlighted on any of the packages, and I also didn't see much of anything with leafy greens in it. The pouches, for instance, pictured fruit only. Ciara returned a few minutes later, when Max had chosen two Gerber Graduates entrees of pasta with meat. Ciara asked what he picked, and he showed her, saying that it's two for $4, and he just picked the one with the highest iron.

In another example, Ashley had an appointment with a WIC social worker that included about twenty minutes of rapid-fire questions and recommendations. She was asked about television usage in a rote, box-checking manner and the question was phrased in a way that discouraged an honest response.

> Social Worker: Mmmhmm. So how much TV do they watch?
>
> Ashley: Um…
>
> Social Worker: Hour? Less or more than an hour?
>
> Ashley: Probably an hour.

In actuality, the TV was on almost constantly during the time that they were at home. At the same visit, Ashley was told that her children's lab tests were normal but then was given a lot of instructions about making sure that there was enough iron and calcium in the diet. Instead of a discussion about screen time that might have been beneficial for this family, they were burdened with vague instructions for a change in diet that probably was not even necessary.

Insidious Influence of Television

For all three of these families, there were periods of time when a television was on almost constantly. At times it was used as a babysitter when parents were tired, at times when an adult was unsure how to play or interact with a young child, and even at times to help children go to sleep.

There were consequences to this ubiquitous television use. Frequently the shows dealt with adult themes like sex and violence, and at times it was depicted graphically. For example, one morning the television was on as Becky's six- and seven-year-old sons were getting ready for school:

> Antoine asked for help with his backpack strap, and Becky helped him with one hand and her eyes still on her phone. The show on TV was Robot Chicken again, and it was *very* violent. There was a lot of cursing (I heard ass, damn, and bitch uncensored, as well as several f***ing bleeps!) and Santa Claus flew into a rage and beat several people to death with a baseball bat, a chair, and a door, with a lot of blood spraying everywhere. Santa was doing the majority of the cursing in this segment. He also pulled Britney Spears' bloody head out of his sack of toys…. (A few minutes later) Batman was killing Robin by impaling him with batarangs (bat-shaped ninja stars). Both of the boys laughed at this segment, and they glanced from each other to the show, so I think their laughter was

> reinforcing each other's. … As Deontre finished zipping his hoodie, he sat back down right as the show switched to Sea Lab. One of the characters said the word "sexy" and Deontre immediately whipped his head from the television to the window and smiled nervously. Then he turned his eyes but not his head clearly toward me. When he saw that I was looking his way, he turned his head and his eyes down to his lap, still looking sheepish. Then he looked at Antoine and, perhaps bolstered by Antoine's lack of reaction, returned to watching the show. Sea Lab was only on for a couple of minutes, though, before Becky said "Okay, boys, turn of the TV, time to go wait outside."

Ashley tried to keep their television tuned to kid-friendly shows and was successful most of the time but there were still occasions when mature content slipped through.

The other consequence of so much television was that it prevented the opportunity for family interaction and connection. During one meal in year 2, Ciara's family was eating as they typically did at that time, in the living room with the television on. There was minimal family interaction while watching the show. However, when the advertisements came on the children excitedly talked with the adults. During year 4, when Ciara and Max had their own home, they usually ate dinner at the table with the television off and the observer noted animated discussion throughout the meal.

DISCUSSION

Following these three families as they navigated various life events and persevered toward goals of independence and stability was a privilege and an honor. Three research questions were addressed:

- How did life events, risks, and processes of resilience interact to shape overall functioning for these families?

- Which resilience processes were the most helpful for them?
- How did the processes of resilience vary from year to year?

Considering these questions in the context of these rich qualitative transcripts and robust ethnographic fieldnotes revealed a more nuanced understanding of the resilience process for these families. Analysis of the data reinforced some general understandings of resilience, revealed some unexpected findings, and suggested some missed opportunities that could be improved.

General Understandings

Unique Trajectories and Cascades

As expected, each family's overall functioning followed a unique trajectory that was shaped by the interactions of their distinct life events, risks, and use of resilience processes. It was not surprising to see the potential for negative cascades, but it was disheartening to see them playing out. For example, after a few years of hard work and hope, Marquan was finally working at a stable job with long term potential and his and Ashley's family finally seemed to be achieving stability and the accouterments of a more middle-class lifestyle. When their car broke down and needed a repair that they could not afford, a negative cascade of events was set in motion. Due to a lack of transportation, Marquan could no longer get to work in the nearby town and had to quit his job. He eventually found another job nearby that he could get to by sharing a ride with a coworker, but the new job had lower pay, fewer benefits, and less potential. This was more than disappointing; it changed their trajectory by decreasing their financial stability, food security, and hopes for moving into a place of their own. It was powerful to compare this to what happened when Becky and Tyler's car broke down. Their extended family was able to step in and pay for the repair. It was still a significant enough life event that Becky considered it to be

one of the major events that had happened since the prior year's interviews, but it did not affect their overall trajectory.

There were also examples of ongoing positive cascades that were set in motion by intentional acts such as using teachable moments or emphasizing the completion of homework. Each of these families was motivated to help their children be successful. Ciara and Ashley both made use of teachable moments. All three families tried to find good prekindergarten programs and elementary schools and emphasized the importance of completing homework. Although there were some missed opportunities with some of their methods, overall these efforts were contributing to success and improvement in school. As another example, Becky and Tyler's oldest son had experienced some racial and socioeconomic-based bullying at school. Each evening they vetted the clothes he planned to wear to school the next day. By making sure that his clothes fit, were without stains, and looked nice, they practiced what Elliott and Bowen (2018) referred to as "defensive mothering" (p. 512). In doing so, they blocked a potential negative cascade of events and attempted to set in motion a more positive one.

Doty et al. (2017) propose the Cascading Resilience Model (CRM) as they operationalize the chain of events that stems from a parenting intervention that generates confidence and positive emotions. They hypothesize that the interactions of these positive emotions with problem-solving abilities, coping skills and social capital resources serve as key steps in resilience cascades (Doty et al., 2017). The positive cascades generated by the use of teachable moments seems to support this model. Ashley's teachable moments led to child learning, parental confidence, and parent-child bonding. This resulted in social capital earned by the students as well as the parents as the children were successful in their school and community. It also resulted in increased problem-solving and coping skills in both children and parents as

successful interactions spread to further use of teachable moments involving Marquan and their other children.

Doty et al. (2017) also note that there are other points of cascade initiation in addition to parenting interventions and suggest an increase in household income as an example. This study also supports that assertion. For example, an increase in income for Becky's family increased their ability to afford clothes that decreased the risk of bullying and to occasionally purchase brand name Lunchables in place of the free school lunch. Both of these resources served to increase social capital for their sons. Additionally, there may be cascades that are mediated through other factors. For example, the resilience that was generated through Becky's family pets worked more through positive feelings and family connections than through social capital.

Fundamental Factors

While these families made use of several key resilience processes, all were not equal. For low-income families, being able to mobilize resources such as a good job was critical to achieving financial stability. Resources such as affordable childcare, affordable housing, and government assistance programs like SNAP, WIC, Disability, and WorkFirst were also key supports to families as they persevered along a path toward financial independence.

Good Jobs. Each family had periods when they were stuck in low wage jobs with no benefits and at times even a lack of work hours. Being able to get a good job was critical for good functioning overall as it provided opportunities for independence, stability and family bonding.

Affordable Housing. Each of these families was housed throughout the study but they also each used creative approaches to ensure this. At various times they lived with extended

family members, had family or friends live with them and contribute to rent, allowed others in need to stay with them, or made choices to live in a rural county where housing costs were lower.

Government Assistance Programs. Programs like SNAP, WIC, Disability, and WorkFirst were critical safety nets that supported families as they were working toward financial stability. SNAP was particularly helpful for mitigating food insecurity for these families. When Ashley's family lost their benefits through an administrative glitch, they experienced a period of food insecurity that was significant enough that their 6 year old daughter described going to bed hungry sometimes. Ciara set her sights on upward mobility and was proud to have achieved a job which enabled her to be independent from SNAP. Unfortunately, earning slightly too much to qualify for SNAP was not enough, without the assistance of SNAP, to be able to afford the healthy foods that had at one time been a priority for her.

Affordable Childcare. As prior research has shown (Hardison-Moody et al., 2018), the period of time surrounding childbirth was a vulnerable phase in the family development cycle for each of these families. Each of these women was either the primary breadwinner (Ciara and Becky) or an equal contributor (Ashley) to household finances so losing their income during the childbearing period was significant. Becky was in the best situation with a good job that she could return to, but even then, her maternity leave was unpaid. Once these mothers had a baby, it was a struggle to find affordable childcare. At various times they were each supported by extended family providing childcare or by coordinating work schedules to minimize the amount of time that an outside caregiver was needed. Early prekindergarten was also helpful when it was available.

Ashley's family struggled with financial security; the loss of her income for a few years due to a lack of affordable childcare was a contributing factor. As the primary breadwinner,

Ciara had to work but to do so she sacrificed time with her children and was dependent on Max's parents even after they divorced. This arrangement was discouraging and ultimately put her in a precarious position during a custody battle. Despite wanting and needing to return to work, each of these mothers had periods of time when they were not able to work due to a lack of affordable childcare.

Unexpected Findings

Being "Good" to Earn Social Capital

All three families seemed to feel pressure for their children to present well publicly and to have "good" behavior, to be seen as a "good" student, and to look "good," and practiced "defensive mothering" (Elliott & Bowen, 2018) to engender such results. This desire might be explained by social capital theory which explains the importance of community support and its potential role as a protective factor for families (Doty et al., 2017). Social capital theory suggests that being able to access community support can result in improvements to physical and mental health as well as in gains in resources such as wealth and reputation (Doty et al., 2017). As part of communities marginalized by race and poverty, increasing social capital may have been especially important for these three families.

Ciara described her oldest son as a "polka dot." a Black boy growing up in the midst of a mostly White community. She used strict discipline at home and had high expectations of his behavior and success at school because she wanted him to be "the best he can be." She emphasized that he was not and would never be a "hoodbugger, "a slang term described in the Urban Dictionary as someone with no job or income who may dress in an "urban style" (g-code-jay, 2014). She proudly noted that after a recent weekend reconnecting with his birth father and grandparents whom he had not seen in several months, they were impressed with his manners

and thanked her for “the boy that she has raised him into.” This need to raise a “good” boy is intricately tied to race and class, as marginalized mothers have long been judged, and at times punished, for any behavior that falls short of this impossible ideal (Elliott & Bowen, 2018).

Ashley worked hard to set her children up for success in school by using teachable moments and emphasizing homework. While appreciating support from extended family, she also felt additional pressure for her children to have good behavior for the several years that they were living in the homes of various family members. Becky and Tyler expected good compliant behavior from their sons by helping with household chores and responding quickly to parental directions. They also made sure that their oldest son looked “good” for school so that he would not be bullied for being biracial and poor. During an observation in year 4 Becky’s sons were complimented by a store clerk for being “good boys” when they helped clean up after an Easter egg hunt at the mall.

> Most of the other children have left the coloring table at this point, although there are two preteen girls sitting on the other side of the table from Deontre. Deontre stands up and starts putting all of the loose crayons back into the boxes. The face painting employee says to him “are you a good helper at home? You must be.” Deontre just nods. Antoine stands up, walks over to the face painting station, and slips into the chair. He asks the woman for another Easter egg. She ends up painting a few jelly beans above his right eyebrow. As Deontre is cleaning up the crayons he also notices an open bag of Butterfinger chocolate eggs on the table. He takes a handful out of the bag and places them into his own bag. He then stacks the now full boxes of crayons on top of the coloring sheets.

On this occasion Deontre's good manners earned social capital for both himself and his brother as they received not only a compliment from an authority figure, but also extra candy and face painting. Although the good will that social capital provided in this setting only seemed to provide a compliment and a trivial reward, the accumulation of social capital or earning it in other settings could lead to more substantial consequences.

To reinforce manners and good behavior, each family engaged in what is often referred to colloquially as "home training" as they prioritized developing these skills in their children. The emphasis on school readiness and homework completion probably also helped generate social capital. All of these families used a parenting style that was moderately authoritarian. Although none of the children were spanked in front of researchers, there were times when each family threatened a "pop" or a "whooping" and the children's quick compliance when told to do something implied an expectation that there would be consequences if they did not. Ciara's use of "Bubble!", the parenting tip she had learned from her son's daycare teacher, helped her elicit quick behavioral obedience. She expanded on her use of these code words and noted that she liked to use them because they were easy for her children to understand. "Violation!" was used as a general warning that a rule was being broken and "Lysol!" was a reminder to cough or sneeze into your elbow. These short one-word commands were effective at achieving a quick response, but at times seemed somewhat harsh.

Ungar (2003) notes that coping skills that are useful in one situation may not be as helpful in another. In this case, although authoritarian parenting styles may be successful in eliciting quick obedience, there may be longer term consequences that are not as beneficial.

Connectedness

Moments of family connection contributed to resilience for all three families, but cohesion played an especially important role for Becky and Tyler's family. Despite moments of unclear communication and an authoritarian parenting style, they maintained a strong sense of family cohesion. This connectedness combined with meaning making to create strong family identities such as pet-loving-family and family-where-everyone-has-a-role. These identities seemed to smooth over inconsistencies or weaknesses in other resilience processes so that overall, they functioned well, and each family member seemed to take pride in belonging.

Pets

The important role of pets for Becky and Tyler's family was also unexpected. Pets were a source of comfort and support during difficult times and were helpful to Becky as she dealt with the aftermath of Tyler's shooting and their breakup. Pets also served as a means for the family members to connect with each other. Over the course of the study, they had a few dogs, a cat, turtles, and two tanks of fish that were prominently located in their living room. Going on weekend outings to a pet shop in a nearby town, sharing responsibility for caring for their pets, and playing together with their pets all increased their bonds with each other. The boys did not have many toys other than video games so playing with pets provided an opportunity for family interaction that they otherwise would not have had. Paying for pets was expensive at times and early in the study Becky described making their own dog food from cheap cuts of chicken because store bought dog food was too expensive. In year 4, Becky struggled to find care for her sick dog as they did not have extra money and she could not find a vet that would take credit. Despite the cost, however, having pets was a benefit for this family.

Missed Opportunities

Interactions with Professionals

Each of these families was motivated to help their children be successful. Ciara and Ashley seemed to seek out and use information from professionals like doctors, WIC nutritionists, and teachers regarding such topics as nutrition and managing children's behavior. Becky had experienced a delayed diagnosis of a chronic medical condition as a teenager and was now more inclined to advocate for her own perspective to medical professionals rather than automatically trusting them as experts. Ciara actively used parenting tips that she had learned from her son's daycare teacher and all three families tried to help with homework.

Unfortunately, their experiences at doctor's appointments or WIC nutrition visits had significant missed opportunities. After observing a doctor's appointment with Ashley's family, a researcher reflected:

> Overall, I thought the doctor was nice, informative, and respectful, but I was a little jolted by her questions. They felt a little accusatory, and I thought she could've explained what the parents *should* be doing with a one-year-old, rather than asking questions that might make them feel like they're doing things wrong.

Slight changes to these professional interactions could have resulted in significant results for these motivated families. First, the professionals could have acknowledged and praised families for the great things that they were doing. Secondly, they could have taken a more individualized approach and honestly assessed areas that could be improved. Finally, they could have given clearer practical guidelines for applying their recommendations to real life. By approaching their interactions in this way, professionals could have improved the likelihood that the positive things

these families were doing were not undermined by spending their energy trying to carry out cookie-cutter suggestions.

Homework and Play

Each of the families emphasized getting homework done, but this was another area that could have been improved. In all three families, a lot of time was spent passively watching television or playing video games. For Ciara and Ashley, helping with homework often involved flash cards and strict expectations even for young children, at times coming up with homework even when teachers did not require it. Better guidance from teachers and health professionals about the importance of play for young children, the benefits of reading books together, and the value of seemingly simple interaction and connection could have been impactful. For Becky, helping with homework often involved providing so much help that her son could probably not reproduce it by himself. Her intentions were good, but she could have benefited from some tips about ways to help with homework. For example, by providing scaffolding, she could have helped him get to the answer step by step, helping him learn the process and be better able to solve future problems by himself.

Daily Opportunities for Family Connection

Despite overall good connectedness within each of these families, there were several opportunities that were missed. Just as having the television constantly on interfered with moments of interaction and connection, there were other lost possibilities at mealtimes. Ashley's and Becky's families rarely ate together. Frequently, in Ashley's family the children seemed to be fed separately from the adults; in particular, Ashley seldom ate at the same time as her children. It is possible that this was a reluctance to eat in front of the observer. However, it seemed to be related to Ashley's propensity to skip meals, perhaps as a way of handling the

family's food insecurity. Becky's family usually ate separately due to a lack of space in their tiny kitchen. Even at times when visitors were present for a special meal, family members would scatter to eat on their own throughout the rooms of their house. An observer describes one special meal:

> I have …argued that (family mealtime) isn't all that we make it out to be, and I think that is true, but this scene feels so sad. Everyone in the house is eating alone, except Becky, who is not eating. Becky just spent a lot of time making dinner, and the "finale", the eating part, feels so underwhelming. Everyone is sitting in silence; no one is talking. The house feels lonely. It is quiet except for the sound of some music coming from the living room.

Limitations

Despite producing rich data that illustrates the resilience process and trajectory of overall functioning for each of these three families, there are some limitations. First, I was not involved with the data collection and received it secondhand. However, the research team who collected the data was a diverse team with a variety of perspectives and engaged in a strong practice of reflexivity, enhancing the validity and richness of the data that was collected. In addition to the high quality of the data, they generated a large quantity as well. I was able to analyze a total of 870 single-spaced pages of fieldnotes (156 observational hours) and 626 pages of interview transcripts (34 hours) for the three families in this case study.

Additionally, at the time of data collection, the focus of the study was low-income mothers' beliefs and practices related to food. Several other factors that relate to resilience and family functioning were also discussed and observed and a rich picture of each family emerged from the data. However, having a focus on the resilience process from the beginning might have

enriched the data, especially in areas that were harder to assess such as the processes of clear communication and open emotional expression.

Lastly, as a case study of three families based on ethnographic data, this research describes the experience of these particular families and cannot be generalized to all families. However, Ungar (2003) notes that although not generalizable, it can be transferable. Gaining a fuller understanding of the resilience process for these three families, allows the reader to use that information and determine how it might apply to the experiences of other families.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the abundance of longitudinal ethnographic data for these three families provided a rich description of their processes of resilience. Their experiences illustrate that each family's overall functioning follows a unique trajectory, with the potential for both positive and negative cascades.

Some factors seemed to be fundamental to achieving stability. The most critical resource for these three families was better jobs. Additionally, affordable housing and affordable childcare were important. As families persevered to attain these resources, a robust social safety net that included programs such as SNAP, WIC, Disability, and Work First was critical. Each of these families was also supported in a variety of ways by their extended families. Families relied on several of the other resilience processes as well, but the specifics varied for each family and also from year to year. However, it was clear that having multiple processes to draw from was beneficial.

There were some missed opportunities as well. Although parents were motivated to learn from professionals such as doctors, WIC nutritionists, or teachers there was room for improvement in these interactions. Small changes in the approach could lead to a significant

change in how families are supported. By recognizing the positive things that families are doing, taking a more individualized approach, and giving more practical guidance for applying instructions, professionals could be less burdensome and more supportive to families.

Additionally, professionals could emphasize the importance of play and give clearer suggestions for helping with homework. It is important, however, to also understand where families might be coming from and to meet them where they are. Recommendations for parents should take into account the value that some families may place on behavior and compliance. By understanding why this may be important to some families, guidance could include how to apply more authoritative, rather than authoritarian, styles in a way that still achieves compliance when it is needed.

Even amid challenging circumstances, families are striving for stability and growth. However, families should not have to do it alone. There is a need for structural changes that enhance support for families as they try to reach their goals. A deeper understanding of the resilience process reveals opportunities to better empower families as they travel a path from surviving to thriving.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

CODEBOOK

B-Meaning making
Any instance of the use of meaning making as a resilience process. (B= Belief systems category)

B-Positive outlook
Any instance of positive outlook, hope, can-do spirit as a resilience process. (B= Belief systems category)

B-Transcend-spiritual
Any use of transcendence or spirituality as a resilience process. Includes formal religious faith as well as informal experiences such as music, art, inspiration, or transformation. (B= Belief systems category)

C-Clear communication
Any mention or observation of communication patterns- either clear or unclear. (C=Communication/problem-solving category)

C-Open emotion
Any mention or observation of emotional reaction or feelings, whether expressed or unexpressed. (C=Communication/problem-solving category)

C-Problem solving
Any mention or observation of problem-solving, collaboration, taking small steps toward goals, or being proactive with plan or prevention. (C=Communication/problem-solving category)

Child development
Any mention or observation of approaches or techniques that enhance or intend to enhance child development. Behaviors associated with developmental stages, learning, or growth.

O-Connect-cohesion
Any mention or observation of connection or cohesion including providing support, repairing disagreements, and respecting individual needs. Also include instances where there was not connection but there should have been. (e.g. a missed bid for attention) (O=Organizational patterns category)

O-Flexibility
Any mention or observation of flexibility, adaptability, bouncing back, cooperation, authoritative leadership. (O=Organizational patterns category)

O-Resources economic
Any mention, observation, or lack of finances, economic resources including jobs, cars, houses. (O=Organizational patterns category)

O-Resources community
Any mention, observation, or lack of community resources including neighborhoods, schools, playgrounds, doctors. (O=Organizational patterns category)

O-Resources fam
Any mention, observation, or lack of extended family resources, including social interactions with family members. (O=Organizational patterns category)

Parenting
Any discussion of or behavior related to the relationship or interactions with ones' children, ones' responsibilities as a parent, or ones' approach to parenting.

Race.ethnicity
Experiences related to discrimination or race. Also, demographic observations about the racial diversity of a community or event.

Relationships
Any discussion of or behavior related to the relationship, partnership, or teamwork with a significant other.

Risk
Any mention or observation or factors that may put a family at risk of adversity or dysfunction such as significant life cycle transitions, hardships, health conditions, drug use, etc.

Rituals
Any mention or observation of family rituals including special events and regularly occurring routines

Roles
Any mention or observation of roles played by adults in the household such as meal preparation, division of household labor, yardwork, etc. Includes instances of role flexibility or inflexibility.

Starquote
Any especially interesting, unusual, insightful, or quotable excerpt.

Stress
Any mention or observation of stress, worry, mental health