

“RESILIENCE CAN LOOK REALLY MESSY:” AN EXPLORATION OF  
RESILIENCE AMONG FFY

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by  
LASHAWNDA M. KILGORE  
Dr. Colleen Colaner, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

“RESILIENCE CAN LOOK REALLY MESSY:” AN EXPLORATION OF  
RESILIENCE AMONG FFY

presented by LaShawnda M. Kilgore,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Associate Professor Colleen Colaner

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Associate Professor Haley Horstman

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Associate Professor Rebecca Meinsenbach

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Associate Professor Clark Peters

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all former and current foster youth, especially my participants. I am amazed by your strength to survive under conditions that no one should ever endure. I admire my participants' bravery, courage, and vulnerability as they shared their experiences.

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## TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

1. FFY - Former Foster Youth
2. CTR - Communication Theory of Resilience

# RESILIENCE CAN LOOK REALLY MESSY:”AN EXPLORATION OF RESILIENCE AMONG FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

LaShawnda M. Kilgore

Dr. Colleen Colaner, Dissertation Supervisor

## ABSTRACT

The present study explores the process of resilience for FFY. This exploration began with understanding how FFY define resilience, followed by how they engage in communicative processes to enact resilience. Using the phronetic iterative approach, the communication theory of resilience (CTR) (Buzzanell, 2010) was used to analyze data from qualitative interviews with FFY (n=14). Qualitative data analysis revealed that FFY defined resilience *as survival* (with subthemes of *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*), *as elastic*, and *as burdensome*. Data analysis also revealed that FFY enact resilience by *crafting normalcy* (with subthemes of *material possessions* and *maintaining family identity*), *communication networks* (with subthemes of *maintaining communication networks* and *creating new communication networks*), *foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings*, and *affirming identity anchors* (with sub-themes of *faith as an identity anchor* and *family heritage as an identity anchor*). These findings advance resilience theorizing and foster care research by illuminating resilience processes used by FFY. Because of their unique experiences of early childhood trauma and the adverse outcomes associated with trauma, researchers must understand how to approach this research with a trauma-informed lens. This study paves the way for future research to continue to explore what resilience looks like among vulnerable populations.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2019, the United States child welfare system serviced 424,000 children (AFCARS, 2020). Children can be removed from their home of origin due to abuse, neglect, parental mental illness, parental exposure to domestic violence, or parental death. As a result of this disruption, some foster youth transition homes, and schools many times before they either age out of care or are adopted. This instability can lead to foster youth experiencing high-stress levels and developmental challenges (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Pecora et al., 2003). In turn, these challenges lead to foster youth experiencing much higher rates of trauma than their counterparts who have not experienced foster care. Trauma can be noted as a risk factor that can prevent individuals from being resilient (Masten, 2001). However, extant literature celebrates FFY (FFY) for their resilience (Masten, 2015; Neal, 2017; Kathori, 2021). While FFY are known for their resilience, little is known about how they engage in the resilience processes.

Dr. Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey's book entitled *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* situate childhood trauma survivors' experiences as the basis for understanding them as a person. It places trauma at the forefront of understanding certain behaviors, coping mechanisms, and relationships (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). One of the most powerful things this book does is explore resilience and healing without overlooking a person's experiences of trauma. Children are like sponges is a colloquial saying which describes a child's ability to soak up information, behaviors, and feelings they witness and are taught. However, the same can be said for their young brains, which are still developing. When trauma is experienced during early childhood and adolescence, the brain stores that information, becoming the

blueprint for the traumatized child's future. Though this information is stored in the child's brain, they can still heal from these past traumas in adulthood. They have the ability to rewire their brains and lead lives that are not dictated by their trauma; this is often referred to as resilience (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005).

Early in life, foster youth encounter many experiences that are quite different from the “average” child from the general population. Their lives are disrupted by the intervention of a child welfare organization, which often leads to them being removed from their home. While some children are fortunate to be moved to a home with other relatives, many other children are placed in foster homes, group homes, or residential facilities (AFCARS, 2020). The intervention of the child welfare system is intended to provide children with a safe haven; however, it often exposes already vulnerable children to a host of adverse outcomes such as homelessness, PTSD, and incarceration (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Being placed in foster care is the first reality that sets foster youth apart from the general population; however, it is not the last. In fact, foster youth have traumatic experiences that persist even after being placed in foster care. Children in foster care experience instability in their home placements and schools (Gabielli et al., 2016), and the lack of stability early on in life can have detrimental effects. Those who grew up in foster care must adjust and readjust repeatedly to new normals such as new caretakers, new homes and living environments, new schools, and new friends.

While several realities separate foster youth from the general population, the most important one is the prevalence of trauma. Trauma is defined as,

The result of an event, series of events, or a set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has

lasting adverse effects on the individual functioning and physical, social-emotional, or spiritual well-being. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], Trauma and Justice Strategies Initiative, 2012, p.7)

Children in foster care are no strangers to trauma; their young lives are riddled with traumatic experiences that can impact their development and change the course of their lives (Mitchell, 2016). When trauma occurs in childhood, it is referred to as *adverse childhood experiences* (ACES) (Felitti et al., 1998). Trauma can have detrimental effects at any age, but trauma experienced in childhood can have a lifelong impact. Exposure to traumatic events in childhood increases the risk for a wide range of mental, behavioral, and physical health problems extending into adulthood. Further, these traumatic events can be followed by biological and cognitive changes, which can negatively impact developmental processes and long-term outcomes (DeBellis & Zisk, 2014). Despite these adverse outcomes, these children grow up to be adults who seek and desire thriving lives (Hokanson et al., 2018). While their early lives are filled with these challenging experiences, FFY have been consistently noted as being resilient (Neal, 2017; Hass, Allen & Amoah, 2014; Osterling & Hiney, 2006; Wojciak, Mcwey, & Wald, 2018).

The ambition to thrive despite life's challenges is perpetually attributed to an individual's resilience (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001). Foster youth experience early childhood adversity at rates much higher than their counterparts, yet they are still noted for their resilience. Scholars from various fields have explored resilience and its complexities. For example, Masten et al., 2014 examined the risk factors for resilience. They discovered that there are things that can make bouncing back from a life disruption challenging for individuals. Given trauma's significant and lasting impacts, exploring its



role in a person's ability to enact resilience is crucial. The understanding of resilience as a process is relatively new and worth exploring. While the literature offers many depictions of what resilience looks like for individuals, communities, and organizations, it is challenging to assume this process looks the same for FFY due to the prevalence of trauma they experience. Trauma can change an individual's life course. Therefore, it is likely that it can also impact a person's ability to enact resilience.

The communication theory of resilience (CTR) is excellent for understanding how FFY engage in the resilience process. CTR states that individuals, communities, and organizations engage in the following five processes to enact resilience: *crafting normalcy, foregrounding positive action while backgrounding negative feelings, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, and putting alternative logics to work*. As conceptualized by Buzzanell (2018), resilience is "constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people's abilities to create new normalcies" (p. 9). CTR also posits that resilience is built over time and through interactions with others. As our field grows in the understanding of resilience as a process, it is imperative that we explore what these processes look like among vulnerable populations.

Resilience literature has been used to create interventions for those who face life disruptions. FFY's lived experiences warrant intervention due to their exposure to early childhood adversity. This study aims to fill the gap in resilience literature on FFY and add to our field's understanding of the relationship between trauma and resilience. This study investigated if the assumptions of CTR rang true for FFY. Foster youth have had unique experiences. These experiences can change their internal working model, hinder

brain development, and cause physiological changes (van der Kolk, 2014). Considering these life-altering occurrences, can these individuals enact resilience? If so, what do these processes look like for FFY?

The current study explored the resilience process among FFY using a qualitative research design. Using the phronetic iterative approach (Tracy, 2013), I employed the communication theory of resilience to understand data collected from qualitative interviews. The next chapter explores what the literature says about FFY, trauma, resilience, and the communication theory of resilience. Chapter three discusses the methodology used to conduct this study. Chapter four presents the findings of the study. Chapter five discusses the current study's implications, contributions, and limitations.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Lived Experiences of FFY**

Annually, the foster care system services 400,000 children. Children are placed into foster care for various reasons such as abuse, neglect, parent death, or parental mental illness. Therefore, foster care can serve as a safe and valuable intervention for children who are unable to live with their biological parents. Foster care placements include settings such as group homes, foster family homes, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, and supervised independent living. These placements are projected to be temporary as the children's welfare agency works toward the goal of family reunification or the termination of parental rights and adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Yet, children placed in care can be in a foster home for as little as a few hours or the remainder of their childhood (Chittom & Geraldine, 2018).

FFY's experiences are significantly different from those of the general population in areas such as education, employment, economic sufficiency, housing and homelessness, mental and physical health, and criminal justice involvement (Okpych & Courtney, 2018; Wojack, Mcwey, & Wald, 2018). While the foster care system addresses the immediate danger that puts a child at risk, children are at an increased risk of experiencing a host of other adverse outcomes during and after their time in the foster care system. It is well known that children placed in foster care are more likely than their peers to experience family instability (Taylor et al., 2009), to be exposed to socioeconomic disadvantages (e.g., Cancian et al., 2013; Widom et al., 2009), and to live in poor neighborhoods (e.g., Andersen, 2010; Coulton et al., 1999; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Freisthler, 2004), all of which are risk factors for poor mental and physical health.

Children who experience foster care are at a higher risk for homelessness, incarceration, depression, and PTSD (Cho & Jackson, 2016). Thirty percent of the nation's homeless population has spent time in foster care, and 20% of the prison population has spent time in foster care (Courtney et al., 2007). These statistics suggest several challenges for children who grow up in the foster care system.

Further, one of the most impactful aspects of foster care is a child's experience with their caregiver. Consistent caregiving is vital to a child's development and self-regulation. Children who receive consistent caregiving develop regulation skills, while erratic caregiving results in children being chronically physiologically aroused (Sroufe, 2005). Children in foster care have an average of eight placements (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021); therefore, the adverse effects of erratic caregiving have particular importance for children in foster care. Placement instability is also related to PTSD, alcohol and substance abuse problems, and suicide attempts (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

While it has been noted that caregiving instability impacts a child's development, it is also important to note that caregiving instability also affects a child's academic growth. The social and emotional difficulties stemming from childhood trauma, such as anxiety, depression, stress, and lack of social support, ultimately inhibit a child's academic ability (Casey Family Services, 2010). FFY exhibit more academic and behavioral problems than their peers and are less likely to finish high school, obtain a GED, or attend college (Barth, 1990; Festinger, 1983; Pecora et al., 2006). Family instability is strongly associated with many adverse outcomes that negatively predict college enrollment and completion, including diminished academic trajectories and

performance (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). In this way, FFY face challenges in obtaining a college degree and the subsequent benefits of higher education for achieving economic stability and job security.

Children experience various types of trauma before and during their time in foster care. Child abuse is not something that only occurs in foster care; however, there is a persistent overrepresentation of abuse cases from children within the child welfare system. Turney and Wildeman (2017) found that children placed into foster care or adopted from foster care were more likely than their peers to experience “parental divorce or separation, parental death, parental incarceration, violence exposure, household member mental illness, and household member substance abuse” (p.117). This study also found that foster youth are seven times more likely than other children to experience parental incarceration or household member substance abuse. Further, Greeson et al. (2011) reported that children in the foster care system have histories of recurrent trauma perpetrated by caregivers. Trauma histories of 2000 foster youth showed that neglect, exposure to domestic violence, emotional and physical abuse, sexual assault, and community violence were the most prevalent forms of trauma among foster youth. As a result of their traumatic experiences, FFY have a higher prevalence of mental health, behavioral and emotional problems, and post-traumatic stress disorder. I have presented the unique lived experiences of FFY. The following section discusses the effects of trauma to understand what is meant when the literature states that experiencing childhood trauma can have a lasting impact on an individual (Burke-Harris, 2018).

## **Long-term Effects of Childhood Trauma**

Trauma changes you. It does not leave you the same. Trauma has the ability to alter the chemicals in your brain, impede development, and leave you with physical, mental, and emotional health problems throughout your lifetime (van der Kolk, 2015). When studying populations that experience high rates of trauma, we must have a thorough understanding of what trauma is and its impact on an individual's life. There are numerous types of trauma. However, the present study refers to trauma as experiences that cause intense physical and physiological stress reactions. Trauma results from something a person experiences as physically or emotionally harmful and has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social-emotional, or spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], Trauma and Justice Strategies Initiative, 2012).

Further, complex trauma, defined as “the experience of multiple, chronic, and prolonged developmentally adverse events, most often of an interpersonal nature” (van der Kolk, 2005, p.402), extends beyond a discrete event and occurs in cases of prolonged abuse, neglect, or chronic stress. A traumatic event is expected to overwhelm coping resources. This means that sometimes regardless of the resources available to individuals, the trauma they experience could impact their ability to use those resources. Trauma experienced in childhood is known as *adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs). ACEs comprise physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; physical or emotional neglect; parental mental illness; substance dependence; incarceration; parental separation or divorce; or domestic violence (Felitti et al., 1998). All of these different types of trauma can impact FFY.

Understanding the impacts of trauma is essential, especially when it comes to the population of FFY, because maintaining psychological well-being under conditions of extreme threat or in the immediate aftermath of disaster takes a toll on the mind and the body (Brown et., 2009). Responses after a traumatic event often include extreme anxiety and hyperarousal, sleep problems, nightmares, exaggerated startle responses, intrusive images or thoughts, and avoidance of reminders of the experiences (Eth & Pynoos, 1985). ACEs are related to long-term physical, mental, and relationship difficulties. The ACE study (Felitti et al., 1998) discovered that those with a high ACE score are more prone to developing cancer and have a 20-year decrease in their life expectancy. One way in which trauma impacts a child's development is through its effects on multiple neurobiological systems. When children experience frequent and prolonged stress, such as being physically, sexually, or mentally abused, they exhibit what is known as a "toxic stress response" (McEweb, 2008). A toxic stressor is an aspect of the environment that leads to "strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body's stress management system" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005, p.1). These stressors can become embedded at every level of a child's neurobiological organization (Hertman, 1999).

Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past. It is also the imprint left by that experience(s) on the mind, body, and brain. Van der Kolk (2014) posits that this imprint has "ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present" (p.21). Trauma can have lasting impacts on several parts of an individual's life, but it has particularly damaging effects when experienced in childhood and adolescence. Perry and Winfrey (2021) state that early life experiences have a

powerful impact on how individuals develop, given the neuroplasticity of children's brains. While these effects can be extremely challenging, developmental psychologists posit that individuals develop resilience after life disruptions such as trauma. Therefore, the next section will explore resilience.

### **Conceptualization and History of Resilience**

To date, there has yet to be a consistent definition of resilience that can be used throughout various fields that study resilience. The English word resilience stems from the Latin word *resilire*, which means to “rebound.” Generally, resilience refers to positive adaptation in the context of adversity. While there is no consistent definition, there is a basic understanding that resilience is the ability to “bounce back” after experiencing hardship. In developmental psychology, “resilience refers to the process of, capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten et al., 1990, p. 425).

Before getting into the conceptualization of resilience, it is essential to understand its history. Resilience was first studied among children of schizophrenic mothers (Garmezy, 1994; Garmezy & Streitman, 1974; Masten et al., 1996). The studies above played a crucial role in the emergence of childhood resilience. After resilience research started to emerge, scholars from various fields sought to understand resilience and how they should study it. Resilience research soon expanded to include multiple adverse conditions beyond parental mental illness, such as maltreatment (Beeghly & Cichetti, 1994), urban poverty and community violence (Luthar, 1999), chronic illness (Wells & Schwebel, 1987), catastrophic life events (O'Dougherty et al., 1997), and socioeconomic disadvantages (Garmezy, 1991). During this boom in resilience research,



there was a focus on the personal qualities of “resilient children,” such as their autonomy and high self-esteem (Masten & Garmezy, 1985). However, as time passed, researchers began acknowledging that resilience may derive from external factors.

Further, much controversy was revealed in this influx of resilience research as a lack of consistency in conceptualizing resilience was heavily critiqued. Various fields debate on how to conceptualize and operationalize resilience. For example, some researchers have stipulated that to qualify for labels of resilience, at-risk children must excel in multiple adjustment domains (Tolan, 1999), whereas others have required excellence in one salient sphere with at least average performance in other areas (Luthar, 1991; Luthar et al., 1993). Despite this decades-long controversy, developmental psychologists have rested on the idea that resilience can be used to describe three distinct kinds of phenomena: (1) good outcomes despite high-risk status, (2) sustained competence under threat, and (3) recovery from trauma (Masten, 2014). Therefore, resilience work encompasses a wide range of phenomena, including the capacity for doing well when faced with adversity, coping with difficulties, recovering from catastrophe, and post-traumatic growth (Masten 2014).

The field of developmental psychology has gifted us with a host of literature on resilience. Scholars such as Masten and Luthar have contributed significantly to our understanding of resilience. However, there is one slight difference in their conceptualization of resilience. Masten defines resilience as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (Masten, 2014, p.10). Luthar defines resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et

al.,2000, p.543). The critical difference is Luthar's understanding of resilience as a process, which is more in line with how resilience is defined in the communication field. Buzzanell's (2018) definition of resilience is similar to Luthar's; she defines resilience as "constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people's abilities to create new normalcies" (p. 9). This understanding of resilience guides the communication theory of resilience, an important and emerging theory in the communication field. The following section will provide an overview of CTR.

### **The Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR)**

CTR offered the best framework for this study because of its unique stance on resilience. Buzzanell (2018) suggests four ways in which this stance differs from others:

(a) focusing on ongoing communicative processes of adaptation and transformation, reactivity and proactivity, stability and change, disruption and reintegration, destabilization and restabilization; (b) situating resilience in interaction and relationships, integrating scholarship from interpersonal, family, organizational, health, and mediated communication contexts; (c) refocusing inability to bounce back from individual deficit approaches to politicized contexts in which material resources, policies, and ideological approaches to politicized contexts in which material resources, policies, and ideological structures about the nature and characteristics of families are socially constructed and enacted; (d) recognizing that there are both benefits and costs for the particular ways in which resilience is constituted. (p.99)

CTR posits that "resilience is activated by a trigger event" (Buzzanell, 2018, p.100). This trigger event could be a variety of things, such as relational turning points,

natural disasters, and a pandemic (Hintz et al., 2021). While this study did not investigate the resilience triggers for participants, I decided that the resilience trigger was being placed into foster care. This decision was made because the communication process that FFY engaged in were in response to being placed into foster care.

The five processes of CTR are (1) *crafting normalcy*, (2) *maintaining and using communication networks*, (3) *putting alternative logics to work*, (4) *foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative emotion*, and (5) *affirming identity anchors*. There is no sequential ordering of the five processes Buzzanell states that these processes are not mutually exclusive and are often entangled in complex ways. While this entanglement is evident, *maintaining and using communication networks* provides a valuable foundation aiding in the other four processes; thus, the description of the processes begins there.

### ***Maintaining and using communication networks***

When individuals, communities, and organizations face disruption, it often leads to a stage of trying to make sense of the circumstances. While trying to make sense of their circumstances, they also assess their situation and stabilize their strong communicative connections (Buzzanell, 2018). In the face of disruption, individuals draw upon their bonds with others through face-to-face and mediated communication. Scharp et., 2022 found that first-generation college students engaged in this process to garner support during the pandemic. Maintaining and using communication networks can aid in crafting normalcy, foregrounding productive action, affirming identity anchors, and engaging with alternative logics (Buzzanell, 2018). Due to this assertion, this process could be the foundation of building resilience. Because resilience is cultivated by

developing deep relationships, Buzzanell has placed relationships and interactions with others at the core of resilience (Buzzanell, 2018).

### *Crafting normalcy*

Crafting normalcy describes an individual's or a community's efforts to regain a sense of life and routine before the stressor. Normalcy is constructed discursively; it is "talked into being" (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 4). If and how FFY craft normalcy has yet to be explored in the communication field. Crafting normalcy often looks like individuals or communities keeping up with routines and traditions, even if some modifications must be made. Buzzanell uses the following example to help us understand this process "Families might still go out to dinner on Friday nights—but the restaurant is not quite as nice or expensive" (p. 4). While this family has made some adjustments to their Friday night dinner plans, they have continued their Friday night tradition. In this way, this family is crafting normalcy for themselves.

### *Affirming identity anchors*

Affirming identity anchors is defined as "enduring clusters of identity discourses upon which individuals and their familial, collegial, or community members rely when explaining who they are for themselves and in relation to each other" (Buzzanell, 2010, p.4). Ventetis and colleagues (2020) describe this process as how people use discourse to regain and maintain that sense of self or identity that existed before the stressor. Buzzanell and Turner (2003) found that fathers and their families co-constructed images of breadwinners and masculinity after the father lost his job. This important finding shows that people enact what is most important to them by affirming identity anchors with others when faced with life disruptions.

### ***Putting alternative logics to work***

Putting alternative logics to work is described as reframing one's view of hardship to aid in coping (Buzzanell, 2010). This reframing can take many forms for those who have just experienced some life disruption. For couples with a partner experiencing breast cancer, couples engaged in this process by discussing how they are more fortunate than other cancer patients (Ventetis et al., 2020). Using a quantitative design, Ventetis and colleagues measured putting alternative logics to work by the participants' ability to employ new ways of viewing cancer by stressing attraction, humor, and jokes and talking about the couple's good luck. When experiencing difficulties such as cancer and chemotherapy treatments, these couples found alternative ways of coping, like joking about their spouse's hair loss and inability to keep food down due to chemotherapy. These alternatives helped individuals reframe their experiences.

Further, military spouses whose partners were deployed engaged in putting alternative logics to work by viewing the deployment as an "adventure." Instead of viewing their spouse's absence as a challenge and a stressor for the family, these spouses reframed it as something positive. While these alternative logics can seem counterintuitive, they can help individuals emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally manage their hardships (Villagran et al., 2018). Putting alternative logics to work is the process in which you see individuals enact their resilience. People use new avenues to reframe their experiences and find new ways of handling their problems. This process is where transformative action occurs in that individuals no longer stick to their usual routines (Buzzanell, 2018).

### ***Foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative emotion***

This process involves two key factors; the first is foregrounding productive action, which means that productive behaviors, mindsets, and attitudes are emphasized over the negative aspects of the situation. The second, legitimizing negative feelings, means accepting the negative emotions that come with this life disruption but still focusing on productive action (Buzzanell, 2010). This process allows individuals to focus on the positive aspects of their situation while also managing their stressors. For example, breast cancer patients shared that they timed chemotherapy around their kids' schedules and balanced the need to stay positive with discussing fear and grief (Lillie, Ventis, & Chemichky-Karcher, 2018). Instead of only focusing on the bad, these patients focused on the good while also acknowledging and discussing the challenges of their situation. They also maintained productive behaviors. Instead of allowing cancer and chemotherapy to run their lives, they arranged their schedules to accommodate chemotherapy appointments.

### ***Resilience as a context-dependent process***

According to CTR, different populations exhibit different recoveries from disasters. Therefore, the interactions vary by context. The five processes have multiple paths, orderings, and configurations (Buzzanell, 2018). Resilience processes can look very different depending on the population due to their unique experiences. In particular, the current study examined FFY's experiences of resilience. As previously mentioned, individuals who have experienced the foster care system are more prone to experience trauma than their counterparts who have not experienced foster care. The current study sought to understand what resilience looks like among this population. Using the

communication theory of resilience, this study aimed to place the experiences of foster youth as the focal point for understanding resilience. Notably, this study investigated if CTR accounts for the unique lived experiences of foster youth, specifically their high rates of childhood trauma. While resilience literature has significantly contributed to various fields, it is still vital to approach resilience theories with a critical lens. The following section discusses noteworthy critiques of resilience literature.

### *Critique of resilience*

Current research offers insight into resilience processes, yet scholars have critiqued resilience literature and its definition. Harrison (2013) argues that resilience literature (1) supports normative judgments, (2) overemphasizes the ability of people to bounce back, and (3) undervalues the hidden costs of resilience. Each of these critiques is described in detail below.

Normative judgments can be exclusive to those who have “normal lives.” Judgments about how well someone is coping are based on individual and societal values. For example, Harrison (2013) found that some individuals believed living paycheck to paycheck was resilient because they made an honest living and cared for their needs. However, a normative perspective of resilience may say that this family did not bounce back well because they were still financially struggling according to society’s standards. Resilience scholarship fails to situate resilience within a cultural context when identifying what is considered valuable or deemed as “good coping,” drawing instead from appeals to “normalcy” based on expectations of how individuals and families should behave. Because FFY face considerable traumas and barriers, they have lives that often differ from normative development models. From their initial attachment disruption of being

separated from their biological families to assimilating to different homes and families while in foster care, the lives of foster children are far from normal. Therefore, using normative judgments is not an appropriate approach to understanding the resilience among FFY.

Further, Harrison (2013) believes that current conceptualizations of resilience also overemphasize outcomes. Individuals are expected to bounce back after a life disruption. However, it is essential to consider how lived experiences impact one's ability to bounce back. Trauma alters physiology and mental health in ways that may impede a return to the previous baseline of well-being (van der Kolk, 2014). A trauma-informed approach to resilience recognizes that "surviving" rather than "thriving" after trauma may be sufficient to demonstrate personal strength. After a life disruption, glorifying a resilient outcome fails to account for the magnitude of trauma to alter long-term mental, emotional, and physical health. Some individuals may be physically or mentally unable to fully return to a previous state due to their traumatic experiences, yet they can exhibit resilience, nonetheless. When studying resilience, we must understand each population's capability to adapt to adversity and allow individuals to determine what it means for them to bounce back.

Additionally, scholars argue that we undervalue the hidden costs of resilience. Cultivating resilience may unintentionally inflict pain on self and others. As one trauma survivor stated, resilience was "built on the backs of other people's pain and trauma" (Kilgore et al., 2020). This participant shed light on the cost of resilience, which is not discussed in this statement. She went on to share that her life was riddled with trauma, but to have a better life, she had to be taken from her parents and put in foster care. She



discussed that no one cared about the trauma inflicted on her family, but rather the focus was on how well she overcame those hardships. Therefore, we undervalue that the cost may be associated with policies that shift responsibility for dealing with crises away from the public sphere. For example, a resilience framework may lead those in power to assume that foster youth will typically pan out well because they are resilient and can overcome their traumatic experiences. This mindset could lead policymakers and legislators not to be prompt about creating policies that prevent childhood trauma and protect foster youth. This could leave the responsibility of bouncing back solely on the trauma survivors, which can be dangerous. Resilience literature tells us that resilience is a process (Buzzanell, 2010; Afifi & Davis, 2016) that is often built through interaction with others; therefore, in our approach to studying resilience, we need to be mindful not to place the responsibility to bounce back on one individual. The following section discusses attachment theory which this study used as a support theory to understand the impact of early childhood trauma and its ability to impact one's resilience.

### **Resilience among FFY**

Now that I have examined the factors that impact resilience, this section will explore what resilience could look like for FFY. One crucial question remains unanswered throughout research on resilience and childhood trauma: How does resilience look among vulnerable populations like FFY? Although some children in foster care do remarkably well despite their early adversity (Rees, 2013), research has consistently highlighted the poorer outcomes, including mental health difficulties, underachievement, and increased likelihood of exclusion from education. The most common adversity is abuse or neglect by a primary caregiver, which can have pervasive and detrimental

effects on a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Cicchetti, 2002; Stein, 2006) and the development of attachment relationships.

Gilligan (2002) found that adults are important in promoting resilience for children in foster care. Resources for those transitioning out of foster care can be very limited (Refaeli, 2017); therefore, they experience high rates of instability and homelessness (Courtney et al., 2011). Even after aging out of foster care, having a supportive adult in one's life is one of the most important promoters of resilience (Avery, 2010; Greeson & Thompson, 2015; Osterling and Hines, 2006). Prosocial adult relationships are among the most critical factors in the resilience process, especially for FFY whose family relationships have been disrupted (Grezon et al., 2010). Many FFY state that relationships with their social workers were positive during their time in foster care. Despite the importance of these relationships, many states and agencies discourage or even forbid child welfare professionals from maintaining relationships with the youth they serve after the termination of their professional relationship. Unfortunately, this puts FFY at a further disadvantage in social and emotional support, which could heavily impact the resilient process known as maintaining and using communicative networks.

Scholars outside of the field of communication have studied resilience amongst foster youth in various contexts. Broadly, FFY are noted as having educational resilience (Day et al., 2012; Hass and Graydon, 2009; Kathor et al., 2020). Educational resilience has also been referred to as academic resilience. Academic/ educational resilience is the increased likelihood of school success despite adverse conditions (Strilin-Golzman et al., 2016). Despite the various barriers FFY face, they have demonstrated educational resilience and attained academic success at rates comparable to the general public (Yates

& Grey, 2012). Hines, Meridinger, and Wyatt also studied resilience among FFY who had attended college. Despite demonstrating educational resilience, these same FFY expressed recurrent themes of stress, sadness, and guilt. This research shows that just because FFY demonstrates resilience in one domain does not mean it will be reflected in others.

Further, resilience has also been studied among adolescent mothers in the foster care system (Bermed et al., 2018). Resilience has also been studied among girls in the foster care system that have experienced sexual abuse. Edmond et al., 2022 found that despite the harshness of their life experiences, half of the girls were functioning well across multiple mental health dimensions. However, this study also revealed that resilience in terms of good mental health does not mean resilience in all domains; therefore, more research is needed to understand how this unique population demonstrates resilience. Rome and Raskin (2019) studied FFY during their first year after they transitioned from foster care and found that despite facing significant obstacles, they demonstrated resilience and optimism as they contemplated their futures. Youth currently in foster care were reported to have relatively high resilience when tested for three types of resilience: internal, external, and general resilience (Davidson-Aradt & Navaro-Bitton, 2015).

So far, literature has shown us that there are various protective factors and contributors to resilience for FFY, such as education, future orientation, family support, peer influence, and religion. Greeson et al. (2010) and Strolin-Golzman et al. (2016) found relationships to be the most significant contributors to resilience. Jones (2012) and Hass, Allen, and Amoah (2014) highlighted independence and supportive relationships as

crucial to demonstrating resilience. Similarly, Hass and Graydon also found that future orientation and supportive relationships are protective factors for FFY. When these protective factors are present, individuals are more likely to demonstrate resilience and overcome adversity.

While research has shown that FFY can demonstrate resilience across various domains, much still needs to be clarified about the process of resilience among the foster youth population. When foster youth are labeled as able to enact resilience, we can apply our basic and normative understanding of resilience to their lives or honor their unique lived experiences and expand our knowledge of resilience. Also, due to the need for more consistency in conceptualizing resilience, FFY need a conceptualization that accounts for their experiences. To begin the exploration of learning more about resilience among FFY, I believe it is essential first to understand how FFY conceptualize resilience; therefore, I posed my first research question:

RQ 1: How do FFY define resilience?

### **The Communication Theory of Resilience and FFY**

The five processes outlined in CTR offer an excellent foundation for understanding how individuals, communities, and organizations respond when life disruptions occur. Therefore, it is a valuable framework for this study as it seeks to understand if and how FFY engaged in these communicative processes when faced with life disruptions such as childhood trauma. Therefore, the following section outlines what these five processes could look like for FFY.

Maintaining and using communicative networks is the foundation of resilient processes. Perry and Winfrey (2021) state that your connectedness to other people is key

to buffering any current stressor and can help you heal from past trauma. This process could look quite complex for foster youth who have just been removed from their homes. In Monique Mitchell's (2016) book *The Neglected Transition*, she discusses the importance of the child's communicative networks. Particularly, Mitchell highlights the importance of a child's connection to their family unit, especially their siblings. When children are removed from familiar and comfortable things (e.g., biological parents, home, school, and peers), the sibling relationship is frequently the most viable ongoing relationship in their lives. (Richardson & Yates, 2014). Therefore, the sibling relationship may also serve as a source of resilience when their other familial resources are unavailable. Stabilizing their strong familial ties could be one of the prominent processes of resilience for foster youth. We can see the importance of the sibling relationship, especially when children face familial disruption. Consequently, maintaining and using communicative networks for foster youth could emerge as maintaining relationships close to their siblings or other family members.

Furthermore, research shows that a child may have already experienced traumatic stressors and can be further traumatized by being placed in a home with people they do not know. Mitchell (2016) refers to this experience as relational ambiguity. Children can worry about the safety and security their new caregivers will provide. One report from a foster youth highlighted how complex this transition could be for children; he reported that the threat of living with strangers was more significant than the threat of being imprisoned (Mitchell, 2016). Considering the process of maintaining and using communicative networks, we know the importance of social support and stable relationships for people, especially children who have been taken away from the only

home environment they know, ultimately impacting their communicative networks. Courtney et al. (2001) state that being engaged in positive relationships can assist children in foster care in developing the skills and knowledge to live and function successfully on their own after exiting foster care. Based on reports from children in foster care, a child's quality of life is diminished when they do not have someone in their lives whom they can trust. For children placed outside of their family, the reality is that they will have to start building trust over and over again as they move through different placements. As previously mentioned, this could significantly impact a person's ability to engage in this particular resilient process due to attachment trauma.

Maintaining and using communication networks is particularly important when considering communication's role in resilience. The communicative networks can serve as healing agents for children that have experienced trauma. Purvis (2013) tells us that a healthy relationship with someone can help children heal from trauma. If someone experiences adversity or trauma, they are most likely to cling to those around them. When considering those who grew up in foster care, their communicative networks could be their caseworkers, siblings, care providers, and biological parents.

In the wake of being removed from one's home, the lives of foster youth are plagued with uncertainty, and normalcy can seem like a thing of the past. However, we need to understand what the resilience process of crafting normalcy looks like for these individuals whose lives have been shaken up by this sudden transition. Mitchell (2016) states that the transition into foster care is "fraught with the experience of loss" (p. 5). Children in foster care experience a loss of home, stability and consistency, important

relationships, and identity. Essentially, what was once normal to the child no longer exists.

Normalcy for children in foster care means engaging in typical, age-appropriate activities, which is a critical component of child development. According to the Annie Casey Foundation (2015), normalcy means allowing children and youth in foster care to experience childhood and adolescence in ways similar to their peers who are not in foster care. However, there is nothing “normal” about experiencing abuse or neglect and being placed into foster care. Although foster care can provide a safe place for children, cultivating normal childhood experiences in foster care can be challenging (National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council, 2013). Child service workers collaborate on ways in which they can promote normalcy among those in foster care. The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (2017) states that “promoting normalcy in foster care includes managing risk, giving children the opportunity to act like children, and encouraging the development of a child’s interests and strengths” (p.2). Now that we understand the desired outcome for normalcy amongst FFY, we must fully understand the communicative process of crafting normalcy for FFY.

Mitchell (2016) provides insight into what affirming identity anchors could look like among foster youth. Mitchell begins the chapter with the question, “How do children make sense of their inner and interpersonal worlds when events turn their lives upside down?” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 64). When a child is placed into foster care, they have the label “foster child.” A child can be plagued with various questions, such as what the label foster child means concerning who they are, who they were, and who they are going to be. A child’s early development and identity are shaped by early experiences, which for

many foster youth, means instability and trauma. Early attachment literature also discusses identity formation. The inner working model is developed early in life and shaped by an attachment relationship. Being in foster care often means home instability and a lack of consistent caregivers. These experiences impact a child's identity formation, as everything they know is constantly changing for them.

Further, the sudden shift from their home of origin to foster care may leave a child questioning their identity. All they know is that they are the child to their parents and a sibling to their brothers and sisters. This shift away from their familiar environment could be viewed as a threat to their early identity development. Our important relationships shape our identity. A child's most important relationship is with their primary attachment figure, which is most often the mother. One can imagine the identity challenges when that relationship changes or is taken away. Further, Kools (1997) interviewed adolescents in foster care, discussing how being a "foster child" can carry a diminished societal and familial status, negative stigma, and depersonalization. The following excerpt from one of the interviews illustrates this sense of loss:

I want to go over there and visit some of my family and relatives. I don't want to forget about my culture and stuff, and so I want to go over there. But it's not easy when you are in foster care. It's like you are not a part of that anymore like they're not your family anymore. I mean, they're still your family, but not like they used to be. You know? It's easy to forget where you came from and who you are. (Kools, 1992, p.268)

This quote shows this adolescent grappling with his identity because of his presence in foster care. We can also see that being placed in foster care changes many aspects of a



child's identity, especially their familial identity. While this is a dated example, it is still relevant to our understanding of identity anchors among foster youth. Children can face many challenges to their identity while determining how to navigate the new home and their new caregivers.

Enacting resilience by engaging in the process of putting alternative logics to work could look similar for FFY. Amid life disruptions, such as being taken from their home of origin, foster youth are left to try and make sense of this tragedy. A pilot study by Kilgore, Horstman, and Colaner (research in progress) found that foster youth put alternative logics to work by seeking counseling and mentorship and listening to and repeating positive affirmations. As FFY mature and begin to process and cope with their childhood experiences in foster care, putting alternative logics to work could aid their coping and healing.

Finally, foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative emotion allows people to validate their negative feeling while refocusing on the positive. This could look like individuals deciding to push through hardships while validating their negative emotions about their hardships. For FFY, this process could be them choosing to excel in life despite the trauma that they have experienced. FFY may recognize the various challenges, yet they still decide to focus on the positive.

While the communication theory of resilience offers some processes that individuals are known to engage in when life disruptions occur, the phronetic iterative approach allowed me to hold loosely to these processes in case FFY engage in other processes that do not align with CTR. Therefore, the following research question was posed to get a complete picture of what resilience looks like among FFY:

RQ 2: How do FFY enact resilience?

## **Conclusion**

Taken as a whole, we can see trauma and its widespread impact throughout the lives of FFY. We now understand resilience and the processes individuals engage in when faced with life disruptions. Now, we need to explore and understand the interplay of trauma and resilience, particularly as it relates to FFY. The communication theory of resilience is an emerging communication theory that provides an excellent foundation for understanding the role of communication in resilience and provides insight into how we see individuals, communities, and organizations regain a sense of normalcy after facing difficult experiences. This theory notes that these five communicative processes of crafting normalcy, putting alternative logics to work, maintaining and using communication networks, foregrounding positive action while backgrounding negative emotion, and affirming identity anchors could look different for different populations. Given the unique experiences of FFY and the prevalence of trauma among them leads me to question what resilience looks like for individuals who experience trauma at such high rates. This study sought to explore the utility of this theory and its ability to capture the essence of resilience for FFY holistically.

As a field, we are still growing in our understanding of resilience. However, there is certain information that lends itself to deepening our understanding of this process. Attachment theory provides the psychological foundation to help us understand the vital role of a caretaker in a child's early development. The extensive research on trauma enlightens us that early childhood development is a predictive factor for a person's development over a lifetime. Further, we also understand that being placed into foster

care can disrupt the attachment created in the parent-child relationship, often traumatizing the child. We must consider trauma and how it can have lasting effects on almost every aspect of an individual's life, even their ability to engage in resilience processes.

Resilience literature posits that, despite all these negative experiences, individuals can still thrive and excel. CTR acknowledges that this resilience looks different for different populations. The current study sought to understand the resilience process among the foster youth population. This particular approach is essential because foster youth have unique lived experiences that literature speculates could discount them from enacting. Literature critiquing resilience work states that these normative judgments of resilience do not apply to various populations (Harrison, 2013).

The current research study explored how FFY engage in resilience processes. This study investigated whether the communication theory of resilience considers trauma when we attribute resiliency to individuals. Doing so allows scholars who study resilience to consider important questions that are currently unanswered: Do communication scholars examine the trauma individuals have experienced when we deem individuals and communities as not being able to bounce back? What does this bouncing back look like? What exactly does resilience look like for FFY who are exposed to trauma at such high rates? Are they incapable of resilience? Placing FFY's lived experiences as the focal point of resilience research advances resilience theorizing. Understanding resilience through a trauma-informed lens allows us to broaden our understanding of this phenomenon among a vulnerable population. Investigating these processes and their applicability or lack thereof could guide us to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of resilience. Capturing their stories is an important

starting point for us to understand resilience through a trauma-informed lens. These crucial takeaways will be discussed in the final chapter. The next chapter will discuss the methodology used to investigate the two aforementioned research questions.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The current study sought to understand the resilience process among FFY. Specifically, it sought to understand how FFY define resilience and what resilient processes they engaged in as they navigated their experiences within and beyond foster care. Additionally, the current study investigated if the communication theory of resilience (CTR) applies to the lived experiences of FFY. This study adds to our field's understanding of resilience and what the resilience process looks like among FFY. To explore the process of resilience among FFY, this study utilized the phronetic iterative approach, in which I alternated between considering existing theories, research interests, predefined questions, and goals on the one hand, with emergent qualitative data on the other hand (Tracy, 2020). Therefore, qualitative interviews were conducted with those who have previously been in the foster care system. To explore resilience among FFY, the following research questions are posed: R1: How do FFY define resilience? RQ2: How do FFY enact resilience? This chapter will provide an overview of my theoretical framework, discuss the phronetic iterative approach, and discuss my rationale for employing qualitative methods, participants, and data analysis procedures.

#### **Rationale for Research Methodology**

The current study took a phronetic approach (Tracy, 2007). This approach suggests that qualitative data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted, analyzed, and communicated to address pressing concerns and prompt change (Tracy, 2020, p. 6). This approach is defined by three core qualitative concepts: self-reflexivity, context, and thick description. Self-reflexivity refers to researchers considering the impact their past experiences, points of view, and roles have on any interaction. Context

refers to the idea that qualitative research is about researchers immersing themselves in a specific context to make sense of it. Lastly, thick descriptions refer to how researchers immerse themselves in a culture, investigate the particular circumstances present in that scene, and then move to grander statements and theories (Tracy, 2020, p. 3-4).

To engage in the iterative approach, Tracy (2020) suggests that researchers begin this approach by “identifying a particular issue, problem, or dilemma in the world and then proceed by interpreting and analyzing so that the resulting project sheds light on the current issue and open paths for possible social transformation. (p.6). This research study situates the lived experiences of FFY at the center of understanding what resilience looks like for them. The dilemma presented in this exploration is their unique lived experiences, namely the high rates of childhood trauma experienced by FFY. The ultimate goal was to investigate this social problem and offer solutions for possible transformation.

The phronetic approach prioritizes practice in context and assumes that perception always is related to a specific (self-reflective) subject position and that social and historical roots come before individual motivations and actions (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). Therefore, qualitative methods are suited for examining phronetic questions. There are many strengths to qualitative research; however, three are specifically highlighted in the current study. First qualitative research offers more than a snapshot and provides an understanding of a sustained process. This is illuminated by the rich data that explains how FFY engage in resilience processes. Qualitative research shows us the whole picture instead of the snapshot that quantitative methods would provide. Second, qualitative research honors participants’ local meanings. This is shown in the first

research question, where I allowed participants to share their understanding of resilience. Lastly, qualitative research was the best approach for this study because it focuses on experiences placed in a context. This was explicated by the study being situated in the context of foster care but seeking to understand resilience more by learning about FFYs' lived experiences. All in all, qualitative methods were appropriate for achieving the goal of this research study, which was to understand what the resilience process looks like among FFY.

### *Self-Reflexivity*

Tracy (2020) states that self-reflexivity refers to “people’s careful consideration of how their past experiences, points of view, and roles impact their interactions with and their interpretations of any particular context” (p.2). As I approached this research study, I reflected on how my background could impact my approach to this research. I am a Black, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman. I have lived in the Midwest of the United States my entire life. I spent six years of my early childhood in foster care.

I was adopted from foster care by my current family. Besides my own experiences, many things have drawn me to the current research. Resilience and trauma have always been topics that have captivated my attention. I am one of eleven foster children adopted by my parents. While we all had different reasons and experiences that led us to our adopted family, our values, teachings, and discipline were all the same within our household. However, each of our paths in life is quite different. We have all experienced trauma, yet some have fared better than others.

Further, I can vividly remember a woman in my old church congregation saying to me, “It is so great to see someone from the foster care system actually make it. It’s

something you don't see often." Her statement bothered me because it felt like foster youth already had their futures written for them, and that future was not promising. Since then, I have often thought about what and how changes can be made to improve the outcomes for those who grow up in the foster care system. These experiences have informed my values and belief systems, and I also acknowledge that they are present in my approach to this research.

Further, I want to clarify my understanding of resilience, as it also informs my approach to the current study. Resilience is a complex process people engage in when facing life disruptions. This process looks different for everyone, so our understanding of resilience can never be complete or consistent. I also believe that trauma adds even more complexity to resilience because of its dynamic effect on people, especially foster youth. While resilience needs to be studied, it should be carefully examined with each participant in mind. I believe a trauma-informed approach should be taken when analyzing resilience among any population known to be significantly impacted by trauma.

### ***Participant eligibility and recruitment***

After deciding on the "problem," Tracy (2020) suggests that researchers decide on a contextual site or group of people to study. The people of study for this research were FFY. For this study, FFY were defined as anyone who spent their early childhood through adolescence in the foster care system. This qualifier was set to allow me to investigate the trajectory of resilience among foster youth during these developmental life stages. Along with the foster care experience criteria, participants also had to be 18 years



old or older to participate in the study. Participants were screened before being interviewed to be sure they fulfilled the criteria.

Due to this population's vulnerability, some challenges were presented during recruitment. However, because I identify with the people, participants were recruited through a closed Facebook group, particularly for foster care alums. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited through this Facebook support group. To post for recruitment, I sent my recruitment flyer to the group's administrators and received approval before posting it. Snowball sampling was also used. Before ending each interview, I asked participants if they knew anyone who fit the participant criteria and if they could pass the information along. Other social media outlets, such as Instagram, were also used. The recruitment poster was posted on my personal Instagram page, allowing my friends to share the post. If they met the study's criteria, individuals who expressed interest were contacted via email to set up an interview.

### ***Participant Demographic Information***

Participants (see Table 1) were 14 individuals in the United States foster care system at any time during their childhood and adolescence. Participants identified as female ( $n = 11$ , 78.5%) and male ( $n = 3$ , 21.4%), with ages ranging from 20 to 51 years old ( $M = 35.9$ ). Most participants identified as Black ( $n = 7$ , 50%), with four identifying as White (28.0%), one as Asian-American (7%), one as Hispanic (7%), and one as biracial (7%). Participants spent between two and 20 years in the foster care system ( $M = 9.5$ ) and reported experiencing two to 16 placements while in care ( $M = 6.2$ ). Participants' relationship status varied, with six indicating they were single (42.8%), four

indicating they were married (28.5%), two indicating they were in romantic relationships (14.2%), and two indicating they were divorced (14.2%). The highest level of educational attainment also varied, with four reporting they have earned their Bachelor's degree (28.5%), four reporting they earned a Master's degree (28.5%), two reporting an Associate's degree (14.2%), one reporting a high school diploma (7.1%), two reporting a GED (14.2%), and one reporting a Doctor of Philosophy degree (7.1%).

### ***Data collection***

To better understand how FFY define resilience and how they engage in resilience processes, I conducted semi-structured interviews with FFY (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The goal of each interview was to extract rich descriptions and narratives to better understand the experiences of FFY and resilience. Using a semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed me to change specific research questions to accommodate each participant's experiences (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Allowing emerging data to influence each interview is also an important step using the phonetic iterative approach.

Before the interview began, participants were informed of the study's parameters. They had to verbally consent that they met the required qualifications and wished to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Then, interview questions were posed to gauge an understanding of the participant's experiences in foster care, their understanding and conceptualization of resilience, and how they engage in resilience processes (see Appendix C). While some questions were added to accommodate participants' experiences, all questions in the interview protocol were posed to each participant. Participants were informed that their answer to each question was voluntary and not

mandatory for the completion of the interview.

In total, 14 interviews were conducted. All interviews took place over Zoom and were 31-90 minutes long. Data collection continued until no new insights were produced from the data, implying saturation had been reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Specifically, saturation was reached when participants' definitions of resilience and resilience processes became repetitive, and no new categories or themes seemed to emerge in relation to the two research questions. This occurred after approximately the thirteenth interview. However, to verify saturation had been achieved, one more interview was conducted and transcribed. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using a transcription software known as Otter.ai. Transcribing resulted in 219 pages of single-spaced text.

### ***Data analysis***

Guided by the phronetic iterative approach, the analysis comprised multiple stages. Tracy (2020) encourages researchers to review their data as soon as possible and along the way during the research project. Doing this allowed me to identify specific areas I should focus on for the following interview. It also allowed me to see if there were any interview questions or qualitative practices that I may need to adjust. After familiarizing myself with the data, I created a way to organize them, such as creating folders for interview audio recordings and transcripts. Next, I engaged in primary and secondary coding, which is the “process of labeling certain excerpts or chunks of the data as representing or fitting into some type of phenomenon” (Tracy, 2018, p.64). The coding process begins with what grounded theorists refer to as open coding, line-by-line coding, and initial coding” (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Primary coding is intended

to capture simple descriptions of “who, what, when, where” (Tracy, 2013). Secondary cycle coding is when researchers begin to interpret, organize, and synthesize codes. Secondary coding is also where the knowledge of past literature and theories is useful as they help you make sense of your data by helping you name and organize your codes (Tracy, 2013). During this process, the communication theory of resilience presented itself as the best theory to understand the data. (See figure 1).

A phronetic iterative analysis alternates between considering existing theories and research questions on the one hand and emergent qualitative data on the other. Engaging in the cycle is the core of the iterative approach. I engaged in the process by asking myself the fundamental questions of an iterative analysis: “1) What are the data telling me? 2) What is it I want to know? 3) What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?” (Srivastava & Hopewood, 2009, p.78).

After settling on a theory and coding, Tracy (2018) suggests creating a codebook which are data displays that list key codes, definitions, and examples of the data of interest. After coding 20% of the data, the phronetic iterative approach suggests that the codebook guides the rest of the analysis. The analysis process also included various synthesizing activities such as analytic memos, theoretical sampling, negative cases, parameter setting, and loose outlines (Tracy, 2018, p. 71). While I did not create a codebook, I did various manual coding activities which Tracy suggests as good alternative to a codebook. One is a visual display I used to code for my first research question (See figure 2). In this figure, you can see that I used a whiteboard to categorize my data. I circled certain words that stood out, which eventually became the definitions for my themes. I used the visual displays to categorize various processes and definitions

of resilience that participants shared. Each theme had its own whiteboard, where I was able to draw connections to current literature and emerging data. For example, one of my codes was strength, which eventually became the theme of “resilience as survival.” Engaging in analytic memos helped me to see that FFY say resilience as a strength that helps them to survive challenging life circumstances. Doing these analytic activities allowed me to visually see my themes come alive as I narrowed down my codes into themes. This process also allowed me to compare my analytic memos, which helped me in using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Owen, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Further, engaging in these analytic activities helped me narrow down my codes to themes. For each theme presented in this study, I had a whiteboard that I used to

### ***Validity***

Creswell (2018) argues that rigorous qualitative research will use at least two forms of validation. This study used two forms of validity: member checking and rich, thick description. First, I validated my findings by using rich, thick descriptions. Thick description means that the researcher provides details of codes and themes. Stake (2010) states that a description is rich if it gives abundant, interconnected details (p.49). This process allows the reader to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred (Erlandson et al., 1993). In the current study, rich and detailed accounts of each theme were provided to give voice to FFYs’ experience of resilience.

Second, I validated the findings of this study by conducting member checks. Member checking occurs when the research solicits participants’ views of the credibility

of the findings and interpretations. For this validation, I contacted all participants with my preliminary findings, including themes, theme definitions, and quotes to exemplify each theme. Participants were asked whether or not my descriptions and interpretations reflected their experiences discussed in the interviews. Only six of the participants got back me, but all six agreed with the findings of this study. However, one participant did mention that he felt a bit censored when I edited his quote to be more appropriate for my study. However, after discussing this decision with colleagues, I added back his full quote because I wanted to honor his authentic voice in this project.

### ***Summary***

Overall, the study's goal was to understand how FFY youth define and enact resilience—using the phronetic iterative approach and qualitative methods allowed for a deep understanding of the nuances of resilience when studied in the context of foster care. Those nuances will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Results

Two overarching goals guided the present study. First, I sought to understand how FFY conceptualize resilience (RQ1). Second, I sought to know how FFY enact resilience (RQ2). In my exploration of understanding resilience among FFY, I needed to start this exploration by gathering what FFY thought resilience was and if they saw themselves as such. This was particularly important for me for two reasons: 1) While our field is evolving in our understanding of resilience, we know that it looks different for different populations; therefore, it may also have different meanings. 2) FFY are often labeled as resilient in the extant literature; thus, grasping their understanding of what it means to them could lead to crafting a model of resilience that accounts for the experiences of FFY.

Further, this exploration also led me to question what the resilience process looks like among FFY. Buzzanell (2018) posits that resilience looks different among different populations. The communication theory of resilience offers five communicative processes in which people engage when enacting resilience. Because FFY have unique experiences compared to the general population, it is essential to explore how they enact resilience and if they engage in any of these five processes. Two research questions were posed to explore the nuances of resilience among FFY: RQ1) How do FFY define resilience? RQ2) How do FFY enact resilience? The first research question leads to an understanding of resilience as *survival* (with sub-themes of *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*), resilience *as elastic*, and *resilience as a burden*. For the second research question, data analysis revealed that four of the five resilient processes of CTR were used to enact resilience by FFY: *crafting normalcy* (with sub-themes of

*material possessions and maintaining family identity), creating and maintaining communication network (with sub-themes of maintain communication networks and creating new communication networks), foregrounding positive action while backgrounding negative feelings to work, and affirming identity anchors (with subthemes of faith as an identity anchor and family heritage as an identity anchor).* This chapter explores the findings of both research questions.

### **Research Question One: Defining resilience**

The first research question examined how FFY define resilience. Participants defined resilience in three ways: *resilience as survival* (with the subthemes of *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*, *resilience as elastic*, and *resilience as burdensome*.

#### ***Resilience as Survival***

This understanding of resilience states that resilient people can survive whatever challenges life throws their way. This was exemplified in two subthemes: *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*. Resilience as survival means that resilience enables FFY to overcome the storms of life; they are not defeated by tragedy and can push through and rise out of tragedy. Jessica, a 39-year-old white woman from California, shared:

Resilience is survival. I think that's what it is to me. And I think that looks different for different people. I think sometimes people can look very poised. They are very still and calm and controlled, yet they're really battling something deep inside, then they're trying to survive. They're trying to be resilient. And then there are people whose struggle is real. I



mean, you know, you can see it clear as the nose on your face that they really have a hard time with life. Life is hard for them, as hard to just get out of bed. It's hard to function. And they're no less resilient than the calm ones. You know, they're surviving, too. Resilience can look really messy. It's not always nice and tidy and clean and calm. Jessica, 290-297. *Please note that the numbers following quotes indicate transcript line numbers.*

Similarly, Rachel, a 27-year-old Mexican woman from Texas, shared, “resilience means overcoming the big things; you struggle, but you’re pushing through and asking for help” (283-285). Resilience as survival also means being able to recover from adversity, as noted by Daniel, a 31-year-old Vietnamese man from Maryland. “I think like people who are in distress; they’re able to recover from it. They survive and can be successful through adversity. Resilience is the ability to overcome what’s happened to you and what’s been handed to you” (289-292). FFY believe that resilience means survival. Participants described resilience as survival in two unique ways: *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*; these subthemes are discussed next.

**Weathering the Storm.** Participants who described resilience as survival stated they were not defeated by tragedy. They described resilience as being able to weather the storm and survive through the elements of life. Naomi, a 47-year-old Black woman from Chicago, shared that resilience is being able to withstand the elements of life:

I define resilience as we think of a forest you got all those trees standing together, and you know, the wind, the sun, anything, you know, the elements just beat up against them, and they would stand together, and you

know, they are fine. But resilience to me is that one little skinny tree that stands in front of them that when the winds and the rain and the snow and the sleet and it hits that tree first, but that tree doesn't bend, it doesn't stop growing, it begins to learn to become more flexible. That's what resilience is to me. Naomi, 294-299

While their tragedies could look quite different than those who do not experience foster care, they see themselves as resilient for surviving such tragedies. Naomi understands resilience as bending but not breaking when the storms come. Similarly, Shelia, a 33-year-old Black woman from Texas, believes that “someone can experience tragedy and hardship and keep going. Resilience means you can keep moving forward; tragedy doesn't defeat you” (214). Hardship and tragedy take their toll on FFY, but it does not break them.

**Rising again like the Phoenix.** The description of the phoenix bird defined this subtheme; while it went through the fire, it could rise out of the ashes and survive. Veronica, a 40-year-old Black woman from Texas, describes resilience as the phoenix bird rising out of the ashes. She believes “there is something within the bird that is greater than the environment around it. I think of resilience there must be something internally in you that wants to fight against all the outside struggles that you are surrounded by” 326-328. This definition ties into the early literature on FFY that often described them as having “grit” which is this deep determination, and persistence to succeed (Thorne, 2015). Similarly, Jacob, a 39-year-old Black man from Texas, viewed resilience as surviving despite the barriers, like the phoenix overcoming the fire and rising from the ashes.

I define resilience as the strength to overcome the odds, obstacles, and barriers that interfere with your growth and development. And that you really hurdled over a lot of pitfalls in life that really sought to destroy you. You escaped; you're like a resilient survivor. You survived hell. Jacob, 273-27

FFY believe that resilience is their ability to survive and overcome the tragedies they endure. They understand resilience as their ability to endure the hardships of life and rise above their circumstances. Bella, a 31-year-old Biracial (Mexican and White) woman for Portland, also defines resilience as survival and one's ability to get back up.

I think resilience is like, the ability to strive and adapt, despite setbacks. Despite being at like a disadvantage, despite having experienced trauma, despite, you know, things that were out of your control as a child. Like the ability to get back up. The ability to kind of, like, move forward to the best of your ability. Bella, 199-20

Resilience as survival was a salient theme that showed up in two subthemes: weathering the storm and rising like the phoenix. FFY define resilience as surviving and overcoming childhood trauma, adversity, and situations that were out of their control. A person who enacts resilience is a survivor.

### ***Resilience as Elastic***

The general conceptualization of resilience is that a person can bounce back from adversity. This was also true for participants in the current study. Some even described resilient people as like a rubber band's elasticity. FFY understand that resilience means that you can experience life disruptions, such as being taken from your birth homes makes you more flexible and increases your ability to adapt. This theme was defined by

participants adopting the mentality of hardship happening to them, but it does not keep them stuck. Keywords representing this theme include *bouncing back*, *rubber band*, *elasticity*, *flexibility*, and *adaptability*. Heather, a 30-year-old White woman from New Jersey, perfectly explained this. When asked to define resilience, Heather states, “I think of like a rubber band, the elasticity of it, being able to, you know, snap back again, it's just the ability to keep going in the face of like, all the really tough, and hard situations” (441-443).

Similarly, Selena, a 20-year-old White woman from Texas, shared that she defines resilience as “the ability to bounce back from a situation. Like a rubber band. The ability to not be a victim of your circumstances” (309-310). As previously stated, resilience is defined differently in various fields; these two participants’ understanding of resilience closely resembles that of engineers. Engineering science describes materials as resilient when they “resist cracking or breaking under stress or return to their original form after distortion by stress or load” (Gunderson, Folke, & Janssen, 2006, p. 1). With society’s general understanding of resilience, it is no surprise that these participants also see resilience as one’s ability to bounce back.

### ***Resilience as Burdensome***

It is important to note that only some participants responded positively when asked to define resilience. Three participants shared the complexities of defining and understanding resilience. These participants describe resilience as being burdensome. Aaron, a 51-year-old Black man from Michigan, believes that society’s understanding is flawed. “Society's version of resilience is what you can show or prove what you can buy, wear, and achieve educationally. I know people with doctorate degrees who are

completely miserable” (406-408). Earlier in the interview, Aaron discussed how his understanding of resilience differs from society’s definition.

When a worker, therapist, or even the general public says, “you’re so resilient.” Why are they telling them that they're resilient because they are in college because they have held down a full-time job because they are driving a decent car, because they are paying the bills, those kinds of things? But that is not true resilience. That is, maintaining. That is going through the motions of life, like survival. Yeah, that is survival. That's not resilience. Resilience is a 360 approach to mental health. For me, resilience means that you are taking care of yourself spiritually, you are taking care of yourself mentally, and you are taking care of yourself physically. You know, all those things. And most of us in foster care are not true resilient people. Because to be resilient is to be in recovery.

Aaron, 352-360

Aaron sees resilience as much more than a person’s accomplishments. He sees it as a person’s commitment to growth and recovery. Unlike the other participants, Aaron does not see resilience as survival; he stated that because you are surviving, it does not mean you are being resilient.

Paris, a 33-year-old Black woman from Connecticut, shares that she hates the word resilience. She feels that society does poorly in acknowledging why someone has to be resilient. Paris believes that there are things that foster youth should not have to endure, and when we label someone resilient, we negate the trauma they have experienced. She describes the burden it is for FFY to be resilient:

Um, it's such an interesting question to me because I hate the word. It is a way to say like, so it is a dual kind of language for me. On the one hand, it is like, yes, you were able to overcome a lot. And you've been able to triumph over that rather than just like be a victim of it. Then, on the other hand, resilience, to me, does not acknowledge the factors that got you there. It is just that people think you were amazing to be able to get over that but do not look at the fact that I had to get over some shit in the first place. Like, why is the system so horrible that I have to be this resilient? Why are we not talking about that? Right? And so, like, why is it such a horror story? Why do we have to be so resilient? I guess it takes the focus off why this happens. It's just like, oh, I'm so proud that you were able to get over the bullshit that everybody placed in front of you. Instead of being like, why don't we just stop putting bullshit in front of people? So, it's almost condescending, a little bit as well. Paris, 233-247

Jacob also shared how resilience can be burdensome. When discussing his definition of resilience, he shared how the burden is now on him to be an upstanding citizen in society despite the hardship he faced while in foster care.

You came out of a lot, and people don't understand how hard it is. We come from extreme situations. We come out of those extreme situations not angry with the world and not wanting to blow it up and shoot at people and kill people. But come out with a kind of heart. We come out with love and with compassion for other people. That's strength right there. That's resilience. Jacob, 282-286

While Aaron and Paris's understanding of resilience differed, they disliked the word resilience. Jacob, Aaron, and Paris all discuss the burden of enacting resilience. Their thoughts about resilience highlight the complexities of defining and studying resilience. Similarly, Jessica's earlier quote about resilience looking messy illuminates the complexities of defining and studying resilience. It is also important to note that each participant shared that they thought of themselves as resilient, even those who did not like the word. Participants who did not like the word resilience shared that they did not agree with how society views resilience; however, they identify with their own understanding of resilience. For example, when talking with Aaron, he critiqued society's understanding of resilience; he believes that we use the word too loosely and say that people are resilient because they can accomplish a goal. But when asked if he considers himself resilient, he shared that he now sees himself as resilient because he is no longer miserable and has done the work. This participant had a very unique perspective of resilience which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The first research question led to an understanding of FFY understanding of *resilience as survival* (with subthemes of *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*), *resilience as elastic*, and *resilience as burdensome*. The following section discusses the findings for the second research question.

### **Research Question Two: Enacting Resilience**

The second research question examined how FFY enact resilience. Participants explained their enactment of resilience in four distinct ways: *crafting normalcy* (with sub-themes of *material possessions and maintaining family identity*), *communication networks* (with sub-themes of *maintaining communication networks* and *creating new*

*communication networks*), foregrounding positive action while backgrounding negative feelings, and affirming identity anchors (with sub-themes of *faith as an identity anchor* and *family heritage as an identity anchor*). Each theme and sub-theme are discussed below.

### ***Crafting Normalcy by Clinging to Home***

Buzzanell (2010) describes crafting normalcy as an individual's attempt to normalize their life after hardship through "language and routines, interactions and rituals, storytelling, and the stories that result to construct a new normal that integrates loss" (p. 101). This is the stage for FFY in which they are trying to grasp onto anything tangible and maintain any routines and rituals of their birth family. To them, normalcy had to be crafted because normalcy for them was taken away when they were placed into foster care. After being placed into foster care, their lives are often riddled with instability, such as several home transitions, transferring to multiple schools, and socially adapting to different environments (Mitchell, 2016). Therefore, normalcy for FFY is what they knew before the disruption of home occurred.

FFY engaged in crafting normalcy in two ways: clinging to their material possessions and maintaining a sense of family identity through rituals, activities, and behaviors that kept them connected to their birth families and their lives before foster care. Both subthemes will be addressed in turn.

**Material Possessions.** First, FFY would cling to their material possessions to maintain the ordinary even if they are surrounded by uncertainty due to this life disruption. Literature discusses how children are placed into foster care and are met with a trash bag of their belongings, in which they sometimes have no say-so into what goes in



that bag (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Unrau et al., 2008). For example, when Naomi was placed in her second foster home, she shared how she was able to go back to her house and get things that were important to her.

Oh, and during the second placement, I was able to go back to my house to get a couple of things that made me feel more like me. I have always felt like an alien in this situation. Like, they just take you. I had this ring, and I got my favorite shirt. Oh, you know, just a few little things that I will keep in my life. Naomi, 579-583

She shared how she felt very out of herself and like an alien but having these special things with her, like her ring and favorite shirt, helped her feel like her usual self even in this weird and unknown situation. Naomi crafted normalcy by clinging to material possessions that helped her feel normal. Similarly, Bella shared that she took a photo album of her family with her when she was placed in foster care. This was important because it helped her feel connected to her family while in foster care.

My aunt had given us all these albums, like all my siblings, and all the albums have pictures of my siblings and my family. So that was something that I still have to this day. It's probably one of the only items that I was able to keep from that time. Bella 289-292.

**Maintaining Family Identity.** FFY also crafted normalcy by remaining connected to their family-of-origin's identity through rituals, activities, and behaviors. For example, Bella shared that in addition to material possessions, she also tried to maintain normalcy by staying culturally connected to her family and staying true to their Mexican heritage.

But it was something I felt that really helped me be closer to my family and deal with not being with them. So, like, whether it be like, you know, speaking Spanish or just like different styles of, like how I wear my hair or, you know, different foods that I'd want to eat like, it was like I was always gravitating more towards trying to stay connected to that culture.

Bella 297-300

Crafting normalcy is the process in which participants enact their resilience by engaging in activities they did with their birth families. Jacob shared that he kept up with boxing even after being placed into foster care because he was born into a family of boxers. It was a way for him to continue a family tradition and keep his family's boxing legacy alive. "Just because I came from a family of fighters. I felt like my connection with boxing, and even my older brother was a three-time champion Golden Glove pro fighter. I feel like boxing was what kept me connected with my family" Jacob, 361-363.

FFY also engaged in behaviors that helped them escape the reality of being in foster care. FFY used music to escape the realities of foster care and stay connected to their families. Aaron, a 52-year-old Black man from Michigan, shared how music was an escape for him:

When I was in foster care, I listened to music constantly. And I daydreamed constantly. So, I would put records on, and I would rock back and forth with my eyes closed in a chair and listen to the record and imagine, like my family being together, I would imagine being a rap star. I would play out a whole movie in my head. That would be my escape.

Aaron, 541-544

Similarly, Paris shared that she kept up on music when she was placed into foster care because her mom loved it so much. She used music to feel connected to her mother when she missed her:

My mom's love of music has always followed me. And I associate so many good memories of her with music. And so, I've always found a way to either get a Walkman or iPod or, like, something that I could use to listen to music when I missed her. Yeah. Wow. And my brothers and sisters, we always bonded through music. We used to play like we were the Jackson Five, and we would sing Boyz II Men's "Mama" song to my mom, like every year for Mother's Day. And so, I would listen to that when I couldn't see her, just CDs of my favorite song or my favorite artist. To this day, my favorite artist is Anita Baker. And it's because of the memories that I have of my mom cooking and stuff, listening to her Anita Baker and stuff, and just like beautiful memories. Paris 427-437

While their lives are anything but normal when they experience the disruption of home, they enact their resilience by crafting normalcy through behaviors that keep them connected to their birth families. Crafting normalcy also allowed them to escape their reality by having a piece of home with them, whether it be a tangible item from their home or a familial tradition. Participants retained their most valuable family routines. We can see this occurring in Paris's life with music and Brianna maintaining her Mexican heritage in various ways. Foster care research notes that this transition can be challenging and filled with ambiguity and uncertainty (Mitchell, 2016). Therefore, it is no surprise that foster youth use crafting normalcy to enact their resilience. Research shows that

when creating normalcy for foster youth, the goal is for them to “live as normal as possible, including engaging in childhood activities that are suitable for children of the same age, level of maturity, and developmental level” (Texas CASA, 2019). Even though their lives were not going back to what they viewed as normal, they engaged in these behaviors to craft it for themselves.

### ***Communication Networks***

Exploring the communication networks of FFY emerged in ways that uniquely reflected their circumstances. Buzzanell (2018) describes this process as “enabling people to draw upon their bonds with others through face-to-face and mediated communication” (p. 102). Therefore, this theme refers to FFY finding and creating their communication networks and using them for support. Buzzanell mentions that in this process, individuals expand their networks and consider transformation; this is often the reality that foster youth face when placed in care.

In line with the theory, FFY maintained existing communication networks to cope with transitions in ways that allowed them to experience resilience. At the same time, FFY had to create new communication networks after being removed from their families. Because FFY were often not permitted to maintain communicative networks already in place, they had to create new communication networks. Both manifestations of communication networks are discussed in turn below.

**Maintaining Communication Networks.** First, FFY utilized communication networks in birth and adoptive families. This most clearly occurred within sibling relationships. Jacob shared how his adoptive brother was a great source of support for him growing up and that he still is today. “My brother gives me advice. The advice my

foster dad gave him when he was growing up, he gives me even now as a 37-year-old man; he still treats me like I'm 15, meaning he still loves me like a little brother. He's that support system for me" Jacob, 386-390. Sibling bonds can be significant sources of resilience for foster youth. Research shows that sibling relationships serve children well when they face adversity (Yates & Richardson, 2017). Research also shows that the presence of a sibling is typically associated with better outcomes in foster care, such as fewer placements (Albert & King, 2008), better relationships with foster parents (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009), improved educational outcomes (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011), and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013).

Jessica and Jacob were the only two placed with their biological siblings out of fourteen participants in the current study. Jessica had a brother with whom she was extremely close. She reflected on how close they were growing up. "In my foster years, it was only my brother, Nathan. When I could be around him, we were best friends. We were like twins. We shared a lot; it was almost like I could read his mind" Jessica, 592-594. Being placed together in foster care was a significant advantage that Jessica and her brother had. They were able to rely on each other for support. In this way, Jessica could enact resilience by maintaining this strong tie with her brother. Jacob was placed with his sister, but she was eventually adopted by the family, fostering them, and he was placed in another home.

Jessica shared how her adoptive grandmother was a great source of support for her growing up. Her grandma would compliment her and her brother on their similarities and even talk about how special her birth family must be.

My grandmother was just the only person who ever asked me questions about my first life before adoption. She never made me feel like it was a taboo conversation or subject. She would often say that my brother and I looked like twins. We really do look like twins. We're very similar in our looks, and she would acknowledge that a lot, and she'd say I wonder if you look like your mom or your dad more. Jessica, 508-510.

Later, Jessica shared how meaningful this relationship was for her growing up. “She was so wonderful. She was always that adult in my life that I just felt safe with, that one you know really sees you. She validated me, all of me, including me, before the adoption. That meant everything to me” Jessica, 525-527. This is particularly important for understanding the supportive relationships for foster youth. Sometimes that support could be as simple as acknowledging their birth family. While small, this meant a great deal to Jessica and possibly other foster youth. This relationship could be a source of resilience for Jessica, especially being the only adult who regularly engaged with her about her life before adoption. In many ways, Jessica’s adoptive grandmother was affirming her identity. This process will be discussed in greater detail later, but essentially Jessica was allowed to feel good about her identity and her birth family because of the safety and support her grandmother offered.

**Creating New Communication Networks.** Although some FFY could maintain connections to their communication networks, the disruptive nature of foster care required FFY to create new communication networks. Resilience typically starts with a life disruption (Buzzanell, 2018). For foster youth, this occurs through the disruption of home. We also know that when faced with disruption, we usually turn to those close to us

for support (Buzzanell, 2010; Doerfel et al., 2010). Because foster youths' separation from family and social circles disrupts existing family networks. FFY face the challenge of creating new communication networks.

Revoking parental rights and consistent changes in placements are two factors that can significantly impact foster youth access to the people in their network. When FFY were removed from their homes, they had to create new familial and social ties. Participants reflected on using this process in their early lives and adulthood. As he grew up, Daniel shared that he sought support in his community when he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Upon not finding support, he created his own support system for those battling the disorder and made a good friend from the group.

My friend I met when I created a bipolar mental health support group on my meetup account. I realized that there is no support here for mental health. There was somebody who had one, but it wasn't local. So, I decided to create one through Meetup, and then we met, and I hosted. They would come to my house, and we would talk and meet and greet and play games. My friend from there, I will call her when I'm down and if she's not that busy. She could understand because she has bipolar, and we would talk for hours. Daniel 563-570.

Daniel was very intentional about expanding his communicative network. He sought out support specifically from those battling the same mental health disorder as him. Scharp, Kubler, and Wang (2020) posit that when people lack familial support, they may turn to a larger community to respond to their difficulties. Daniel builds community resilience by creating this support group for those battling bipolar disorder. While Daniel

sought support for his mental health by creating a community, Hillary sought support from a friend at church. Hillary shares that she is grateful for support from her friend because she can be transparent about her life without fearing judgment. “I met her at church; she’s really been there for me. I can be honest with her. I am not very honest with many people about my past because I fear they will judge me” Hillary, 570-573.

Transformation in supportive networks occurs for FFY, as well as they enact resilience. Brianna shared

The older I got, the more I felt like I had people in my corner. It was probably very much the opposite when I was in foster care. Like, I felt like my support system was my biological family. But they weren't always able to be there for me, or I wasn't always allowed to see them. Brianna 317-319

Though she stated that she now has a great support system, her access to them was limited due to her being in foster care.

These findings highlight the complexity of communicative networks for foster youth. When FFY are removed from their family system, they face the challenge of maintaining those ties within the limitations of care-specific child protective laws. FFY thus create new social networks throughout their different placements, highlighting the complexities FFY face when relying on their communication networks. Many of them must create new support circles by reaching out to those outside their social circles in the community and those within their foster and adoptive families. These findings illustrate the degree to which FFY communication networks operate to create resilience while also differing from communication network processes in other contexts.



## **Foregrounding Productive Action while Backgrounding Negative Feelings**

Foregrounding positive action while backgrounding negative feelings is the process that centers on the embodiment of resilience (Buzzanell, 2018). This process also involves conscious decision-making. Scharp et al. (2020) describe this process as people's decisions to address their problems and the support they might receive from others. This process is dual-layered; when faced with life disruptions, people, organizations, and communities enact resilience by foregrounding their positive and productive actions while backgrounding their negative feelings. This is a conscious effort to keep things moving. This is not a dismissal of feelings; instead, it is a decision not to allow negative emotions to interfere with productive action.

Buzzanell (2010) states that backgrounding is a “conscious decision to acknowledge that one has the legitimate right to feel anger or loss in certain ways, but these feelings are counterproductive to important goals” (p. 9). Justice evidenced this during her time in college when she was homeless; even amid her sleeping in her car and having to go to a food pantry, she still went to school. In fact, she stated that her experience of being homeless is what motivated her to keep attending school. Her goal to attend school and be successful was at the forefront of her mind, and her negative feelings about being homeless were put in the background.

But I think more significantly when I was in college, I was homeless for a short time because something happened, and I couldn't pay my rent at the time. I ended up homeless, sleeping in my car, but I had my car and had to go through a food pantry, and it was pretty bad. I think that experience accelerated my need for success even more because I saw firsthand what it

looks like to be homeless. I didn't care what was happening in my life; I always attended school. Justice, 452-457

Similarly, Paris used the process to enact resilience. During her final semester of college, her funding was pulled, which meant she would have to pay out of pocket. She did not get the funding figured out and instead enrolled in 10 classes and graduated early so that her scholarship still covered her. "I did what I needed to do to make sure I could graduate a semester early. I enrolled in five extra classes and took ten classes in my last semester of college, and I barely skated by" Paris, 164-167. She did not let her negative feelings rule the situation. Instead, she engaged in productive action. Paris shared that she kept calling the scholarship office, but when no solution was found, she took matters into her own hands and got to work. Taking 10 hours to graduate early is no small feat, yet Paris was determined to do it and not allow her negative feelings about the situation to stop her from accomplishing her goals. Amidst her learning that she was losing her financial support due to aging out of foster care, she was faced with the challenge of being unable to contact her social worker. Because of this, she engaged in more productive action and wrote about her experience to the Department of Children and Family Services. Paris made the conscious decision to keep working towards what she wanted. During the interview, Paris got emotional, sharing that it was one of her first times discussing her feelings about this situation.

I don't even think I got emotional about it at the time. This is the first time I've ever talked about it. But it was hard. I was in classes all day, every day. I did not sleep. I was an RA, so I also had a job during this time. 179-182

This is what the process of foregrounding productive action and backgrounding negative feelings can look like. FFY keep pushing to do what needs to be done. They also make the conscious decision to engage in productive action and not allow their negative feelings to interfere with whatever goals they have set for themselves. For these two participants, their productive action was continuing to attend classes despite the life disruptions they faced. By engaging in productive action, they embody resilience and showcase their ability to withstand life's challenges.

### ***Identity Anchors***

Identity anchors are a “relatively enduring cluster of identity discourses upon which individuals and their familial, collegial, and or community members rely on when explaining who they are for themselves and in relation to each other” (Buzzanell, 2010, p.4.) This is the process in which individuals enact that which is most important to them. Within the current study, FFY clung to essential aspects of their identity when faced with hardship, including their faith and familial heritage. Each is discussed below in turn.

**Faith as an Identity anchor.** First, FFY anchored their identity on their religious beliefs. Participants used language such as praying, reading their bible, trusting God, and submitting to a higher power when discussing the parts of their identity that carried them through their challenging upbringing. Naomi shared:

I'm a very spiritual person, um, I know that is always there. I know there's always a reason for everything, good or bad, up or down, rain or shine, there's a reason. Whether I get to know them or not is not the point. I'm now looking at life and the day-to-day challenges as more opportunities to trust God. And I need to stop resisting these lessons. And know that I am

fine; I am safe. I am 100% taken care of by God, and I am grateful for that. Naomi, 758-762

Naomi trusts in her spiritual identity whenever she faces challenging times. Because of her spiritual identity, she can trust God regardless of the circumstances. Similarly, Aaron shared, “God knows what he’s doing. God knows what he’s done. And I can only control myself and my actions. Whatever I do with that will determine the outcome of whatever it is I’m trying to do” 597-599. Justice, a 34-year-old Black woman from Texas, shared that she trusted God completely regardless of what was going on in her life.

The first thing is God. I can’t say it enough. I hold dearly everything I owe to him. I’m undeserving of a lot of His mercies, and there are times I’ve seen things happen to me or could have happened to me, and nobody else but God did not allow it to happen. Yeah, I also feel like everything I’ve ever asked him for, he’s always told me yes. Naomi, 758-762

**Familial Heritage as an Identity Anchor.** Second, participants also discussed their familial heritage as an integral part of their identity. Jessica shared that it was her familial lineage that contributed to her resilience. She believes resilience is generational, so she relied on her familial identity to enact resilience. Jessica shared:

I love the resilience of the women in my family. Particularly I feel my grandmothers, my mother, and my aunt. Some of them are alive now. Some of them are not. But it’s something I can’t really put into words, but I just feel like there’s a lot of, like, toughness and soul. It’s just like, I just

know it is going to be okay. You know, we've seen some horrible, ugly, unspeakable things. But we are survivors. Jessica, 345-349

Similarly, Brianna shared that clinging to her Mexican heritage was a way for her to enact resilience when she was first placed into foster care.

But it was something I felt like that really helped me be closer to my family and deal with not being with them. So, like, whether it be like, you know, speaking Spanish or just like different styles of, like how I wear my hair or, you know, different foods that I'd want to eat like, it was like I was always gravitating more towards trying to stay connected to that culture. Brianna 297-300

Brianna's strong identity connection to her family identity is particularly notable given the nature of familial separation built into the FFY experience. Even in the face of separation from their family of origin, FFY still clung to the things that keep them connected to their birth families, including their heritage and lineage of strong women. Despite the familial separation, they can still affirm their familial identities. Their identity was anchored in their family heritage.

## **Conclusion**

The current study sought to understand how FFY define resilience. Data analysis revealed that FFY define resilience in three ways: resilience as survival, resilience as elastic, and resilience as burdensome. This study also sought to understand what the resilience process looks like for FFY. FFY engaged in four resilient processes offered by the communication theory of resilience: crafting normalcy by clinging to home, creating and maintaining communication networks, foregrounding productive action while

backgrounding negative emotions, and identity anchors. This study has important implications for resilience research, foster care research, and practice which are discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The current study aimed to understand what resilience means to FFY and how they enact it. This study discovered that FFY define resilience as *survival* (with sub-themes of *weathering the storm* and *rising again like the phoenix*), *elastic*, and *burdensome*. This study employed the communication theory of resilience using the phronetic iterative approach. The phronetic iterative approach “alternates between considering existing theories and research questions on the one hand and emerging qualitative data on the other” (Tracy, 2020, p.11). Through this process, the current study discovered that FFY enact resilience using four of the five communicative processes of CTR: *crafting normalcy* (with sub-themes of *material possessions and maintaining family identity*), *communicative networks* (with subthemes of *maintaining communication networks* and *creating new communication networks*), *foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings*, and *affirming identity anchors* (with subthemes of *faith as an identity anchor* and *family heritage as an identity anchor*). These findings contribute to current foster care, communication, and resilience research by (1) giving voice to FFY to define resilience for themselves, which could expand our understanding of resilience, (2) illuminating communicative processes articulated in the communication theory of resilience, and (3) providing a framework for a trauma-informed care approach to resilience and foster care research and practices. This chapter discusses these contributions, theoretical implications, future research directions, and limitations.

### **Giving voice to FFY**

Literature has revealed the complexities of conceptualizing resilience; the definition varies by discipline. However, the communication field understands resilience

as engaging in processes to create new normalcies when facing life disruptions. The communication theory of resilience (CTR) comprises five processes in which Buzzanell (2014) posits that individuals, communities, and organizations engage in enacting resilience. However, these processes are based on normative judgments of resilience that look different among FFY because of their unique experiences, such as the high rate of childhood trauma. Normalcy in the context of foster care means that foster youth engage in typical, age-appropriate activities similar to their peers who are not in foster care. While one of the goals of the child welfare system is to create normalcy for foster youth, it is often hard to construct due to various child welfare laws and policies (Annie Casey Foundation, 2015). For example, some participants in this current study experienced fifteen or more different foster care placements before they were 18. “Foster care prepares you for the move; you are always packing up and moving” (Shelia, 156). As exemplified in the previous quote, these many life changes can appear to be expected for those in foster care. However, when compared to the general population is not normal. Therefore, normative judgments should not be applied to FFY. Their experiences are unique; consequently, we need to approach research about FFY through different lenses.

Foster youth understand resilience primarily as their ability to endure and withstand tragedy. While this is a noteworthy quality, it should not be expected. When setting up systems that support foster youth and their families, it’s important not to assume that their resilience will bring them through whatever circumstances they face. Instead, we should set up a system to protect them from further harm. For example, foster youth should not be expected to endure the reality of having food withheld from them by their foster parents (Paris, 496). When scholars and practitioners see resilience through



normative judgment lenses, it places great responsibility on people to endure yet survive. For example, as noted in the previous chapter, FFY discussed how burdensome it is to enact resilience. Jacob reflected on the burden of surviving “extreme situations” he states that people do not understand how hard it is to not be mad at the world and have love and compassion in his heart after having to endure so much in foster care. Further, Paris questioned why the system was so horrible that she had to enact resilience. Paris also questioned why the foster care system has not changed. “It is just like, oh, I am so proud that you were able to get over the bullshit that everybody placed in front of you. Instead of being like, why don’t we just stop putting bullshit in front of people” (Paris, 244-246)? FFY believe that instead of making changes to a broken system, they are forced to endure such harsh realities. This is the reality for FFY. Their understanding and experience of enacting resilience are necessary to consider when we inquire about resilience among this population.

FFYs’ understanding of resilience highlights the level of disruption and complexity that exists when we explore how resilience can look in different contexts. This complexity is also discussed in Harrison’s (2013) exploration of the problematic nature of the emphasis on resilience in policy and academic fields. Harrison argues that this emphasis on resilience “supports normative value judgments, may overemphasize the ability of people to ‘bounce back,’ undervalue the hidden costs of resilience, and may shift responsibility for dealing with crisis away from those in power” (p. 97). Participants in the current study speak to the idea of undervaluing the cost of resilience and shifting the responsibility from those in power. When shifting the responsibility of dealing with crises from those in power, the responsibility is now on the individuals that experience

those crises. As FFY have stated, this is burdensome, putting them in extreme circumstances that they should not endure.

Similarly, when we undervalue the cost of resilience, we ignore how these disasters and life disruptions impact these vulnerable populations and underestimate the actual cost of resilience. FFYs' understanding of resilience is the pressure to keep surviving circumstances that many believe can be changed. These changes can be made if we look beyond a person's survival ability and examine and modify the systems that reinforce survival.

Giving voice to FFY is an important contribution to the current study. Buzzanell (2018) and Harrison (2013) discuss the obstacles different individuals and groups face in constituting resilience. This study explores those challenges among FFY by placing their voices at the forefront of inquiry. By placing the voices of FFY at the forefront of investigation, this study reveals the constraints that resilience puts on FFY and sheds light on various changes that need to be made in the foster care system and resilience research. To understand the nuances of resilience for FFY, it is meaningful that their experiences are at the center of our work. Next, I discuss how CTR is a valuable theory for understanding how FFY use communication processes to enact resilience.

### **Illuminating the Processes of CTR and Theoretical Implications**

The communication theory of resilience is valuable for studying resilience among different populations. Participants engaged in four of the five communicative processes of CTR. These processes help understand resilience among vulnerable populations such as FFY. I walk through some of the resilient processes to highlight their utility.

Affirming identity anchors is an important process that should be studied to understand how individuals use different aspects of their identity to cling to hope when faced with life disruptions. This study shows the importance of a person's cultural heritage and spiritual identity when enacting resilience. Jessica remembered the strength of her bloodline, and she clung to that as she endured the difficulties of foster care. She discussed the strength of the women before her and how she knew she could do anything because she came from generations of triumphant women. This supports what Buzzanell (2010) states about resilience; she posits that it is cultivated by intergenerational behaviors and values (p.100). Like Jessica, Bella clung to her Hispanic heritage to remind her of her family and stay connected to her roots. She engaged in traditions from her heritage, such as how she dressed, the food she ate, and even continuing to use her native language. More research is needed to understand how individuals, communities, and organizations use their cultural identities to enact resilience. Affirming identity anchors also highlighted the refuge that people take in religious institutions. Heather discussed the safety she felt in her relationship with her friend Colleen because they were church friends. Aaron and Jacob discuss how their faith in God helped them to be resilient. Scholars have not highlighted how spiritual friendships and religious identities are resources for individuals to enact resilience.

The communicative process of foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative emotions could be used to further understand resilience in various populations. This study highlights the utility of this process, especially when you need to get things done despite the hardship you are currently facing. We all know that life does not stop when tragedy strikes. What is not discussed in the extant literature is

the negative consequences that could result from deciding not to process and deal with the emotions that come with life difficulties. Buzzanell states that this process does not mean people ignore their feelings; they acknowledge them, but the focus in this process is the productive action they engage in. We want to be mindful of how we celebrate individuals that enact resilience by pushing through their emotions and not taking the time to process them. Van der Kolk (2014) states that acknowledging and validating your feelings is essential but processing them as well could move you toward greater healing. It is crucial that we do not create a culture of emotionally unhealthy people, all in the name of resilience. Instead, we could equip people with the skills to ask for help, pause, process what is going on, and feel those feelings.

Putting alternative logics to work was not a salient resilient process for FFY. Buzzanell describes this process as individuals utilizing their agency, crafting their familial and organizational or community roles, enriching and reframing identity anchors, and seeking productive action to react to contextual aspects that they perceive do not enable adaptation and transformation for a new normal. This is the process in which individuals realize that one is an agent of and co-creator of realities. Pransky (2003) states that, for many, an alternative logic operates in the heat of transformation in the bleakest circumstances. This process is rather complex because individuals try to make sense of and adapt to new situations while also having the urgent need to act. Putting alternative logics to work was one participant's "messiest" process. Heather was the only participant who engaged in putting alternative logics to work. She engaged in this process when dealing with sexual abuse at the hands of her foster dad. Heather would run away, which ultimately landed her in scary situations, such as survival sex, drugs, and

homelessness. Survival sex is the “exchange of sex for food, money, shelter, drugs, and other needs and wants” (Walls & Bell, 2011, p. 424). When asked why she kept running away, she shared that she never felt safe and would run away again if something did not feel right. In these instances, Heather is taking control of her life; she is the agent. During this process, Heather realized she had agency and began to take ownership of her life. She did not have to endure this sexual abuse; she could escape and take matters into her own hands. Putting alternative logics to work is a rather complex process because individuals try to make sense of and adapt to new situations while also having the urgent need to act. I am fascinated by this process, and I believe much more could be learned about how individuals put alternative logics to work in the face of life disruption.

Maintaining and using communication networks is another helpful process; however, this study was called creating and maintaining communication networks. This change highlighted FFY’s ability to create their communication networks. FFY used this process to build community resilience. In their attempts to create communication networks, FFY used Facebook to create various online support groups for FFY. I located all my participants from several online communities that exist for FFY. The purpose of these groups varies, some are for support, connecting others to resources, and building community, and some are to solicit advice and participants for research studies. These groups are very intentional about building community among FFY. Research conducted among foster youth online communities should be done to understand how these communities build collective resilience.

The current study highlights the usefulness of the communication theory of resilience. It is a great starting point for understanding how vulnerable populations enact

resilience during life disruption. FFY engaged in four of the five communicative processes of CTR. FFY engaged in these processes to enact resilience during the life disruption of being placed into foster care.

### **Trauma-Informed Approach**

Now that I have laid out this study's contributions to resilience theorizing, this section introduces a trauma informed approach to resilience and foster care research and practices. I propose a trauma-informed lens to resilience, specifically among FFY.

SAMSHA defines a trauma-informed approach as:

A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved in the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and seeks to actively resist retraumatizing. (p. 9)

A trauma-informed lens means that we do not go into this research knowing what type of resources FFY should use to enact resilience; in fact, a trauma-informed resilience approach allows FFY to define what resilience is for themselves. It also means that we are open to the complexities embedded in FFY's resilience processes. The complexities often appear as early childhood adversity and must be considered in a theoretical framework articulating resilience. Lastly, we do not get to determine or judge the outcomes for trauma survivors. Below I lay out what a trauma-informed approach to resilience research and foster care could look like.

### ***Trauma-Informed Approach to Resilience Research***

The phronetic iterative approach allowed me to sift through existing theory, research questions, and emergent data from qualitative interviews to understand how FFY enact resilience. This approach sheds light on the theory's usefulness and how it can be used to understand how different populations enact resilience. The findings of this study provide empirical support for this emerging theory. More importantly, however, investigating CTR in the context of childhood trauma interrogates the meaning of resilience and urges scholars to consider a trauma-informed care approach to resilience theorizing. Guided by CTR and trauma research, I reflect on findings from the current study to introduce a trauma-informed care approach to resilience research. While this study did not set out to investigate trauma, one must consider the participants' lived experiences. When FFY are the subjects of research studies, it is essential that researchers consider the trauma that they may have experienced. On average, children entering the foster care system have already experienced two adverse childhood experiences (Liming, Akin, & Brook, 2021). Adverse childhood experiences live in the body and impact brain development, exposing individuals to adverse health outcomes. Taking this into consideration allows researchers to take a trauma-informed approach to resilience.

Trauma leaves an imprint on the mind, body, and brain. Trauma experienced in early childhood can impact a child's brain development, which has implications for how they interact with the world around them. Van der Kolk (2014) states that trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations of their bodies. Similarly, I propose that resilience researchers, specifically those using CTR to investigate resilience understand that trauma can impact an individual's access to specific

communicative processes. Therefore, it can affect how an individual enacts resilience. For example, one participant from the current study discussed how she kept running from her foster home because she never felt safe. Without considering the trauma she endured at the hands of her foster parents, one could think she was a rebellious teenager. Because of her being in foster care and her traumatic experience of being sexually abused by her foster dad, her way of enacting resilience was to run away and find safety. This could look unproductive because she was exposed to more traumatic experiences when she ran away, but this was her way of coping. Purvis (2013) argues that instead of viewing these behaviors as acting out, we should understand that these are signs of dysregulation and disconnection. In their discussion on trauma, resilience, and healing, Perry and Winfrey (2021) share that everyone should understand what it means to be trauma-informed.

But in essence, it is approaching people with the awareness that “what happened to you” is important, that it influences your behavior and your health. And then using that awareness to act accordingly and respond appropriately-whether you’re a parent, teacher, friend, therapist, doctor, police officer, or judge. Perry & Winfrey, 2021, p. 219-220

In taking a trauma-informed approach to resilience research, scholars foreground the complexities of a person’s trauma and its impact on how they engage in specific resilient processes.

### ***Trauma-informed Data Analysis***

Data collected for this study were analyzed using a trauma-informed lens. When analyzing data from the second research question, it was important for me to try to understand each participant's full interview when I interpret how they engaged in certain



communication processes. For example, when I am looking at how participants foreground productive action while backgrounding negative emotions, I can see that they had to focus on their goals and push through difficult times. However, by taking a trauma-informed lens, I can see that these participants really had no other choice but to enact resilience this way. They saw this goal they wanted to accomplish as their way out of their tough situations. Engaging in trauma-informed data analysis allowed me to gather the whole picture and make suggestions for improving resources for FFY.

Further, when using CTR, scholars must understand how different communities engage in these processes and their access to them. For example, relationships are essential for foster youth. Creating and maintaining communicative networks is the most salient of the communicative strategies in this study. Many participants shared about people they could rely on when things were difficult. A few participants said they could confide in their social workers and friends. Only a couple of participants stated they could rely on their foster parents. Relationships are a source of healing for FFY; they seek relationships when those around them have either been removed or dissolved. Perry, 2021 states that “relationships are the key to healing” (p. 159).

The resilient processes related to communicative networks were named *creating and maintaining communicative networks* to highlight the experience of FFY having to start anew regarding their communicative networks. Studies using CTR have explored the idea of individuals reaching out to their communicative networks when they face life disruptions (Buzzanell, 2010; Doerfel et al., 2010) but what is missing from the literature is how individuals *create* their communicative networks when they do not have individuals to turn to when facing life’s difficulties. Resilience theorizing posits that over

time, people reconfigure their networks and use different means of connection as they enact resilient processes (Chewning et al.,2013). One participant, Daniel, found another means of creating a community for himself. He made a Meet Up group to meet friends and have support for his mental disorder.

Resilience theorizing also posits that when faced with life disruptions, to make sense of what is happening, individuals stabilize their strong ties before expanding their networks (Buzzanell, 2010). Maintaining and using communication networks for foster youth is more complex than reaching out to those closest to them when they are in need. Resilience starts with a life disruption (Buzzanell, 2018), and for foster youth, that disruption occurs within their close communication networks (i.e., their family). A physical separation occurs; sometimes, these separations can be permanent with revoking parental rights. Some foster youth are also separated from their siblings, which research shows are often the closest relationships children have (Yates & Richards, 2017). Foster youth are sometimes moved to different school districts, which forces them to create new communication networks with teachers, friends, and family. Reports illustrate that a child's quality of life is diminished when they do not have someone in their lives whom they can trust (Unrau et al., 2008). Therefore, it is essential to consider the communication networks of FFY. When exploring maintaining and using communicative networks as a resilient process, it is essential for scholars to understand that some populations must create new networks, sometimes repeatedly. Therefore, this study expands the understanding of this resilient process by offering a new conceptualization of this process as creating and maintaining communication networks. It is important to be

sure that we account for the experiences of those who may not have access to communication networks and do the work to create those networks amid life disruptions.

### ***Trauma-Informed Approach to Foster Care***

This study revealed that FFY often feel the burden of enacting resilience and must carry that burden alone. Therefore, there is very little responsibility placed on the systems that forced them to engage in resilience processes when they experienced life disruptions. Foster youth should not have to endure the things they do while in care. They endure childhood adversity and then must figure out how to make it as civilized adults in society, all for the glory of being labeled resilient. Foster youth are deemed solid and resilient, and the foster care system stays the same, producing traumatized children who grow into adults with no choice but to rely on their resources to survive. The foster care system is a system that could be more trauma-informed. For example, placing a child into foster care, the culture of the child and the family they are placed with should be considered. As shown in one of the participant's accounts, she had to personally affirm her cultural identity because that was not present in her foster home.

Similarly, foster youth should be able to pack their own bags when transitioning out of their home into foster care (when it is safe to do so). This will allow them to take things that are important to them, their identity, and something that keeps them connected to their familial identity. Showing up at a child's school with a garbage bag full of their belongings is not only insensitive, but it can also be highly traumatizing for the child as they are given no opportunity to take stock of what is happening. It further takes away any control they have. One of the resilient strategies is crafting normalcy, and it is hard

for foster youth to create any normalcy for themselves when they cannot take things that are important to them from their home to their new placement.

Several participants shared the neglect and abuse they endured at the hands of their foster parents. This was troubling because foster parents are supposed to be supportive and loving individuals who step in and help FFY in-between homes and need care. Instead, many foster youth were met with abusive foster parents. Individuals who sexually abused them locked the refrigerator to keep them from eating, physically abused them, adopted them, and changed their minds. This has been a harsh reality for many foster youths I have interviewed, and unfortunately, it seems more prevalent than good and loving foster parents. This is something that needs to be addressed. Children already enter foster care with an average of two adverse childhood experiences; they should not be further traumatized in a home that was supposed to be a safe place. The foster care system needs policies for individuals who want to protect foster youth from further harm in these homes. When children are removed from foster homes because of abuse, the foster parents do not bear any consequences. The weight of their abuse is now on the child, and their responsibility is to heal and recover from it. Thus, this system requires foster youth to enact resilience by placing them in situations that stricter policies for foster parents could have likely avoided.

### ***Lack of resources***

Many participants mentioned that their biological parents never abused them, but they did not have the means to provide for them. This is also a widespread problem in the child welfare system; children are often taken due to poverty. This highlights a much more significant issue in the foster care system. The foster care system exists to protect

vulnerable children and families (Mitchell, 2016). This protection often looks like the child being removed from their biological family. While this can be a solution that works out for some families, we must acknowledge that doing this could further traumatize the child and leave the family vulnerable with a lack of resources.

Similarly, when foster youth age out of the foster care system, they lack resources to sustain themselves. Foster youth rarely have the resources to stand on their own post-care (U.S Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). They are left to deal with the compounded trauma of foster care. They are thrown into the world with no safety net, unlike those from the general population that typically have various support systems when they graduate high school. The foster care system should consider a more trauma-informed approach and offer more resources to families to better support healthy environments for children to grow up in and provide resources for foster youth once they leave care. The foster care system providing these resources and improving access to these resources could aid in more families reuniting and more FFY having more positive outcomes post-foster care.

### **Limitations**

While this study adds to the conversation about resilience, foster care, and taking a trauma-informed approach to resilience and foster care research, policies, and practices and has important implications, some limitations are worth mentioning. This study was quite diverse in terms of race and ethnicity; however, it was homogenous in terms of educational level. Most participants had higher-level degrees, such as a Master's (6), and one even had a Ph.D. Thus, this sample does not reflect the larger FFY population (Pecora et al., 2006). These individuals can be seen as demonstrating resilience according

to normative judgments; it would be beneficial to hear from individuals with different educational aspirations and career paths other than college. While this study did reach saturation, the number of participants could have been higher to have a deeper understanding of the research questions.

Only three males were included in the study, which limits the knowledge communication scholars have about the experiences of men who have experienced foster care. It is excellent that some males participated, but we still need to understand more about the experiences of both men and non-binary conforming individuals.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Resilience research is not new, but it become widely studied recently in the communication field. This study adds to the research that uses CTR to understand how vulnerable populations enact resilience, such as first-generation college students during the pandemic (Scharp et al., 2022), healthcare workers during the pandemic (Hintz et al., 2021), and refugees (Sanchez & Lillie, 2019). This study also extends the line of research on foster youth and foster families, such as that conducted by (Nelson, 2018), (Bish, 2019), (Nelson & Horstman, 2017), and (Thomas et al., 2017). While there is research being conducted in resilience and foster care, there are many more avenues that for this research.

Beyond the suggestions for future research discussed in this chapter, the study points to additional avenues for future research. To begin, I would like to bring up attachment theory briefly. This theory was discussed in chapter two. However, I have yet to mention it in this chapter. It is particularly relevant when I think about future research that could be conducted to understand resilience among FFY. Many of my participants

talked about traumatic experiences they had early on in life, such as being placed in foster. The early experience could have impacted their attachment style, which as research shows, often stays with us well into adulthood. Mikulincer and Shaver (2008) hypothesize that adult attachment style may affect the degree to which an individual believes social support is important. It would be exciting and insightful to understand how a person's attachment style impacts their resilience process. More specifically, a study that tests a person's attachment style and then explores how they enact resilience would be insightful. This study could employ the communication theory of resilience to see if individuals enact resilience using any of the five communicative processes. This would be an insightful research endeavor for communication scholars.

Second, I set out to understand the relationship between trauma and resilience more in this study. While I know this study shed some light on this, I still want to know much more about the relationship. It would be worthwhile to study this relationship more. For example, does the type of childhood adversity you experienced impact which resilient process you engage in? Also, how does trauma impact one's ability to enact resilience? This study started that conversation, but I believe much more is to be revealed about the relationship between trauma and resilience. Understanding this could lead to our field knowing more about how trauma survivors enact resilience and how practitioners can help them recover.

Next, community resilience came up in this study and should be studied more. FFY were intentional about staying connected and supporting each other through face-to-face and mediated communication. I am a part of several of those communities on Facebook. The communities serve as a social resource for FFY. In Houston's (2017)

exploration of community resilience, he situates resilience as an interactional process. He states that communities characterized by resilience are collectives that interact successfully to adapt to changing circumstances—studying what community resilience looks like among siblings placed together would be interesting because of their collective experience of being removed from their homes. Also, understanding how FFY build community resilience through various support groups would provide insight into how they seek support and enact resilience.

Lastly, a study explores if and how participants engage in the sixth communicative process of CTR proposed by Hintz et al. (2021). This new process is *critiquing and resisting the status quo*. Hintz and colleagues (2021) conceptualize this process as a means for crafting normalcy (the end state of CTR) by prospecting a new status quo. This process is also interrelated with other processes such as maintaining and using communication networks, employing alternative logics, and affirming identity anchors. A study sheds more light on this process among FFY would be insightful.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study deepens our understanding of resilience among FFY. The current study explored how FFY define and enact resilience. FFY understand resilience as their ability to survive and endure life's challenges. They defined resilience as survival, elastic, and burdensome. This understanding of resilience sheds light on a much bigger issue: the responsibility of dealing with life disruptions, such as being placed in foster care. Participants feel like they are forced to be resilient, while those in power bear no responsibility for changing the systems that traumatize FFY. This sheds light on the relationship between trauma and resilience. Trauma can impact how individuals enact



resilience. This study gives voice to FFY to define resilience for themselves. Placing their voices at the center of this work is also a noteworthy takeaway from the current study.

Additionally, this study proposed a trauma-informed approach to resilience and foster care research and practice. A trauma-informed approach starts with the individuals and systems understanding that what happens to you matters and impacts the way you show up in the world. When this approach is taken, we as researchers can ask better questions, and practitioners can better serve those who have experienced trauma. Recommendations for the foster care system and those who work with former and current foster youth were discussed. To truly understand FFY, we must make space for understanding how their experiences impact their ability to enact resilience and engage in specific processes.

Understanding resilience among FFY is one of the most important takeaways of this current study. Buzzanell (2018) states that enacting resilience looks different for different populations, and she offers five processes that people may engage in to create normalcy for themselves when life disruptions occur. This study shows that FFY engaged in four of the five communicative processes offered by CTR. This emerging theory has utility for understanding resilience among vulnerable populations. However, more research needs to be done to understand these processes better. Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that the theory needs to account for some of the nuances of FFY, such as them having to create new communication networks due to the instability of the foster care system. This study offers a reconceptualization of maintaining and using communication networks to *creating and maintaining communication networks*. Putting alternative logics to work was only enacted by one participant; this could be for various

reasons. There is much more room for scholars to engage in resilient research using the communication theory of resilience.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in Care</b>	<b>Number of Placements</b>
Raina	Female	Hispanic	27	6	2
Naomi	Female	Black	47	2	2
Heather	Female	White	30	9	3
Jacob	Male	Black	37	20	9
Jessica	Female	White	39	6	4
Veronica	Female	Black	41	10	2
Bella	Female	Biracial	31	10	16
Selena	Female	White	20	6	4
Aaron	Male	Black	51	11	18
Daniel	Male	Vietnamese	34	8	6
Paris	Female	Black	33	13	10
Maria	Female	White	44	7	2
Justice	Female	Black	34	16	3
Shelia	Female	Black	35	10	6

Figure 1: The Phronetic Iterative Approach

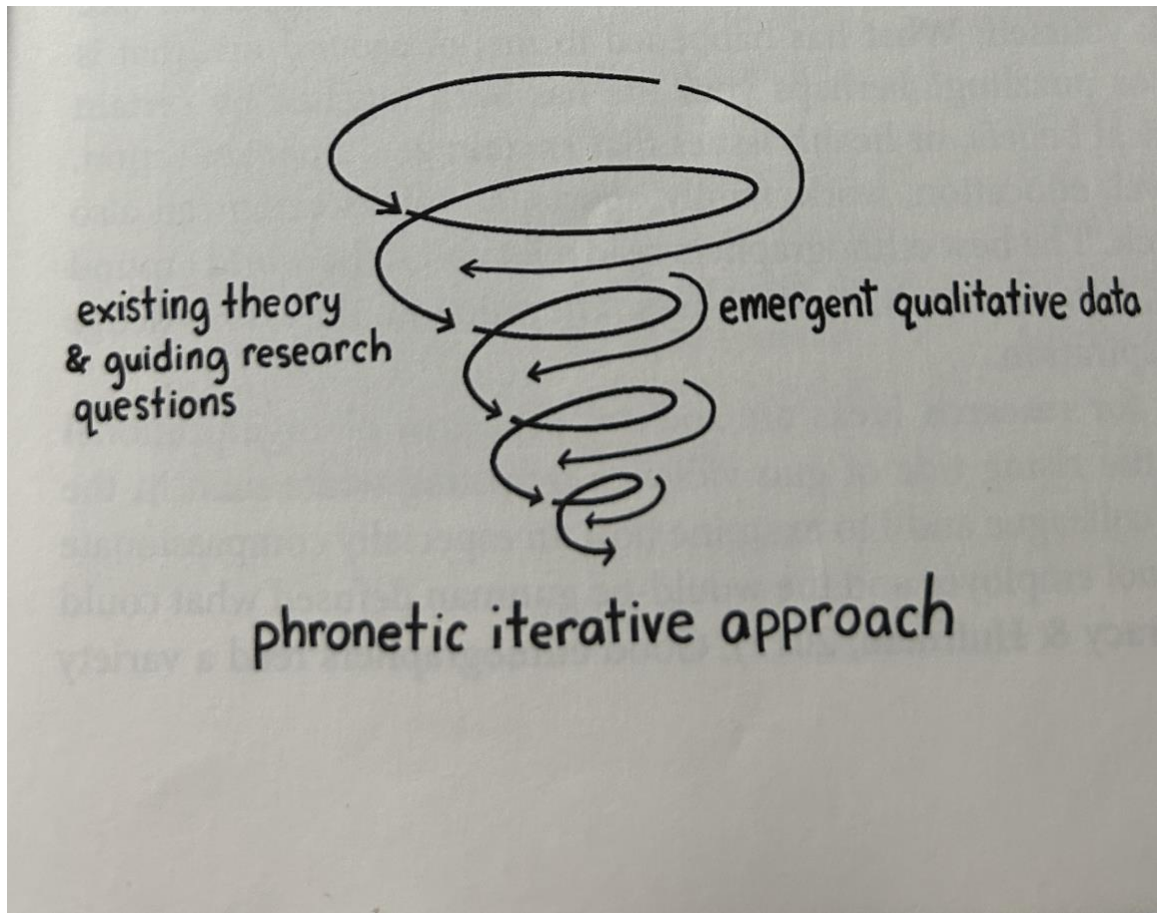
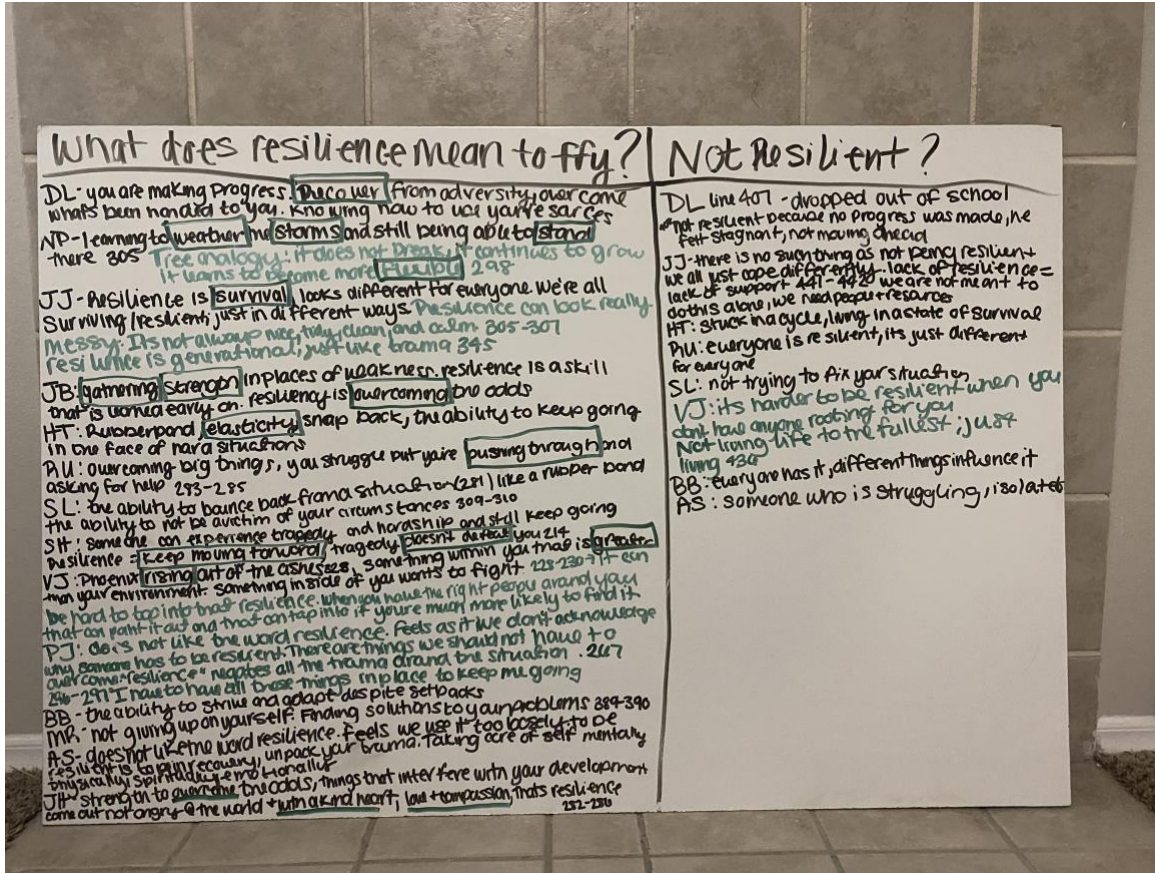


Figure 2: Phonetic Iterative Process Analytic Activity



## **Appendix A: INFORMED CONSENT**

### **Informed Consent Form**

Project title: Resilience Among FFY

You have been invited to participate in a research study regarding resilience among FFY. Your participation in this research project is contingent on you being at least 18 years old and having spent some time in foster care during your childhood (before you were 18yrs old). The following is a brief description of the project and your rights as a research participant.

Purpose of the Study: This study aims to understand resilience among FFY. Questions will be geared towards learning more about how you define and enact resilience. You will be asked to discuss various experiences about your time in foster care.

Procedures and Duration of the Study: You are invited to an interview, at which you will answer in-depth interview questions. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. This interview will be audio recorded using a digital recorder.

Risks and Benefits of Participating in the Study: The risks associated with this project are minimal. There exists the possibility that you may feel uncomfortable answering some questions. You are more than welcome to skip any question(s) or stop your participation at any time without consequences. If you feel distressed by your participation, please get in touch with PATH (Providing Access to Help) at 211 or 1-888-865-9903 or NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Health) at 1-800-950-6264 for help. You may benefit from



this study by understanding your personal experiences in foster care.

Confidentiality: I will do my best to keep your responses confidential. All transcripts will be held in a locked filing cabinet in my office that only the researchers can access. Any names you mention during the interview, including your name, will be changed to pseudonyms during transcription. I will destroy the transcripts seven years after the completion of the study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer or skip questions you do not like or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

Contacts and Questions: The researchers for this study are Miss. LaShawnda Kilgore and Colleen Colaner. If you have any questions regarding the study, you are encouraged to contact LaShawnda Kilgore by phone at (573) 814-9483 or by email. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, you are encouraged to contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board Office at (573) 882-3181. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email

Statement of Consent: Thank you for your assistance in this research project. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### **Introduction**

This is an interview about your experiences of resilience. As a social scientist, I am curious about your experiences. The interview is for research purposes only; its primary goal is to hear about your lived experiences. You can share as much or as little as you like. If you would like to not share about certain things, you are more than welcome to ask me to move along to another question. You can also stop this interview at any given moment.

Do you have any questions?

### **Study Overview**

Hi! First, thank you so much for taking the time to sit with me for an interview! I have always been interested in learning more about the experiences of foster youth. As a FFY and a graduate student, I want to see research and theories that capture our unique lived experiences. So that's kind of what I am doing with this study!

1. So, this study is centered around those who grew up in foster care. I want to start there; can you tell me a little about what it was like when you first entered foster care?

Probs if they do not already share:

- a. What was the reason you were placed in foster care?
- b. How long were you in foster care?
- c. Did you age out, or were you adopted?

- d. How many placements did you have, and what were they?
    - i. What were these placements like?
    - ii. Are you still in contact with any of them? (Caregivers and foster siblings)
  - e. What was your transition out of care like?
    - i. Tell me more about that.
2. What did your birth family relationships look like upon your departure from your home of origin?
  3. How was communication with your birth family after being placed into foster care?
    - a. Can you tell me more about that?
  4. Would you consider these experiences to be trauma?
    - a. Why or why not?
  5. Researchers and policymakers talk about resilience, but we don't always know what that means. What does resilience mean to you?
  6. So you define resilience as \_\_\_\_\_. Would you say you identify with that definition?
    - a. Can you tell me a little more about that?
  7. That's an interesting perspective on resilience. What do you think led you to understand resilience this way?
  8. Can you describe what it looks like for someone to be resilient?
  9. How do you think your experiences in foster care have shaped your resilience?
    - a. Tell me more about that

10. Tell me about a time when you were resilient.
  - a. What did that process look like for you?
  - b. What do you think helped you be resilient?
11. Can you tell me about a time when someone was not resilient?
  - a. Tell me more about that.
12. Considering that things changed for you after being placed in foster care, is there anything you did to make yourself feel more comfortable?
13. Sometimes when we go through hard times, it's easy for us to rely on our people. Was there anyone or a group of people you relied on to help you through these experiences?
14. Was there a point in your life that you felt like you just had to push through?
  - a. If so, can you tell me more about that?
15. What are some things about yourself that you hold firmly to when facing challenging situations?
16. Were there things you felt you needed to do or change to help you make sense of what was going on?
  - a. If so, can you tell me more about that?

## VITA

LaShawnda M. Kilgore (B.A., Communication, University of Missouri, 2014; M.S. Communication, Illinois State University, 2017) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her research is geared towards understanding the experiences of foster youth (former and current). Specifically, she seeks to understand how they communicatively process and cope with trauma. She is fascinated by the resilience of former foster youth. Many foster youth face a variety of challenges throughout their lifetimes such as familial instability, abuse, and neglect. Due to these traumas, they are predisposed to negative outcomes such as PTSD rates higher than those of military veterans and even a 20-year decrease in life expectancy. She is determined to write their stories into literature. Her long-term goals are to inform and produce policies and practices geared towards eradicating the negative outcomes of foster youth. LaShawnda is a recipient of the Gus T. Ridgel Fellowship and the Southern Region Education Board Fellowship. She has also served as a Research Associate for the Institute of Family Diversity and Communication during her time at Mizzou. At the University of Missouri, LaShawnda has helped facilitate and teach courses in Family Communication and Public Speaking.