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SHATTERING THE GLASS CEILING THROUGH PURPOSE DEVELOPMENT: AN

INTERSECTIONAL EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF ADVERSITY AND MENTORING

AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Dissertation
By
Lily Sarah Konowitz

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**Abstract**

Shattering the Glass Ceiling Through Purpose Development: An Intersectional Examination of

the Role of Adversity and Mentoring among Adolescent Girls

Lily Sarah Konowitz

Dissertation Direction: Dr. Belle Liang

Adolescent girls have reached unprecedented levels of success in today's society.

Simultaneously, many adolescent girls face adversities and their mental health remains a concern

(Schramal et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 2018;). Positive Youth Development scholars continues to

explore how society can best support adolescent girls as they navigate key developmental

milestones (Lerner et al., 2005; Damon, 2004). Importantly, research has solidified a number of

benefits of Youth Purpose (i.e., a long-term, committed, directed aspiration, with a prosocial

desire). Youth Purpose is considered a key developmental asset, and contributes to thriving.

Indeed, having a sense of purpose can serve as a protective factor for individuals and help bolster

their overall well-being (Liang et al., 2018; Liang et al, 2017; Damon et al., 2003). Youth

purpose along with Post Traumatic Growth can positively impact individuals facing adversities

(Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Tedeschi & Lawrence, 2004). Similarly, mentoring relationships

are associated with numerous positive outcomes including the development of purpose (Dubois

& Rhodes, 2006; Lerner, 2004; Liang et al., 2017).

While youth purpose is well documented (Damon et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2010), there is

limited research on purpose development for adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds.

Given the profound benefits of purpose, additional research is warranted on how purpose is

cultivated in marginalized adolescent girls. This dissertation sought to expand the literature and

better understand how adversity relates to purpose development, during the adolescent years and how mentoring relationships can contribute to this development. Additional research is needed to focus on one of the most vulnerable populations, adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds, and to discover ways to help protect their mental health and well- being as they continue to thrive in society.

This study included 13 interviews with adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and five major themes emerged. Analyses suggested that while these participants experiences endured adverse experiences, they maintained a positive outlook on life, and their future. With the help of their mentors, and through the development of critical consciousness, participants were able to utilize adverse experiences to help inform their sense of purpose. Data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This crucial time period allowed for the collection of exemplary data, which revealed how adolescent girls utilized the pandemic as a time for self-growth, and how they conceptualized their purpose with respect to the pandemic.

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# Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER ONE

**Introduction to Problem**

Adolescence is characterized by multiple, simultaneous transitions, physically, socially, cognitively and psychologically (Gutowski et al., 2018; Hankin et al., 2007). This time is also marked by an engagement with significant developmental tasks such as identity formation and the construction of self-beliefs (Schleider & Weisz, 2016). During this time period, adolescents are often shaped by both positive and negative stressors and/or experiences. For example, individuals experience increased freedom but also at times greater pressure to focus on academics and their professional futures (Spencer et al., 2018; Bowers et al., 2010). While U.S. adolescents have more academic and vocational privileges than did previous generations, they continue to be taxed with the combined pressures of navigating the multiple transitions of this developmental stage and experiences of marginalization associated with their diverse backgrounds and social locations (i.e., gender, socioeconomic status, and race) (Gutowski et al., 2018; Sumner et al., 2018; Fine et al., 2004).

As a result, many adolescents experience emotional and physical exhaustion as they cope with limited external and internal resources for navigating challenging life circumstances and overwhelming emotions (Burnett et al., 2011). While all youths can be affected by this transitional time, research suggests that adolescent girls can experience particular stress (Schramal et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 2018; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). It is hypothesized that this stress may be due in part to societal messages influencing the development of girls' self-concept and or interpersonal relationships (Schleider & Weisz, 2016; Rudolph, 2002). Stress can negatively impact social, physical, and emotional well-being (Bjorling & Sing, 2017); thus, not surprisingly, adolescent girls are especially likely to experience psychological distress (Schleider

& Weisz, 2016), including depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms (Spencer et al., 2018).

Moreover, adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds experience additional stressors due

systemic barriers. For example, systemic injustices associated with racism and classism are

highlighted through disparities between schools and school districts (Flores, 2013; Kena et al.,

2016; Fine et al., 2004; Gutowski et al., 2018). These experiences mixed with experiences of

classism and racism can negatively predict psychological well-being (Gutowski et al., 2018).

## Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by two overarching theoretical frameworks: Relational

Developmental Systems metatheory (RDS) (Overton, 2007) and Positive Youth Development

(Lerner et al., 2005), a perspective about youth development that is derived from RDS. RDS

helps explain the variations in girls' experiences of flourishing. The metatheory states there is a

continuous interaction between individuals (including their values, behaviors and cognition) and

their environment (school, family) (Overton, 2007). These unique relationships are considered

bidirectional: "mutually influential relationships between individuals and contexts, represented

as individual ← → context relations" (Lerner & Callina, 2014, p. 325). Furthermore, these bi-

directional relationships between individuals and contexts highlight that development is dynamic

and highly individualized. Positive Youth Development (PYD) scholars argue that all young

people have strengths, and during adolescence, if their strengths are matched with appropriate

resources, positive development is more likely to occur (Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005;

Lerner, et al 2015), often leading to the adolescents' experiencing a sense of accomplishment, or

thriving (Damon, 2004). Moreover, they experience an increased sense of competence,

confidence, connection with others, character, sense of caring, and compassion for others (also

known as the 5 C's) (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al 2015).

**Statement of Problem**

*Purpose and adverse experiences*

This dissertation explored the influence of youth purpose on adolescent girls' lives, especially in the face of adversity. Purpose is defined by Damon and colleagues "as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (2003, p. 121). Studies have shown that purpose serves as an important aspect of positive youth development and is associated with a host of beneficial outcomes (e.g., Pizzolato et al., 2011; Blattner et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2018; Bronk & Finch, 2010). It is argued that having a sense of purpose is connected with a strong intrinsic motivation to pursue one's goals (Liang et al, 2017). Indeed, youth purpose can emerge from the 5 C's, especially from confidence, competence and character development. More specifically, a sense of purpose has been associated with high self-esteem, prosocial behavior, moral commitment, achievement and well-being. Maintenance of a sense of purpose has contributed to adolescents being more academically engaged and resilient. Furthermore, both the development and cultivation of purpose is essential for adolescents' well-being. (Liang et al., 2017).

While having a sense of purpose can be extremely beneficial, it is important to understand how and why purpose can be cultivated. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) created three different pathways to explain how a person can develop a sense of purpose: the proactive pathway, the reactive pathway, and the observing others pathway. This dissertation focused primarily on the reactive pathway, which is defined as the way in which a sense of purpose can develop unprovoked or by chance, such as experiencing a significant or traumatic event that ultimately shapes the way one sees the world. Moreover, the dissertation examined experiences of adolescents with adversity and how this adversity may shape their purpose. While there are an

infinite number of situations that could be considered adverse, this dissertation focused on three

categories of adversity that are particularly salient for this population: mental health, family

challenges, and marginalization experiences.

*Post Traumatic Growth*

Post-Traumatic Growth theory may help explain how and why adverse experiences can

fuel the development of purpose. Post-Traumatic Growth is defined as positive changes that

occur as a result of struggling with highly significant life challenges (Tedeschi & Calhoun,

2004). Despite the name, these challenges do not have to be defined as traumatic but can be

categorized as adverse experiences. When individuals experience Post-Traumatic Growth, they

often are able to rebuild, likely in a beneficial manner, after the adverse experience and

incorporate the adverse experience into their understanding of the world. While one's life may be

significantly altered by the adverse experience, one may also derive positive changes. The

acceptance of the event does not need to be conscious, nor an attempt to make sense of the

situation, but simply a means of psychological survival and a way of feeling safe after the trauma

(Tedeschi & Lawrence, 2004).

The growth that occurs after a traumatic experience can be profound, as it can spark

purpose development and a greater commitment to a sense of purpose. Indeed, the process of

understanding the trauma or the experience one endured can serve as a transformative

experience. Those who experience Post-Traumatic Growth have indicated a greater appreciation

of life and a new recognition of possibilities for one's life (Tedeschi & Lawrence, 2004).

Through critical reflection, and as an attempt to psychologically survive after the event, the

individual may experience transformations. This heightened reflection and search for

understanding can motivate a person to change their priorities in life and live with a clearer sense

of meaning and desire (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). The result of this psychological and cognitive processing can lead to a sense of clarity that provides momentum toward a heightened sense of purpose (Tedeschi & Lawrence, 2004).

As previously stated, Relational Systems Metatheory is the overarching theory that informs this study. Purpose development and post-traumatic growth are both concepts that help inform the conceptual framework. In this dissertation, these are considered under the umbrella of Relational Systems Theory, rather than overarching theoretical frameworks for the study.

*Selection of Adverse Experiences*

**Mental Health Issues:** Adolescent girls and women have surpassed their female predecessors in terms of academic and vocational success. Indeed, more adolescent girls attend college than ever before, and more women are accepting leadership positions in large companies (Spencer et al., 2018; Kena et al., 2014; Buchman & DiPrete, 2006; Ewert, S; 2012). Yet these accomplishments have been accompanied by a host of mental health issues for adolescent girls and women. Indeed, there are higher reports of stress and depression for adolescent girls than boys (Schramal et al., 2010; Schleider and Weisz, 2016). These differences may be due to how adolescent girls cope with their stressors, such as being highly reliant on their interpersonal relationships (Rudolph, 2002) and/or due to societal messaging that teaches girls they are less competent than are boys (Schleider and Weisz, 2016). Regardless, stress is debilitating and can prevent adolescent girls from achieving their aspirations to become successful, strong women.

**Family Stressors**: Family interactions and dynamics affect youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Bronfenbrenner 1997, Kiang, 2012). Moreover, Bowlby (Bowlby 1988) has demonstrated that positive attachment at a young age is an integral part of individual development. Positive family functioning can serve as a buffer against the poor mental

health outcomes often associated with lower economic status, neighborhood violence, and parental divorce (Balisteri & Alvira- Hammon, 2016). Adolescents who feel comfortable in their family units tend to demonstrate higher academic motivation, lower levels of externalizing behaviors, higher self-esteem and positive well-being (Telzer et al., 2013). This higher sense of self concept and dedication to the family can be protective when families experience a sense of conflict or stressful life experiences (Telzer et al., 2013). Indeed, it is hypothesized that family obligations and commitment can help cultivate a sense of purpose in an individual's life (Kiang, 2012). On the contrary, based on the profound impact that parents and family relationships can have on an individual, researchers must also provide opportunities for adolescents to express and come to terms with their negative experiences. Negative family interactions, such as neglect, childhood abuse and household dysfunction, including criminality of family members, drug usage, mental health issues and violence, can have a devastating impact on a child's development, and future well-being (Dube et al., 2003).

**Marginalization and Discrimination:** Youth with marginalized identities tend to be at an increased risk for discrimination (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). The effects of perceived discrimination can negatively impact every facet of an individual's life, leading to poor mental health, sense of isolation, and an unstable development of a sense of self (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Moreover, research has found that perceived discrimination can be related to psychological and physical distress (Ryff et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 1997). Marginalization, whether or not it is accompanied by discrimination, can be especially detrimental in youth as it predicts negative psychological well-being among youth (Gutowksi et al., 2018; Ryff et al., 2003). This situation may be due to the nature of marginalization, in which the goal is to uphold social order and is often enforced through oppression (Causadias & Umana-

Taylor, 2018). It may also be explained as marginalization is fueled by segregation and isolation, and this sense of othering can cause people to experience shame about their racial group (Sumner et al., 2018).

The reduced psychological well-being of those who experience marginalization may also be related to the lack of access to resources. Moreover, poverty and systemic racism cause many marginalized individuals to disproportionately experience limited access to quality schooling, including attending schools with less qualified teachers, less advanced course work and overcrowding. In addition, living in poverty is related to increased exposure to uncontrollable and life-threatening events, which can disrupt development (Gutowski et al., 2018; Smith & Romero, 2010).

*Mentors*

This study examined the role of formative relationships in helping young people navigate life adversity and in using this adversity to inform their purpose and life direction. Mentor relationships, in which more experienced persons guide young people, play an important role in Positive Youth Development (Dubois & Rhodes, 2006; Karcher et al., 2005; Lund et al., 2019; Lerner, 2004; Rhodes & Dubois, 2008; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). These relationships can be especially helpful as youth begin to increasingly seek guidance outside of their family during the adolescent years (Liang et al., 2016). Mentoring relationships have been associated with increased self-esteem and positive identity shaping during the adolescent years (Damon, 2008).  Mentoring relationships have also been found to promote purpose development (Liang et al., 2017).

Liang and colleagues (Liang et al., 2017) identified four critical factors that influence the development of an individual's sense of purpose; people, (specifically significant adults); passion

(interest or enthusiasm for one's purpose); propensity (maintaining unique character traits and skills that make a person successful in their quest for purpose); and prosocial benefits (the desire to contribute to those besides themselves, including family and community). This dissertation specifically examined the influence of "people" in the development of purpose, through the examination of mentor relationships.

Indeed, mentoring relationships can be especially important for adolescents with marginalized identities as mentors can help these adolescents reframe current life stressors and connect it to their sense of purpose. Moreover, it has been stated that mentors have helped these adolescents not only develop their purpose, through conversations and role modeling their own purpose, as well as identifying ways to pursue purpose, such as through exposure to different activities and programming (Liang et al., 2017).

The current study also examined the role of mentors in helping adolescent girls navigate adversity and ultimately develop a sense of purpose in the face of adversity.

## Significance of the Study

*Current Events*

Right before the start of data collection, COVID-19 changed the world. Furthermore, while this study did not intend to focus on a pandemic as a source of adversity, it was impossible to ignore. Research suggests that large scale natural disasters can negatively impact youth's mental health, including a potential increase in externalizing behaviors and effects on physical health such as an increase in somatic concerns (Self-Brown et al., 2013). Furthermore, due to the nature of COVID-19, and the quarantine protocols implemented to reduce the spread, many people are left feeling a sense of isolation. This research study addressed the literature gap on how adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds are affected by natural disasters, specifically COVID-19 and how it influenced their sense of purpose.

*Marginalized adolescents*

Critics of the youth purpose literature point out that this research has overly focused on privileged and white populations and suggest poor or disadvantaged youth may not have the luxury of developing a sense of purpose given pressures to survive in the moment, rather than dream about the future (Sumner et al., 2018). However, research suggests that purpose may be especially salient for underprivileged youth populations (e.g. Liang et al., 2017a; Liang et al., 2017b). For example, adolescents who have been discriminated against based on their race, gender, or SES can draw upon their personal experiences of marginalization as a source of motivation for change--both intrapersonal transformation and transformation of systemic and societal norms (Gutowski et al., 2018). It is necessary to continue to explore how this awareness and motivation can translate into purpose development.

This dissertation built on the limited research on cultivating youth purpose, especially in the face of adversity, among adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. While a very limited number of studies has suggested that adversity seems associated with purpose development, no studies to date have explicitly examined this relationship between adversity and purpose development among marginalized adolescent girls. Lastly, this study contributed to the mentoring literature by elucidating the unique contributions of significant adult relationships in shaping youth purpose. While many of these constructs have been explored in part separately, this dissertation integrated them in order to investigate the mechanisms of youth mentoring's influence in cultivating purpose in the face of adversity among marginalized adolescent girls.

The current study addressed the following research questions: "How do experiences of adversity (i.e., mental health, family, marginalization challenges) among marginalized adolescent girls influence the development of purpose? How do mentor figures help girls navigate this

adversity and ultimately influence their purpose development?" I conducted a qualitative

thematic analysis utilizing Braun & Clark's (2006) theoretical framework. Thematic analysis is

an appropriate methodology as my goal is to uncover patterns that emerge within and among

data sets. This study also aimed to discover the contextual and cultural factors that affect the

participants and highlight similarities among the participants' experiences (Braun & Clark,

2006). Developing an in-depth understanding of these experiences will be essential in informing

educators and parents on how to help foster vulnerable adolescent girls' sense of purpose.

      The following chapter provides a deeper examination of the literature regarding the

theoretical lens, adolescent experiences, stressors, purpose development, post-traumatic growth

and mentor relationships. The subsequent chapter contains a detailed description of the

methodology. The fourth chapter analyzes the results, and the fifth chapter highlights the

conclusions, clinical and practical implications, limitations and proposed future studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Introduction to the Literature Review

      The following literature review provides a description of the theoretical orientation of

Relational Developmental Systems Metatheory and perspective of Positive Youth Development,

which informed the research question, interview protocol, and interpretation of the study (Lerner

et al., 2005; Lerner & Callina, 2014). Moreover, this chapter includes an overview of adolescent

development--especially for adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. I explicate three

categories of stressors, also known as areas of adversity salient in this population, namely, family

challenges, marginalization identity challenges, and mental health issues. The chapter also

includes research on youth purpose, particularly focused on marginalized adolescents. Links

between adversity and the development of purpose were also examined. In particular, the chapter

highlighted the positive influence that significant adults, especially mentor figures (e.g., teachers, coaches, clergy, extended family members, etc.), can have as they can help adolescents make meaning of adversity, as well as shape their sense of purpose and future-oriented aspirations. Connections between the theoretical orientation of Post-Traumatic Growth and purpose development provided insight into how youth may be transformed by adversity in ways that inform their sense of purpose. Taken together, existing research and theory provided a rationale for the research questions: "*How do experiences of adversity (i.e., mental health, family, marginalization challenges) among marginalized adolescent girls influence the development of purpose? How do mentor figures help girls navigate this adversity and ultimately influence their purpose development?"* The literature review demonstrates that while aspects of these questions have been studied, they have not been fully explored together in this specific population. Moreover, the chapter underscores the ways that this study builds on previous research.

## Relational Developmental Systems Metatheory

For much of history, psychologists understood human development through a reductionist, or Cartesian framework (Lerner & Callina, 2014). This framework adopts a viewpoint that development is a discontinuous process rather than a continuous process. In addition, depending on a person's perspective, development is solely influenced by a person's nature (genetics), or nurture (environment) (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) Metatheory rejects this framework and argues that, in fact, human development occurs across the lifespan, in a more fluid, integrated and dynamic manner (Overton, 2015). In the RDS metatheory there is a continuous interaction between an individual (including values, behaviors and cognition) and their environment (school, family). When the relationship between the individual and environment proves to be mutually beneficial it is referred to as adaptive

regulation (Brandtstädter, 1998). This unique relationship is considered bidirectional and described as "mutually influential relationships between individuals and contexts, represented as individual ← → context relations" (Lerner & Callina, 2014, p. 325). This framework informs the nature vs. nurture debate as it argues that youth shape their environments, and are not passive recipients of their genetic composition as suggested by a pure *nature* perspective. In addition, this framework acknowledges that development does in fact have a biological impact so that individuals are not only influenced by their environment, as suggested by a pure *nurture* perspective. The RDS theoretical orientation suggests that adolescents should be viewed through the bi-directional relationship between their contexts and themselves, given that their development is dynamic and individualized (Lerner & Callina, 2014).

## Positive Youth Development

The study of adolescent development originates with Stanley G. Hall (1904). Hall proposed that "adolescence" was an important stage to study, and it was marked by a period of "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904; Arnett, 2000). Adolescence was assumed to be a hardship, rather than a time of positive growth and thriving.  Indeed, adolescents were viewed through a deficit-based lens, with little attention to their strengths and potential for positive contribution to their communities (Lerner et al., 2005).

Positive Youth Development (PYD), emerged out of RDS and also rejects the rigidity associated with the Cartesian framework (Lerner & Callina, 2014). PYD scholars have demonstrated that young people have strengths and talents, and through appropriate connection to resources, these strengths and talents can be discovered and/or enhanced (Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). When adolescents utilize their strengths, and seek out environments that complement their skills, they can also be active participants in shaping their own experiences.

Moreover, it is beneficial when adolescents are introduced to environments that help them uncover their strengths and skills (e.g. school, after school activities, community service groups, religious groups). The PYD framework demonstrates that adolescents can leverage their internal strengths and skills and be productive citizens. In fact, alignment of youth strengths and contextual resources can lead to five characteristics that an individual develops: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner et al., 2005). These characteristics allow an individual to maintain a sense of self confidence and can lead to valued outcomes, such as making positive and profound contributions to society (Lerner et al., 2005).

## Adolescence

*Overview*

This dissertation defines adolescence as a time between the ages of 10-19 years old. This is in concession with the World Health Organization's definition of adolescence (World Health Organization, 2020). During this developmental period, individuals experience significant transitions in how they appear physically, interact with others socially, and perceive themselves (Bowers et al., 2010) For example, they often begin to examine their self-concepts and overall self-worth, based on other people's perceptions and achievements. In addition, they also experience increased freedom and agency, such as being able to drive a car or obtain a job (Bowers et al., 2010). All of these changes are accompanied with adolescents' increased ability to identify their complex emotions and experience greater emotional lability (Rubenstein et al., 2015).

As previously mentioned, adolescence was once associated with a deficit perspective, and termed the period of "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904). Along these lines, adolescence has traditionally been conceptualized as the most difficult time period in a person's life (Arnett,

1999). In fact, it is categorized as a time when depression is most likely to develop (Arnett, 2000). While this dissertation adopts a positive youth development perspective of adolescence, and demonstrates how strengths and purpose can help one thrive, challenges associated with this developmental period were explored. For example, as adolescents become better at identifying their own emotions, they are still working to develop their ability to interpret their emotional repertoire and thus may be left with a sense of confusion (Burnett, et al., 2011). This situation can lead to feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion, cognitive difficulties and lack of motivation (Burnett et al., 2011). As adolescents develop their social-cognitive skills, they also may be more likely to engage in comparisons to others and self-criticism (Arnett, 2000). It should also be noted that many adolescents today, compared to those from previous generations, may experience even greater stress due to higher academic demands and greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships (Burnett et al., 2011). In fact, research has found that 20% of adolescents in the general population experience at least one depressive episode (Rubinstein et al., 2015).

Fortunately, many adolescents successfully navigate these challenges and demonstrate an ability to cope with difficulties (Maynard et al., 2017; Zarrett, & Eccles, 2006; Virtanen et al., 2019; Roeser et al., 1999). Indeed, adolescence can even be viewed as a positive time in one's life (Bowers et al., 2010), as it allows for enormous growth. During adolescence, individuals experience changes (i.e., plasticity) in their behavioral, psychological, cognitive and social abilities (Lerner et al., 2014). Plasticity allows for the regions of the brain to engage in reorganization based on experiences and emotions (Alloy et al., 2016). These natural changes explain how and why one's childhood experiences, or learned behaviors, do not need to be a projection of one's future life. Furthermore, through understanding the capabilities of plasticity,

PYD research suggests that though adolescents may experience difficulties, they are not confined to those experiences as their brains and bodies are constantly changing. They gain cognitive and social skills to deal with their difficulties over time; and when scaffolded and supported, they can identify the long-term aspirations and purpose, including ways to positively contribute to the world beyond themselves (Lerner, et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2008; Lerner et al., 2005).

That said, there are particular challenges salient in the lives of adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds that are highlighted in the next sections. These include mental health and familial challenges, as well as marginalization related stressors (e.g., socioeconomic and race-related stress).

*Mental Health among Adolescent Girls*

The experiences of adolescent girls have been the focus of a growing body of literature (e.g., Spencer et al., 2018; Kena et al., 2014). Adolescent girls and women have reached unprecedented levels of success in society, due to the increased opportunities and access to education. Moreover, female involvement and success in schools continue to rise. In addition, more women now pursue higher educational degrees including bachelors, masters and doctorate level than men (Spencer et al., 2018; Kena et al., 2014; Buchman & DiPrete, 2006; Ewert, 2012). While there are significantly fewer women in leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies, more women, compared to their male counterparts, were named "highest performers" and "most distinguished" for their work. These statistics hold true in all sectors except for technology (Gangone & Lennon. 2014).

Despite these accomplishments, studies have documented increasing mental health problems and distress in adolescent girls, from the least to most privileged backgrounds (Spencer et al., 2018). Indeed, stress is more prevalent in girls than boys (Schramal et al., 2010). Stress is

of high concern due to the impact it can have on all domains in one's life including social, physical and emotional (Bjorling & Sing, 2017). In addition, girls are twice as likely as boys to develop depression (Schleider & Weisz, 2016). Scholars suggested that these gender differences in mental health may be due to the fact that girls place greater reliance on their peers for emotional support, and disruption in that support can often cause distress (Rudolph, 2002). Moreover, girls have also reported experiencing greater strain and stress due to interpersonal problems with friends and family (Rudolph, 2002).

In addition, girls receive negative messages about their future opportunities. Whereas boys are encouraged to take ownership over their environments, girls often receive the message that they have less control over their environments (Schleider and Weisz, 2016). These different messages are likely to contribute to a gender gap in self concepts.

There also appears to be a confidence gap between boys and girls, which impacts girls' academic performance. Research suggests that starting in elementary school, girls' confidence levels often dip, as girls tend to underestimate their abilities (Cole et al., 1999). This gap can affect test scores, and while it has been found that girls tend to maintain a higher GPA than boys, the mean score for SAT is higher for males than females. According to College Board 2017, males hold a 30-point advantage over females on the math section (College Board, 2017). This circumstance is significant as many colleges still use aptitude tests as criteria for college admission. Thus, many women may be prevented from attending their desired college due to test scores. However, the difference between males and females on test scores is not actually a predictor of success. The female underprediction effect phenomenon demonstrates that while females often perform worse on standardized tests, they actually earn higher GPA in college compared to their male counterparts (e.g., Kling et al., 2013; Minnigh, 2019).

*Family Stressors among Adolescent Girls*

The type of bond and relationship that develops between a child and caregiver has great implications for one's self concept and construction of the world (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby 1988). Adolescents with positive and healthy relationships with parents tend to report higher life satisfaction, greater academic success, interpersonal functioning, self-efficacy and lower psychological distress (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004; Bell et al., 1996; Cutrona et al., 1994; Black & McCartney, 1997; Arbona & Power, 2003; Thompson, 1999; Bradford & Lyddon, 1994). Parent-adolescent relationships that are described as warm and supportive are also proven to help foster academic achievement (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004).

On the contrary, relationships that are considered to be low acceptance, low support, and high conflict can be extremely stressful for the adolescent (Crowell et al., 2017). Indeed, adolescents who lack a secure relationship with their parents find themselves less successful in coping with various life changes and adjustments (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001). The negative relationships often produce a significant amount of stress that can also impact academic performance and adjustment to school (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). Moreover, parent-adolescent relationships that are filled with conflict and lack of support and engagement have been identified as triggers for adolescent depression symptoms and suicidality (Crowell, et al., 2017).

As the parent-adolescent dynamic is important for both girls and boys, girls tend to seek and maintain stronger attachments to parents (Cross & Madson, 1997). Girls appear especially vulnerable to the effects of positive or negative parenting (Mortimer & Call, 2001; Windle, 1992). The quality of the relationship between adolescent girls and parents can often generalize to their friendships. Research has found that if adolescents have a healthy, positive attachment to

their parents, they are more likely to have positive relationships with peers (Ma & Hbener, 2008). In addition, girls with fewer family driven conflicts have a higher motivation to create a life that is meaningful and filled with a desire to contribute to others (Liang et al., 2018). On the other hand, adolescent girls who experience negative parent relationships are at risk for additional stressors such as interpersonal difficulties and self-esteem struggles (Blattner et al., 2013; Whitbeck et al., 1992). More specifically, those that experience higher levels of parental alienation and disconnection actually experience a decrease in self-esteem when searching for their sense of purpose (Blattner, et al., 2013). In addition, those with low parental support were at a greater risk for engaging in unhealthy romantic relationships, which in turn are associated with depressive symptoms (Whitbeck et al., 1992).

*Marginalization Identity Stressors*

PYD research and theory suggest that all individuals have strengths, and, thus it is important to explore how adolescents from marginalized backgrounds can be supported to develop and draw on their strengths despite the challenges inherent in their contexts and pathologizing messages they receive from society.

*Social Causation Theory.* Social Causation Theory suggests that those who are living in poverty and/or considered low income are vulnerable to specific stressors (Liu & Ali, 2008; Beiser et al., 1993). In particular, the reserve capacity model demonstrates that when people have fewer financial resources, this can cascade into psychological distress. For example, prior research has demonstrated that households that are socioeconomically disadvantaged, compared to their counterparts, maintain a greater prevalence of parent-child conflict and family disorganization. Those who feel as if their resources are being quickly depleted (perhaps due to common financial demands or emergency situations) while living in unsafe environments,

experience increased arousal and anxiety, which may lead to greater interpersonal conflict (Gallo et al., 2005; Liu & Ali, 2008). Adolescents who experience these stressors often also report increased depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and school difficulty (Felner et al., 1995; Compas et al., 1989; DuBois et al., 1992).

In addition to these stressors, adolescents are forced to navigate systemic issues that daily reinforce societal oppression based on economics. For example, less resourced communities compared to their wealthier counterparts tend to be characterized by under-qualified teachers, minimal advanced classes, overcrowding, poor school conditions, gaps between vocational dreams and reality, and significant school suspension or expulsion (Kena et al., 2016; Fine et al., 2004; Flores, 2013). These conditions cause students to become disengaged and highly distressed (Becker & Luther, 2002; Felner et al., 1995). Furthermore, the socioeconomic disadvantages influence environmental experiences and adolescent development, all of which can negatively impact academic motivation and emotional well-being (Becker & Luther, 2002; Felner, et al., 1995).

*Race Related Stress.* The effects of racism on an individual is widely studied (e.g. Franklin et al., 2006; Franklin 2004). Racism occurs on the individual, institutional and cultural level. Individual racism is internalized racist beliefs, demonstrated in acts of prejudice. Institutional racism is enforced through power and authority and maintained through discriminatory policies that enable majority groups to suppress minority groups. Lastly, cultural racism refers to the dynamic where dominant group members enforce beliefs about minority group members which then become cultural norms (Franklin et al., 2006). Through these experiences of racism, people of color can internalize feelings of inferiority and experience harassment and humiliation, all of which contribute to chronic stress. Harrell (2000) identified

six types of stressors derived from experiences of racism that can lead to emotional and psychological responses: 1) racism and overt discrimination, 2) vicarious racism, 3) daily racism also known as microaggressions, 4) chronic contextual stressors (i.e. less accessibility opportunities for people of color), 5) collective experiences (discrimination demonstrates in inequities in wealth and socioeconomic status), 6) transgenerational transmission (stress associated with the historical tales of racism) (Franklin et al., 2006; Harrell 2000). As a result of these forms of stressors and their responses, minoritized individuals are at risk of depression, substance abuse and decreased overall well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014; Evans & Cassells, 2014; Ryff et al., 2003; Taylor & Jackson, 1997; Williams et al., 1997). These stressors can also derail students' academic performance and self-esteem (Polk et al, 2020; Benner & Graham, 2011; Huynh & Fulgini 2010).

### Sense of Purpose

Interest in the powerful role of purpose has continued to increase ever since Victor Frankl's seminal book entitled *Man's Search for Meaning.* In this personal account of being a prisoner of World War II, Frankl noted that in times of extreme suffering, having a strong belief system, or a sense of purpose, helped foster resilience (Frankl, 1985; Damon et al., 2003). This early exploration on purpose served as a catalyst for positive psychologists and positive youth development scholars to research purpose and advocate for the significance of living a meaningful life (Damon et al., 2003). Scholars have argued that purpose can emerge from higher level values, rather than survival needs, such as hunger and thirst (Damon et al., 2003).

Purpose has been defined in various ways. Frankl described purpose as "inner strength" and used the terms purpose and meaning interchangeably. Ryff and Singer (1998) defined purpose as "feeling that there is meaning in one's present and past life." Baumeister situated

purpose within the larger umbrella of meaning, alongside values, efficacy and self-worth. Reker and Wong (1988) defined purpose as "the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment." McKnight and Kashdan (2009) defined purpose as a way to provide individuals a sense of direction, which helps them manage behavior, organize goals and experience a sense of fulfillment. While all the above definitions are important, for coherency this paper utilized the definition of purpose provided by William Damon and colleagues (2003, p. 121): "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self". This definition conceptualizes purpose as one's personal search for meaning but also a desire to contribute to the greater good. Damon articulates that purpose is not interchangeable with meaning, as meaning does not require a prosocial intention, whereas purpose does. In addition, purpose can be conceptualized as a goal or desire, but it is more stable and farther reaching than lower level goals, such as completing homework (Damon et al., 2003).

*Dimensions of Purpose*

This definition of purpose (Damon et al., 2003) includes three specific dimensions: intention, engagement, and prosocial reasoning. The first dimension, intention, refers to the idea that purpose must be voluntary, and includes a long-term goal that a person is working towards. A person must authentically desire this purpose rather than pursue it because of outside pressures. The second dimension, engagement, differentiates purpose from simply an empty dream. This dimension involves an active commitment to or working towards one's sense of purpose. The final dimension is prosocial reasoning. That is, one's intention is to positively affect other people (Damon, 2008). Most people struggle to satisfy all three dimensions. Bronk

and colleagues (2010) have articulated three common "types" of people who fall into these three corresponding categories. Those who have a clear intention to accomplish something beyond themselves and desire to contribute to the world around them, but lack an active commitment, can be referred to as "beyond the self-dreamers." Those who have a clear intention to accomplish a goal and are continually actively engaged, but their purpose is solely personal can be thought of as maintaining "self-oriented life goals." Lastly, those who maintain a commitment to something, but are not engaged in action, can be referred to as "drifters" (Bronk and Finch, 2010).

*Mechanisms of Purpose Development*

There are various theories of how purpose might develop. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) suggest three distinct pathways that explain one's development of purpose. Proactive development refers to a deliberate search for purpose. People on this path may be curious in nature and seeking out meaningful and rewarding experiences. They may engage in new and challenging events, which will allow them to form a more coherent understanding of their environment. Reactive development is when a sense of purpose emerges prior to active engagement. This unsolicited development can be referred to as a chance development, such as a traumatic event, or a transformative, unexpected experience that changes the way one views the world. The last pathway utilizes Bandura's Social Learning Theory framework (Bandura, 1977). In this pathway, people learn about purpose through observing others, including their behaviors and outcomes. Furthermore, the development of purpose can come from the act of observing behaviors and the emotional reactions that are paired with it. People are often likely to experience a "hybrid" of two or three of these pathways (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). While previous research demonstrating that adversity in younger years may indeed curtail purpose

development in adulthood (Hill et al., 2018), this dissertation takes a special interest in the reactive pathway and its effects on adolescent girls from marginalized communities.

Based on qualitative interviews with diverse, low income high school students, Liang and colleagues (Liang et al., 2017) created the "4 P's of Purpose" framework reflecting key influences on purpose development: people, (specifically significant adults); passion (interest or enthusiasm for one's purpose); propensity (maintaining unique character traits and skills that make a person successful in their quest for purpose); and prosocial benefits (the desire to contribute to those besides themselves, including family and community) (Liang et al., 2017) . While all four elements are clearly important, this study especially focused on how people contribute to an individual's sense of purpose development.

*Purpose as a Protective Factor*

The cultivation of purpose in adolescents is associated with positive development trajectories (Damon et al., 2003). Evidence suggests that early development of purpose is a protective factor in the face of multiple transitions associated with adolescence. In contrast with the various extrinsic motivations salient in the lives of adolescents, purpose is an intrinsic motivator (Liang et al, 2017). When asked to describe their sense of purpose, adolescents' responses often reflect deeply rooted, foundational motivations that provide direction for their life (Hill et al., 2010). Adolescents with a sense of purpose, compared to their counterparts, tend to be more academically engaged and perform better academically (Damon et al., 2003). In addition, compared to their peers, purposeful youth also report lower alcohol and drug usage, along with higher self-esteem, pro social behavior, moral commitment, and sense of meaning in their lives (Damon et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2010).

Conversely, when adolescents do not have a sense of purpose, they are susceptible to becoming overwhelmed and/or bored by their environments, as they lack the direction, motivation, and coping ability that purpose can help fuel as one navigates mundane daily tasks (Liang et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2010). Purposelessness has been connected with feelings of self-absorption, addiction, antisocial behaviors, unstable interpersonal relationships and lack of productivity (Damon et al., 2003). These findings taken together suggest that youth who lack purpose compared to purposeful youth may be at greater risk for anxiety, depression, and other threats to their well-being (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Damon, 2008; Spencer et al., 2018).

*Role of Purpose among Marginalized Adolescents.*

Less prevalent is research that explicitly examined the role of purpose in youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, critics of youth purpose work have argued that purpose is more relevant for privileged youth than for underprivileged youth (Liang et al, 2017; Sumner et al., 2018). Some studies suggested that these youth may lack motivation regarding their future opportunities and may face imminent pressures in their lives that may make them less inclined to adopt a future orientation (Gutowski et al., 2018; Sumner et al., 2018). In addition, it has been hypothesized that if families are struggling to provide support for their adolescents financially, they may be less likely to help them foster purpose development (Sumner et al., 2018).

Despite these barriers and misconceptions of purpose as being relevant to only privileged youth, qualitative studies have demonstrated the salience and prevalence of youth purpose in marginalized youth (e.g. Liang et al., 2017(a); Liang et al., 2017 (b); Sumner et al, 2018). Indeed, these youth may be especially attuned to issues of systemic injustices that have contributed to personal adversity and thus recognize the importance that they and others have in

transforming circumstances in their immediate communities and beyond (Sumner et al., 2018; Diemer et al., 2016). Youth from marginalized backgrounds may be reflective about their life circumstances and use their experiences as a catalyst for future change. Studies of marginalized adolescents demonstrate that they are often motivated to benefit their families, usually in a financial manner (Liang et al., 2017). In contrast, adolescents from privileged backgrounds tend to develop aspirations apart from a desire to benefit their immediate families (Sumner et al., 2018). Along with the long term benefits that purpose development can have on marginalized adolescents, these youth had higher GPAs and better academic performance, school behavior and higher graduation rates (Pizzolato et al., 2011; Adelabu, 2008; Liang et al., 2017).

## Post-Traumatic Growth

Research on Post-Traumatic Growth may further expand our understanding of mechanisms for purpose development among marginalized youth. Post- Traumatic Growth is comparable to the Reactive Pathway through which purpose evolves from unexpected circumstances (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Post-Traumatic Growth literature suggests that positive growth can result from even highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). More specifically, in the aftermath of a difficult, and even traumatic experience, sometimes individuals experience increased insight and psychological growth (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). Studies have shown that Post-Traumatic Growth did not differ across life events, thus suggesting that it is not the type of trauma or experience that occurred but rather the meaning-making or reflective processing afterwards that made the difference (Milam et al., 2004). Moreover, experiences do not have to meet the Diagnostic Statistical Manual 5 criteria for trauma. They can instead also include cumulative adversity, such as major life events, chronic stressors, sexual harassment and discrimination (Jirek & Saunders, 2018).

Interviews conducted with people who have experienced a traumatic event or a life crisis have shown that Post-Traumatic Growth can be demonstrated through five life changes: 1) greater appreciation of life and changed sense of priorities, 2) more intimate relationships with others, 3) greater sense of personal strength, 4) recognition of new possibilities or path for one's life, 5) spiritual development (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). Moreover, these benefits are often derived when individuals try to psychologically survive and rebuild after the adverse experience through forming new schemas for understanding the event and their lives. This growth does not necessitate accepting the experience but rather an understanding of how it has shaped their development (Tedeschi & Lawrence, 2004).

The outcomes of Post-Traumatic Growth can influence purpose development. Some survivors may even at times excel beyond where they were before the experiences of adversity. For example, survivors who experience an increased appreciation of life, sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities or life trajectories, and a transformed set of priorities, are likely to gain a sense of their purpose or a commitment to purpose. This process may ultimately transform adverse experiences into ones that have positive, profound influences on individuals' life aspirations and purpose. An example is captured by the following anecdote: "One of the people who talked with us about her personal loss was influenced by her own struggle with grief to become an oncology nurse, where she could try to provide care and comfort to other persons facing suffering and loss" (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004, page 6).

Post-Traumatic Growth may play a role in the way that adolescents from marginalized backgrounds process life-changing experiences of poverty, homelessness, social conflict and interpersonal violence. While research has clearly suggested that stressful events predict emotional distress during these vulnerable years (Ickovics et al., 2006), more research is needed

to ascertain whether and how young people make meaning of these experiences and whether they

can lead to Post-Traumatic Growth and ultimately a sense of purpose. It is argued that compared

to older people, young people may be more likely to report growth given their malleability and

openness to change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

It is important to note that many people who have experienced post traumatic growth

have also experienced post-traumatic stress symptoms.  Post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic

stress disorder refer to the deleterious emotional and physiological aftermath of a traumatic

experience. They may experience distressing and intrusive nightmares of the trauma, irritability,

hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, poor sleeping, emotional withdrawal, increase in anxiety,

depression symptoms, and suicidal ideation (Yehuda et al., 2015). After a traumatic event or

events, individuals who have experienced post-traumatic stress often must relearn how to feel

safe and secure in their environment and physical bodies.  Thus, while this dissertation highlights

post traumatic growth, and ways in which an individual is able to positively reframe their

mindset after a traumatic event, the serious negative effects of trauma must not be minimized.

## Mentoring Relationships

Formative adult relationships, such as mentors, may play a particularly important role in

helping marginalized youth to navigate and make meaning of adversity, and ultimately to

develop a sense of purpose in the face of adversity. While many of these first relationships occur

between a child and parent, the relationship between a non-familial adult and child can be

formative. Such relationships are critical especially as formative relationships can serve as the

"blue-print" for future relationships (Bowlby, 1977; Bowlby 1988). As adolescents transition out

of being dependent on their parents and seek comfort through outside sources, they often still

require adult validation (Liang et al., 2016). Indeed, many adolescents need assistance and

guidance as they transition from child to adulthood (Liang et al., 2008). Thus, adolescents often turn outside their family to other adult figures, such as mentors, for guidance. A mentoring relationship is defined as "connections between more experienced individuals and less experienced (often younger) "mentees" in which the former plays a role in guiding the mentee in some area of the mentee's life" (e.g. Rhodes et al., 2006). These specific relationships can provide a sense of safety and security that contribute to a young person's self-esteem and sense of agency (Liang et al., 2016). Mentoring relationships can occur naturally and or in the context of official mentoring programs (White et al., 2020). Regardless of formality, mentors can teach adolescents skills, perspectives and knowledge that the individual may not encounter in the home (Liang et al., 2008).

Substantial literature suggests ways in which mentoring relationships contribute to Positive Youth Development (Rhodes, 2002). Traditional mentoring relationships focused on mentors serving as a role model and teaching skills to the mentee. Research by Liang and colleagues (Liang et al., 2016) have identified specific qualities of mentoring relationships that are more reciprocal and growth enhancing (Liang et al., 2016). These qualities are informed by the Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) and include "a) mutual engagement (i.e., perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship), (b) authenticity (i.e., the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the relationship), (c) empowerment/zest (i.e., the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action), and (d) the ability to deal with difference or conflict (i.e., the process of expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling." That is, mentoring relationships that are caring, supportive and growth

fostering contribute to adolescents' flourishing (Liang et al., 2016; Lund et al., 2019; Jordan et al., 1997; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

*Mentors and Purpose*

Emerging research demonstrates that purpose development can be enhanced through mentoring relationships (White et al. 2020; Liang et al., 2016). Indeed, there is a positive association between mentoring relationships and individual self-esteem and sense of purpose.  These youth also sought out more activities that related to their sense of purpose (White et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2016). In fact, it is often the mentor, rather than the parent who introduces youth purpose to an individual (Damon, 2008). This occurs as their mentors often role model meaning making and purpose in their own lives (Damon, 2008).

 Liang and colleagues (Liang et al., 2017) have identified through the 4 Ps theory that mentors can also serve as a catalyst for the mentee's purpose developments, specifically mentees from marginalized backgrounds. These adolescents have identified that mentors can help them identify and build their sense of purpose through affirmations, guidance and cultivation (Liang et al., 2017). Through mentors providing individuals with verbal affirmations, adolescents reported feeling valued and emotionally safe. Moreover, in a genuine mentorship relationship, the mentees felt as if their mentors wanted them to succeed, and this sense of commitment and guidance fostered self-confidence. Mentors can also help adolescents cultivate their sense of purpose, through providing them with opportunities they may not have been exposed to. For example, mentors can introduce adolescents to internships, and or afterschool/ summer programs that can help expand adolescents' life experiences. Lastly, through guidance, such as direct advice, the adolescent experiences a sense of scaffolding through concrete help in reaching their sense of purpose (Liang et al., 2017).

For marginalized adolescents, when psychological stress is a barrier for purpose development, experiences of social support, including mentoring relationships, helps reframe the stress. In fact, the mentor can often help the individual break down their barrier, bolstering purpose development (Gurowki et al., 2018). Mentors have also been found to urge minority adolescents to pursue their education, help them to persevere despite setbacks and difficulties, help develop practical skills, and instill a sense of hope in them (Liang et al., 2017). In addition, a sense of social support can be especially helpful in reframing difficult experiences to lead to purpose development. In fact, "adolescents who develop a commitment to others through shared life events, whether recognition of shared identity or shared purpose may be especially likely to engage in purpose development" (Sumner et al., 2018). When adolescents are provided an opportunity to explore their previous experiences with people who demonstrate support, understanding and even empathy for such experiences, they are likely to engage in purpose development (Sumner et al., 2018).

## COVID-19

As the data collection was about to begin, the country and the world became affected by a global pandemic, COVID-19. The pandemic caused most people to postpone future plans, and rethink their immediate goals and opportunities (Efuribe et al., 2020; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Son et al., 2020). In addition, social gatherings and in-person interactions came to a halt. Public health measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 left many individuals confined to their homes, and they experienced a profound sense of isolation. Heightened isolation is of the utmost concern as it is associated with mental health problems (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). This type of isolation can be especially damaging during adolescence, a time when young people begin to rely more heavily on (and find happiness through) their friends and

peers rather than their families (Jager et al., 2015). The experiences surrounding COVID-19 also led to an increase in worries. Research with college students found that many experienced an increase in concerns surrounding the health of loved ones, academic difficulties, and financial pressures (Cohen et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Indeed, a small subset of studies, focused in Texas after Hurricane Ike, found that some students struggled to return to their pre-disaster levels of academic performance (Lai et al., 2019).

While this present study was not initially designed to examine a global pandemic as a source of adversity, it explored the potentially profound effects of the pandemic on adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. There are gaps in research on the effects of natural disasters, including the global pandemic, on adolescent girls' development. This study provides a timely opportunity to collect data on this critical influence on this population of young people.

## Summary of Literature Review

The literature review provides a summary of the relevant research and theories surrounding adolescent girl's development, youth purpose, experiences of adversity, and the role of mentors. All of these themes are relevant to understanding PYD. The role of mentors on the development of purpose among adolescent girls can be understood as a bi-directional relationship between individuals and their environments--a PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD illuminates that all individuals have strengths, and it is through matching individuals and their environment that their strengths can best develop. Furthermore, just as individuals are shaped by their environments (e.g., mentors, adverse experiences), individuals can shape their environment (mentors can create environments that cultivate youth purpose). The literature review also highlights Post-Traumatic Growth and illuminates how an adverse experience may be crucial for purpose development as it is known that adolescent girls from marginalized

backgrounds are likely to be exposed to at least one adverse situation. Post-Traumatic Growth along with PYD are two frameworks that conceptualize youth development from a strength-based perspective. These frameworks highlight adolescents' ability to persevere and positively contribute to their communities.

As previously stated, some of the constructs of interest have been thoroughly explored, yet studies have not examined them all together. Both purpose and relationships with mentors are positive influences in adolescent development (e.g. Liang et al., 2016; Damon et al., 2008). Moreover, purpose development can be just as helpful if not even more beneficial to youth from marginalized backgrounds (Sumner et al., 2018). Yet, what is less clear and studied, is whether adversity plays a role in cultivating purpose through post-traumatic growth in the lives of adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. Adolescent girls from low income and or racially minoritized backgrounds may struggle with various stressors; studies are needed to understand whether some are able to navigate these challenges through the kind of post-traumatic growth and meaning-making that leads to the development of purpose.

Such research will inform educators, parents, and other mentor figures how to better support and scaffold adolescent girls as they rise above their circumstances and navigate life challenges. Moreover, this work may inform the development of adolescent girls to positively contribute to society and achieve their aspirations. Indeed, as we strive for a society characterized by gender equity, including enhancing the life chances of adolescent girls such that they can pursue aspirations for leadership and influence in society, we must further explore understudied populations, such as adolescent girls from low income and/ or racially minoritized backgrounds and identities.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Introduction to Chapter Three**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an explanation of the methodology utilized for this dissertation. As previously stated, the goal of this dissertation is to further explore purpose development with adolescent girls who have endured an adverse experience. In addition, these adolescent girls come from low SES and or racially minoritized backgrounds. Specifically, this dissertation addressed the following questions: *How do experiences of adversity (i.e., mental health, family, marginalization challenges) among marginalized adolescent girls influence the development of purpose? How do mentor figures help girls navigate this adversity and ultimately influence their purpose development?"*

This dissertation built upon previous literature on youth purpose by illuminating how purpose development in adolescent girls can derive from adverse situations and the role of mentors in cultivating purpose. The practical significance of this study is that the findings can potentially help educators and parents better understand how to support adolescent girls as they navigate challenges. In addition, further research on this crucial process and developmental period can contribute to adolescent girls' positive youth development and flourishing, including their ability to contribute to society and achieve their aspirations. In particular, findings can inform the development of youth purpose.

**Study Design and Rationale**

A qualitative methods design was chosen for this dissertation. Qualitative methods are considered a holistic, interpretive and empathic approach to research design (Toma, 2011). This methodology shows how data can represent participants' rich interpretations of the world (Creswell, 2013). More specifically, it allows for individualized and specific examples rather than forcing participants to select from predetermined answers on a survey (Creswell, 2013). As concepts and themes emerge from the data, researchers are able to draw connections and even

create theory (Toma, 2011). Qualitative methodology is essential in studying purpose

development as it allows for a thorough exploration of abstract topics and perspectives that may

not have been articulated through quantitative methodology. In addition, the process creates a

safe space for adolescents to reflect on their individualized experiences. Moreover, it is

especially useful for allowing the voices of vulnerable populations to be heard (Bronk, 2008;

Liang et al., 2017).

For this dissertation, I employed Thematic Analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003;

Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis is a qualitative methodology that is utilized across various

epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). The flexibility allowed in this

methodology can meet the needs of a range of studies seeking to collect and analyze rich and

complex data (Norwell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis identifies themes that become apparent

based on the descriptions of the various phenomena (Daly et al., 1997). The themes can offer

insight into patterns that occur across the interviews (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Thematic analysis is often the chosen analytical method when the aim is to make

meaning across various data sets and or transcripts. Moreover, Braun and Clarke argued that

thematic analysis can be best utilized to illuminate various participants' perspectives and

highlight their similarities and differences (Norwell et al., 2017). This approach encourages the

researchers to engage with the data through comprehension of unified experiences among

participants (Braun & Clark, 2006).

While thematic analysis has undergone various renditions, the two most popular versions

are Boyatzis' "Small Q", and Braun and Clarke's "Big Q" (Braun & Clark, 2006). These two

frameworks are both housed under thematic analysis, but they differ in their conceptualizations

of knowledge and utilization of data. Boyatzis argued that thematic analysis served as a bridge

between positivist and interpretive paradigms (Boyatzis, 1998; Terry et al., 2017). Moreover, there must be a strong and rigid emphasis on coding reliability. Throughout the coding process the coders are instructed to remain very close to the codebook and continually calculate their inter-rater reliability score (Cohen's Kappa). It is assumed that "good" data and "good" codes are determined by coders producing similar results (Terry et al., 2017).

Based on my ontological beliefs discussed in greater detail below, Braun and Clarke's "Big Q" best fit my epistemology and research design. Braun and Clarke's "Big Q" framework acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and the influence it can have on data and analysis processes. Codes emerge from the data, rather than applying a predeveloped codebook based on theory (Braun & Clark, 2006). Furthermore, within this framework, coding is treated as a flexible process that undergoes numerous iterations.

Thematic analysis allowed me to identify themes that reflect similarities in participants' experiences, such as how adversity shapes their purpose and aspirations. In particular, my goal was to illuminate key themes that enable researchers and educators to better understand the development of purpose in the target population. While thematic analysis appears to be the best qualitative design based on the goals of the study, it is important to also highlight methods that one may assume could be appropriate, but were not chosen. For example, grounded theory would not be an appropriate methodology for this study as its aim is to generate a new theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While a new theory may later emerge from this data set, it was not the primary focus. Similarly, phenomenology is not an appropriate research methodology as it focuses on how we initially experience a phenomenon, rather than how we process or reflect on past experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this current study, I aimed to understand how the participants reflect on and make meaning of their experiences to inform their current

selves.  Relatedly, while the aim of conventional content analysis is to obtain rich detailed data, the focus is more on language and classifying the large text into different categories that reflect communication messages (Hseih & Shannon, 2005).

Unlike other methodologies, thematic analysis is not associated with a specific research paradigm (Terry et al., 2017). In fact, thematic analysis requires the researcher to state their beliefs and consider where their methodology will fall on the following scale: essentialist to constructionist, experimental or critical orientation, inductive or deductive. I followed a constructivist approach, and I believe that meaning from data is often socially produced and that data collection does not occur in a vacuum (Braun, & Clarke 2006). A constructivist approach argues that there is not one single reality, but rather there can be multiple realities, and these realities should be considered equal (Appleton & King, 1997). A reality is often based on the individual's interpretation of the experience. A constructivist approach also believes that research produces an impact of mutuality as the researcher and interviewee can influence one another. Thus, as I conducted my research I did not question if the participants' experiences were "true" but rather I always assumed they were "true" and honored participants' sense of reality. In addition, I acknowledged that my biases and interests may have affected the data, as they already informed the interview protocol. In addition, I could not control if my presence impacted the participants' responses, and if my understanding of the world impacted the data analysis process.

Moreover, I gravitate towards the experiential side of the spectrum rather than the critical side. On the experimental orientation, what participants think, say and do reflects their reality. The critical orientation believes that the researcher should utilize the participants' language to help them construct their reality and understanding of the world. For this research study, when

reflecting on my personal views I believed the participant is the knower of their reality, and their speech reflects their own reality (Terry et al., 2017; Braun, & Clarke 2006). The adolescent girls already processed their experiences, and I do not seek to poke holes in how they tell their stories by dissecting their word choices. My job rather was to help them tell their stories.

Lastly, I plan to employ a combination of inductive and deductive approaches to the coding process. I utilized an inductive approach and worked from the ground up to allow the themes and codes to emerge from the data. Moreover, I constructed a codebook when I began to read the transcripts, rather than have created one beforehand based on the literature.  However, it is deductive in that I have already conducted a thorough literature review and familiarized myself with many key theories such as Purpose (e.g., (Damon et al., 2003), Relational Mentoring (Liang et al., 2016), and Post Traumatic Growth (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004).  Yet, Braun and Clarke state that a deductive and inductive approach can occur simultaneously: "as the researcher is never a blank slate, and inevitably brings their own social position and theoretical lens to the analysis, but an inductive orientation signals a data-led analysis" (Terry et al., 2017, p. 9).

While I employed a constructivist paradigm, I did so through critical inquiry. Critical inquiry seeks to better understand and expose power differences, inequality, and injustices. Through this lens, researchers often ask themselves how societal structure has perpetrated these structural inequalities (Charmaz, 2017). As I conducted my interviews and engaged with the data, I continually asked myself how systems of oppression regarding race, class and gender affect the participants' unique dialogues.

Similarly, I viewed my research process through a feminist perspective. A feminist perspective encourages researchers to value women's experiences, ideas and needs, recognize conditions that oppress women, such as ideological, structural and interpersonal dynamics, and

maintain a desire to change the oppressive system that limits women (Hall & Stevens, 1991). Alongside feminist scholars, my goal was and continues to be to also bring awareness to adolescent girls' life challenges. I highlighted the long-term effects of certain stressors and aimed to promote solutions that could better support adolescent girls, such as cultivating purpose development. In keeping with feminist approaches, the participating adolescent girls were their own story tellers, and I listened to their own descriptions of their perspectives, rather than seeking information from their parents, teachers and friends (Hall & Stevens, 1991).

## Study of Procedures

**Sampling of Participants.** The present study aimed to focus on the experiences of adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds that identified as highly purposeful and experienced an adverse event (family issues, mental health issues or discrimination) The study involved recruiting high school aged girls from a larger mixed methods study that the researcher was engaged in as the project coordinator. For the purposes of this dissertation, the interviews constituted an additional data collection. The larger study focused on adolescent girls' sense of purpose in three all-girls, mixed-income high schools. The schools were located in California, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. The schools were charter schools and were attended by racially diverse students. This dissertation recruited only students from California and Pennsylvania, as the Massachusetts students declined to participate. In order to make up for the school that declined to participate, I also recruited participants from a local all girls lacrosse team that aimed to serve marginalized adolescent girls.

**Sampling Method.** Consistent with previous qualitative studies of youth purpose, I aimed to utilize a purposeful sampling in which I pre-select the participants in hopes to yield richer data (Morrow, 2005). I engaged in a criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). This sampling

method (examining a phenomenon in a population likely to exemplify it) was consistent with that used in previous qualitative studies of youth purpose (Patton, 2002). In criterion sampling the phenomenon of interest was adolescent girls from low socioeconomic background and or racially minoritized backgrounds, and have experienced an adverse situation and exemplify a sense of purpose. Specifically, participants were administered a youth purpose measure (i.e., the Claremont Purpose Scale; Bronk, et al., 2018) and adversity measure (i.e., an adapted version of The Adolescents Perceived Events Scale; Grant & Compas, 1995). Given that this study examined how adversity shapes youth purpose, these quantitative measures enabled the researcher to identify students who met the criteria for selection--those adolescent girls who have a strong sense of purpose and who have a history of adverse experiences. The initial criterion for invitation to interview was based on scoring in the top half of the purpose scale and reporting a minimum level of adversity as indicated by endorsing "somewhat bad" or greater levels of negative experience on at least one of three preselected adversity measures (i.e., family adversity, discrimination, and mental health struggles). For the lacrosse team, individuals who demonstrated a level of purpose, and experienced an adverse event were invited to interview.

      **Sample Size.** The sample size in qualitative research methods can vary based on the theoretical framework. Many methodologists adhere to the notion that data must meet saturation (also known as redundancy), and then the researcher can stop interviewing (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Miles and colleagues (Miles et al., 2013) suggest approximately 10 cases, as they caution that greater than 10 causes can cause a researcher to lose complexity and richness of data. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that a sample size ranging from 6-15 individuals is appropriate for the dissertation.

**Participants**. There were a total of 13 participants. Table 1 provides demographic information of the participants. All participants self-identified as female. The mean age was 16.69 years old, and the mean grade was 10. All the participants identified as students of color. Of the 13 participants, Asian (N= 2), Latina (N= 3), Black (N= 2), Biracial as Asian and Caucasian (N= 3), Biracial as Latina and Asian (N= 2) and Biracial as Black and Caucasian (N= 1). The participants self-identified their socioeconomic status as middle/high (N= 8), middle (N= 3), and low/middle (N= 2). As for sexual orientation, the participants responses varied as heterosexual (N= 8), bisexual (N= 2), and I don't know (N= 3). Of the participants, more than half attended the initial schools recruited (N= 8), whereas the others were members of the lacrosse team (N= 5).

**Recruitment.** The Institutional Review Board at Boston College approved the larger study. I submitted an amendment to the IRB complete with updates with regards to my dissertation and usage of the data. Once the amendment was approved, I reached out to the schools involved in my study. My mentor, Dr. Liang and our research team have already established connections and relationships with the sample. I then arranged a phone call with each site to ensure they thoroughly understand the steps required in the proposed study. The schools then reach out to their students and parents/guardians via email (approved by the IRB) to request permission for students to participate in this research study and to provide a description of the study. I also included my contact information if the parents or students had additional questions. In the email and on the consent form, it emphasized that individuals can choose to not participate in this study and will not be penalized. During the recruitment process, the Massachusetts school struggled to obtain consent forms from the parents and guardians. Of those that consented, they declined to participate in an interview. At this point we decided not to have the Massachusetts

school participate in this part of the study. In order to compensate for the loss of the participants

from the Massachusetts school, an all girls lacrosse team, situated in the Boston area, agreed to

join the study. A new IRB amendment to include the lacrosse team as part of the study, with the

updated consent and assent information was submitted. Once IRB was approved, the previous

steps were followed. Upon competition of the surveys, the sample for the interview study was

compiled. Participants were then contacted via email to invite them to participate in an hour,

zoom interview.

**Data Collection**

**Informed Consent.**  All students and parents/guardians received an email containing an

invitation for their student to participate in the research study. Within the email there was a link

to an informed consent form and assent form. Anyone under the age of 18 who wished to

participate had to have their parents/guardians fill out the informed consent which provided them

the opportunity to choose whether they consent to their child's participation in the survey and /or

the interview. Those who were 18 years old could fill out their own consent form and participate

without parental permission. If parents chose to consent their child into the study, we then sent

out via email an assent form to each participant under 18 years of age, ensuring all participants

agreed to the study before participating.

The consent/assent form provided information about the study, including its purpose, and

any risks and benefits of their participation. Based on previous research that suggests that

reflecting on purpose can lead to purpose, students may benefit from participation through an

increased sense of purpose. Although the risks of participation were minimal, some participants

were informed that they may experience low levels of discomfort from filling out surveys or

answering the interview question on psychological experiences. The consent/assent form also

contained details about how the information would be kept confidential and anonymous. All copies of the survey were saved on a Boston College secure drive. A list of participants' names was kept separate from the data on the secure drive. In addition, interviews were immediately de-identified, and participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Participants that were consented into the study by a parent/guardian were then provided via email an assent form and a Qualtrics survey link. When participants were interviewed, they provided verbal confirmation that they knew and agreed to be recorded.

**Measures**

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Participants were asked to indicate age, race, gender identity, and sexual identity. To assess socioeconomic status, students indicated parents' educational background and whether they receive free or reduced lunch in school. Students filled out Part One of the youth version of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. The measure contained a ladder with ten rungs of the ladder labeled based on socioeconomic status. Higher up the ladder referred to higher socioeconomic status. Participants were asked to rank where they believe their family would fit on the ladder. The instructions include "Imagine that this ladder pictures how American society is set up. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off — they have the most money, the highest amount of schooling, and the jobs that bring the most respect. At the bottom are people who are the worst off — they have the least money, little or no education, no job, or jobs that no one wants or respects. Now think about your family. Please tell us where you think your family would be on this ladder. Mark the rung that best represents where your family would be on this ladder." (Goodman et al., 2001). Based on a two-month, test- retest, the reliability for the measure was .73 (Goodman et al., 2001).

**Claremont Purpose Scale.** The Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS) was utilized to assess

the participants' sense of purpose. This scale, developed for adolescents, identified three types of

purpose: goal-directedness, personal meaning, and beyond the self-orientation (Bronk, Riches, &

Mangan, 2018). This CPS scale applied adaptations to the Meaning of Life Questionnaire,

Identified Purpose Scale (Steger et al., 2006), Ryff's 1989 Scales of psychological well-being,

and Schwartz's (1992) Value Survey: Self Transcendence subscale. The scale included 12

questions. Example questions included "how clear is your sense of purpose in life?" and "how

important is it to you to make the world a better place in some way?" Participants responded on a

7-point Likert scale, ranging from *1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree*.  High scores

indicated they met criteria for having a sense of purpose. The CPS has a strong internal

consistency ($\alpha = .916$). The individual subscales also had strong internal consistency (i.e.,

meaning $\alpha = .910$, goal directedness $\alpha = .916$, and beyond the self-orientation $\alpha = .873$).

**The Adolescents Perceived Events Scale (APES).  The Adolescent Perceived Events**

**Scale, Short version (**Compas et al., 1987) measured the daily and major stressors in an

adolescent's life. The APES short scale contains 90 items ranging from major life changes (death

of a family member), to more neutral or mundane events (daily tasks).  Through self-report

participants identified if the event occurred in the last six months and then ranked it in terms of

its effect on them, including desirability ( -4 =extremely bad, 0 = neither good or bad, +4 =

extremely good) (Compas et al., 1987).  Research shows the scale has good reliability and

validity (Compas et al., 1987). The test-retest reliability, for total items, over a two-week span

ranged from .77 to .85, negative events ranged from .74 to .89, and positive events ranged from

.89, and.78 to .84 (McCullough & Laughlin, 2000). This dissertation, explored if adolescents

ever experienced these life events, rather than in the past six months, as this study focused on

whether adversity (not just recent adversity) influenced their purpose development. In addition, this scale was created and normed on a primarily white, middle to low SES, rural and suburban population. To make it more applicable to a marginalized population, the following items were added (*1) experiences of discrimination based on race, 2) experiences of discrimination based on gender, 3) experiences of discrimination based on social class, 4) financial difficulties, 5) food insecurity due to financial difficulties)*

**Interview Protocol.** After the sample was selected, in-depth (Johnson, 2002), semi-structured (Seidman, 1991) interviews were conducted. Once the interview pool was established, I reached out to participants via email with an invitation to participate in a 60-90-minute, one-time zoom interview. Of the 20 invited, 13 agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted by Zoom in a secluded place to ensure confidentiality. Interviews began with a review of the informed consent and ensured that participants understand they can skip questions or choose to end the interview at any time, without any negative consequences. In addition, verbal consent was obtained, indicating that the interviewee understood she was being audio recorded.

The interview protocol, that was informed by youth purpose research (Bronk et al., 2004), served as a suggestive guide for the interviews. Interview questions broadly covered the following topics: who they are as people, what they care about, what are their dreams for the future, how they would define their sense of purpose, where they think their purpose came from, how their adverse experiences shaped them and their purpose, and how people, specifically mentors or significant adults, helped them make meaning of their adversity to ultimately shape their sense of purpose. In short, participants had the opportunity to explore their sense of purpose, how it changed or was affected by their adversity, and how, if at all, people in their lives helped them make meaning of their adversity in a way that may have contributed to their

life aspirations and purpose. The interview protocol was created, piloted, and revised with a small subset of participants in a different research study. In addition, the interview protocol touched upon how COVID-19 affected their current lives, and perhaps their sense of purpose.

During the interviews and immediately afterwards, I took field notes. My field notes contain detailed descriptions on body language, and affect. I also described the environment in which they chose to conduct the interview. In addition, I also took notes in my research journal on my reactions to the interviews, including how I felt during the interview, anything that stood out to me as unique or significant, or if I sense potential themes. Afterwards I created my contact summary sheet. My contact summary sheet will contain participants' pseudo names, ages, and any important themes or ideas specific to the individuals.

**Analytical Strategy**

Interviews and coding occurred simultaneously (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Braun and Clarke (Baun & Clarke, 2006) provide a six-step protocol to ensure that researchers are thoroughly grappling with the data as opposed to jumping to conclusions. The first step required researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. This entailed reading the transcripts multiple times, asking questions about the data, participants' assumptions, and observing the researcher's assumptions. The second step was to create codes  (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal was to create codes that capture the interpretation of the data. I began with in vivo coding for the first order codes. In vivo coding is line by line coding, in which the participants' language was utilized as codes (Charmaz, 2006). This coding process is helpful especially when working with children and adolescents whose voices may have been marginalized as it empowers their stories and language (Saldana, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). Also, in vivo coding captures participants' processing and problem solving. Following in vivo coding, I

engaged in focused coding. Focused coding allows for categorization of the data based on themes or concepts (Charmaz, 2006). I cross-compare data derived from other transcripts to highlight additional themes (Saldana, 2011). The most popular codes became named "salient codes" and became part of my code book. While in-vivo coding and focused coding are more often associated with grounded theory, the benefit of thematic analysis is the flexibility of incorporating different coding styles to match with various analytical approaches (Saldana, 2011).

The third phase, construction of themes, involved examination of patterns. I looked across transcripts and reviewed the various codes, especially the salient codes. The codes were clustered, combined and sorted to create a pattern/theme. In the fourth phase I reviewed the previously suggested themes, which to this point are thought of as "candidate themes," rather than "finalized themes." During this phase, I asked myself, "Are all the themes different enough yet still connected?" Do the themes actually represent the data I have rather than what I want? Do my themes connect to my research question?  Step 5 included reviewing, finalizing, and naming those candidate themes. I, the researcher, then began to tell the story of how and why these finalized themes connect. Step 6 involved the write up of findings, which will be provided in chapter 4 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Quality and Trustworthiness.** Qualitative methods must uphold rigor and standards according to the type of methodology. Lincoln and Guba deemed a set of criteria necessary for a study to be considered trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba 2000; Morrow, 2005).  Moreover, a rigorous study must establish credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to a proper fit between the respondent's views and researchers' presentations of them. A study is transferable if a reader is able to generalize the findings to a different

appropriate context. While qualitative research is often focused on unique and individualized

experiences, many times the findings cannot and should not be perfectly transferable. However,

in order for readers to feel as if they have the ability to expand it to different settings, the

researcher must provide detailed descriptions of the whole process including information about

the self, the research context, the process, participants and any research-participant relationships.

Dependability refers to research being consistent across time and space. As opposed to

transferability, whereas the results can be applicable to different settings, dependability states

that the research process must be repeatable by a different researcher. Lastly, confirmability

requires that the findings should stick close to the data and situation being investigated and be

mindful of when and where researcher bias and assumptions become influential. Moreover,

confirmability "is based on the perspective that the integrity of findings lies in the data and the

researchers must adequately tie together the data, analytic process and findings in such a way

that the reader is able to confirm the adequacy of the findings" (Morrow, 2005, p.252).

I strived for credibility through member checking with the participants. The participants

were able to provide feedback on their transcripts to ensure it properly matches what they

intended to say. Through ongoing debriefs with my dissertation chair, I upheld the research

process according to the above criteria and standards, including that the study is repeatable by

another researcher, satisfying the dependability criteria. We continued to monitor confirmability

through continual discussion on codes and themes to monitor to ensure that I stayed close to the

data and did not make assumptions that did not reflect what the participant aimed to state. Lastly,

other researchers should have a clear idea of the other samples that this study could be

appropriate for based on my logical, traceable and clearly documented research journal and audit

trails. I aimed to also uphold transferability by providing a section in the dissertation about

myself and reflexivity and through upholding detailed audit trails and research journals, thus allowing my research process to be transparent and perhaps replicable (Morrow, 2005).

Morrow argues that Lincoln and Guba's suggestions for upholding trustworthiness fall closer to a positivist paradigm (Morrow, 2005). While the suggested criteria are necessary and will be upheld in my research study, I also employed Morrow's suggestions based on a constructivist paradigm: researchers should emphasize the extent to which participants' meanings are understood and the extent to which the researcher and participant engage in mutual construction of meaning. Moreover, through clarifying a participant's meaning, Morrow suggests that context and culture must be considered to ensure the data is not being analyzed in isolation. I aimed to understand context by including questions about the participants' "here and now" experiences, such as their interests and hobbies, allowing me to understand who they are and their daily influences. Morrow also stated that in order for research to be co-constructed between the participant and researcher, the participant must feel comfortable disclosing certain pieces of information (Morrow, 2005). While I was an outsider to many of the participants, I attempted to become a familiar face to them. I worked closely with the participants' school personnel, to ensure the participants knew who I was before I asked them to interview with me. I personally sent out the emails for interviews and thus the participants then coordinated times directly with me. In addition, I factored in time in the beginning of the interview for the participants to ask questions about me and get a sense of who I am before I start.

**Self-Reflexivity.** Reflexivity is the act of being transparent about one's experiences, biases and assumptions (Darawsheh, 2014). In order to engage in self-reflexivity, I will share the identities I hold which may influence assumptions and views of the world.  I am a 27-year-old, cis gender, white female, born and raised in the Northeast. I lived in a suburban town directly

outside a city. The town was majority white families, from middle-upper class backgrounds. I attended public schools from K-12. In my town it was expected that one attends a well-known college. As the curriculum was rigorous, there was also a significant amount of peer competition. As I can appreciate what it is like to experience stress during the adolescent phase, it is essential that I do not project my own assumptions onto the participants. Furthermore, while we may have some shared experiences, I cannot assume I know their whole stories. I must provide space for them to share their perspectives.

Additionally, I anticipate I differed from the participants based on race and social class. In this research study, I was purposefully seeking individuals who are minoritized based on race and or SES. As a white individual who is nearly a decade older than them, I may have appeared to the participants as if I hold a position of power. In addition, while they did not know my financial situation, my reality may affect my interpretation. Personally, my family's monetary status did not cause me distress. While these differences may have caused me to feel unfamiliar with a select few of my participants' experiences, I remained open to their experiences by asking questions and seeking clarification.

As a Jewish young woman, I have experienced forms of microaggressions. These microaggressions have influenced how I understand the world, and my hope is to help those who feel powerless find their voice. While I have experienced microaggressions, I must acknowledge that they did not come in the form of discrimination. Furthermore, I cannot assume I know what an individual means when they state they experience discrimination. The microaggressions I experienced as a Jewish person might be extremely different than that of a person of color, and thus, I cannot equate these experiences.

In order to continue to reflect on my positionality, I maintained a journal alongside my field notes. In this journal, I reflected on my assumptions, thoughts, biases and opinions along with fears of how these beliefs may affect the research project. I continually consulted with my dissertation chair to ensure I was clear of when and why my assumptions influenced the research process. I aimed to be transparent in the final project about my reflexivity, positionality, and potential influences on the findings.

## CHAPTER 4

Introduction to Chapter 4

This dissertation aimed to address the following research questions: How do experiences of adversity (i.e., mental health, family, marginalization challenges) among marginalized adolescent girls influence the development of purpose? How do mentor figures help girls navigate this adversity and ultimately influence their purpose development? To address these questions, this chapter begins with a table (Table 2) that outlines each participant's identified sense of purpose. This table helps to orient the reader to each participant. The chapter is organized into four sections 1) No Grit No Pearl, 2) Desired Outcomes, 3) Mechanisms to Purpose, and 4) COVID-19. The No Grit No Pearl section identified participants' sources of adversity, and whether and how these adversities informed their sense of purpose. The Desired Outcomes section identified five ways in which the participants maintained their sense of dedication and motivation to pursue their purpose: 1) surround themselves with positive inspiration, 2) developing their identities as women, 3) strive for continual self-growth, 4) reminding themselves of their bigger picture, and 5) rely on their sense of confidence.

The chapter then explored the mechanisms that allowed these participants to arrive at their deep realization of their purpose. These mechanisms focus on the role of mentors and the

development of critical consciousness. The chapter concluded by highlighting the context of the global pandemic and its effects on adolescent girls' development. This pivotal moment in history allowed the researcher to explore critical consciousness at work, as many of the participants developed greater awareness of inequalities during the pandemic.

### No Grit No Pearl

During an interview, when one participant was asked how she reminds herself of her purpose, she responded with her favorite saying, "if you have no grit, you have no pearl." Another student provided an elaboration of this idea by emphasizing that one has to work hard and perhaps endure difficult situations to experience a sense of reward. Indeed, multiple respondents provided examples of ways that their experiences of adversity contributed to their grit and ultimately resulted in a pearl or sense of purpose. Indeed, all 13 participants identified adverse experiences that inspired and led to a sense of purpose they had identified and now were actively pursuing. Therefore, we referred to adversity-informed purpose as "the pearl" (i.e., a purpose that is clearly tied to respondents' experiences of adversity).

During the interviews, participants identified their most significant adversities. The survey measures focused on four adversities that individuals from marginalized backgrounds may experience: racial discrimination, gender discrimination, family issues, and mental health issues. Yet, in attempts to collect rich, participant-driven data, the interviewer did not limit the participants to describing discrimination, family issues, and mental health, but instead encouraged them to share their most pertinent experiences. The participants identified many experiences related to discrimination based on gender, race, and family or social difficulties.

*Racial Discrimination*

Aria defined her sense of purpose as twofold. Her vocational aspirations were to become a doctor and participate in activist work on behalf of Asian American females. She stated, "Cause I know as, like a female minority, I can speak on behalf of other people that feel silenced in today's world." She reported that this drive to represent those who are marginalized came from her own experiences of discrimination and feeling isolated growing up:

> I would always come to school with like, really traditional and Chinese things, and I just felt like I wasn't like the kid that had like the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. So it was like, I had to be either like too white, but then it was like, I was losing like my Chinese side. I was raised bilingual and then it was like, but then if I was too Asian, it wasn't like white enough?

Olive also hoped to work in the medical field and defined her sense of purpose as, "addressing the issues of systemic racism within medicine" through increasing the representation of black and African American people in the medical world. Olive attended a predominantly white institution, and as a person of color, she reported that she always felt different and questioned her sense of belonging. Olive's insecurity was heightened when she endured a racist incident with her teacher. Aria defined this incident as, "one of the worst racial instances I've ever had in my life," yet she was able to identify a positive outcome from it. This incident increased her sense of purpose in helping others who might be in similar positions:

> Compared to only other people I know where it's been a lot more dangerous a lot more life-threatening, so I realized, like, I think that I had to give back because, even though it's a negative moment [the incident] it felt privileged for me to say, like that was such a racially-charged moment in my life. When I know people who had much more scary instances where was a lot more life-threatening, I just felt like I had to give back, I had to

use my voice and, like my place of privilege to let people be aware of what other people's

experiences oppression or discrimination.

On the other hand, Georgia described her sense of purpose as stemming from witnessing

discrimination rather than enduring it directly. She reported that her purpose was to produce

movies that showcase diverse people, including disabled individuals and the LGBTQ

community. More specifically, she stated, "I want to be one of the people to have that door open

for them [minorities]." Her sense of motivation has come from wanting to positively impact

future generations and create a world for them that is more accepting:

I think I want to see, like, I've seen so much hardship and like difficulty. My life goal is

to have kids. I want them to have like a better experience I guess than I did or like not to

see so much like hate and violence is like, we see right now and so a lot of it… yeah a lot

of with like anti-Asian hate crimes right now like it's been really hard because a lot of

them were happening in like San Francisco area, and I had a lot of family there.

*Gender Discrimination*

As previously stated in the introduction and literature review, girls and women have made

leaps and bounds in educational and leadership accomplishments compared to previous

generations. Yet, despite these key milestones, adolescent girls today still feel the stereotypes

placed on women and experience different forms of gender discrimination. Many of the

participants identified their experiences with gender discrimination as part of their "grit."

For example, three participants described feeling overlooked or undermined in sports

simply because of their gender. Diane was a golf player on a mixed-gender team and felt that the

culture on the team was detrimental to her well-being. When asked about how sexism appeared

in her team she reported:

> I mean, it's, it's a little more indirectly. They obviously won't say it directly to my face, but you, you definitely feel it…., sometimes you feel like you're less of a capable player than they are.

As a result, she had to learn to rely on herself to encourage her along the way, rather than turn to her coaches or teammates. Similarly, two other participants spoke about how their female lacrosse team did not have the same opportunities to attend tournaments or meet with scouts as presented to the male team. They broached their concern with the coaches and eventually were provided access to the tournaments. Yet, unfortunately, they both stated that they still experienced lingering self-doubt that they were not as good as the boys. Participants also spoke about societal messages on what it means to be a woman, reporting that these messages influenced their daily interactions. For example, Ellie described a sense of distress around expectations placed on women, and as a result, she often "overthinks" her behavior:

> It's hard because you have all these like internalized things that stop you from going to your full potential because you don't want to overreach as a woman. At the same time, if you were to like overreach, you might get limited by the people who see that as bad and who want to stop you, so it's hard because you have to find the balance between like being confident in yourself as a person and not just as a woman.

While these barriers, and experiences of "grit" exist, many participants have identified ways they integrate gender discrimination advocacy into their purpose. For example, Aria described believing that women were at a disadvantage in various fields compared to men:

> I just think that's like the only thing that's kind of hard, especially in like today's world, because like women can't feel like they can't speak up or like they can't say something. In my opinion, we live in like a very male-dominated world and like, obviously like we've

come a long way from them, but like it's still things still haven't like changed like

dramatically as they should.

She explained that she has learned to channel those feelings to fuel her  self-worth and now feels

confident in her ability to help other women: "Cause I know like I was like a female minority,

like I can speak on behalf of like a lot of other people that like feel silenced in today's

world."  Other participants experienced gender discrimination and sexism at a young age. For

example, Frances stated that growing up in a Mexican-American household, she felt her family

valued boys more than girls and then limited her activities based on their gendered beliefs:

> Like I wasn't allowed to like do what I truly wanted like Girl Scouts or, or like
>
> gymnastics or fencing or karate or any of that. Like I had to do ballet, and I hated ballet.
>
> It was really frustrating because I was like when I was younger I was like I want to be a
>
> boy, like that [being a boy] looked so much fun.

Even so, Frances learned how to be proud of her gender identity: "It's like I love the color pink,

like I love being a girl, and I'm kind of taking that back, and it's been really cool. Yeah, like

reclaiming."

When imagining their futures, most participants anticipated some form of gender

discrimination. For example, Becca hoped to go into a career in technology and described her

expectations that she would be the subject of discrimination in the field this way:

> I know that men are men. I know that I'm going to be, in some sense, one day overlooked
>
> as a woman, as a Hispanic woman. I know that, at some point, it's going to be... When I'm
>
> in my career, I'm going to experience hurdles in a male-dominated field and one that's
>
> typically dominated by, if we're thinking execs, older white men.

Some students imagined how they would advocate for themselves when facing inevitable sexism. Becca stated "I know that, if I were to experience some sort of discrimination, that I'd call people out on their bullshit, because that's what I typically do." Nicole who hoped to have a career in business, described her expectations that men would make her feel less valuable and worthy:

> There will be men who will make it difficult for you and you feel like you have to prove that you are enough because you're female, not because of your capabilities. The fact that you have to prove that you are like better than or as good as a man is like ridiculous and, like you, can't just prove that these are like why I'm qualified, you have to prove like these are why I'm more qualified than this guy.

She anticipated fighting for herself by leveraging her courage to speak up:

> I will speak my mind on what I think is important, like in that conversation and I try to not be afraid to like voice my opinion and, which I think is all part of like my purpose as well it's just like speaking out more.

*Family and Social issues*

Some participants identified their sense of purpose as stemming from stressful and difficult experiences with their family members or peers. Ellie stated that being bullied at a young age influenced her sense of purpose. She defined her purpose as wanting to improve the lives of others (in both short and long-term ways):

> If I make [differences], whether that's individuals or, on a big scale would be great but I feel like as long as I can tell myself like, I made someone's life better today, I've had a long-term effect on someone in a positive way, then I would be happy.

She reported that while her experience growing up was difficult, and she struggled emotionally, it had enhanced her desire to care for people because she knew what it felt like to be isolated. In addition, she was especially motivated to help people who bullied others, as she believed their behavior reflected their own personal struggles. Frances shared a similar sentiment, in that her purpose developed out of years of difficult experiences with her family. She explained that her purpose was to experience a sense of peace within herself and her life, and that, by feeling more secure, she hoped that her purpose would also include helping her friends and becoming an English teacher. Upon further discussion, Frances explained that her life at home was unstable, hectic, and detrimental to her mental health. She stated that school served as an escape and allowed her to feel as if she belonged somewhere. When asked about how her purpose related to adversity, she stated, "I want to help other kids that had what I was dealing with. And like [I] had to come to school and like felt horrible… So, I want to be there for that."

Jules hoped to become a behavioral therapist and defined her purpose as helping other people, and being a person others could depend. She attributed this sense of purpose to her relationship with two of her siblings with developmental disabilities:

> In helping my sister growing up because whenever something was happening, I had to run to my mom and even when I didn't even know a lot of words, as like a toddler, I just always like knew like whenever she had like a seizure.

According to Jules, while her childhood was challenging at times, these experiences allowed her to realize her natural talents in caring for people and her innate empathy for dealing with families in similar straits.

**Desired Outcomes: Positive Inspiration, Identity as a Woman, Self-Growth, Big Picture, and Confidence.**

All participants described a sense of certainty that they would live a life aligned with their purpose. Some participants highlighted that the journey towards their purpose has been difficult and might continue to be difficult in the future, but that they felt confident it would be rewarding. The participants viewed the potentially challenging journey as reflective of their grit, and their sense of purpose as the pearl. When asked how they persevered through the arduous journey and reached their desired outcomes, they identified five themes: positive inspiration, identity as a woman, self-growth, big picture, and confidence.

**Positive Inspiration**

Along with being inspired by the bigger picture and their own self-growth, participants identified three ways to stay inspired on their journey.

*Privilege*

While all of the participants identified as being from marginalized backgrounds, and inadvertently faced experiences of being disadvantaged, they also spoke about ways in which they hold privilege. Indeed, this privilege motivated them to pursue their purpose and goals. For two of the individuals, they reflected on their privilege and acknowledged that not everyone experiences a similar lifestyle. Furthermore, their awareness fueled their desire to help better others' situations. Haley spoke about how she has learned to use her privileges to give back, rather than feeling ashamed of them:

> I just have to realize that like, yeah, I am privileged. In this sense, and because of my privilege, I'm in a position where I can actually do something with my privilege… I feel like guilty. It doesn't do anything it. It's good that you can recognize you know how lucky you are and like your privilege. But, if you like, appreciate the fact that you haven't had to face a difficulty and then, you know, think about that and actually realize that

difficulty exists. I feel like that's so much like more useful like you can just be guilty or

feel guilty about something and then just sit there and do nothing about it, or you can be

appreciative of what you do have and then go out into the world and do something about

it, and I feel like going out into the world and like a change, while recognizing like have

lots of you've been is way more useful and helpful than just, you know, feeling guilty

wallowing in your guilt.

Olive acknowledged that her privilege allowed her to provide for others in a variety of ways

ranging from donating canned foods to donating a week of her time, here and there:

You know I'm in such a privileged position, and I have such a privileged life that I felt

like if I don't give back, I feel [it] is kind of wasteful, in a sense, because I have so much

to give and it's so small to me like doing a week of habitat for humanity is not a big deal

to me, especially in my summer when I'm like not doing anything. I feel like it's really

important to give back and when you will come from a place of privilege, especially,

because it's so small, but it can have huge ramifications for other people's lives.

Two other participants acknowledged that while they have minority identities, they have yet to

experience outward discrimination, and as a result, viewed that as a sense of privilege. Many of

them have witnessed greater discrimination against their peers or family members, and utilized

their own phrasing of "privilege" to explain why they had not suffered discrimination. Haley,

heard stories about the discrimination her grandmother faced, and although had not personally

experienced such discrimination, she was motivated to make a change in the world:

My grandmother is Mexican, and she has told me stories of like when she was a little kid,

and she would, you know, get harassed …like me having the privilege to not ever have

encountered that in my life is also empowering to me. And I also want to make sure that

nobody else ever has to deal with anything like that again because, like I said before, it

shouldn't matter.

Similarly, Georgia described her experiences with the spike in hate crimes against Asian

American women, constantly fearing how her family might be treated, yet expressed not having

to worry for her own safety:

> None of my family members have been attacked, or anything, but it's just like, like the
>
> constant thought that they could be [hurt]. A lot of people say I don't look Asian and so
>
> it's like a lot of the like knowing that I won't, I probably won't experience like the things
>
> that they did because of the way that they look.

Moreover, while she may not be directly affected, she feared for her younger cousins and hoped

to make a change in the world, so they would not endure such traumatic hatred. Olive reflected

on a time that she endured discrimination from her teacher because she was black. She stated that

even though this experience had drastic effects on her, she could reframe the experience and tell

herself that she still had privileges, including a strong support system. She believed that if she

had gone to a different school or had grown up in a different community, the situation could have

been worse:

> Even though it's [was] a negative moment, because we're [in a] privileged position for me
>
> to say, like that was such a racially charged moment in my life. I know people who had
>
> much more scary instances that were a lot more life-threatening. I just felt like I had to
>
> give back, I had to use my voice and, like my place of privilege to let people be aware of
>
> what other people's the oppression or stripe for discrimination.

*Making an Impact*

All thirteen participants described how making an impact on their families, friends, community, and the world, motivated them to pursue their sense of purpose. Many of the participants spoke about their impact and acknowledged that it was a main focus of their journey. For example, Diane stated, "I think what motivates me to do my purpose is wanting to leave, I guess, a mark." Others stated that they hoped to make their impact on the world through their positive interactions with others. Ivy described the desire to impact people this way:

> And essentially to leave places better than I found them, whether that's just a quick exchange with someone who's having a bad day or whether it's like putting in that long term work to fix something, but just regardless of where I go and who I meet just changing it in a better way.

Other participants were interested in pursuing careers that will allow them to make an impact in their daily work. Through their jobs, they hoped to fulfill their sense of purpose. For example, Aria, who defined her purpose as sharing her voice and becoming a better person each day, hoped to be a doctor because of how it can help others. She reported, "I just want to like impact people…, [in the] future when I like go to college and like go to med school and like become a doctor…I can like help when I'm a doctor." Other participants shared a similar sentiment. For example, Carson reported serving others and fostering relationships as her purpose and hoped to be either an environmental scientist or a teacher. Jules defined part of her sense of purpose as being open-minded and helping others, and hoped to contribute through future work as a behavioral therapist. Diane defined her purpose as helping others, and further stressed that her purpose on earth was to positively contribute to humanity. She hoped to be an architect, and "create things that can help others." Lastly, Haley defined her sense of purpose as advocating for

better treatment of the planet and hopes to work in a business that operates sustainably, aims to eliminate fast fashion, and promotes diversity.

*Family*

Participants (4) identified their family as a source of motivation for their journey towards living a life aligned with their sense of purpose. Some individuals remained focused on their purpose by reminding themselves of their hope to inspire younger generations. For example, when thinking of who Jules wanted to impact, she stated, "I want to show my two little brothers, …you can make it, I'm gonna try to be their role models and show them that anything's possible." Other participants explained that making their family proud motivated them to continue to pursue their purpose. For example, Georgia stated, "So I think a lot of what motivates me is just like making sure everyone around me is like proud of me or happy for me." Similarly, Nicole reported "I think family is really important to me, and a lot of my sense of purpose definitely comes from wanting to make my family proud."

**Desired Outcomes: Identity as a Woman**

Along with making their families proud, many of the participants reflected on lessons they have learned from their family members that allow them to persevere despite adversities. Many of these lessons related to experiences of gender discrimination and what it meant to be a woman in today's society. Indeed, while these participants were aware of and had experienced the gender inequalities that still prevail in society, they were not paralyzed with fear and attribute their strength to their family. The lessons they learned from their families translated into many of the participants viewing themselves as strong, talented, independent women, who hoped to make a change in how people view and treat women. For example, Haley attributed being surrounded

by strong women her whole life a source of motivation to reach her purpose. Similarly, she viewed being a woman as empowering, reporting:

> I feel like there's so many strong women, not even like in just like in my specific life like my boss and my mom. But, just like in general, I think, as a society, we've obviously come a long way since like ancient times or whatever. I like feel so empowered by like just women in general and I feel like, firstly, it's something that connects so many people, and something that so many people can relate to, and it's just inspiring because there are so many women out there who, you know, are women and have done such amazing things that would like be amazing regardless of if they were women or not and [that is] like really cool and I feel like I'm, I'm lucky to have been, like, born when I was.

In addition to being proud to be women, two participants discussed how they are proud they were raised to prioritize independence, be self-sufficient, and not feel dependent on men. This sense of pride translated into a sense of confidence. For example, Jules stated:

> Well, knowing that I can be independent because my mom taught me a lot about being independent, and I don't really need anyone else to get [me] to where I want to be as long as I got myself, and I put like my head to what I want to be.

Similarly, Aria stated:

> Cause my mom always raised me to be like very independent and be like, uh, like a woman like by myself, which I thought was really powerful for me because it made me learn like more about myself and not like have like a man tell me or like another female even tell me [what to be]. I just think like that was something that made me realize that like I can do things like by myself.

When participants spoke about their experiences of gender discrimination, many of them expressed a sense of responsibility and even excitement at the idea of standing up for themselves and other women. Aria credited her family for her strong resolve to defend herself and other women. She reported, "I grew up in a family [that taught] speak what you'd like, say what you want to say, do what you want to do and don't feel sorry because someone doesn't like what you're saying if you're passionate about it." She believed that her upbringing allowed her to feel confident in herself and be in a position to better help other women.

**Desired Outcomes: Big Picture**

Numerous participants explained how their daily stressors, such as school, college applications, and extracurriculars, distracted them from their purpose or at times even made them doubt it. Participants explained that by reminding themselves of the bigger picture, which included their future goals or sense of purpose, they experienced relief during difficult times. For example, Aria used a visual cue to remind her of why she exerts effort in school. She reported:

> Sometimes I'm so focused on like homework and getting good grades. I forget about the bigger picture. I have um, [a] corkboard, I have like pictures of like things that I'm really passionate about. I have like politicians who I'm like really invested in or places like I really want to go to one day and like visit or people like I'm close with or just like things that like I find passionate and things that give me joy. I can just like put around to like help me, like remind me like this [stress] is only temporary.

Carson also reflected on how she reminded herself that her grit would lead to her pearl during difficult times by looking to the future as a source of motivation. She highlighted that her growth and journey would be beneficial. She expressed:

Even though I'm stressed in this moment, my hard work will pay off, whether it be in a

few months or graduation or my career. Just knowing that I'm working towards

something and progress, it's not linear, but you do end up growing because of it

Olive and Diane reported that they often reminded themselves of the bigger picture (they used

phrases like "life after high school," and "my long term plans," to help cope with feelings of self-

doubt. For example, Diane reframed moments of self-doubt and feeling uncomfortable as

chances to grow and improve:

I reaffirmed myself that I'm totally capable if I set my mind to it, [and] taking yourself

out of those comfort zones. I mean, if you have that self-doubt, if you have that, like [you

have to endure], uncomfortableness because you're doing something takes you out of

your normal place and that's good because that allows you to grow

Olive, stayed grounded during difficult times by reminding herself that she is working towards

her purpose, to become a doctor and address systemic issues of racism within the medical field:

[Within] moments where I'm suffering or even where I'm like oh I can't do any more or

this like a major … I think just watching the news and kind of seeing what's happening

with like reminding [me] how important it is that, like, even though it won't completely

like overhaul the system and won't change the whole ramifications of everything. I think

it's really important to know how important it is [and] your individual impact can be big

if you get enough people to believe in it.

In addition, by reminding herself of her purpose to address systemic issues of racism within the

medical field, she was able to remain open to various future opportunities:

And it is like a very hard journey [to become a doctor] and, like the requirements, but

getting into MED school are really strict and really intense so like my fear is like I might

not make it into MED school. In general, like, I know that I want to work in medicine in some capacity, and so I realized that if I don't go into [to Medical School] necessarily being an actual practicing doctor like I still think research is like such a great avenue to learn so much. And there's also just like healthcare marketing and like healthcare communications and also working like [in] the public health.

Being open to additional possibilities allowed some individuals to be more resilient in the face of roadblocks and enabled them to find new directions that were best suited for them.

**Desired Outcomes: Self Growth**

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the value they placed on self-growth as a means to attain their pearl, purpose, or goal. Many participants viewed self-growth as "exploring new ways to learn," and "pushing themselves despite obstacles." Indeed, many participants viewed exerting little effort as a deterrent when thinking of living a life with their sense of purpose. For example, when asked about her future plans, Becca stated "I definitely don't want to stay stagnant." Ivy answered in a similar fashion, "I know that I don't want to be stagnant, I don't want to just be stuck." She later reported that her desire to challenge herself is what will allow her to live a life aligned with her purpose. She stated, "I think what motivates me is definitely like my drive to want to just keep moving, keep excelling. And just keep doing better [in] everything that I do." Similarly, Haley stated that her desire for self-growth aligns with her values of making a difference. She reported that, when thinking of her future, she continued to challenge herself in various ways because "I just don't want to live out my entire life without ever having like done something that I'm truly proud of and like done the things that I really wanted to do and kind of like tested the limits of what I can do."

Participants also explained that part of self-growth included acceptance that their journey may contain setbacks and obstacles. For example, Diane stated that when faced with a difficult situation, she learned, "I'm just always trying to take those steps to getting better and just keep on going. And sometimes I think that the easy way out may not be the best way out." She explained that she learned this lesson through playing golf and stated, "Sometimes I do not do so well in my games, but I'm always thinking, that's just another opportunity to learn. You have to practice, you have to just keep on going, if you really want to continue with it." She has translated that lesson to other parts of her life, including her school work and sense of purpose. Similarly, Carson welcomed various challenges as it introduced her to new perspectives: "I love the classes I chose because they are challenging because I do enjoy pushing myself."

Participants also reflected on the growth they had already accomplished and how the journey had enhanced their sense of purpose or life goals. Frances stated her journey was to cope with her mental health issues; however, she acknowledged that it had been a difficult path to take:

> I wasn't doing too hot, and everything sucked, and [I decided] I'm gonna like notice all the horrible things about it because there's like this huge comfort and being miserable, that I feel like no one talks about. [But then] when you start feeling better, it's hard to start choosing to feel better because when you feel better than you have to certainly be better. And like that's a lot of work. So, it's a lot of work to choose to be happy.

However, through consistent effort, she was able to solidify her sense of purpose, which is to gain more internal peace and to give back to others. Leena also experienced self-growth by exploring different options and pathways to narrow her sense of purpose. She enrolled herself in screenwriting classes and then challenged herself to hone her own skills:

> I started like taking classes, and like having a topic like [explained] to me in a way like okay here's how I can understand it. And then I could build my own skills by going to more classes. I remember just like working towards it every day, like being able to see progress, you know, like, like with my writing right. Like I told myself, you know what I'm gonna work on it every day, and I tell myself [for] an hour.

Along with Leena, other participants encouraged themselves to take responsibility for their actions in developing their sense of purpose. For example, Ellie stated: "so I just keep telling myself like to actually like do the things I want to do and like make, I have to make an effort, and actually be actively involved in like doing things in order to, you know, achieve my goals and whatever." Similarly, Georgia pushed herself to think outside the box as, "I just actively like look for things to do and things that I could take part in that would just contribute to that [send of purpose]."

**Desired outcomes: Confidence**

Approximately half of the participants (n= 6) described a sense of confidence and trust that they could live a life aligned with their purpose and goals. Jules explained that, despite hardships or potential barriers, she knew that relying on her upbringing and characteristics would make her successful:

> Well knowing that I can be independent because my mom taught me a lot about being independent, and I don't really need anyone else to get to where I want to be. As long as I got myself and I put like my head to what I want to be.

Similarly, when asked about any potential challenges in her future, Nicole believed she could overcome these:

I definitely think that there will be like, very many challenges that I have to personally

face, like moral challenges, as well as career obstacles that will come my way. I think

that's inevitable. But hopefully nothing I won't be able to like overcome.

Participants used this sense of confidence to counteract moments of self-doubt. For example,

when Diane was faced with doubt, she stated, "I reaffirmed myself that I'm totally capable if I set

my mind to it." Haley maintained a sense of trust that she will have a bright future as she stated,

"I just tell myself that, I am still like in control of my future and in control of what I do."

## Mechanisms to Purpose Development

As described above, these adolescent girls were highly purposeful. They learned how to

preserve despite setbacks, and strive to make changes in their society. They arrived at these deep

and profound realizations through their relationships with their mentors, and developing critical

consciousnesses.

### The Role of Mentors

Of the 13 participants, five reflected about how their mentors helped them process their

adversities, and 10 participants also spoke about how their mentors either inspired their sense of

purpose or served as a source of inspiration for them. Lastly, two participants spoke about how

their mentors provided them with support and encouragement as they searched for their sense of

purpose and that this helped them maintain their motivation.

*Processing Adversity*

A handful of participants reported that their mentors helped them process their adversities

and, for some, this helped them reach a new level of acceptance. For example, Ellie described

her adversity as a time when she was involved in a disciplinary incident at school where she lost

friends and jeopardized her scholarship. She reported that she was nervous to interact with one of

her teachers, who was also her mentor, because she knew she let her down. However, her mentor

provided her with the support she needed during that fragile time. She reported:

> [My mentor was] very forgiving, and she like explained to me that you know everything
>
> happens for a reason and it's like my job to respond. And I can control the way that I
>
> respond to this and what happens after, so she taught me a lot about turning things into
>
> positive situations and she was always like supporting me for everything after that.

Her mentor shared some personal adversities because they were similar to her struggles. Ellie

stated that her mentor's disclosure, "really helped me to see the positive of this and see the things

that I learned and how I could use that later in life." Aria also reported that her mentor had

shared adversities and how she overcame them in order to encourage Aria. More specifically, her

mentor helped her to come to terms with her tumultuous relationship with her father:

> I was still very angry at my dad for what he did. And like, I was very like angry. And she
>
> had gone through very similar things, and so she just helped me like grow my love for
>
> politics and like political change and then she also helped me realize a lot and now I'm
>
> like, I'm not angry at my father anymore. Which [is] really shocking to me cause I felt
>
> like I was never going to get out of that[anger].

Once Aria was able to accept that her relationship with her father had been filled with

disappointment, her mental health improved, and she was able to explore her interests, such as

politics. Leena also relied on her mentor to learn to persevere despite setbacks. She reported that

she sought advice from her mentor on how to bounce back after difficult events:

> [i said] Look, I'll be honest with you, life is confusing you know, [and] like can I move
>
> on when I'm so broken? And then she [her mentor] just like explained to me is like hey,
>
> like people are broken and then it's okay like feel like horrible, and then like you kind of

> get through it, even though if you get through it like horribly ,you get through it, not how
>
> you want to get through it, or if you just struggle the entire time, it's like you got it. And
>
> once you get through it, then it gets a little bit easier. You just carry it with you and you
>
> acknowledge how much it hurts, but then you carry it with you. And it hurts less.

Leena's moment was crucial for her as she did not have other people in her life she could talk to about her struggles. Processing adversities with mentors played a critical role in participants' ability to understand and accept the difficulties they had endured.

*Inspiring a Sense of Purpose*

For many participants, mentors served as role models for them in terms of living a life that honored their sense of purpose. Participants spoke about how their mentors modeled living a life infused with purpose. This role-modeling seemed to inspire participants' own purpose development and commitment. Diane reflected that her observation of how her mentor, one of her teammates, showed her how to prioritize her values and her own self-care, rather than succumb to overwhelming academic pressures. Diane explained why her teammate is her mentor:

> She studies a lot, but when you really like meet her, it's, it doesn't seem like that's like her
>
> personality. Cause I do know a lot of people who that practically is their personality, but I
>
> think the way that she, she kind of used life or her future, it goes beyond that her
>
> academics. She is really just enjoying the time she has in high school. Yes, she worries
>
> about the future, but she not killing herself for that. I know a lot of people who do [stress]
>
> and it's kind of, it starts to become a matter of feeling, um, purposeless. I think she just
>
> really keeps true to who she is. And I think that has just really inspired me to think
>
> beyond just my schoolwork, realizing that, um, the world's much bigger than, like a B or

a C on an exam. I mean, it's not that it's not important, but you know it shouldn't define

how you see life and it, and it doesn't like, I guess it shouldn't weigh you down as much.

So just being, um, so just being fair to yourself, I think that's important as well.

As previously stated, Diane's purpose is "to leave a mark in the world," or leave the world better

than she found it. Through watching her mentor, Diane became motivated to live a life aligned

with her values and pursue her purpose rather than become overwhelmed by societal pressures.

Nicole, whose mentor was also a peer, reported that her observations of this person's passion

inspired her and helped her reconnect with her own purpose: to combat injustices and work

towards making her community better. She explained,

> Another girl my school, the most confident outspoken person and just like so extremely
>
> intelligent, not just like it's not like not book smart or anything but just she like knows so
>
> much and is so passionate about her advocacy it's just been really inspiring and
>
> motivating to be around her

Similar to Diane and Nicole, Aria believed her sense of purpose was enhanced through watching

her mentor live out her own purpose. Aria reflected on her old boss and how she inspired her to

stick to her sense of purpose even if others disagree.

> She was really big on not letting like other people change who you are or like change
>
> your beliefs or like change who, what you believe in or what you're passionate about
>
> because she, like, she had her own clothing company that was like gender non-binary. So
>
> that was like something that was really influential to me because it was like, you can still
>
> do what you want. And like, even if people are so against it, like that's on them, like that's
>
> not on you because it's something you're interested in.

Diane and Ivy reflected on how their mothers served as their mentors. Ivy's mother brought her to various community service events, and through these opportunities, she developed her own purpose, which involved giving back to her community. She reported:

> [My purpose] came from my experience growing up, because, my mom she's very active in our community so ever since I was a child, we're always helping out, always very present in the community

Diane reflected that, while her mother raised her to treat other people with kindness, which is her sense of purpose, she learned this lesson most through watching her mother's interactions:

> I think she [my mother] modeled it more [kindness]. I feel like there's a lot of things she told me to be but she didn't tell me, like make sure you're kind to other people and but she's just always [is], and I don't even know that she realizes this. [her actions] like that are really inspiring to me.

Other participants spoke about how they were better able to identify their purpose through conservations and direct scaffolding with their mentors. Jules identified her coach as her mentor and essential in influencing her sense of purpose and desired future career. She reported that her coach was the first person to push her to think about her life after high school. She stated:

> I didn't really think about my future or like career college until they put me into like this SAT class over the summer and [now]we just always talk about careers and everything. Because of her, I have this mindset that I want a career, and I'm going to stick to it, and I'll do whatever I can to get where I want to be. [Before my mentor] I didn't really get asked about school or about careers; she was like the first person and she was like tell me what you want to do in school that might influence your career

Haley discussed how her parents encouraged her at a young age to educate herself on matters that she found interesting and important. This early education fueled her sense of interest in making a difference in the world. She continued,

> Both of my parents are really like passionate about like all social just like all sorts of social justice issues, and they kind of raised me to also like try to stay informed and like also informed and [be] opinionated on like these types of things because it's important to have an opinion and then also to like have an informed opinion. And if you have an opinion on something and you're educated about it, it gives you, the power to do something about it. I think like that sense of like purpose like trying to like, improve the things that you can change, kind of comes from that. That's just been how it is in our family.

It was evident to her that she could best hone in on her sense of purpose by exploring various academic topics and being as educated as possible. Olive also was raised in a house that prioritized activism and education surrounding current events. Similarly, she believed that her parents' education on various issues influenced her desire to impact the world. She stated her parents influenced her purpose as:

> I definitely think like my parents and, like my upbringing in general, both my parents were political science majors when they went to college. When I was little they'd have like serious political conversations and I think because of that, I would like to learn just about how many issues are like just surrounding us, and I think I just felt like a passion even though I know I can't change every issue, I feel like I should dedicate my time to the issues I feel like [are important].

Two participants spoke about how they observed their mentors lose track of their own sense of purpose, or change their purpose. As a result of witnessing their mentors' divergence from their callings, their own resolutions to prioritize their purpose were strengthened. For example, Frances reported that her older sister and cousin prioritize money over their happiness. She realized that they were not embodying the types of people she hoped to be when she was older. Instead, she wanted to prioritize her purpose of being content with herself, and being able to help her friends and family. On the other hand, Diane added that she observed a mentor of hers pivot in their sense of purpose, and this transition inspired her to be flexible with her own purpose. She reported:

> Seeing them develop and kind of seeing what their purpose was being that, you know, I want to go to school, I want to find a job. I thought that was their purpose, but then I realized that the purpose was really just, um, you know, finding themselves, finding what they love, seeing what they can do to help others. So I think that's where my sense of purpose came from.

As a result of watching her mentor change her purpose, Diane realized that one does not need their purpose to be their career, but rather one could find ways to infuse purpose into their daily life.

### Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness (CC) refers to the ability to reflect and mobilize for action or change in the sociopolitical environment; this is an "antidote for oppression" (Diemer et al., 2006). CC encompasses three components: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action (Diemer et al., 2006). Adolescents can experience these components by reflecting on the injustices and or social oppressions in their world, developing a sense of motivation to make a

change and then engaging in instrumental ways in which they combat these injustices. While CC was not part of the research question, it appeared that many of the participants had developed aspects of CC, and this critical awareness allowed them to best develop their understanding of the world and dedication to their purpose. Since gender discrimination was discussed in a previous section, this one will focus specifically on racial and economic discrimination and inequality. In addition, since many participants' purposes involved a prosocial benefit, there are slight repetitive quotations in this section.

*Critical Awareness*

Of the 13 participants, seven reflected on inequalities in society. For some participants, their reflections contained hopes that society would change to be more inclusive of all people. For example, Aria reflected on the stereotypes held against Asian American women, which she believed have become dangerous. She stated:

> I feel like people put like a very big stereotype on Asians and like Asian Americans as like, oh, you guys are so smart. Like a lot of like racial jokes that like in their eyes are funny. But I think now it's just gotten a little bit too old and it's like, obviously, like we still face challenges like with like the shooting in Atlanta or um, people like being attacked on streets. And I just think it's like, it's a very like dangerous world that I live in right now being an Asian and like having my whole mom's side be Asian.

As a result of this discrimination, she reflected on her purpose, and strongly believed that she would represent Asian American women and be an activist in situations where they are oppressed.

Leena acknowledged how systemic racism exists within the academic world and emphasized that this can negatively affect people of color. She reflected on society's emphasis on

attending a well-known university and the connections formed at these institutions can be vital

for career development. She also reflected on the difficulty of being accepted into these

prestigious universities and how many schools privilege individuals with legacy ties. She

recognized that the legacy system can make it harder for people of color to gain entrance into

universities. She reported, "I don't have a legacy and like, like in the past with the people who are

able to like go to those like high rate yet institutions were like, you know, not people of color."

She went on to explain that she personally saw racism within the college process even before she

began the applications. She stated that there were not enough SAT testing sites in her city, and

she could not secure a testing spot. As a result, she was forced to drive to another town, two

hours away to take her test. When reflecting on this situation, she reported, "Thank God my

parents had a job. Thank God my parents didn't have to work that day and they have a car. Some

parents couldn't drop them [their kids] off [at the test site]." She explained that when she looked

around the test site, a space that had availability, she was the only person of color in the room, "if

you look at the town demographics 95% White, like 2%, Asian 3% other races, zero percent

black, I was the only black person in that test site" She explained that test sites closing down or

filling up quickly created a profound barrier as more people of color would be unable to apply

for colleges. She explained:

> I don't think like, the college would answer like let's make it hard for black people. But
>
> it's like if there's a lot of people in the city. It's mostly black, and you're not having
>
> enough test sites for people in the city to get a test. [There are] ,more Black people like in
>
> the city [and] like an [additional] SAT [site] could help and like probably getting into a
>
> good school

Other participants spoke about times when they were directly discriminated against. Becca stated that, during middle school, she experienced derogatory remarks directed towards her. She recounted, "[I] definitely [experienced] low-key xenophobic towards me and the other Mexicans. [One person] yelled at me, "build a wall" and put his arms in front of me and wouldn't let me pass." Two participants reflected on how they have different skin tones than their parents or family members, and as a result have endured blatant racism regarding their family dynamics. Jules recounted, People made like weird remarks to her- kind of snide ones- but not ever me, [and] people used to ask if she [my mother] was my babysitter." Frances stated a similar instance that occurred with her father, as her father's skin color was different than his sons, and the police would be called when he went to pick his children up at school. She also witnessed discrimination when she was with her brother, who has a darker skin tone than her. She reported, "I'll be just crossing a border state with my brother, who is not white, and they like stop him, and look through his car because they don't trust him because he's looks like Mexican."

Other participants explained that, while they have not witnessed direct instances of discrimination or racism, their family members and friends have told them stories about their own experiences with oppression. For example, Haley stated, "My grandmother is Mexican, and she like told me stories of like when she was a little kid, and she would, get harassed for not being a real American even though she was born here." Ellie reflected on how her friends shared with her some of their struggles with oppression, including comments that people would make on social media. She stated, "And it's like I guess just seeing, seeing comments like that about people that I very much see as people that are just so dehumanizing is just disturbing." Diane explained that once President Donald Trump entered office, her awareness of and experience

around racism increased. Prior to his presidency, she stated that she had yet to experience forms of discrimination. Yet, she became much more aware of it after watching the news. She stated:

> My dad, he, he's worked very hard to get my family to the US and then, you know, having a president, a leader saying that you're bringing [the] worst and I guess his words were rapists or things like that [and] knowing that you have a president that thinks like that it's scary. It's very scary."

As a result of President Trump's words, Diane began to question her sense of belonging in America, despite it being her home and place of birth.

Lastly, two participants were introduced to forms of socio-economic oppression during the pandemic. One spoke about how the disjointed vaccine discrimination introduced her to inequalities that lower-income communities experience outside of America. She stated "you know vaccine availability and like developing countries, and that sort of thing has definitely just shown me even more, that there's so much that needs improvement in this world." Similarly, Nicole reflected on how, when the country shut down and many people could not attend work, society failed to properly support and respect those who relied on their jobs for basic needs. She expressed:

> Like their [essential workers] reliance on their job is not just for like extra spending money or so their kids to can go to college; it's for like survival. And, just like the lack of like basic necessity and the lack of empathy and that lack of and just like people neglecting like basically a huge majority in the US.

*Critical Motivation*

Participants also reflected on their sense of motivation to be leaders and advocates in the future in hopes of combating these injustices. Haley reflected on how her motivation to be a

leader, and to change the world, stemmed from years of confusion around her privilege. Growing

up, she was often made aware of her privilege in the world yet was unsure how to use it to help

others who experience more difficult situations. She stated:

> My dad would always say like, you know, finish your dinner, there's like children, like
>
> not just like in developing countries but there's children like in San Diego like where we
>
> live, that you know don't have dinners. And that used to make me feel really guilty, but
>
> now it just makes me want to change that, like, there shouldn't be children like in my own
>
> city that don't have dinner.  I have like this privilege and like ability to get an education.
>
> And you know, go to college I can use that to again [make] change

Now, she was dedicated to using her opportunities to educate herself on how to help others in

society.

Two participants discussed how they plan to be an advocate for others in the future when

they witness experiences of discrimination. Ivy vowed to acknowledge and vocalize against any

discriminatory comment. She stated, "If anything, it's just like small little quick comments, and

those things are, I think they do need to be addressed regardless of how, like small and

insignificant people think they are." Jules reflected on how she planned to advocate in the future

for her mother if she endured experiences of discrimination. She explained, "My mom [had

someone] tell her to go back to her country, or like speak English, and I [am] like that hurts. [If

that happens again] I will definitely want to go argue with someone who says that to my mom."

While some participants hoped to help all humanity, other participants have a vested

interest in a minority group. For example, three participants reflected on how they planned to

defend the Asian American community. Nicole reflected on her goal of "breaking the bamboo

ceiling," and aimed to do so through educating others about why these stereotypes held for

Asians are detrimental. She was concrete about her goals and stated she wants to "show that not all Asians are like [just] smart [and] really good at math and we have like personalities and there are other traits to us, aside the ones that have been set online." Aria added that her purpose is to be a representative for the Asian American community, specifically the females, and use her voice for good. She stated "Cause I know as a female minority I can speak on behalf of like a lot of other people that like feel silenced in today's world." Lastly, Georgia reported that the increase in hate crimes against people who are Asian was difficult for her to process as she became constantly worried about the safety of her family members. This worry fueled a sense of energy in her and she explained:

> It's like motivates me to try to make this a better world for them for when they grow up, and when they're my age and stuff so they don't have to like see a lot of what we're seeing now with like islands and things like that.

Four participants have channeled their awareness and worry around oppression into creating a career that incorporated their sense of purpose in creating a more just society. For example, Georgia hoped to diversify the film industry. She stated, "I want to change like the film industry where like more representation for like disabled people and more representation for the LGBTQ plus community." Similarly, Haley hoped to work for a company that offers opportunities for people of color in the modeling world. She stated:

> [The company's] models are super diverse, and so I feel like working in like something like that would be like the perfect combination what I love because I would get to like make sure that like I feel good about like the sustainable and ethical side of it, but then also like promoting body positivity and acceptance and like diversity and like true diversity, not just have like, you know, we have like diversity.

Unlike Georgia and Haley, Olive was unsure of her exact career journey yet was dedicated to choosing a career based on how much it could positively impact others. She added, "you can utilize your career, no matter what you do to give back in some way and it's really about like how much I can do to give back." Similarly, Ivy was in the exploration phase for her career interests but had identified that she would be interested in working for a company that would allow her to travel and explore her purpose of giving back. She reported:

> I do want to even get out of America and help these other countries. I do want to help like the kids starve in in Africa and the kids that need and the kids like working in sweatshops in India. just It's hard to pick a certain one. So that's why I hope like travel and help different places. But definitely, like, [help] just those who need it.

*Critical Action*

Four of the participants identified ways in which they are currently fighting the social injustices in the world and working to create a more just society. Indeed, two of the participants spearheaded their own philanthropic organizations. During the pandemic, Leena designed and sewed face masks, and within six months, donated a total of 400 face masks to homeless shelters. Nicole created her own nonprofit to support those who are affected by period poverty. Nicole explained that, after learning about period poverty and its prevalence among homeless women and women living in shelters, she acted:

> My friend and I started a nonprofit called glow, so we can buy a feminine hygiene products, and donate to homeless shelters in our area. We make face masks for women with sensitive skin because and the overall message is so women can be more confident and feel more comfortable in their skin

Both of these organizations were cultivated and led by the participants themselves. Ivy acted against social injustices in the world by being an active member in her community and often donated her time to help those who do not have access to food. During the pandemic she reflected:

> The church that I go to they opened a food pantry, so they would get like big trucks coming with, like vegetables and food. On Wednesdays I would help pack up and on Thursdays we pack on Fridays and Saturdays, we would like to distribute towards the community.

In addition to donating her time, Ivy explained that she often engaged in critical action when she witnesses discrimination and racism. She stated "with any like discrimination that occurred, but I'm very vocal on it, fighting and advocating for it everywhere else, like, regardless if it's ever happens in our school in our community."

## COVID-19 and the Adolescent Girl

Budding research has highlighted the detrimental sequelae of COVID-19 in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults. All 13 participants in this study supported these initial findings as they described ways the pandemic negatively affected their lives. For example, numerous participants stated they struggled with motivation around their school work and felt disconnected from their friends. Other participants expressed a sense of worry that they were missing out on vital experiences that occur during their high school years, both socially and academically. Yet, despite these concerns, all participants were able to identify how COVID-19 helped them grow and develop into who they are today. Indeed, these adolescent girls demonstrated their deep-seated resilience and explained how this difficult time allowed them to better identify and connect with their sense of purpose.

*Exploration around Interest*

For some participants, being at home, paired with having fewer responsibilities, allowed them to channel their energies into their own interests. For Aria being at home allowed her to research her future as a doctor:

> I could watch like a political debate or I could like talk to my parents about like a surgery that they had to do or just something like that that just like helped me like grow my like passion for what I wanted to do in the future.

Similarly, Haley explained:

> I feel like I've had more time to you know, educate myself and like learn about different things in like, read books and stuff about like the things I care about and be able to kind of figure out like where, like, what the next steps are in my journey or whatever.

For Leena, she utilized her time to explore her newfound interest in writing. She reported, "Well with COVID I have more time, work, you know, writing, and if it wasn't for COVID wouldn't be able to like write, I wanted to be able to become more confident in my skills." Participants also used their time in remote schooling and at home to become involved in organizations that might not have been available to them. For example, Leena described enrolling in online film writing classes that normally would have been too expensive. She stated:

> These classes New York Film Academy…normally looks like $1000, $2000 $3,000 but it's like okay, like because it was online now they reduce the price to like $350, which I could actually pay for, so it's like if it wasn't for the pandemic I wouldn't have gotten those professional classes

Similarly, Ellie capitalized on a virtual internship created because of the pandemic, aiming to enhance communication between cultural ambassadors of different countries. Through this

experience, she further explored and narrowed down her potential career interests. She reported, "[The] organization I intern at now wouldn't have had the program that they had if it weren't for COVID, and that's how I figured out I wanted to be an international relations major."

*Time to Reflect*

Other participants utilized their extra time to reflect on themselves, their relationships, and their sense of purpose. Olive expressed that this time allowed her to slow down and reevaluate her values. She reported that forced isolation due to the lockdown separated her from her community and caused her to reflect on the high-paced culture. She reported:

> I think, before I kind of was not like selfish but very like my own goals oriented like I wouldn't do that, I want to do this, but [during the pandemic] I learned how passionate I was about other issues and I think, because I was so caught up in like the world where I live, and it's a very money-oriented, you need to get those grades, you need to do this, so you can get a good job, so you can make money, and it's very like me me me me me goal-oriented.

However, the pandemic allowed her to take a break and redirect herself and her purpose:

> I think taking a pause from that, like reflecting on myself, I learned what my values truly are, and it helped me kind of solidify a lot of my beliefs and my like opinions around surrounding the world. That's the silver lining with the pandemic; I really did learn a lot about my sense of self because I was alone. I wasn't dealing with all the chaos of what's normal surrounding you like school, and all this, so I did learn a lot about myself as an individual.

Similarly, Aria utilized the time at home to reflect on the type of person she strived to be and to reevaluate her friendships. She reported:

It gave me a lot of time to like think and like reflect on myself as like a person and like who I wanted to be and who I wanted, like around me, who I didn't want around me, who I wanted to be in life and kind of just like helped me get that grasp.

For Carson, the pandemic directly increased her sense of purpose. By being alone, she more fully comprehended her strong desire to connect and help improve the lives of others. She explained:

I think it just made it stronger. But I think it really has strengthened my resolve to reach out to others, let them know they're appreciated and loved. And to help them out. Sometimes I can't offer goods, but I can offer time.

Georgia reported that, by being at home for such an extended time, she developed a newfound sense of motivation to be proactive when pursuing her purpose. With the pandemic she witnessed how quickly her life could change, and she hoped to be more proactive when it came to her aspirations. She stated:

It's like shown me to not wait around for when I think that it's a good time or the right time…but like working hard to get there. And not just waiting around for opportunities to come to me like looking for things to do to actively get there and to reach my goals.

Lastly, Frances described the pandemic as an essential time for growth and, while it was painful at times, she saw it as beneficial for self-identity. She reported that when the pandemic first began, she struggled being at home because of hostile and conflict-prone family dynamics. Before the pandemic, she had learned to cope with her unhappiness related to her family by immersing herself in school and extracurricular activities. However, once these were stripped away, she realized how much she relied on outside experiences to fuel her happiness. She described the experience:

> I felt like I was just like this, like an empty shell, and I didn't notice it was empty because
>
> I was like filling it out with all of these things that I didn't think were temporary that I
>
> didn't think could like go away and a couple of days.

With the extended time at home, she was forced to evaluate what fueled her sense of happiness:

> I thought more about how I can rely on myself for happiness. And like the slow transition
>
> of becoming more optimistic… So it's just like being super excited about everything that
>
> happens because I learned that when you don't have big things to be happy about. You
>
> can be like just as happy about little things.

Relating to her purpose, she hoped to have a life filled with happiness and a sense of peace for herself. In striving for this, she also hoped to support her friends and their dreams whilst becoming an English teacher who will be able to connect with adolescents who struggle with their own families.

*Critical Consciousness at Work: Community Service and Inequalities*

During COVID-19 many participants developed or enhanced their sense of critical consciousnesses. The pandemic pushed other participants to think critically about racial and income inequalities in America. For Nicole, it was the first time she thoroughly reflected on these inequalities. Nicole identified as Asian American, and, throughout the interview, she discussed her personal experiences of discrimination and stereotypes that affected her on a daily basis. However, the pandemic exposed her to discrimination based on socio-economic status. She stated:

> We're a stable socio-economic class, and it definitely has allowed me to see the
>
> disparities and the injustices that lower-income communities and marginalized
>
> communities have to face. Before I never really thought about the essential workers and

what they have to go through…their reliance on their job is not just for like extra

spending money or so their kids to can go to college it's for like survival.

Unlike Nicole, Haley was encouraged to think about socio-economic inequalities throughout her

childhood. Yet, the pandemic provided her a sense of motivation to do something about these

social injustices. She reported:

> I don't think [the pandemic] has directly changed my sense of purpose, but I think it's
>
> given me more insight and given me like you know added more like fuel to the fire, kind
>
> of like seeing how COVID has, like, affected, different populations, like differently. Like,
>
> you know vaccine availability and like developing countries, and that sort of thing has
>
> definitely just shown me even more, that there's so much that needs improvement in this
>
> world, and like it just made me want to like make a difference even more.

Along with reflection, participants utilized critical action and engaged in service projects.

Community service was already a vested interest for many participants, and opportunities during

the pandemic solidified their passions. Ivy stated, "I was able to go out and volunteer, which

were very nice moments because it's just like I got to get out and I got to help and I felt like I was

moving towards my purpose." Similarly, Diane added, "I realized that, um, with the pandemic

it's more important than ever to really be there for others and during quarantine, I found myself

doing a lot of service projects." Lastly, Leena utilized her creativity to design and donate four

hundred face masks.

For Ivy, while she was heavily involved in community service projects growing up, the

pandemic solidified her strong desire to choose a career that could allow her to be financially

stable while incorporating a humanitarian aspect. She believed this would satisfy her purpose of

helping others. She stated that, in the future:

If I, go join one of those programs or, like, be able to just take time out of my day to help out, which is something that would be great but I don't think it would be enough honestly just volunteering a little bit at the end of each day. Um, I think COVID has just made me realize that I need something, or job path that's going to really integrate it [community service with business.]

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**Introduction to Discussion**

Purpose development is a vital aspect of positive youth development. There are profound benefits associated with having a purpose, including better mental health, a sense of moral commitment, a drive for achievement, and strong intrinsic motivation (Damon et al., 2003, Damon, 2008; Malin et al., 2017; Pizzolato et al., 2015: Blattner et al., 2013; Liang, et al., 2018; Bronk & Finch, 2010; Liang et al, 2017). Yet, there is contradictory research on if and how purpose development can be beneficial for adolescents from marginalized backgrounds. One subset of this literature argues that adolescents from marginalized backgrounds may not be a suitable population for purpose development, due to the greater and more urgent pressures they face and their need to focus on the "here and now" rather than "future dreams" (Sumner et al., 2018). In contrast, a second body of literature found that purpose development can be especially beneficial for adolescents from marginalized backgrounds as they tend to utilize their own experiences of marginalization as fuel to spark change (Gutowski et al., 2018). The present study sought to add to the literature on purpose development by better understanding the critical role that it plays for adolescents from marginalized backgrounds. Specifically, 13 adolescent girls— all from marginalized backgrounds—were interviewed about their sense of purpose and the potential relation to their adversities, as well as the role that mentors played in shaping purpose.

Through the use of qualitative methods, the researcher was able to honor the participants' ideas and themes. Qualitative data was analyzed through Thematic Analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998), which yielded four final themes:

1)   No Grit No Pearl: The participants articulated that as they strived towards their purpose (aka the "pearl"), they reflected on the past barriers and adversities (aka the "grit") that shaped them along the way. Participants identified their barriers as discrimination, family, and social issues, all of which fueled their sense of purpose.

2)   Desired Outcomes: The participants identified five sub themes that helped them remain dedicated to their sense of purpose and achieve their goals. When faced with obstacles and challenges, participants reported turning to these five sources of motivation (inspiration from family members, identity as a woman, self-growth, big picture and confidence).

3)   Mechanisms of Purpose Development: The participants described the vital role of mentors and critical consciousness in constructing their purpose.

4)   COVID-19 and the Adolescent Girl: Participants reported that the COVID-19 pandemic provided a beneficial opportunity for purpose development. With more free time to explore interests and reflect on values, participants were able to strengthen their sense of purpose. In addition, for some, COVID-19 fueled the development of critical consciousnesses, as participants became aware of societal inequities and identified ways in which they hoped to remediate these issues.

This chapter presented a summary of major findings and their connection to current research. Moreover, the clinical and educational implications of this research, along with identified limitations and future directions, were also discussed.

## Key Findings

### *The Adversities*

The present study adds to the existing literature of the Reactive Pathway (Kashdan & Mcknight, 2009) and Post Traumatic Growth theory (Milam et al., 2004) by confirming their previous findings and illuminating unique factors that contribute to the way adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds develop their sense of purpose. As previously stated, purpose development within the Reactive Pathway occurs by chance, or as a response to an unexpected, traumatic or life changing event (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Post Traumatic Growth is defined as psychological growth and/or increased insight, and potentially purpose development after a difficult or traumatic experience (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). As consistent with the research on Post Traumatic Growth and the Reactive Pathway, these participants did not seek out their sense of purpose but rather their purpose stemmed from enduring difficult life experiences. Indeed, the participants described their adversity, or barriers, as consistently connected to their purpose development and sense of purpose. This finding is significant as marginalized adolescents may face more obstacles than other adolescent groups and thus have a greater potential for purpose development than anticipated. While these results suggest that growth occurred for the individuals, it is important not to minimize the struggle they endured to attain such growth, nor negate any harm done as a result of the adverse experiences. It is likely that participants experienced post-traumatic stress, even though they are emphasizing their experiences of growth in the present study.

### *The Relationship between Purpose and Adversities*

The primary goal of this dissertation, however, is to extend the existing literature and to reveal additional themes for understanding the development of purpose in adolescent girls from

marginalized backgrounds. Through thematic analysis, the nature of participants' understanding

of adversity and its relationship to their purpose were clarified. As previously mentioned, one

participant described her experience with her adversity and purpose as her "grit" and "pearl,"

respectively. Most of the participants shared similar sentiments that their purpose (pearl) often

stemmed from undergoing difficult times (grit). Furthermore, many of the participants were not

only accepting of the adversities they faced but were also able to process how it served as a

source of inspiration for their purpose. In previous studies, researchers have drawn connections

between adversity and the development of purpose. While some findings have suggested that life

challenges and trauma can curtail purpose, others have indicated ways that suffering and

adversity inspire purpose development (Hill et al., 2018, Liang et al., 2017(a); Liang et al., 2017

(b); Sumner et al, 2018). These findings support the Post Traumatic Growth literature, and the

Reactive Pathway literature but also add to it by underscoring that individuals can and do

positively reflect on their adversities as they transform such experiences into their purpose.

Furthermore, these individuals are able to reframe difficult experiences, "their grit," as positive

moments of growth. The results yielded multiple methods in which the participants processed

their adversities. Some participants retrospectively processed their adversities and how it affected

their purpose, whereas others with the help of their mentors, began to formulate their purpose

alongside their adverse experiences.

Many participants defined their purpose as helping others facing similar adversities to

their own. They were willing and eager to continue facing their previous adversities on a daily

basis if that meant their efforts could help others. For example, some participants anticipated

making an impact through their future careers, including Olive who hoped to become a doctor,

with the goal of helping more people of color enter the medical field. Other participants planned

to contribute to the world beyond themselves through their daily interactions with the world. For example, Ellie hoped to treat each person with kindness, as she knows what it is like to be mistreated by others. Furthermore, not only did adversities help individuals develop their purpose, and view it as opportunities for self-growth, but in addition, many resolved their sense of purpose to help others who endure similar situations.

The desire to help others aligns with the current definition of youth purpose, specifically the intention to *contribute to the broader world* (Bronk et al., 2010; Damon et al., 2003). Previous research explored purpose development for adolescents from urban, lower income backgrounds, and found that instead of contributing to the broader communities, many adolescents often described their intention to contribute to their families directly (Liang et al., 2016). Participants in this study hoped to impact their family members with their sense of purpose but also impact others facing adversities similar to their own. These participants underscore that the contribution of adolescents from marginalized backgrounds and their sense of purpose do not need to be limited to family but can extend to the broader world.

While most participants were able to identify that their adverse experiences inspired their sense of purpose, a handful of participants verbalized how they could also align their character, strengths, and skills to work towards their goals. Positive Youth Development theorists posit that adolescents thrive when they are able to utilize their own innate strengths and skills (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner, et al 2015). This study supports that theory and the literature on how one's strengths can be connected to their purpose. Participants were able to identify how they could apply their strengths to their meaningful aspiration of helping others. For example, Georgia planned to use her strong writing skills and creative thinking to produce movies that feature a

diverse cast. This desire stemmed from her own experiences of witnessing discrimination and lack of opportunities for minorities.

*Desired Outcomes*

While having a sense of purpose is important, research has found that it may be equally vital to maintain a sense of dedication (Damon, 2008). Participants seemed to maintain an unwavering level of commitment and dedication to their purpose through five sources of inspiration: reflecting on their privileges, surrounding themselves with inspiring family members, relying on their self-confidence, embodying strong women, striving for self-growth, and thinking about the bigger picture. The participants acknowledged all the ways they felt grateful for their *privileges,* including, their family support, educational opportunities or financial freedom. Moreover, they expressed a strong desire to use their privileges to help others. They prioritized spending time with *family and friends* who inspired them to explore and maintain a sense of dedication to their purpose. In moments of doubt, they relied on their internal strengths, including being *confident* in themselves and their will to have a bright future. They reminded themselves of *strong women* that inspire them and reflected on the type of women they hoped to be when they are older. They also resolved to inspire other young girls on their journey to womanhood. They sought situations that pushed for *self-growth,* and when they felt their sense of purpose wavering, they reminded themselves of their *bigger picture*, and what awaits them after high school. These sources of inspiration allowed the participants to remain committed to their sense of purpose, even as they combat current stressors.

*The Mechanisms*

Along with identifying ways in which participants remained dedicated to their purpose, the data also revealed how participants initially developed their sense of purpose. Based on the

data, there were two key mechanisms that helped individuals develop their sense of purpose: the help of mentors, and critical consciousness awakening.

*The Role of Mentors*

Findings on how mentors contributed to the development of purpose in adolescents were consistent with the results of other studies. This data affirmed the positive role that mentors can play in purpose development (Liang et al., 2016). Consistent with the "People" in 4 P's of purpose development (Liang et al., 2016), participants declared that their mentors provided them affirmation, cultivation and guidance. Participants expressed feeling affirmed that their mentors believed in their abilities after they engaged in in-depth conversations about their career choices and dreams for the future. Validation by mentors translated into many participants developing a greater sense of confidence in themselves and their capabilities. The vital support by their mentors helped participants feel capable in choosing a purpose that properly reflected their abilities.

Participants also reflected on how their mentors cultivated their sense of purpose through encouraging them to explore their own interests and to expand outside their comfort zones. Many of the mentors encouraged the participants to explore their various interests and become educated on an array of topics. Participants specifically reflected on how many of their mentors valued education and urged them to form opinions about matters important to them. As a result, once participants began to narrow in on their purpose, they felt that their purpose reflected their values.

Lastly, with the guidance of mentors, participants were able to process adversities and better understand how they can relate to their sense of purpose. By engaging in conversations with mentors about their adversities, mentees were able to think differently about these

challenges. Whilst enduring the adversities, some participants turned to their mentors for direct guidance and help coping. For others, after the adversities ended, participants processed their experiences with their mentors and reflected how these experiences positively influenced their character strength. Mentors also confided in the participants about their own struggles and how they were better able to make sense of where their struggles fit with their sense of purpose. Indeed, through this relationship, many participants reported that their adversities no longer plagued them and they were able to use their energies to think more deeply about their life goals.

Results of this study also support Kashdan and McKnight's (2009) Social Learning Theory, specifically regarding how some participants viewed their relationship with their mentors and sense of purpose. Social Learning Theory upholds the belief that the development of purpose occurs by observing other people engaging in purpose-related behaviors and imitating these behaviors. In the current study, participants stated that they often felt motivated when they observed their mentors living a life with purpose. The mentors' resolve to pursue their sense of purpose and ability to remain unwavering even in moments of weakness inspired many of the participants to commit to their own sense of purpose. While many of the participants did not imitate their mentors' direct actions, they instead, began to imitate their mentors' dedication to their purpose. These specific findings emphasize that mentees do not need to simply adopt their mentors' sense of purpose, but rather that they can choose their own purposes while learning about commitment to a purpose from their mentors.

*Critical Consciousness*

The participants' level of critical consciousness varied. Many of the participants maintained at least some sense of critical awareness and reflected on the forms of oppression and

marginalization in society. A smaller number of participants maintained a sense of critical motivation and had plans to help combat these injustices in the future. Lastly, a handful of participants were currently active social justice agents fighting to make society different. Even with these varying levels of engagement, it was evident that critical consciousnesses aided participants in their purpose development. For some participants, critical consciousness served as a healing mechanism (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) from their past adversities, and allowed them to better understand their purpose. For others, their level of critical consciousness leveraged them to develop their sense of purpose.

In the Social Justice Model of Youth Development, healing can occur alongside the development of critical consciousnesses (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In this model "young people heal from the impact of racial and economic suffering when they comprehend and address the complex, hidden social and economic forces fomenting their everyday challenges" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, 92). Many of the participants reflected on the healing that occurred when they spoke about their purpose. Oftentimes, their purpose connected to various ways in which they had experienced oppression or discrimination. By formulating their sense of purpose and feeling empowered to respond with action addressing these adversities, they began to heal. This process also enabled purpose enhancement, as many felt an even stronger connection to their purpose once they were able to find a connection between their trauma or adversities and their ability to help others in similar situations.

For other participants, the development of critical consciousness served as a directing pathway towards their sense of purpose (White, 2021). Having a sense of critical consciousnesses gave participants clarity on how they wanted to leverage their strengths and skills in living out their purpose and simultaneously help others. Through the development of

critical consciousnesses, and even just critical awareness, participants were exposed to a variety of injustices. Awareness can lead to direction, as it is critical for people to understand *what* is needed, and *where* in society it is needed, in order to act (Jemal, 2017). Awareness of one's level of privilege was, for some participants, enough to spark a sense of purpose that aimed to combat injustice. For others, witnessing and experiencing forms of oppression served as a source of direction as they connected it to their own experiences and developed a sense of purpose and mission regarding these experiences.

*The Overlap between Critical Consciousness and Mentors*

Many of the participants attributed their development of critical consciousness to conversations with important people, including mentors and family members. This result is consistent with the literature, as critical consciousness can be developed through open and supportive dialogue with trusted people (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). In this study, however, mentors had a profound impact on participants' understandings of themselves and womanhood. Participants spoke about their experiences with gender discrimination that often made them feel inferior to men. A few participants explicitly mentioned worries about their future and how they may be perceived because of their gender. Despite these experiences, messages, and internal worries, the participants were proud to be women. By surrounding themselves with strong, powerful women on a daily basis, many of the participants described experiencing a sense of empowerment about being women. Based on their relationships, the participants felt they were equipped to handle experiences of sexism. In fact, participants reported that they learned through their mentors to stand up for themselves and to be vocal when they see or experience moments of gender oppression. While the research question did not directly explore how mentors can impact mentees' experiences as women, mentors can have a profound impact on an adolescent girl's self-

concept and her desire for gender equality. Mentors can also be extremely influential in helping

adolescent girls feel empowered to advocate for themselves in difficult situations. Furthermore,

the results of this study demonstrate that mentors can model for adolescent girls how they can

live their lives aligned with their sense of purpose, while combating societal oppression of

women.

*Covid 19 and the Adolescent Girl*

The research study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic; thus the researcher was

able to collect timely data on how the pandemic affected research participants. As the country

adjusted to the pandemic and new regulations were adopted, including increased isolation and

lockdown, researchers, educators and clinicians alike were concerned about the development of

adolescent girls and feared they would miss key developmental milestones (Mayne et al., 2021).

Results from this study are inspiring, as participants fared much better than other individuals

amidst the pandemic (Mayne et al, 2021). While the participants discussed ways in which the

pandemic and isolation negatively affected them, they also were able to reflect on how the

pandemic allowed them to grow and develop, specifically with regards to their purpose. The

pandemic allowed participants to utilize their free time in constructive ways, like exploring their

future career interests. Participants enrolled in online classes to expose themselves to novel

opportunities and engaged in conversations with their parents about their futures. They also

utilized this unique time to reflect on their own characteristics and evaluate who they are as

individuals and who they want to be in the future. Indeed, participants reevaluated their

friendships, and pivoted their priorities to better align with their values. Critical consciousness

grew for some participants, as they engaged in community service projects and critically

reflected on societal inequalities. Through watching the news, or even through personal

experiences, participants became aware of the negative effects of income inequality and felt motivated to work towards combating it in their future careers and with their sense of purpose. The effects of COVID-19 on society and on individuals remains unknown. Current research has found that during the pandemic mental health concerns and cases continue to rise (Mayne et al., 2021). However, this study underscored that some adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds actually found ways to thrive despite these unforeseen circumstances.

## Implications for Practice

The results of this study offer several important suggestions for working with adolescent girls, especially adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. The study highlighted adolescent girls' resiliency and, therefore, the results of this study are relevant for students and all those who work with them including parents and educators. Learning about peers that are able to utilize their resilience to foster a sense of purpose can be inspiring to adolescent girls. This study can also reframe traditional deficit model views of adolescent girls' experiences. These participants demonstrated that adolescent girls can and do draw on an abundance of strengths, education, passion, and purpose, and that they can grow and flourish in the face of difficulties.

On a micro level, results suggest that educators and parents would do well to prioritize purpose development in conversations with adolescents. Searching for purpose can be stressful (Blattner et al., 2003), and adolescent girls benefit from the scaffolding of adults. Purpose development is a highly reflective process, (Damon et al., 2003) and educators and parents should foster conversations that allow for such reflection. Questions can include "how do you see yourself impacting the world?" "Thinking about now and even when you are older, what do you want to be known for?" and "How do you hope to explore your purpose?" Educators and parents can help adolescents plan steps to live a life aligned with their purpose. These

conversations can occur in a natural, relaxed setting, such as when a parent is driving their daughter to school.

Educators may remind students who are overly identified with extrinsic metrics of success (e.g., grades) to think or journal about their purpose prior to receiving academic feedback (Liang & Klein, 2022). Girls can be reminded and socialized to resist cultural narratives of these superficial indicators of their self-worth. Instead, they can be reminded of their bigger picture to recognize their purpose beyond the grades they receive or other short-term measures of success. Educators can even help girls create a vision board that reminds them of their purpose and can be kept in their binder or assignment notebook.

Schools can also provide adolescents with ample opportunities to develop their sense of purpose through various clubs, classes, or focused retreats. Providing adolescent girls with formal spaces designed for reflection is beneficial. In addition, students should be encouraged to be involved in diverse activities to explore their interests in and out of their "comfort zones."

It was found that participants identified their most influential adults as those who believed in both themselves and the adolescents. Their mentors' emotional strength, directed conversations and their role modeling what it means to have a sense of purpose, were inspiring for adolescents in their own purpose development. Female role models would do well to pay attention to the way they speak of themselves, eliminating self-deprecating language, especially in the presence of their mentee.

Along with purpose development, parents and educators have the ability to provide scaffolding for adolescent girls to develop a level of critical consciousness. Participants reported that they primarily learned about social justice issues through conversations with close family and in school. Parents and educators can first introduce the topic of social justice through

ongoing discussions on current events and encourage the adolescent girls to form their own opinions. As one participant stated "It's important to have an opinion." Educators can utilize technology to spark individuals' interest in these topics by sharing thought-provoking media (e.g., readings, documentaries, Ted Talks). Participants found it helpful when they discussed current events and issues surrounding inequalities as a family, such as during dinner time. Participants reported that, once they became aware of inequalities, they began to seek opportunities to learn more and even to take actionable steps to combat them.

The results of this study provide examples of a myriad of opportunities for adolescent girls to begin to develop their sense of purpose. On a daily basis, adolescent girls can learn the practice of reflecting on who they are, what their core values are, including who they want to be after high school and what they hope to represent in and out of school. This reflection can be done through journaling or conversations among peers or the significant adults in their lives. Adolescent girls may also work towards understanding that they do not have to decide their sense of purpose quickly but that purpose development is typically a gradual evolution or process. Adopting this mindset may alleviate some pressure of wanting to discover one's purpose prematurely. For those who have determined their purpose, next steps may be to think about how the steps they take today can positively impact themselves tomorrow. For example, if a student describes her sense of purpose as becoming a nurse and leaving a positive impact on her patients, she may then work towards that purpose by enrolling in additional science classes or researching different nursing programs.

Mentoring is a critical resource and mechanism for pursuing purpose, and girls should be supported to identify mentors. For example, they may be encouraged to make a list of all people in their family, school, and social circles whom they feel inspired by, and who may live out

similar values or purposes to their own. They can be encouraged to select potential mentors to reach out to from this list to initiate conversations and build mentoring relationships.

Macro and systemic implications can be drawn from this study. This study underscores the importance of the development and understanding of critical consciousnesses in all people. The desire to enhance critical consciousness should not just fall to adolescents, but also to policy makers. For example, town school committees can adopt a critical consciousness mindset, and engage in continual discussion about ways the educational system may be perpetuating oppression. The school committee members may research how each school interacts with their minority students. For example, a school may actually be upholding inequalities if more students of color in special education classrooms than white students and/or if more students of color are being suspended or expelled than white students. Answers to these questions can help inform how schools can better support their students of color, and investigate any biases that may be held which impact the judicial process in schools. In addition, school committee members can pair up with other policy makers to create an anti-racist group that is open to the public. Members can discuss racial and socioeconomic inequities in their town, brainstorm ways to promote awareness, and mobilize for action. This can help foster intergenerational collaboration. Lastly, policy makers can help change the educational curriculum implemented in schools. Students at younger ages should be introduced to key concepts of critical consciousnesses, including oppression, privilege, and action. Policy makers may need to provide additional funding to schools to ensure their teachers are properly trained in the important topics.

## Limitations and Future Research

The present study yielded important findings for the field of adolescent girls' research, however, there are limitations in this study. While a strength of this study is that it occurred

during a global pandemic and provided key insights into how adolescent girls fared during unprecedented times, the pandemic did impact recruitment. Originally, the intent was to recruit participants from the three schools within the researcher's partnership. As data collection began, however, feedback from the school officials, participants, and parents highlighted students "Zoom fatigue" and exhaustion from being in front of a computer. Many individuals declined to participate in both the quantitative and qualitative portion of the study. In addition, one school removed itself from the study, as they were enduring a community trauma and worried about the well-being of their students. In order to create a diverse sample pool, the researcher was required to add another site. This site was not a private all-girls school, but rather a public, all-girls lacrosse team. While they shared the commonality of having marginalized backgrounds, their socioeconomic status varied greatly. Most of the girls from the lacrosse team came from lower- to middle-class families, whereas the private school participants were from middle- to upper-class families. In addition, through the partnership with the private schools, the researcher became aware of the school's values and educational status, whereas, for the lacrosse team, the researcher was unaware of their schooling experience.

Another limitation was the selection criteria used to determine participation in the study. Data collection for this study occurred on a rolling basis and began with the two schools and then the lacrosse team. For the two schools, approximately 50 individuals completed the survey, and of those participants, invitations to interview were sent to those who scored in the top half percentile on the purpose scale. For the lacrosse team, however, 8 participants completed the survey, and they all indicated having a sense of purpose, and thus were invited to interview. Furthermore, the selection criteria to interview was not consistent across the sample but rather was molded to fit the needs of the study.

Future studies should explore the core research questions of the study longitudinally. It would be interesting to conduct a qualitative examination to see if adolescent girls' sense of purpose changes as they advance to higher levels of high school and even college. For example, studies should be done to compare how purpose manifests during high school as compared to the college years. Many of the participants in this study described feeling very comfortable in their schools and home environments, and as a result, they may have been particularly confident. Future research could explore their transition to college. For example, for those with such a strong resolve about their purpose, does their purpose waiver or change when they leave their stable environments for new situations, such as going to college? Researchers could investigate if feeling comfortable in an environment affects one's level of commitment towards their purpose.

Research should continue to explore the positive ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected individuals, and specifically adolescent girls. As previously stated, research has identified numerous detrimental effects that occurred as a result of the pandemic, yet this present study identified ways in which participants actually experienced growth during this difficult time. For many of the participants, their growth surrounded their sense of purpose. Studies could investigate this phenomenon, and in addition explore if the pandemic, and the strength required to thrive during it, actually enhanced Positive Youth Development

Future research should explore adolescent girls who have experienced adversities, but have yet to develop their sense of purpose. In the current study, the adolescent girls had already identified their purpose and were able to articulate their purpose. Future research could investigate the process that occurs from the start as an individual recognizes the connections between their adversity and future purpose.

A program evaluation may be conducted to evaluate what effects occur, if any, when a teacher begins to implement purpose development into the classroom. For example, if a teacher employs the vision board technique, students can be surveyed at the start and end of the school year to investigate how interacting with their purpose vision board on a daily basis impacted them.

Researchers should continue to explore the vital role that mentoring can play in adolescent girls' development. Specifically, future research could continue to investigate additional ways in which mentors can help adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds formulate their sense of purpose. Researchers may explore at the best age individuals are introduced to their mentors and how the duration and nature of a mentoring relationship impacts purpose development. Additional research is needed to investigate the role that mentors can play as they help their mentees process their adversities and translate it into a sense of purpose. Through interviewing both the mentees and mentors, researchers can gather rich data from both perspectives on the quality of the mentoring relationship and successful dialogues around adversity and purpose. These successful dialogues could be used to help other mentors better address their mentees adversities and help them translate it into purpose. All of these findings could positively contribute to mentoring programs, in and out of schools.

## Conclusions

This study adds to the existing purpose literature, specifically highlighting the relationship between adversity and purpose development for adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds. Viewing their purpose as their pearl, and their adversity as their grit, the adolescent girls studied were able to reframe their adversities and connect these to their sense of purpose. Indeed, the girls began to view their purpose as helping others facing similar adversities as

themselves. The role of mentors and the development of critical consciousnesses served as a vital

mechanism in leveraging purpose development. This study supports the important role of people

(Liang et al., 2017a) in the development of purpose and critical consciousness fostering purpose

development through the healing and or directing pathway (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002;

White, 2021). This study also underscores five important sources of inspiration that lead

individuals to their desired outcomes and sense of purpose. The role of the pandemic and its

influence on purpose development was a serendipitous and critical finding of this study. For

most individuals, while the pandemic was difficult, this unprecedented time actually fueled

greater purpose development. This study offers important contributions to the literature focusing

on purpose development, adolescent girls' development, marginalized identities, mentorship,

critical consciousness, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study enhances an

understanding of how purpose is indeed vital for adolescent girls from marginalized backgrounds

and clarifies various mechanisms through which educators, parents, and clinicians alike can

scaffold this development of purpose in young people.

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**Appendices**

Appendix A: Table 1

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Age | Grade | Race/Ethnicity | Gender Identity | Sexual Identity | SES Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | 12 | Asian | Female | Heterosexual | Middle/high |
| 16 | 10 | Latina | Female | Heterosexual | Middle/high |
| 16 | 10 | Asian/Caucasian | Female | I don't know | Middle/high |
| 16 | 10 | Latina | Female | I don't know | Middle/high |
| 18 | 12 | Asian/Caucasian | Female | Heterosexual | Middle/high |
| 15 | 10 | Latina/Caucasian | Female | Bisexual | Middle/High |
| 16 | 10 | Asian/Caucasian | Female | Bisexual | Middle |
| 16 | 11 | Latina/Caucasian | Female | I don't know | Middle |
| 17 | 11 | Black/Caucasian | Female | Heterosexual | Low/middle |
| 18 | 12 | Latina | Female | Heterosexual | Low/middle |
| 17 | 11 | Black | Female | Heterosexual | Middle |
| 18 | 12 | Asian | Female | Heterosexual | Middle/High |
| 17 | 11 | Black | Female | Heterosexual | Middle/High |

Appendix B: Table 2

**Table 2**

*Participant Sense of Purpose*

| Participant | *Participants defined their "sense of purpose" ...* |
|---|---|
| Aria | To become a doctor and political activist. To share my voice and be an advocate for Asian American women. To become a better person each day. |
| Becca | To travel the world and develop a sense of internal peace. To have an engineering career that allows me to make products that help others. |
| Carson | To serve others either by working directly with them or by an organization. To continue to foster positive relationships. |
| Diane | To have a career in architecture that will create things that can help others. To combine my ambitions and creativity to help others in their daily lives. To leave my mark. |
| Ellie | To help improve the lives of others. To have a career in international relations and make a positive impact on an individual level and eventually larger-scale. |
| Frances | To be happy, have a simple life and be able to help my friends when they are in need. To eventually become a teacher and support my students who struggled like I did. |
| Georgia | To leave a legacy and be someone to be remembered by. To create films/movies that are more representative of the LGBTQ community and represent minorities. To embody kindness. |
| Haley | To make a difference in the world and to treat the planet better and combat global warming. To test my limits and push myself outside my comfort zones in hopes to make a positive impact on the world. To be compassionate to all people. |
| Ivy | To leave the world better than I found it. To have a career that maintains a sense of social justice within it. To impact everyone I encounter in a positive manner. To contribute to my own community or travel to impoverished countries. To continue to support those who feel discriminated against and educate people. |
| Juliana | To become a behavioral therapist and help others. To be someone people can rely on. To inspire my younger brothers to be the best they can be. To be open minded. |
| Leena | To become a screenwriter and provide a sense of escapism for people. To provide people with a different viewpoint. To inspire others that they can achieve their careers as well. |

| Nicole | To go into the business while fighting injustices in the world. To help my community. To fight against the bamboo ceiling concept. To strengthen relationships. To help end period poverty. |
| Olive | To enter the medical field and help address issues of systemic racism specifically in medicine. To help others when they experience instances of discrimination. To educate others on lack of food regulations and make people more aware of what they are eating. |

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

**Informed Consent for Participation Permission for your child in Antecedents of Purpose Study**
**September 2021**
**(ONLINE)**

Your daughter is being asked to participate in a research study examining the lives of adolescent girls. We are particularly interested in the hopes and dreams adolescent girls have for the future and important relationships adolescent girls have with friends, parents, and teachers. Your daughter was selected as a possible participant because she and her classmates at school are part of a unique academic environment at the _____ School. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to grant your daughter permission to be in the study. Your daughter will also have to read and complete a form, providing her consent, before participating in the study.

The purpose of the study is to try to understand how adolescent girls feel about themselves, what they aspire to in the future, and how relationships matter in their lives. We hope to learn about how adolescent girls feel about school and about the relationships they have with people in and outside of school (e.g., relationships with teachers, parents, and friends). In other words, we want to learn more about daughter and what it's like to be an adolescent girl today. To help answer these questions, we have asked your daughter and her classmates at the _____ School to participate in our study. We have also asked girls from another school in _____ to participate, too.

If you grant permission for your daughter to be in this study, we would ask her to do the following things: complete an online survey and, possibly, participate in a zoom interview. The online survey will take about 30 minutes to complete. A subset of girls will be selected to participate in in-person interviews. If selected, the zoom interview will take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

It is possible that some of the questions part of the online survey may make your daughter feel uncomfortable. You daughter is free to skip any questions that make her feel uncomfortable. The benefits of participation are that findings from this project are expected to help identify ways in which teachers and parents can promote purpose development, healthy well-being and achievement for your child, her classmates, and other adolescent girls. Her participation will also add to a growing body of scientific knowledge on adolescent development among girls. There is no cost for her to participate in this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file at Wingate University and Boston College. All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however, please note that the Review Board may review the research records.

Your child's participation is voluntary.  If your child chooses not to participate, it will not affect your or her current or future relations with Wingate University, Boston College, Rivier University, or your child's school.  She is free to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason. There is no penalty or loss of benefits for her not taking part or for you stopping your child's participation. If your child chooses not to participate, her academic standing is no way jeopardized.

The researchers conducting this study are Drs. Terese J. Lund, Belle Liang and Angela Mousseau. A graduate student from Boston College (Lily) will also be involved in the study.

Please ask any questions you may have about the study by contacting Dr. Terese J. Lund (t.lund@wingate.edu). You may also contact the chairperson of the Wingate University Research Review Board at rrb@wingate.edu or at 704-233-8187 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Please Check YES to indicate you are agreeing to let your child participate in the study.

YES_____          NO_____

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions.  I have received answers to my questions.  I give my consent for my child to participate in this study.  I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Study Participant (Type Name) : _____
Study Participant email (type email)_____
Parent/Guardian (Type Name): _____
Parent/Guardian (Signature): _____ Date _____

Appendix D: Informed Assent Form

**Informed Assent for Participation as a Subject in Antecedents of Purpose**

**September 2021**

**(ONLINE)**

Dear Student:

 We are excited to present you with the opportunity to take part in a ground-breaking study on the predictors of purpose in life among adolescent girls from high-achieving schools. This study

was initiated by [Head of School and other contacts].  With their guidance and collaboration, this project will be coordinated by Drs. Angela DeSilva Mousseau (a professor at Rivier University), Belle Liang (a professor at Boston College), and Terese Lund (a professor at Wingate University).

 You were selected as a possible participant because you and your classmates at school are part of a unique academic environment.  We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

 This study will explore how adolescent girls feel about themselves, what they aspire to in the future, and what role relationships with friends, parents, and other important mentor figures play in their lives. In other words, we want to learn more about you and what it's like to be an adolescent girl today.   To help answer these questions, we have asked you and your classmates at the _____ School to participate in our study. We have also asked girls from two other schools in _____ to participate, too.

 If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: to complete an online survey and, possibly, participate in an in-person interview. The online survey will take about 30 minutes to complete. A smaller group of girls will be selected to participate in zoom interviews. If selected, the zoom interview will take approximately 45 minutes to complete and be done with our graduate assistant (Lily Konowitz).

It is possible that some of the questions in the online survey may make you feel uncomfortable. You are free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. The benefits of participation are that findings from this project are expected to help identify ways in which teachers and other individuals can promote purpose development, healthy, well-being and achievement for you, your classmates, and other adolescent girls. Your participation will also add a growing body of scientific knowledge on adolescent development among girls. Furthermore, there is no cost to you to participate in this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private.  In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant.  Research records will be kept in a locked file at Wingate University and Boston College.  All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file.  Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however, please note that the Review Board may review the research records.

 Your participation is voluntary.  If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your or her current or future relations with Wingate University, Boston College, Rivier University, or your school.  You are free to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason. There is no penalty or loss of benefits for you not taking part or for you stopping your participation. If you choose not to participate, your academic standing is no way jeopardized.


The researchers conducting this study are Drs. Terese J. Lund, Belle Liang and Angela Mousseau. A graduate student from Boston College (Lily) will also be involved in the study.

Please ask any questions you many have about the study by contacting Dr. Terese J. Lund (t.lund@wingate.edu). You may also contact the chairperson of the Wingate University Research Review Board at rrb@wingate.edu or at 704-233-8187 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

 Please Check Yes to signal:

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions.  I have received answers to my questions.  I give my consent to participate in this study.  I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I give my consent to participate in the survey, and to participate in an audio-recorded individual interview.


                              YES_____          NO_____




_____                    _____

**Signature of Study Participant**                          **Date**



_____

Email Address



Like we said above, you may be selected to participate in some additional interviews with us about the things that are important to you and goals that you have for yourself. If you are interested in being selected for these interviews, please provide your email address and/or phone number in the space below. We will use your email address or phone number to contact you if you are selected for the interviews. If you are not selected, we will not do anything with the information. No one else will have access to this private information.



**E-mail address:** _____

**Phone number:**  _____

**If you would like a copy of this form for your records, please let me know.**

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

<div align="center">Interview PROTOCOL</div>

1.  Interviewer: Today is [DATE]. I am here with [STUDENT'S CODE NAME]. Thank you so much for participating in today's interview! My name is [NAME], and I'm a [POSITION] at Boston College. I want to ask you some questions to understand how you are currently thinking about yourself and your future, and the role that a sense of purpose plays in your life. We define purpose as a long-term, big picture goal/passion—something you want to do or be one day that's very meaningful to you. You might think of it as similar to a life dream that you have. Purpose is also characterized by an active engagement in the pursuit of one's goal(s), meaning someone is constantly engaging in activities to further their purpose. These activities have to do with trying to reach this long-term goal. Does that make sense?
    a.  My sense of purpose is working with kids to help them learn how to increase their own well-being so they can feel confident enough in themselves to follow their dreams and perhaps positively impact the world. Does that make sense?

Before we begin: Do you have any questions before we get started? [STUDENT ANSWERS] Great. Do I have permission to audio record this interview? [STUDENT ANSWERS] Okay. Remember that you can stop the interview at any point.

<u>Getting to know interviewee</u>
2.  First, I want to ask what are your gender pronouns?  (Student answers or pauses)... Mine is (She/hers/her)?

3.   I have a bunch of questions to ask you in this packet. But, if I get anything from this conversation, I want to get a sense of *who you are*. So I'm wondering if you can tell me about yourself?
    a.  Probe: What do you love doing?

<u>Thinking about The Future and Goals</u>

4.  Thanks for sharing that. Now thinking ahead, can you tell me about the type of person you want to be when you are older? This could be characteristics you want to have, or things you want to do, or the person you want to become?

5.  Great. Now besides that, is there anything else that you think of when you think of your dreams for your future?

6.  Would you consider this your sense of purpose? (Or is a part of that dream your sense of purpose?)

    a.  *For your information* we define purpose as 1) having a personally meaningful long-term goal, 2) active engagement with that goal, 3) intention to contribute to the broader world

7.  Where do you think this sense of purpose came from?

8.  What do you think motivates you to pursue this goal or idea?


Adverse Experience:

9.  So we are going to switch gears a bit and talk about how everyone has a unique story. We all have different experiences that impact us in various ways. These experiences influence the way we look at the world. Challenging or adverse experiences can especially influence our perspectives and life choices. Have you ever experienced any form of difficulty, challenges or adversity in your life?

    a.  Probe: This can range from a death of a close family member, a parental divorce, food insecurity, financial concern, experiences of discrimination.

10. Would you be comfortable sharing with us about this experience?

11. *IF student does not mention adverse experience mentioned in survey:* You prompt them and say, "you previously completed a survey in which you shared that you've experienced some tough things. Can you talk about those?

12. How do you think these things have impacted you or are connected with your goals or path in life?

13. Was there anyone in particular that helped during the difficult time you previously mentioned?

    a.  Probe: How did they help you?

Covid Experience:

14. Thank you for sharing...as you are very aware we are in a global pandemic and it's been hard for everyone in different ways. How about how has COVID affected your life?

15.  what has been some of the hardest things for you since the pandemic began?

16. What has been your biggest worry associated with COVID?

17. How do you deal with these worries?

18. Has COVID changed how you think about your sense of purpose or goals for the future?

People:
    19. Are there any people or relationships in your life that have influenced this goal or sense of purpose?
        a.  Probe: Who?
        b.  Probe: Can you think of a specific memory of how they influenced you?
    20.  *If person identified family membe*r: are there any people outside of your family members who mentored you or helped motivate you to achieve your goal?  This could include a teacher, a coach, a babysitter, or camp counselor. (If say yes)... Can you tell me a story of something they did or said that helped you work towards your goal or purpose?

    21.  Do you hope to impact anyone as you work towards your sense of purpose? Who and how?


Barriers
    22.  Sometimes it can be hard to reach our goals for a lot of different reasons. For example, perhaps our parents don't approve of our goals, or we struggle to maintain motivation. Have you experienced any challenges on your journey to [insert whatever their long-term goal/career plans/purpose is, e.g., becoming a doctor, etc...]
    23. Has anything made it difficult to achieve the goals you're working towards?
    24.  Some students say that their gender identity, can get in their way of achieving their goals. Can you relate?
        a.  Probe:  How so?


    25.  Has your race ever affected you achieving your goals?
        a.  Probe: Can you give me an example? *If no answer can answer about overall identities?*


    26. Has SES ever affected you achieving your goals? For example, some students may say lack of resources, or opportunities may have made it hard for them to achieve their goals? Can you relate?
        a.  Probe: Can you give me an example?

Strengths
    1.  If you were to describe yourself what are your character strengths?


Emotions
    27. When you think about pursuing your purpose (career goal, or other goal mentioned here) how do you feel?
        a.  Probe: For example, are you excited, or stressed about your future? Why?

28. .  How has your sense of purpose influenced your overall day to day activities and life?

Thank you.