RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION REGARDING TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES DURING ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of traumatic events during childhood or adolescence and the consequences for identity formation. This study is guided by Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, which describes how teenagers are forming their identity as they enter emerging adulthood. The central research question of this study is: What are the lived experiences of young adults regarding trauma and identity formation? Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants to be interviewed using a researcher-developed semi-structured interviews. Thematic analyses were conducted following Giorgi's method. Based on these analyses, there were five themes: Participants described intense changes in emotions; they described their identity as changing as a result of external support; participants described their coping in context as they were going through the trauma; participants described their negative consequences as a result of their traumatic event and they described their interpersonal changes as they were dealing with the traumactured. The results of this study can help promote healthy adolescent identity development and resilience.

Keywords
Trauma, identity, identity formation, childhood trauma.

1. Introduction

Many individuals experience traumatic events in childhood or adolescence. Traumatic events can seriously impact an individual's physical and psychological health (Marin & Shkreli, 2019; May & Wise, 2016; Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene *et al*., 2020). Jenkins et al. (2021) stated that young adults who suffered from traumatic events were associated with negative social experiences, which hinder social identity development. Young adults identified that traumatic events resulted in psychological distress, anger, anxiety, and increased abuse of drugs (Planellas *et al*., 2020). Although some studies have viewed the relationship between trauma and identity development (Marin & Shkreli, 2019; Raemen *et al*., 2021), much remains unknown. More specifically, there is a gap in understanding experiences of identity formation due to traumatic events. Individuals might wonder who they are or find themselves more resilient to unexpected trauma. Due to this gap in the literature, there is a lack of understanding of adolescents' lived experiences regarding their identity in response to trauma. The goal of this study is to

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explore the lived experiences of individuals who experienced trauma as a child or adolescent and how this trauma impacted their identity formation.

2. Literature Review

The conceptual framework for this study is Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of development. This framework is meaningful to consider because it describes identity development during adolescence. Erikson (1968) stated the fifth psychosocial stage occurs during the often turbulent teenage years. This stage plays an essential role in developing a sense of personal identity, which will continue to influence behavior and development for the rest of a person's life (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson (1968), an adolescent successfully integrates identity and resolves an identity crisis through exploration and questioning. However, if someone doesn't resolve this crisis, they experience identity diffusion. Identity diffusion is the status where an adolescent does not have a sense of having choices they have not yet made (nor is attempting/willing to make) a commitment (Marcia, 1966). Identity diffusion essentially inhibits development in later psychosocial stages.

Trauma is exposure to an experience that poses a psychological or physical threat to oneself or others (Lucas *et al.*, 2020). The prevalence of trauma varies in age from childhood to young adulthood. Kilpatrick et al. (2013) found that among a sample of approximately 3,000 individuals, 89.7% were exposed to trauma across their lifetime and exposure to multiple traumatic events was common. The National Council Survey (2016) reported results that over 90% of children experience sexual abuse, 77% of children are exposed to a school incident and 35% of urban youth are exposed to community violence, consistent with findings in the National Council for Behavior Health Survey (2018) report that 15-43% of girls and 14-45% of boys experienced at least one trauma during childhood (Veterans Affairs, 2018). The National Council Survey (2018) reported that 70% of adults in the United States have experienced a traumatic event at least once.

Trauma can impact adolescents when individuals experience challenges to the self and identity development in a way unlike other experiences and undoubtedly, necessitates meaning making. When an individual has negative experiences, such as trauma, it can disrupt the normative identity process. Trauma complicates identity development by prompting questions regarding previously held beliefs and assumptions about the self and the world (Marin & Shkreli, 2019). If identity formation was achieved before a trauma, there would be an examination of how impacted they were. If the individual wasn't influenced and developed their identity, how did the trauma affect them? As individuals narrate their traumatic events and experienced stories, connections form between their past identity formation and between self and experiences.

Traumatic events and identity development are highly stressful for teenagers and young adults. When trauma coincides with identity formation, mental health issues may result. Blaauwendraat et al. (2017) stated that traumatic events are highly stressful situations threatening one's life, health or personal integrity or witnessing violent events or unexpected or violent deaths of close family or friends. This study will aim to understand how trauma may impact young adults' identity development, which has implications for mental well-being. Young adults have varying experiences of trauma, which can have different consequences on identity development. Learning how trauma impacts an emerging adult can help describe potential identity changes.

Empirical studies stated that trauma has short-term effects on well-being. Long-term or short-term traumatic events affect young adults differently and addressing trauma

early increases the chance of recovery. Children exposed to negligence and abuse often experience instability in attachment (Raemen *et al*., 2021). A child who suffered a traumatic event and grew up without any help could suffer a PTSD event that potentially could lead to a higher risk for subsequent trauma (Albarello *et al*., 2021; Planellas *et al*., 2020). Albarello et al. (2021) found that combining a developmental approach with a social-psychological one helps to comprehend how individuals and social factors interact to assist coping.

Researchers have identified the long-term effects of trauma and how it can confuse the thinking of young adults. Some of the long-term consequences include anxiety, depression and anger (Planellas *et al*., 2020). A history of childhood exposure to a traumatic event is associated with higher rates of chronic diseases, suicide attempts, mortality and psychiatric disorders in adulthood and interpersonal violence-related trauma is strongly associated with PTSD (Planellas *et al*., 2020). Yazdani et al. (2016) stated that adolescents increase their vulnerability to various impairments as they mature into adults. Yazdani et al. (2016) found that trauma can be associated indirectly with a family-shared environment, where the traumatic experiences have been transferred or reenacted in scary ways. These results are consistent with Yohanna et al. (2016), who found that young adults exposed to traumatic events are at high risk for adverse developmental outcomes, prompting low academic performances, poor social skills and mental health concerns. Kearns et al. (2021) argued that a traumatic event increases the risk of using alcohol as a coping strategy among young adults.

In some cases, traumatic events can have a physical effect and some young adults or adolescents react differently to pain or fear (Shalka, 2020). Some physical symptoms caused by traumatic events include hypervigilance, sleep disturbances and flashbacks, which individuals feel they have reexperienced the trauma or psychological reactions to triggers of the trauma (Shalka, 2020). Other consequences of trauma can be poor academic performance, poor social skills and mental health concerns (Mętel *et al*., 2019). Trauma reactions can be unpredictable for some young adults or adolescents to pass and others may continue to experience trauma in their bodies; in some cases, a traumatic event can lead to permanent developmental trauma (Ranieri, 2021). Ranieri (2021) found that trauma can result in stress that can affect the entire part of psychological growth. Another consequence of trauma is to develop a dissociated defense mechanism to avoid that feeling of mental health (Ranieri, 2020).

Trauma can also lead to alcohol abuse, drugs, suicide, depression, body movement and breathing issues. For instance, Kearns et al. (2021) stated that the literature emphasized a risk factor for problematic alcohol use after a traumatic event. Kearns et al. (2021) suggested that the body's arousal stimuli during interpersonal traumatic events can produce conditioned cues to trigger post-traumatic stress. Subsequently, this can lead to increased symptoms of drugs, drinking alcohol, using drugs, suicide, depression and anxiety. Some researchers stated that traumatic events depend on when the trauma occurs, the situation and whether the individuals received help (Kearns *et al*., 2021).

Adolescence is a crucial period of development in identity formation and any trauma is likely to change a teenager's experiences with learning about who they are. Marin and Shkreli (2019) studied concentrated young adults who had 32 trauma narratives and concluded that a combination of identity commitment produced low identity distress - the limitation where clinical implications of the finding were discussed. Rabiau (2019) studied identity formation in adolescent refugees. The researcher concluded that family plays a role in cultural identity. The study was conducted on

refugee adolescents (Rabiau, 2019). As a result, trauma and relationships played a role in identity. Other studies have examined trauma in the adolescent or identity context. For example, Raemen et al. (2019) stated that traumatic experiences are related to identity diffusion, which was connected to more self-harming behavior. Previous researchers linked the mediating role of identity formation and self-harming behavior as consequences of traumatic events (Raemen *et al.*, 2019). Raemen et al. (2019) stated that identity diffusion was positively associated with health concerns and concluded that it is essential to identify trauma and identity diffusion as risks for self-harming behavior. Berman et al. (2020) stated that trauma can alter or change identity formation and vice versa; a traumatic event can impact how individual feels about themselves or how they should deal with their trauma. Berman et al. (2020) revealed that severe traumatic experiences could have adverse effects and suggested further studies to understand better how trauma impacts' identity development. As a result, traumatic events may promote identity diffusion, which can have health complications. These studies help explain the consequences of trauma for adolescent identity development, but there remains a gap about the experiences of trauma and identity develop to better understand *why* trauma contributes to identity development processes.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Methodology and Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to understand the lived experiences of individuals with traumatic events and the consequences of identity formation. This approach was selected over other approaches, like case study, grounded theory and basic qualitative since the current study focuses on the lived experiences of participants and other designs do not focus on lived experiences. With this design, participants are encouraged to detail their experiences by elaborating in their own way, how they have lived a particular experience (Giorgi, 2009). The other approaches focus on developing or editing a theory, focus on a single case, or seek to describe a phenomenon. Given these parameters, phenomenological was chosen as the optimal design for this study.

3.2. Procedures

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling using groups on Facebook and LinkedIn associated with parenting. Posts were added to groups to share information about the study and a link to a screening questionnaire hosted by SurveyMonkey. The first page of the screening questionnaire was the informed consent for the study, which provided details about what the study involved, what to do if they experienced any secondary trauma as a result of participating in the study (i.e., contact for free mental health services) and that they could skip any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. By selecting "Next" at the bottom of this first page of the screening questionnaire, they were agreeing to participate in the study and that they could be audio-recorded during their interview. Once the consent form was complete and participants were confirmed to meet the inclusion criteria, an email was sent to set up a time for the interview. Once the interview began, the participants were asked if they had any questions and then the semi-structured interview began (see Appendix A for protocol and interview questions). The semi-structured interview questions were tested with two field tests and

reviewed by an expert panel, all who had professional experience with qualitative methodology.

A total of 12 participants participated in this study (Table 1). Each participant was treated as an autonomous agent who voluntarily gave informed consent to participate in the research study with the promise of privacy and confidentiality and the right to withdraw from participation in the research study without any penalty (Stadtlander, 2018). The interview was audio-recorded, and each interview lasted about 45-60 minutes. After the end of the interview, the participants were debriefed, thanked and reminded that if they had any questions or concerns, to let me know. The interviews were transcribed using the transcription services provided by Zoom. Next, the principal investigator reviewed the transcripts and edited for consistency with the interview. Once the transcripts were edited, copies were made available to participants to engage in member checking (no participants requested any edits to their transcript).

Table 1. Participants Interviews

Participants	Date interview	Interview duration	Gender	Mild trauma
P_1	01/25/2024	32.33 minutes	Female	Parent's Divorce
P_2	01/27/2024	34.29 minutes	Female	Parent's Death
P_3	01/28/2024	35.55 minutes	Female	Parent's Death
P_4	01/30/2024	26.09 minutes	Female	Health's Diagnosis
P_5	01/31/2024	29.06 minutes	Female	Health's Diagnosis
P_6	02/01/2024	31.37 minutes	Female	Parent's Divorce
P_7	02/02/2024	33.19 minutes	Female	Family Tragedy
P_8	02/03/2024	50.66 minutes	Male	Parent's Divorce
P_9	02/03/2024	31.40 minutes	Female	Bullying School
P_{10}	02/06/2024	17.41 minutes	Female	Health's Diagnosis
P_{11}	02/12/2024	27.55 minutes	Female	Parental Conflict
P_{12}	02/20/2024	21.40 minutes	Male	Parent's Divorce

3.3. Data Analysis

Giorgi (2009; 2012) provided six steps to analyze responsive interviews. The first step is to collect and describe the phenomenological data. All interviews were transcribed using Zoom and then rewatched to ensure no errors with the audio transcripts. Second, transcripts were read multiple times to engage in coding the data. This process involves finding "excerpts from the transcript with specific concepts, them, events, examples, places or dates" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These passages contain meaning that relates to the concepts being studied. Third, each code was described and broken into meaningful units. Codes were sorted into different files or groups and then summarized. Fourth, the meaningful units were organized into themes and subthemes. After comparison and assortment, a file summary was completed. The fifth step was identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012). The codes from every file integrated to understand the different interview descriptions better. The sixth step integrates features into the phenomenon's essential structure, including combining themes to deduce what has happened with the participant's experiences. This step was critical as it allowed a better understanding of how the concepts answer the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Reflections were conducted throughout the interview process to help observe how

the identified findings could be applied in other situations or conditions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

4. Results

The meaning units reflect the descriptive information compiled from the interviews during the study research. The second step was organizing related units of meaning into sub-themes. In addition to these lived experiences, each participant had their own childhood experiences or adolescent trauma and some of their experiences had similarities that overlapped the sub-themes. The Principal Investigator began to develop a clearer sense of how participants made sense of the phenomenon. The meaning units were grouped by similar sub-themes. For instance, P1 and P3 had similarities in potential sub-themes, including academic motivation and self-determination. The fourth step was to organize related sub-themes into main themes. The transcripts were reread and reevaluated to determine the relevance of the experiential themes developed (Table 2). As a result of this analyses, five themes and 20 sub-themes emerged from the 20 meaning units using Giorgi's (2009) phenomenological analysis by examining the lived experiences of participants' responses (Table 3).

Table 2. Descriptions and examples of thematic codes

Meaning Unit	Description of Meaning Units	Example Quote
Loss Confidence	People felt less confident when dealing through difficult situations.	"Am I good enough" (P4)
Fear	Feeling anxious and scared as a result of family experiences.	'The fear of that sense of Failure" (P1)
Academic Motivation	Feeling motivated to succeed academically in school.	"Outlet was going to school and staying" (P3)
Self-Determine	Participants were determined to improve their identity.	"As I got older, I changed because religious and maturity" (P6)
Early Marriage	Some people choose to get married young when experiencing family distress.	"I got married very early and that had to do with it because I wanted to be accepted and loved" (P3)
Loss Identity	When people go through a family situation suffered loss of identity	"My whole world just came down" (P11)
Change in Peers Relationships	Peer relationships can change when dealing with difficulties.	"I didn't really fit in with anyone at that time" (P8) "I was more in a caregiver role than necessarily a daughter" (P4)
Religious Support	People practice religious to find healing or support.	"My relationship with Christ, it is important to me" (P12)
Parental Pressure	Parents expectations can add pressure and distress.	"I wouldn't want to let me parents down" (P8)
Fake	People pretended to be someone to hide pain. Feeling anxious and scared as a result of family experiences.	"I would have like deep sadness. That I would try to cover up. I would have to put a happy face" (P2)

Coping through school	School can be a a place where emotional reactions to stress might have a positive or negative impact.	"I do better, maybe then that might help changes things" (P12)
Coping through Work	Work is an outlet to forget worries or find self-worth	"I was allowed to start working part-time and that was a big change in my life because I felt self-worth" (P3)
Change in Personality	People describe how they see themselves or others when they experience difficulties	"What I had to live through, what made me hard, why I decide to be the person I was" (P3)
Marriage in Distress	Participants reported stress and conflict in their marriages	"I devaluated myself and I never self-worth. That affected my relationship with my husband" (P2)
Anger	People feel angry when dealing with difficult situations.	"As a teenager, I was very angry" (P3)
Program Support	People look for guidance and support when they go through difficult situations.	"I helped in the organization "Big brother, Big sister"" (P7)
Diagnoses	People who go through health diagnosed can altered everyday life activities	"It was hard. I missed a lot key stages and social development" (P5)
Coping through school	School is affected when dealing with situations and expectations.	"I just literally go and just focus on what I supposed to do, go to class and learn" (P11)
Counseling/ Professional Program	People look for counseling to help them when difficult situations.	"What change for me was, like they say counseling" (P10)

Table 3. Thematic Analysis

Themes	Sub-themes	Meaning Units
They describe intense changes in emotions	Fear	
	Fake	Loss Confidence
	Anger	Fear
	Self-determined	Academic Motivation
		Self-Determine
They describe their identity as changing as a result of external support	Counseling/Profession al support	Early Marriage
	Religious support	Loss Identity
	Program support	Change in Peers Relationships
		Religious Support
Coping in Context	Work as coping	Parental Pressure
	Academic motivation	Fake
	School as coping	School Difficulties
	Early Marriage	Coping through Work
		Change in Personality
Negative Consequences	Loss Confidence	Marriage in Distress
	Loss of Identity	Anger
	Parental Pressure	Program Support
	Marital Distress	Health Issues
	Health Issues	Change in Family roles

	School Difficulties	Coping through school Counseling/ Professional Program
Interpersonal Changes	Change in Peers Relationships Change in Personality Change in Family roles	

Fear

Some participants, like P1, P2, P6, P7 and P8, felt anxious and scared due to family experiences. P1 said she was afraid to fail because of what happened in her family. Her mom left her family without notice and they were a Christian family. She did not want her marriage to fail like her family.

P1 shared her traumatic event referring to his dad:

In his controlling way. What she would do, she couldn't do anything, including you know, she didn't want her even controlling any of the funds or the money or anything like that. And then, in his opinion, if she didn't work out or she didn't even deserve a hug or anything else or any attention. And and… that was a major blow. To go along with everything else that had just happened to her. And… Those kinds of things just continued until finally. It just broke her down. And… she started having panic attacks. The fear of that, a sense of failure. Cause now she thought that She had lost her self-worth. And then, that caused trouble with her at school, where she was always at the very top of her class. You know, now she can't even focus on her work. And and… that just led to, you know, depression and anxiety. She did not understand how to deal with it. The fear of being a failure. And… now she's afraid that her marriage is falling apart. And… it was it was one too many blows for her to take. You know…

When I asked about the impact of trauma, P6 stated,

Hmm… It's different now as an adult than it was as a kid. As a kid, it made me fear men. It made me really afraid of authority figures I had to be I felt like I had to be very respectful of them and not always, always… stay. Quiet and kind of out of the way so that I would not.

I asked the participants how the trauma impacted their family relationships during adolescence. P8 stated, "I was always… I think… I was always fearful of letting people down again". Participants shared how their trauma impacted their emotions, with some participants mentioning how they tried to protect themselves from the fear as a consequence of the trauma.

Fake Emotions

Some participants, like P2, P3 and P7, felt that after a trauma, they hid their emotions. When I asked about how trauma impacted their personality development,

P2 stated,

Yeah. Well, I think that… I think that just having alcoholic parents in general, you know since I was a very young child. I always… I had to put on a happy face when I went to school and you know, pretend like I wasn't.

Participant 3 shared the same emotions as others:

But I had a lot of stuff going on inside… I did not have the resources to expel it and I don't know if I did. That's why I think it is a personality trait, not a chameleon, where you can be one person and be another person.

Participant 7 shared the impact of trauma and how they acted:

He, he… did a school shooting. But nobody, nobody… passed away or anything like that. He tried to do something bad. So, it affected our whole family. My dad ended up actually seeing a psychiatrist. Me, I just kind of… Act like it did not affect me and did not tell anybody what happened.

Participants said they pretended to be someone or acted differently to hide their emotions. The three participants shared ways in which the trauma impacted their feelings and hid their emotions.

Anger

Anger was a common emotion expressed by the participants after a traumatic event. Participants shared how they felt and acted after a trauma. When I asked about how they identify themselves as a teenager, P3 stated,

Due to the to that event… Yes, as a teenager. I was very angry. I might say very. Guarded has been my feelings as a person; I withheld them from a lot of people by not showing emotion.

Participants felt angry when dealing with difficult situations. For example, P4 shared,

I love my dad, but because of his choice to have an affair and the effects that that had on our family. I was very angry with him and struggled with that relationship and trying to understand. The decisions that he made.

When I asked about how the trauma impacted who they are, P5 stated,

At first... in my younger years, my teenage and young adult life, I was very angry and sad. It took a long time to move past that. Even as a Christian, I was still very angry and sad even with God in my life and trying to ask him, you know.

Participants shared how frustrated they felt after they experienced a trauma. P8 stated,

I was put on the stand…. I was in a judge's office, I am… I should say…I was put in a judge's office and asked by the judge who I wanted to live with when I was 12 years old and each of the attorneys was on either side. We are trying to convince them that I hated the other parent and that broke me. I do not know if I have ever recovered from that.

Some participants described how trauma impacted them, with some feeling anxious and scared as a result of family experiences. Other participants pretended and hid their feelings.

Self-determined

Some participants, like P3, P6 and P11, shared what helped them to be self-determined. P3 mentioned what motivated her after the trauma:

The personality trait was motivation, you know, because I knew one thing, I did know is that I had to keep going. I could not stay behind. I know I need it because of my dad. I needed to finish school, which always motivated me to do my best in school.

Participants described who they are or who they see themselves before or after a difficult situation. For example, P6 stated,

Gosh, I do not know I just think I was…I would say average, but I do not know. I was…really into school. It was important to me that I achieved success in school. So that

I could make something of myself. So, I was really studious. Being friendly was important to me, as well as being kind to people.

Some participants mentioned who impacted their lives. P11 stated,

I will say, my son, yes. It is my son because I would not want him to see me the way I saw my mom that night. I wanted him to trust me to know that it is okay to trust his mom. And I am always going to be there no matter what. So, I'm trying to be a better person for him to show him the good and bad things about this world. Yeah, it is him. He's the reason why I want to keep my goals so that he can know that through struggles, better things are coming.

Some participants expressed having difficulty in their emotions like fear,

Fake emotions and anger after the trauma. Others mentioned how, after the trauma, someone or something encouraged them to be self-determined.

Theme 2: Participants Experienced Their Identity as Changing Due To External Support

Some participants described their identity as changing due to external support. The external support was from programs like counseling/professional support, religious support and program support.

Counseling/Professional Support

Some participants look for counseling or professional support for help after the traumatic event. Some participants shared how counseling or support programs helped them after a trauma. P4 stated,

When we were going through the divorce, my mom did have a counselor working with us - the same counselor who worked with my mom, me and my brother. My brother is five years younger than me. And so again, along with the divorce and then her health changes, we went through a lot as a family… and I think the time I most benefited from the counseling was probably in high school.

Participant 10 mentioned that counseling helped her cope with her situation. She did not want to go through life being anxious:

I think what impacted me the most to change was…I think, like…trying to control everything I like. I did not want to go through life like... Being always anxious and stuff. That is when I reached out to a counselor to help me. Manage through my anxiety.

Some participants mentioned how counseling or support groups helped them deal with difficult situations after a traumatic event. Some participants mentioned how having family support made a difference.

Religious Support

Some participants found support in religion, or they might have had high expectations in their family. Other ones were involved in their church. Some participant's religion helped them after a trauma. For instance, P5 stated,

What keeps me going now is just the fact that. I just need to keep going. I just. It is God's plan. It is me… it is God's plan for me to keep going. You know, until he says it is not for me to keep going. It is that I am here for a purpose. And I, you know. I cannot explain it. That is it. Hold on, let me find the words. I keep going because God has a plan for me to inspire others around me.

Some participants shared how religion and maturity impacted their lives after a trauma. For instance, P6 stated,

Am I different now? Yes, but not because of the trauma because… the trauma made me who I was. I think I am different now because I … met Jesus; through his grace, he showed me that I do not have to live like that. So, the trauma made me who I was, but God and then maturity and just age and kind of maybe hopefully a little wisdom in there.

Some participants mentioned what helped them to overcome a trauma. P7 stated:

I have my mom on the phone. I called her and said, I need help and we need help.

So, I got with…actually, a Christian counselor. And I was not going to church at that time at all. I got with a Christian counselor and then also a regular counselor because I wanted to get healthy. I started listening to forgiveness tapes, which friends and many friends helped me with. I moved down from my house.

Some participants mentioned how religion plays a role after the trauma. P12 stated,

Who was I without… this without this governing how, how… did I act? And then the second part of it was my relationship with Christ, which, again, because of what I went through because of that key point. Because I struggled to trust my parents because I struggled to feel emotionally safe with my parents. I struggled even after I became a Christian after I accepted Christ. I struggled with the state to put 100% trust and faith in him. Over the last couple of years, like I said, my wife and I went through a little bit of counseling last year. Through that, I am really starting to try and and… okay. This is a relationship with Christ that I say is important to me. I need to start acting like it. It really kind of helped me, too. I realize it is no longer okay to let that event dominate my life.

Some participants expressed that religion affected them when their parents divorced. Other participants found religion as a way to forgive and deal with the difficulties caused by the trauma.

Program Support

Some participants expressed how support programs impacted them positively after the trauma. Participants mentioned different programs to help them after experiencing a trauma. P5 stated,

I believe God brought a survivorship program into my life as well and it, it… brought a new light on why I was brought to this path and now it has changed.

P7 said, "I helped in the organization Big Brother, Big Sister", she said that maybe because of her pain, she felt good trying to help children. Some participants shared how family support impacted them after the trauma. For example, P11 stated,

What helped me the most was… I will say.1. Just the fact that… I had my dad with me. He was there for me through all of it. And and…he was the only person I talked to about my situation when I felt sad because he is the only one who has shown me support ever since that day.

Some participants said they chose to get help counseling because they did not want to feel anxious. Other participants felt that participating in support programs and helping others felt good. Some participants expressed that having family support was essential for them.

Theme 3: Participants Describe Their Coping In Context as They Were Going Through the Trauma

Some participants discussed how they managed to cope with their circumstances as they were going through the trauma. Participants shared how they deal with coping at work or school. Some participants expressed how academic motivation helped with the trauma and others sought relationships like early marriage to fill the hole caused by the trauma.

Work Coping

Some participants found work as a guiding force was helpful as they were trying to cope with their traumatic events; for others, it was a survival or fake emotions method to cope with trauma. Some participants described what work meant to them after a trauma. For example, P2 stated,

My work? I worked at a little Christian daycare and I actually had many different jobs. So, I would have to say that was my outlet. My jobs were really my outlet. I felt like I could go and I did not know it. It was a lot of me pretending.

Participant 3 shared that when she was at work, she felt self-worth. She stated, "I was allowed to start working part-time and that was a big change in my life because I felt self-worth". Participant 4 shared, "As a teenager. I had a lot of responsibility because my mom became a single parent working full time". As she grew up, P4 said her job helped her to help others and it was healing to help other families. She said it affected her professionally and personally. She worked in a profession that help children and families. She tried to provide a safe place. P5 said she likes to get to work and inspire others. She said, "I wanted to share my story and tell them and there is a light at the end of the tunnel".

Some participants' work was vital to dealing with their trauma. P6 stated that they needed money. At work, she did not want to make anyone mad and shared, "I just never wanted anyone to get mad or angry and I just did not know" and "I usually had male bosses and I just I… was always afraid of them, because I was afraid of the men". P7 said she worked, was overly compliant and tried to make everything perfect.

Some participants used work to cope with the trauma. P8 said she had a good job in high school and made pretty good money for a high school. P8 mentioned that as an adult, he immersed himself in work. P8 stated, "I do not like to deal with things and I will put my head in the sand or immerse myself in work if I have to". Some participants' work stayed the same; they did not have to cope and followed their parent's examples. P12 shared his trauma work impact: "I have always believed them working hard. So that really did not affect it. At least one comes to a job; I believe in working hard. I have not necessarily done that school".

Some participants found work as a place where they could help others as they were dealing with trauma experiences. Others saw an identity for their future and many other participants were immersed in a job to avoid dealing with their trauma difficulties.

Academic Motivation

Some participants, like P1, P3, P8, P9 and P10, described school as a motivation. P1 dad shared, "It had to be an A and the highest "A" that She could have," which was what she expected of herself. Some participants mentioned that the trauma impacted their school. P3 stated:

It was back in the sixties and seventies, when maybe it was a cultural thing, or you know, where you go to school, you come home, you do chores, you … know. You do your homework and go to school, which is the only kind of interaction you have. I mean, that was me. The outlet was going to school and staying there.

P6 said the school was essential to her. School was easy for her and she excelled because she liked the recognition there. P6 stated, "I was really into school. It was important to me that I achieved success in school. So that I could make something of myself, I was really studious".

Some participants shared how the school did not make any impact after the trauma. For instance, P8 stated,

The trauma did not really impact my school that much because when my parents were going through a divorce, it was in my seventh-grade year and…I maintained great, you know, as far as, throughout school, no matter the trauma. I maintained… the ability to focus on the job at hand and get things done. And… I have that.

P9 said she was an "A" student. She was involved in extracurriculars like band and theater. After the trauma, her grades went down and she quit band and theater. Some of her classmates were not nice to her. P9 stated:

And then, because I became so doubtful about myself and ever since my grades started dropping, I stuck to being an "A," just an average student. Because you know, before, I would always get A's, all A's, B's. But as I got older, I kind of just settled for the bare minimum and I feel like that stopped me from getting a lot more opportunities.

Participant 10 was affected, too; however, the support from teachers was helpful. P10 said she volunteered during high school. Volunteering helped her to keep herself active and kept her busy. She stated, "It affected my school because I felt behind on a lot of homework and stuff and sometimes in my test and final".

Some participants used academics as motivation to get positive attention. Others found school to be the place where support was received or to avoid dealing with trauma.

School as Coping

Some participants dealt with school coping positively or negatively. P7 said she went with the flow, but maybe too much. She said she was a class clown. She stated, "Yeah…you know, maybe it did affect the school as well. I have just almost the perfectionist". P10 said it affected her school because she missed a lot due to her illness. She said her teachers were very understanding. She volunteered at school for a lot of hours because she was missing school. She was nervous about not being able to graduate. P10 stated, "Most of my teachers were understanding, too".

Some participants shared how, after trauma, they were affected negatively. P11 shared,

My classmates. I have never really talked to anyone. I was very isolated. I would just literally go and focus on what I was supposed to do, go to class and learn, then move to the next class. And I, like I said, I didn't. I was not. I was really not great at socializing with others. It was just me and my own little mind.

Participants discussed the impact of grades and behavior issues at school after the trauma. P12 shared,

I would love to say it did, but my problem is all right. The problem I have with the current way we do education is that it does not; it needs to be designed to meet an individual and so on. For me, I was always and…I was struggling because I was bored, not because I did not understand the material or what the teacher was saying. I was just

bored and they reflected in my grades; you know, C's and B's were common for me. Hey, I just never put in the effort because I was bored. And so, when all this came down. There was a time when I thought, well, maybe if I do better, maybe that might help change things. And for a little bit, I did for about a year. I did better and went from B's and C's days to B's, but it did not change anything. And so, I went back to the old way since I figured I was putting in a little extra effort to get no results. Yeah. It is not the way I want it. Let me rephrase that. I decided just one more, then back to doing things I always had. Okay, so. So, I got a short improvement for about a year and then back to things.

Some participants expressed how school affected them positively through their trauma because it was a place where they had support. Others felt that because of their health issues, they found it hard to relate to others at school. Other participants found school as a place where they went in/out without being noticed.

Early Marriage

Some participants shared about the impact of trauma on relationships. P1 shared that his daughter married at a young age and she felt that he was a great man, except he was controlling toward her. Her dad mentioned how the trauma impacted her choices. P1 stated:

But back to the divorce. It happened whenever her mother decided to leave and that caused some issues for her… She was a perfectionist. She was always the best at everything she did, so failing was not an option for her. She got married to a guy who was in the Air Force.

P3, she said she married young. She wanted to be accepted and loved. P3 said, "I got married very early and that had to do with it because I wanted to be accepted and loved". Some participants cope through work, academic motivation or school as an outlet to forget worries and find themselves worthy. Other participants were impacted at school due to having missed because of health issues or other trauma-related issues.

Theme 4: Participants Experienced Negative Consequences Because of Their Traumatic Event

Participants discussed the negative consequences of their traumatic event. The final codes regrouped with the themes of loss of confidence, loss of identity, parental pressure, marital distress, health issues and school difficulties.

Loss of Confidence

Some participants mentioned how they lost confidence after the trauma. Participant 1 shared that after her mom left, she was confused about what happened in her safe home, Christian environment and she began to have self-doubt. P1 dad shared,

When her mother decided to leave, that caused questions, doubts and… worries because that was not supposed to happen. And… I am sure now that cost her a worry in her life. And then she found out that the person she married was not quite what she thought it was going to be.

Participant 4 described that she felt that she missed out. She could not do things like a teenager. P4 said, "am I good enough?" and the following:

Yeah, I think my confidence I am not very competent. And... It affected me physically, but even academically; when I was going through the surgeries, I was in a

homebound program and I struggled in school. And I think that because I had at that time, I would have been a child with disabilities.

Participants described how their emotions changed after the trauma. Participant 7 said she was a people pleaser over safety concerns. P7 said she did not realize she was smart and pretty but overly shy. P7 stated, "I would say very insecure, not realizing how smart, pretty and that I was a good person. I did not realize that at that age".

Participants lose confidence when they experience a change in their life. Some participants were affected by their parent's divorces and others because of health issues that changed their lives.

Parental Pressure

Participants felt their parents' expectations added pressure and distress. P1 did not have to work. Her parents expected her to achieve a scholarship to pay for her college. Her parents expected her to be an "A" student. P1 dad shared what was expected from her:

I told her her… job was to, you know, get the scholarships. That was her job and she earned 32 different scholarships. And… I mean, the closest one to her was at the school where we were you know, I had probably ten scholarships. So, for her to have 32 was huge. And that was her; that was her work. That is what she did. She went through trying to make sure that she had enough money for college and she did. She had a lot. And… So she did not have to work. She focused more on getting the scholarships and then on her schoolwork. And then, by the time she got into college. Any, you know, these are not acceptable. It had to be an "A" and the highest "A" she could have. And that was what she expected of herself. And she probably knew that is what I expected of her. And and… so she was always achieving at the very top. She was even the president of her little fraternity at the school. And and… there was another club that was there that was just for the people that were in the psychology department and she was the president of that. So that was, to me, that was her job. Those were the things she was doing to try to get an education. Okay. And just be the best that she could be. And and… she earned enough money with those that while she was in college, she did not have to work.

P8 said he needed to help his mother because she did not handle things well.

P8 stated,

Yeah. It makes me more of a people-pleaser and I discussed this with my wife. And and… I do not want to let anyone down, you know? And that is what I kept trying to do. As a teenager, I would not want to let my parents down. Because I felt in the back of my mind, I was thinking that had something to do with them breaking up and logically, I know that is not. That's not it. And I have had long talks with both my parents about that in the past. And they reassured me that that was not the case. But I always had this and carried this till today. I have to please whoever I am with. You know, I cannot. It is like I carry the weight of the world on my shoulders with relationships.

Some participants felt that their parent's conflicts affected them. Participant 10 said that it affected her when her parents were fighting. They were a supportive family and they sought counseling to help them. P10 stated:

When my parents were fighting. It affected me because I heard them fighting them. It got to me like I was like… I hope they don't get divorced and move out. And I would have to be going back and forth like and… I cried a lot when they were fighting.

Some participants mentioned were impacted by difficulties caused by parent's pressure after the trauma. A loss of confidence impacted other participants. When dealing with trauma.

Marital Distress

Some participants had conflicts in relationships that affected their marriages when they got married years later after the trauma. Participant 2 shared that she realized it affected her first marriage. She devalued herself and affected her relationships. She felt not authentic, not happy and sad. She said she could not deal with a relationship. It affected how she handled conflict. Her second marriage was the same; she said she was very susceptible. P2 said, "I devaluated myself and I never self-worth. That affected my relationship with my husband". P2 also stated:

But, I was not able to deal with relationships. Very well. It, it… affected. It affected the way I handled conflict. I would…You know, I would bottle it. And just. I would end up just exploding. Probably every three months because I would put on a happy face and… instead of expressing my emotions daily and saying, you know. You know, when you do… when you… when you do this, it hurts my feelings. I, I…would bottle it and just go, oh, you know, I am like Teflon. Nothing and that's just not. That's not true for anybody. And… I would say that with my second marriage. It was… it was the same and I would have to say that I am very susceptible to just jumping into someone else's life because I could not handle my own. And… I am like, oh, you know, I'm going to subscribe to what you do. You go to casinos; you drink alcohol and that sounds like fun to me. Let's and instead of me really focusing on. Who I am what I like - my passions. I would… I would just subscribe to whoever I was with.

Some participants shared how trauma caused marital distress and not being able to feel valued. Other participants seek relationships to deal with their pain through the trauma.

Health Issues

Two participants, P5 and P10, have these health issues that caused them to miss a lot of school. P5 said that was hard and she missed a lot. She said that after the leukemia diagnosis, she felt that her life was spinning. P5 said her interaction with children in childhood was good; the children got along and they were children with health issues like her. P5 said, "It was hard. I missed a lot of key stages and social development". P5 also stated:

Yes, at the age of six, I was diagnosed with childhood leukemia. Well, I was always a little bit different from everyone else. I had a different view on life compared to my peers. I was always treated like a little more precious than they did. And for this, I was kind of persecuting it for this, I guess, if you want to see it, I was even, even… going back younger. I was kind of just cheated differently. For that reason, I saw so much when I was a child. You know, so much. Sickness and and… death that, that…my life was different compared to other children.

Participant 10 shared about how she described herself as a teenager:

Yeah, I, like, I suffer from a condition called CVS; every time that kicked in, I was hospitalized and I missed a lot of schools, like elementary school and throughout middle school and high school. It went on…as a teenager. I think that was more playback,

quiet and antisocial like antisocial because I think my condition like affected me with anxiety, too.

Both participants expressed how certain conditions, like a leukemia diagnosis, changed their lives. Both participants felt that missing school created setbacks in social interactions with their peers and family and they felt that it was hard to miss special events that were important in their development and school.

School Difficulties

Four participants discuss how the school can be a place where emotional reactions to stress might have a positive or negative impact. P2, her schoolwork was more difficult. She said that she could not focus. She said that she pretended like she was not at school. P2 shared, "Yeah…Yeah, yes… schoolwork was much, much more difficult. I could not focus on it". Participants shared how the trauma affected them academically. P4 shared that she could achieve more because people felt bad for her. She was failing her grades because of her time out for surgeries. She felt that she missed social interactions in relationships. She did not have any family support. P4 stated:

Honestly, I almost failed high school. I just was not strong academically and I did not have as much support at home because my mom was working full time and my parents were separated. So, it was really kind of like I felt like I was on my own. And I do not feel like I ever had the support to help me be a stronger student. I think my grades were just kind of accepted, so I did not do very well academically.

Some participants were impacted at school and they shared their difficulties. P5 said that she missed a lot of school. It was hard. She was a home school student. P5 said that she missed a lot of socialization. P5 said her grades need to improve. She said she was disappointed because she could have done well in math or science.

When I was first diagnosed, I missed a lot of key stages. I missed kindergarten through, basically. Second grade and so I missed a lot of social development. And so, when I went back to school in fourth grade, like when I went to home school, I missed childhood interactions. So, it was only when I was in fifth grade that I started interacting with children again other than children in the hospital but would not be in the hospital. We just got along. We were all the same children. We just got along, we, we… liked each other, you know. But when you're in the real world, you know, so and so does not like you because the day so and so does not like you because of this, so I had to learn really quick what it was like to be part of, you know, whether you are cool or you are not cool.

P5 shared changes in high school by saying, "By my teenage years, I started to have signs of depression. I started to have depression. So, my grades started to slip. And so. So yeah… I started to have a lot of depression".

Participants expressed the impact of health issues and marital distress and how it affected them negatively at school or caused them to experience early marriage or school difficulties. Participants shared how the trauma affected their social development and in some cases, emotional development.

Theme 5: Participants Experienced Interpersonal Changes as They Were Dealing with the Trauma

All 12 participants described one, two or three interpersonal changes as they were dealing with the trauma. The three final codes were changes in peer relationships, personality and family roles.

Change in Peer Relationships

Some participants shared how peer relationships can change when dealing with trauma. Participant 1 shared how she was before the trauma; her friends protected her, she cared for others and she used her knowledge to help others. P1 stated how she was dealing with relationships after the trauma:

She tried to hide much of that because she did not want other people to know. When her mother decided to leave, then those caused questions, doubts and … worries because that was not supposed to happen. And and… I am sure now that cost. That worry in her life and when she found out that the person she married was not quite what she thought it would be. Because of problems on her end, she kept trying to do everything she thought she should do. And and… she kept getting hit by other issues. You know, from him. Towards her, that made things very, very… difficult. For her.

Participant 2 shared how her relationship with her sister became close. They were co-dependent, which caused problems and was unhealthy. After some years, they had to break away. P2 said it changed her confidence and ability to follow through. She focused on one relationship. She had low self-esteem.

P2 stated,

My … two sisters and I became very close. Probably in an unhealthy, you know, unhealthy way. What is it called? What is that called when you attach yourself to someone? Co-dependent. We had unhealthy co-dependency going on after my parent's car wreck. And we would rely on each other, you know, for things you would rely on, maybe your parent or a grandparent. And it is it… Well, it… That is all, I guess. I guess it was all we knew to do. But over the years, it caused problems in our relationships. And we… had to break away from each other and then come back at a different level, if that makes sense. Of … and create.

P2 said she had a boyfriend and would break up before the accident. After the accident, she chooses not to break up. She said her boyfriend was her secure blanket. P2 said she began to focus on her boyfriend and not friends. P2 said she had to move because of the trauma; she lost friendships.

P2 stated,

Yes, instead of feeling safe and secure, I always felt unsafe and insecure. And and… honestly, I still do not feel safe and secure. I still do little with that, but through my relationship with Jesus Christ, He is the one. He is the one that. That fills that hole.

P3 said her friends were only at school during recess. P3 said she was angry because she was raised with non-family. Her dad told her brother that no matter what, they stayed together and finished school. P3 said she wanted to give her family what she did not have.

P3 stated:

I was okay. We talked and asked if I had friends, but it was just during class during recess or in elementary school recess. Walking home, yeah, it was just. I would like to think that it was that I was normal in the sense where…We could talk and you know, say, what are you going to do tonight? Blah, blah, I think I carried myself pretty well. Limited, but at the same time, it was okay. I would. I… just did the best I could with what I had. And and… excuse me, I just kept a lot of stuff, but it was not to the extent. I did, I did…feel sorry for myself a lot.

Some participants felt that it was not many changes in relationships after the trauma.

P4 shared:

So, when I was a teenager and as far as the divorce goes, I am not sure that that had as much of an impact other than I was having to be really responsible at home and taking care of my brother and helping my mom. So, as a single-parent household, we probably had fewer than many people attending my school. But if I said what had the most impact, I would say having gone through these surgeries because I had scars on my legs on both knees and both ankles. It really affected my self-image as a teenage girl and being able to feel good about myself and feel confident because I was excluded from activities. I was lucky to have a high school boyfriend from my sophomore in my senior year. But I bring that up because he liked me and despised the scars and the scars were long and very fresh. So, they were very visible then and had somebody who could. You could say love me unconditionally despite, you know, what my insecurities were, helped me to get through my teenager. Mm…So, I think having a positive support system. And and… the teenager was very helpful.

P4 said her mom's relationship was changing and she became significant support and took care of helping her. She said she was angry with her dad and could not understand why he left his mom. P4 said that her stepfather became a role model. She said he was a great support. P4 said", I was more in a caregiver role than necessarily a daughter".

Participant 5 said she was different than her peers. She said she had a different view of life.

P5 stated,

I just had a very different view of life and they did not. I just, I, I… got bullied a lot for, for... my beliefs. And and… it really just, It really just… changed me. They do not like you because of this, so I had to learn quickly what it was like to be part of, you know, whether you are cool or not. So. I still like behind. By the time I got to this part of the social scene. If that makes any kind of sense. So, it was very hard. I still do not stand how people would act the way they would act. Socially. Why would they treat people like they would for no reason? And it would hurt my feelings to see other people's feelings get hurt. I was very empathetic to other people. And other people would get mad at me for being empathetic to other people. And. I would lose friends over that and friends would stop talking to me because of that. And it would just be a big mess, but. All right, it was just. And then I would get mad. I would have. I would be angry at God for giving me this heart that cares so much. And it would cause me to get into a deeper depression.

Participant 6 said she stayed away from her friend's fathers. She was afraid of them. She had a large group of friends. She only had a few close friends and was cautious about friendships. P6 said that she and her sister were very close. Mom was strict. She said they followed Mom through her different relationships. Mom did not know how to be parenting. Mom's goal was to have a man in her life. She said she was a little baggage she brought alone in her relationships. They were supposed to be quiet and stay out of her way through her relationships. P6 said the last man adopted her and she had a good relationship with him. She said it took a long time to trust him. P6 cautions with relationships. Later, as a teenager, she began to like attention through relationships. She still did not like the older man. She did not know how to handle relationships.

P6 shared,

I was nervous when I would go home with friends. I did not want to be around their dads. I was always afraid of them. And and… You know, at my house, we learned to be very quiet and stay out of the way. Because you do not want to anger anybody, I think I was that way everywhere. I, I... had a big group of casual friends. You know, there

I was…I always did stuff with large groups, but like close friends, there were always just a couple. You know, the couple that you would trust. To really tell who you are, too. You know.

Participants shared how they were affected by relationships. P7 stated,

I was overly shy. People had to come to me to be friends. Versus me, joining in. I had to be and it is still like that to this day. Unless I know you, it is easier. To I freeze, I freeze. I did as a child as well. Okay. And less I knew than the other children.

Participant 8 shared the impact on her relationships and feelings:

I did not go to prom. I did not go to homecomings. You know, I felt a social disconnect. Because I felt that, at times, I needed to take care of my mom and sister, whom I had at the time. I had three siblings: an older… sister, a younger and an older brother. So, my two older siblings went and lived with my dad. And and…myself, twelve years old and my sister, who was seven years old at the time, went and lived with my mom. And my mom did not have a very good handle on things and she, she… always worked and she never… missed a day of work, but she had a drinking problem and… she had a man problem. Yeah, not a lot of close friends. No, everyone liked me. I think I mean I was the class clown, trying to make everyone happy and … do everything that everyone wanted me to do. I was hard at work and you know, so it was not like people sent me; there were clicks, of course, like in any normal high school. I was not a jock. I was not an athlete. I was not really a super brainy guy, so I was not part of that, you know, the real, smart people. And you know, I would not want to be a stoner either. I did not like to do any of that. So … I did not fit in with anyone at that time as a teenager.

Participant 9 shared the impact on her peer's relationships:

So. Unfortunately. My situation was very publicized. The way it was handled made it so that a lot of people at my middle school knew what happened. So, I was. It wasn't me thinking that people were judging me; there were people judging me. Because you know we were so young, you know that. People she was raped. Kids do not grasp that idea. They do not really understand what that means and you know. I was a kid and I had a boyfriend at the time. So. You know, it was, oh, she cheated on him. And you know, at such a young age, the idea of sex is so, you know, that is something that some people would not even think about. So, it did make people view me. Very differently, they saw me as promiscuous and you know. And some of my friends, you know. It was hard for me to deal with the fact that some of my friends were friends with the person who did that to me. So, because I was so young, I did not really know how to. Dealing with that was kind of like. I attempted to give people an ultimatum, but. Like I said, we are so young. They can only agree to do that like, oh, I will stop talking to him, but I will keep talking to you. You know, I cannot stop people from being someone's friend, so. That made me very angry and so I did lose a lot of friends.

Participant 10 shared the impact of health issues on her relationships:

I missed, I know, many birthday parties when I was young and when, like, I had to tell them, oh, because I was in the hospital. Some did not like that they did not get it and were disappointed. So, I did not have like… a lot of friends.

Participant 11 shared about the relationships at school:

My classmates. I have always been, but I have yet to talk to anyone. I was very isolated. I would literally go and focus on what I was supposed to do, go to class and learn. Move to the next class. And I, like I said, I didn't. I was not. I could have improved at socializing with others.

Participant 12 described how his trust in relationships was after the trauma:

It may be a wonder when they are going to end. Watching my parents, you know. You are growing up, your parents are married, you assume that they are going to stay together forever and then watch that get torn apart. At least for me, it made me wonder what other relationships in my life would end and when they would win. And So… I was always in the back of my mind. I had, yeah, a group of friends both at school and in the local neighborhoods that I grew up in. You know and we, you know, my friends in the neighborhood, we would run around together in the evenings on weekends and friends I had at school. We did school events together and we had a good time. Do not get me wrong, but…It probably drove some of my personality at that point, but I… caused it. Well, I necessarily feel like I kept people at arm's length, but I was probably. When I would make jokes, they were probably more mean-spirited than they needed to be or should have been, which came from that. Place of wondering how long that relationship was going to last. So, I guess, in a sense, one of the things that caused me to start self-sabotaging some of my friendships and relationships.

Participants described the impact of their interpersonal changes as they were dealing with the trauma. The participants shared some of the changes they made when dealing with difficulties.

Change in Personality

Four participants discussed how their personalities changed after the trauma.

Participant 2 shared how they see themselves:

You know, because I was 15 and I always, I always worked hard. I always had a job or a babysitter. But I need help to answer that question. Because it is age 15 is before you start having those dreams about who you want to be. So…I mean, I believe in my heart. I have loved children since I was little. So, I believe my destiny has always been to work with children. But I have to wonder what I would have done if I had been able to have parents who would have been able to pour into my life and also helped raise me throughout my high school years. With that, that is just that security and that safety that you get from even alcoholics. You so, I wonder what I would have ended up doing, but I love my job. I love what I do with children. I do not know. I don't know if that would have changed.

Some participants shared the positive changes in their personalities. P3 stated:

I am a happy person now. As you grow through your childhood, you know, you learn. How do you not know what you are doing as a child? You go through life. You need to realize how you are getting through it or why. You struggle if you do not have anyone to talk to and then as you grow. My personality, my personality. I was very quite withdrawn but very quiet as I grew. I just I… do not know how to answer that. My personality now. I like myself now before. I really did not like myself, but…I got along, so I do not know how to answer that. For myself, you know, but personality. I like the way I am now. I did not like the way I was then. Yeah, I was very mouthy. Let me put it that way. I was not a pleasant person. I was always in a bad mood. I guess that that is… what what… is. I do not know how we would If I had to see a person the way I was. You know, you try, you say, oh, everything is okay. Everything's okay. But it is not. It is not okay. And now I can, I can say as a personality, I say, hey, I am not having a good day, you know, I can remember. When I was like that, now I am this way and I am a happy person now. I am joyful. I feel full of life. So, I do not know how that came about, but I do not want to be the person I was before.

Some participants describe how their personalities change as a consequence of the trauma. P6 stated:

Yeah, that is a hard, tricky one for me. I am not sure how to answer that because. It is like there was no me before the trauma. And then the trauma, and then me after, because I was so young. Yes. There was not one of me before, so I cannot answer that. The trauma shaped me. You know. Yes. Yeah.... through the years now as an adult. The drama streams, too. However, we change you differently; like you say, you find God, and that helps you. Right, so the trauma made me who I was, but God and then maturity and just age and kind of maybe hopefully a little wisdom in there. Has shown me that. There, I do not have to live like that. I do not have to be that person. I can be a better, you know, that like. Like a lot of that, you know, it. It was not my fault, so that is not who I must be. I can be a better version of myself. But that was. The trauma. Hmm…I think it was me overcoming. The trauma through religion through maturity. Through just kind of life and age.

Participant 9 said her new friends supported her. She can be honest with them and let them know how she feels. Her boyfriend's support and motivation. Her boyfriend encouraged her and helped her follow through on her life goals. P9 stated:

I… in high school I, I am… got a boyfriend and you know, I did not take it very seriously at first because I did not think you know it is a high school relationship. They can only last so long, but. I've actually been with him for the past six years. Moreover, he motivated me to keep going and follow through, like being more confident. He was always that little push. That, that I needed, you know. I did and I think that was something I needed after having something. So horrible happens because something like that happening, you know, you know, it strips away every sense of yourself that you knew. Many people thought it was not a good idea for me to jump into a relationship after something like that happened so soon after. But I really do feel like it. I needed that. Constant support and you know. Even if, at some point, it was a little co-dependent. He was understanding completely, and He was willing to like. Deal with whatever happened along the way because of, you know, all the stuff I had to deal with. He was just very understanding, and he is always, you know, motivated me to be my best self. So, I think that is definitely something that has made me. I am willing to, you know, keep pushing through and following through with my goals in life.

Some participants mentioned their experiences with interpersonal changes in their relationships. Other participants described how they felt about their experience with the personality change.

5. Discussion

The goal of the study was to understand the lived experiences of individuals who experienced a traumatic event in childhood or adolescence and how it impacted their identity formation positively or negatively. There is a gap in how identity may explain the relationship between adolescent trauma and these negative consequences. However, few researchers have examined adolescent experiences of trauma and identity to address the social problem of teenage trauma. The findings of this study will build on current literature by providing a better understanding of how trauma might have affected adult identity development. These findings are consistent with Ranieri (2021), Erikson (1985), and Shalka (2020) regarding how trauma can lead to problems that permanently affect identity formation. These findings are similar to Erikson's (1985) theory that if trauma is

not dealt with during adolescence, it can have negative consequences later in life, making it more difficult to resolve future psychosocial conflicts.

Theme 1: Participants experience intense changes in emotions

Many participants experienced intense changes in emotions, which can be best explained as fear, fake anger, or self-determination. These findings are consistent with what was found in research on trauma (Blaauwendraat *et al*., 2017; Mętel *et al*., 2019; Yazdani *et al*., 2016). Some participants grew up with a fear of relationships as a consequence of divorce, health issues, and other trauma. Additionally, participants expressed how minor trauma caused a lack of trust and low self-esteem, and found themselves with anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. These findings are consistent with Doba et al. (2022), who explained that children who experience trauma likely feel strong emotions. It seems that the influence of minor trauma is relatively similar to the consequences of trauma in general. I found that emotions can change and confuse individuals' identity formation.

Changes in emotions can cause individuals to doubt who they are, and this occurred frequently before the minor trauma, as reported by participants. Depending on individuals' experiences of trauma, not displaying emotions can disrupt identity development, preventing teenagers from adding the identity versus identity dissolution psychosocial conflict (Erikson, 1963). Some participants experienced a period of identity loss. The key to promoting identity formation in individuals after experiencing the negative emotions of trauma lies in how the trauma is resolved and the level of support they receive during this process (Berman *et al*., 2004; Erikson, 1985). Erikson (1985) explained how emotion regulation can assist teenagers with identity development, which is reflected in the experiences of participants in this study.

Some participants experienced anger as a side effect of their trauma, which changed many areas of their lives and who they wanted to be when they grew up. For example, for many participants, missing school made it hard for them to continue with what they wanted to be in the future. It has been found that a lack of interactions with others from childhood to adulthood can negatively impact relationships. In this study, I found that people who experienced health issues could overcome their fears if they had family support. For others, I discovered that due to a lack of self-esteem, the search for relationships, in some cases, caused more pain or led to becoming codependent and clinging to others, which had implications for their identity development. This finding is consistent with Yazdani et al. (2016), who found that people who experience trauma report emotional or behavioral changes that have implications for identity development. I found that many people often felt that withholding their emotions could be safer for them. In this study, I found that some people pretend not to be hurt, and they get involved in relationships to avoid their childhood trauma. I found that other people fake their feelings in new relationships to avoid anyone seeing their distress and lack of confidence. This fluctuation in emotions is consistent with Raemen et al. (2021), who explained that trauma can target risk factors to their identity as a consequence of traumatic events. This study found that keeping emotions guarded from anyone helps them deal with the trauma, which is also similar to Raemen et al. (2021). These findings show that people who experience childhood trauma can affect their identity development.

Theme 2: Participants describe their identity as changing due to external support.

Many participants reported experiencing identity changes due to external support, such as religious, counseling, and support programs. I found that for participants who experienced trauma as a child, religion was crucial for changing their emotions into a positive emotional outcome. Some people found religion to be a motivation for healing and forgiveness. This finding is inconsistent with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. However, there is consistency with Branje (2022), as religion is connected to how identity changes through real-time interaction with others, particularly in a religious context. Some appropriate religious counseling made it easier to navigate the situation. This would mean that if trauma were to occur during identity development, finding support and religiosity could help teenagers address the identity versus identity dissolution conflict.

Most people in this study found healing when they decided to get help through support groups, family support, peer relationships, or counseling. This study finds that people with family or peer relationship support experience fewer changes in their identity formation. I found in this study that support groups, counseling, or family or peer relationships are the key to a positive outcome or fewer changes in identity development. This result is consistent with Branje (2022), as life transitions or life events can contribute to identity changes. However, I found inconsistency in some people who expressed that having family support did not alter their identity development. Individuals felt that this caused some immediate effects on their identity development; however, through the years, their identity formation recovered and was not altered after going through life stages. I found that some individuals, as they were getting older and family was there through the hurting process, were able to overcome their pain and find or recover who they wanted to be. This result is inconsistent with Branje (2022), as life events can contribute to changes; some individuals explained that having family support and aging did not influence their identity formation.

Other individuals reported that helping others gave them a new sense of identity. These findings are consistent with Perry et al. (2021), who found that coping mechanisms, including therapy, support, or family, can reduce distress as a consequence of trauma. As participants experience more life events as consequences of their trauma and their identity, like divorces, loss of jobs, and loss of relationships, they find themselves wondering what is wrong and seeking religious counseling. The participants experienced extensive changes during times when participants sought religious counseling. This finding relates to Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory of development. Erikson (1968) defined *identity* as a "fundamental organizing principle which develops constantly throughout the lifespan" (p. 98). As a result of minor trauma and other environmental variables, such as religious support, individuals' identities continued to change throughout development.

Theme 3: Participants describe their coping in context as they went through the trauma.

Work, academic motivation, school, or early marriage can be essential for coping after a traumatic event. This finding is consistent with Perry et al. (2021) because having a way to reduce stress can provide some psychological effects. This study found that most people's work is critical to finding healing, and for others, it can be a place to feel valued and develop self-esteem. Some participants found work as an outlet for them to avoid worries or to avoid dealing with their trauma and distress. This finding is consistent with

Shaw et al. (2022) because seeking support can provide some recovery and can support identity development.

Additionally, some participants' schools and plans for their future changed after the minor trauma; people developed a lack of interest in focusing on school. This finding is consistent with Doba et al. (2022), who explained that people who experienced trauma may lack concentration as a consequence of their distress. Some individual's identity was affected at school because of the lack of interest due to the trauma. Other people found school to be a place where they could pretend or avoid dealing with trauma or distress. This study found that some people's coping method with school was to act silly or be a class clown. However, for other individuals, school was the place to feel recognized by different people and people developed goals to finish school to assist with coping. This finding is consistent with Albarello et al. (2021), who explained that trauma can create social factors that interact to help with coping. This study finds that identity development at school was affected in various ways, including distress or pretending to be someone else at school, as well as the use of school as a social support mechanism for coping. However, participants' experiences were inconsistent with Yazdani et al. (2106) because some individuals exposed to trauma were at high risk, prompting low academic performance. Additionally, as participants grew older, others found their identity at work. This finding connects with Erikson (1968), who stated that unresolved trauma can impede identity formation; however, through an identity crisis, exploration and questioning can help promote healthy identity formation, as described by participants in this study.

Theme 4: Participants describe the negative consequences due to their traumatic event.

This study revealed how traumatic events have negative consequences for identity development. Some negative consequences include lost confidence, self-doubt, and instability. Some mentioned increases in depression and panic attacks. Participants who experienced a parent's divorce or the death of their parents during their childhood could result in insecurity, reflected in experiences of losing their safety, feelings of loneliness, withdrawal from peers, anger, and lack of interest in school. Participants losing a lack of support from parents caused them to blame themselves or one of their parents, causing people to feel that they need to be in charge because their parents are not there. People experienced barriers of insecurity and character flaws. This result is consistent with Kearns et al. (2021), Yazdani et al. (2016), and Planellas et al. (2020), who found that many people exposed to traumatic events can be at high risk of negative consequences due to trauma.

Some people avoid dealing with any trauma, and other people move through life pretending not to have pain, do not cope in any form, do not seek help, and end up struggling with identity formation. Others go through adulthood struggling with relationships, numbing themselves, and avoiding conflicts, which can cause many broken relationships throughout their lives. This finding is consistent with Raemen et al. (2021) because it explains how a traumatic event can increase individual risk factors. These changes in individuals created a change in identity formation. When a participant has been sexually abused, it can cause a significant break in their character, emotional distress, identity confusion, and a lack of trust in peer relationships. This finding is consistent with Doba et al. (2022), who explained how trauma can hinder and alter individuals' development of their self-concepts.

In contrast, some participants disguised their identity or did other behaviors that did not allow them to determine who they were. In this way, participants were restricted in their identity development. Some participants found that they could see later, as adults, how their identity changed after the trauma. Some people change from introvert to extrovert, outgoing to highly withdrawn, and joyful to angry. Some participants' reactions were to be overly protective. These findings are consistent with Perry et al. (2021), that if people do not seek help, it can lead to maladaptive coping methods. People who do not deal with a trauma or deny having a trauma struggle emotionally. These findings are similar to Erikson's (1985) theory that if trauma is not dealt with during adolescence, it can have negative consequences later in life, making it more difficult to resolve future psychosocial conflicts.

Theme 5: Participants describe their interpersonal changes while dealing with the trauma

This study found that most people who had a traumatic event in childhood experienced changes when dealing with peer relationships**,** personality changes, and family roles. These findings are some barriers that can affected during the developmental stages of identity and it can be the potential for failure (Erikson, 1985). Some examples of how personality changed, as described by participants when dealing with trauma, were being a hard worker, joyful, "A" student, defensive with others, angry with people, and religious, having low academic grades, and having higher expectations of themselves than before the trauma occurred. Additionally, other individuals' personalities increased, becoming more perfectionist and hard on themselves, creating a no-failure policy. Other individuals felt disappointed in religion, were rebellious with parents or authorities, ended relationships, and reported anxiety, panic attacks, and depression. Some participants end up in an abusive relationship and/or severe depression. These findings are consistent with Weiss et al. (2019) and Maroney (2020), who found that adding trauma can cause increased stressors and impact negatively on adolescent emotional or physical development.

Another finding regarding interpersonal relationships is that people change after a trauma. Some examples are co-dependency with siblings and seeking love relationships, which were consequences of minor trauma in this study. I found that some people changed their ability to follow through and focus on loving relationships, lost confidence, and most people lost friendships. Other findings included anger, struggles with relationships, trust in others, fear of failure, and insecurities. This finding is consistent with Mętel et al. (2019) about how early trauma can affect behavior. For some participants, their role in their family changed after a trauma. Individuals had to be caretakers for their parents in some traumatic events. For people who suffered trauma in this study, I found that having positive peer relationship support can be helpful for their healing from the trauma. However, I found that with other individuals who had peer relationships who were abusive and experienced being bullied, it was hard to build trust in relationships. These findings were consistent with Doba et al. (2022), who explained the effects of early childhood trauma can cause issues with peer relationships and lower eth trust in others. This finding is also consistent with Raemen et al. (2020), who explained how individuals can experience different consequences for identity development.

Theoretical Implications

Erikson (1985) said development occurs by addressing eight different psychosocial conflicts, with the fifth conflict being identity versus role confusion. For the current study, it is clear that trauma likely hinders individuals' ability to figure out who they are. Trauma may make it harder for individuals to address the identity versus identity confusion psychosocial conflict. Trauma impedes identity development; however, individuals who address the minor trauma were able to find their identity; in this study, individuals who experienced external support like family support, religious support, school support, peer relationships or joined religion their identity were positively impacted.

Trauma can impact an individual in many ways; it may not impact their identity if the trauma impacts a previous stage of psychosocial development. However, if it did, according to Erikson (1985), not resolving conflict in earlier stages can hinder identity development. I found that age can be a factor because if a trauma occurred before their identity developed, according to Erikson (1985), identity development occurred between the ages of 12 and 18. Some of the individuals needed clarification about who they were throughout their teenage years. However, I found some participants whose identity development had changed. Then, they returned to who they wanted to be as they got older; others received some support and experienced healing.

Some participants expressed that their identity did not change. However, in one particular case, the trauma caused their identity to develop a barrier of high expectations on others and themselves, and this individual did not know how to adjust or balance their identity and took their life. This finding is related to Erikson's theory that if an individual does not develop the essential skills needed for a strong sense of self, it can cause adverse effects (Erikson, 1985). However, there is an inconsistency in this literature. If the individual did seek help to deal with conflict, there is an unknown area as to why the individual's identity formation could not adjust even with help. It was more like the identity of a teenager grew to higher expectations, and trauma caused a solid identity to grow even more perfectionist. There were no programs to reach out to the individual to help, or it could have caused the individual too much damage to develop a mental health block, and there were no support programs, including treatment, to help with the individual's identity formation.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

Although this study provided insight into the experiences of traumatic experiences and identity formation, it has its limitations. One of the limitations was conducting interviews through Zoom; it was challenging to read body language and emotions. There were also some recruitment issues, as some individuals initially contacted the first author but did not attend the Zoom interview. After the initial communication, they stopped responding. Another limitation was that they were more mature adults who volunteered to participate. When asked about the past, some participants may have altered their experiences due to retrospective or social desirability biases. Additionally, the relatively small sample may limit the transferability of these findings. Future studies are encouraged to examine a larger, more diverse sample to help improve transferability.

This research sought to understand the lived experiences of traumatic events in childhood or adolescence and how they impacted young adults' identity formation. Multiple studies have shown that traumatic events are highly stressful situations in individuals' lives (Blaauwendraat *et al*., 2017). Each participant expressed distress

differently depending on their trauma, age, coping, support, and identity, which was affected by the barriers of the trauma. Most of the individuals interviewed were affected by their shared emotional experiences; however, how their identity was changed or rediscovered was a consequence of support and age. Some individuals took a long period of their lives struggling with who they are or who they became because of the trauma. These studies can be used to inform Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development, as well as provide support for children and adolescents who are dealing with short- and long-term trauma.

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Appendix A: Research Announcement in Social Media

Doctoral Research Study

Topic: An Examination of the Experiences of Traumatic Events and the Consequences of Identity Formation

Purpose of the study: To understand the lived experiences of individuals who experienced a traumatic event in childhood or adolescence and impacted positively or negatively their identity formation.

Participants will be interviewed via Zoom. Interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

Information about free or low-cost mental health resources will be offered to participants.

You are eligible to participate if you lived experiences with a minor traumatic event during childhood or adolescence and a traumatic event played a role in your identity formation.

If you are interested in taking part in this research study, please get in touch with XXXXX at XXXXX

Walden University

Appendix

Screening Questionnaire

You have indicated that you are interested in participating in a research study examining the lived experiences of an individual who had a minor traumatic event, how an adolescent's identity initially develops, and how traumatic events play a role in this individual's identity formation. To ensure that you meet the criteria for this research study, please ensure that the following information is accurate for you.

1. Did you experience a minor traumatic event during your childhood or adolescence between the ages of 8-17?

2. If yes, please provide your email and phone number so the principal investigator can contact you and schedule an interview.

Interview Protocol and Questions

Interviewer: Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research study. Do you have any questions regarding the consent form? As a reminder, it is okay if you need to pause or stop during the interview and I will not use your name in order to protect your privacy. Let's begin. Describe a traumatic event or events you experienced during childhood and/or adolescence.

1. Describe how your identity yourself as a teenager.

2. How did the trauma impact who you are?

3. How did the trauma impact your peer relationships during your adolescence?

4. How did the trauma impact your school and/or job during adolescence?

5. How did the trauma impact your family relationships during adolescence?

6. How did the trauma impact your personality development?

7. How much did you change because of the trauma?

8. Describe what helped you with coping with the changes as consequences of the trauma experiences.

9. How did the trauma change who you were planning to be?

10. Describe what impacted you the most to change or keep your goals in life.