AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF


Title: “We’ll Be That Kid That You Think We Are”: The Influences of Stigma and Interactions with Important Adults on Youth Identity Development in a Rural Context

Abstract approved: ______________________________________________________

Dr. Leslie N. Richards

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by crystallization in individuals’ sense of identity (Erikson, 1994; Harter, 1999). Research on positive youth development stresses the ways in which thriving trajectories during adolescence contribute to positive lifelong outcomes (Lerner & Overton, 2008; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). A symbolic interactionism perspective (Mead, 1934) describes how individuals interact with their social contexts to create meaning, which is then incorporated into their personal identities. Rural contexts can present risks and positive assets for youth during this stage. Rural areas are often marked by close-knit social networks (Elder & Conger, 2000), but can suffer from limited access to and unequal distribution of financial and social resources (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Duncan & Coles, 1999). Poverty and income inequality in rural communities can create stigma (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) which shapes how resources are distributed across social networks (Sherman, 2009). If rural, low-income youth experience marginalization and stigma due to their low-income status, these experiences may shape their identity development processes.

Adult relationships increase in number and significance during middle and late adolescence (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001) and positive relationships with adults are a developmental asset for youth (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011). Sustained positive relationships with important adults can produce positive outcomes for adolescents, including improved emotional, social, and cognitive skills, as well as positive behavioral outcomes (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam,
However, low-income youth, especially those in rural settings, may be more isolated from interactions with adults in communities and institutions (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Lareau, 2003). More research is needed to understand the role that important adults play in adolescent identity development in rural contexts, including the experiences of stigma and positive youth development outcomes. This study explored the effects of stigma and important adults on identity development of low-income adolescents living in a small rural community in Oregon.

Data were collected in the rural community of Mountainside, Oregon. The sample includes semi-structured interviews with 16 low-income youth aged 16-18, eight mentors and important non-familial adults identified by youth, and 14 key informants who work in community-oriented professions. Two qualitative interviews were conducted with youth participants, and one interview was conducted with each mentor and key informant. Interviews were analyzed using open and focused coding, in order to address the research questions as well as explore emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results focused on the construction of meaning around “low-income youth”, and subsequent influences on youth identity development and behaviors. Low-income youth respondents reported many positive strengths and capacities in their own lives, and seemed to hold largely positive self-concepts. Positive identities were supported by relationships with important adults within and outside of youths’ families. Adults in the sample held more pessimistic views of “low-income youth”, seeing them as a problem in the community, and describing their stigmatized status. Youth in the sample experienced constraints due to their low-income and stigmatized statuses which limited their identity development and future outlooks. The findings of this research both support and expand theoretical understandings of stigma, rurality, influences of important adults, and adolescent identity development in context. Implications for research and programming that encourage positive youth development in the contexts of education, family, and community are discussed.
“We’ll Be That Kid That You Think We Are”: The Influences of Stigma and Interactions with Important Adults on Youth Identity Development in a Rural Context

by
Joy R. Lile

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Dean of the Graduate School

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Joy R. Lile, Author
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CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Dr. Leslie Richards assisted with all portions of this project, including providing advice and feedback, editing, and serving as the principal investigator. Dr. Kate MacTavish advised on the introduction, literature review and methods sections, and provided a guiding framework for the results section. Dr. MacTavish was the principal investigator of Growing Up Mobile in a Rural Trailer Park, and guided me along with student researchers Brenda Barrett-Rivera and Lauren Maulden in the collection and initial analysis of key informant interview data. Drs. Mary Arnold and Sarah Cunningham provided feedback on the literature review and methods sections. Drs. Barbara Lachenbruch and Vicki Tolar Burton served as my graduate committee representatives.
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Introduction

Research on identity formation across life span development has framed adolescence as a crucial time for the emergence of conscious and active construction of the self-concept (Erikson, 1980). During adolescence, individuals can experience major shifts in self-concept, as well as solidifying identities (Harter, 1999). Research into the development of the prefrontal cortex during the teens and twenties (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006) supports older understandings of adolescence as a crucial phase in the “crystallization” of identity across contexts and the emergence of an over-arching self-concept (Erikson, 1994; Harter, 1999). Adolescence is also marked by expanding access and exploration of the broader social world outside of family and school, including increased access to and interactions with non-parental adults (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001); however within specific contexts this access is limited and constricted. In rural communities, limited resources and geographic isolation can intensify income-based differences in youths’ trajectories, as some youth are isolated from community support (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Exploring the specific vulnerabilities and strengths that low-income, rural youth inherit from their community contexts can enhance our understanding of how to best support these youth.

Identity, or the construction of the self-concept and its relation to the outside world, is a central theme in the social sciences (Leary & Tangney, 2013). An Eriksonian understanding of identity takes the perspective that it is a life-long process, marked by continuity and increasing complexity as an individual advances through the stages of life (Erikson, 1980). Empirical evidence and models of identity development suggest that adolescence is a time during which individuals do much work to craft their identities, both consciously and unconsciously (Erikson, 1994; Harter, 1999). The theoretical perspective of symbolic interaction posits that a person’s self-concept is created by adopting the meanings of others through interactions with the social world (Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionism can be understood as a pattern which influences identity formation across the life span.

Stigma, or the rejection and isolation of particular social groups based on their perceived levels of power in the community, is an important concept in the symbolic
interaction perspective (Goffman, 1963). Individuals are impacted by stigma as they either adopt or reject the stigmatized identities of the groups to which they belong. Research suggests that low-income youth are marked by stigma in some environments, creating community perceptions that they hold high levels of risk and low chances for positive outcomes in life (Fishkin et al., 1993). The close-knit nature of rural communities can concentrate the effects of stigma, creating discrimination that leads to fewer opportunities to engage with school, work, and community life (Link & Phelan, 2001). Individuals may react to stigma in unhealthy ways, including stereotype threat (Goffman, 1963) and complementarity (Markey, Funder, & Ozer, 2003).

Another factor influencing rural youth identity development and community involvement is participation in post-secondary education. College attendance has become an increasingly normative part of early adulthood; between 2001 and 2011, rates of college attendance for individuals under 25 rose from 36% to 42% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Increasing normalization of college attendance and post-graduate education across recent decades has created the experience of “emerging adulthood” and prolonged identity exploration (Settersten & Ray, 2010a). For many rural youth, attending college and finding subsequent employment requires leaving their small home towns (Artz, 2003). Unfortunately, the talents and skills required to pursue college degrees are often fostered through early supports, which are distributed unequally along SES lines. Beginning in early childhood, parents and adult caregivers in higher-SES families appear to be more well-equipped to encourage their children to interact with adults and advocate for themselves in institutional bureaucracy (Lareau, 2003). Social capital is conferred along class lines, helping children of middle and higher income families to find activities and connections to non-parent adults through family (Bourdieu, Pierre, 1986). Carr and Kefalas (2009) demonstrate how early experiences and differential resource distribution along class lines leads to canalization, causing higher-income youth to leave small towns for college while lower income youth seek low-wage employment upon graduating high school. In many rural, resource-dependent North American communities, globalizing forces have eroded the prospects for stable careers in resource production and distribution (Brown & Swanson, 2010). In the face of the loss of
stable blue collar employment, low-income early adults are left lacking the skills and early parental support to attend college, but also lacking the ability to support themselves or a family by working. This study explores how these macro-level social processes play out in the lives of low-income youth, specifically how rural low-resourced environments may shape adolescent identity development.

With these social processes (social capital, canalization, and macro-economics) converging to confine the outcomes of youth in low-income rural environments, it is important to find buffers that can encourage more access to exploration and positive identity development. Early developmental theorists sometimes took a negative view of adolescence, which Hall described as a time of “storm and stress” marked by a lack of emotional control and over-sensitivity to social stimuli (Hall, 1931). In recent decades a field of study has emerged which challenges these notions and focuses instead on the healthy traits and capacities that youth develop during adolescence; this field is labeled Positive Youth Development (Larson, 2000). Some researchers in this field also focus on how youth interact with and change their own contexts in positive ways, through “relational-developmental systems” that involve youth, adults, and communities moving through development together, in concert (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015).

One beneficial support that adults provide to youth is mentoring, or positive and sustained connections between youth and non-parent adults (Molpeceres, Pinazo, & Aliena, 2012). Mentors and non-parental adults can act as supports for youths’ positive development by enhancing their emotional, cognitive, and identity development processes (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006).

In a similar vein, the study of resilience focuses on how ordinary processes within the individual and their environments can support them to develop “positive adaptations in the context of risk or adversity” (Masten, 2015, p. 9). Social support is a crucial factor in experiencing resilient outcomes, and can be provided by non-parental adults and in school and neighborhood settings (Masten, 2015). Given the challenges that exist in a town like Mountaiside, a study which looks at how vulnerable youth are both shaped by and actively shape their contexts in positive ways and experience resilient outcomes can serve to better inform practices for supporting these youth.
Adults can influence youth development in both positive and negative ways, by contributing to stigma (Goffman, 1963) and limiting opportunities for youth engagement, or by mentoring youth and contributing to positive youth development (Larson, 2000) and resilience (Masten, 2015). This study seeks to explore interactions between adults and vulnerable youth in a rural context. This project is a case study in the rural town of Mountainside, Oregon\(^1\), a small logging town of less than 9,000. Youth were aged 16-18 to reflect the identity processes of mid- to late-adolescence (Harter, 1999), and were identified as low-SES by household income, living situation, and household reliance on financial support. Adults were identified as mentors to youth respondents, or served as key-informants in the community. This study uses the lens of *symbolic interactionism*, specifically the social-structural development of the self and the confining nature of social stigma, as well as past research on the creation of identity, positive youth development, and developmental trajectories created by poverty and low socio-economic status in rural communities. This literature will frame an exploration of how important adults and mentors may influence identity development for youth in a low-income, rural setting.

\(^1\) All place and individual identifiers have been changed to provide confidentiality to study respondents.
Literature Review

Past research in the community of Mountainside suggested that low-income youth in this rural context may experience stigma. In Producing for the Future (a low-income youth garden project developed by Leslie Richards in Mountainside, Oregon,) some youth reported that they did not interact with adults on a regular basis, and that they felt stigmatized and stereotyped by adults in the community (Lile, 2014). However, some youth also reported that as they engaged with community members through the garden project, they felt more welcomed by the community. This was an important finding in this project, but one requiring more exploration. I decided to explore the existing literature on mentoring and youth development in rural contexts in order to frame a more in-depth study of youth development in this context. Theoretical lenses and empirical findings that inform this study include stigma (Goffman, 1963) and its parent theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), conceptualizations of identity development during adolescence, research on the influence of important adults (Molpeceres et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006), and research on youth development in rural contexts.

Symbolic Interactionism

The framework of symbolic interaction provides a model for identity development which has been proven useful in considering how the social world shapes identity. This perspective posits that individuals develop through interactions with those around them, which in turn generates the cultural milieu in which they live (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Individuals make meaning out of the symbols in their environment, and to continually construct and re-define the meanings that symbols have based on their interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). If an aspect of the environment does not have a meaning that has been socially constructed by others, it does not become a symbol to the individual. However, if meaning is conferred through the social setting an item becomes a symbol that takes on meaning to the individual. For example, to someone unfamiliar with baseball, a baseball bat would resemble a smooth piece of wood. However, to someone who is familiar with the game, a bat may take on meaning, reminding them of their own time spent playing baseball, of the players they watched in the World Series, or
of fond memories shared with a parent. Similarly, a baseball bat only resembles a weapon in certain contexts. The social world grants meaning to the people, places, and things within it that we interact with. In the same way, the self is constructed through a bi-directional process between the individual and others in the social setting.

**Social Construction of the Self**

In Mead’s (1934) conceptualization, the self is developed through an iterative process that individuals continually move through as they do identity development work. Blummer (1969) later summarized Mead’s model of the construction of the self in three steps: 1) interaction with others, 2) interpretation of other’s responses to the self, and 3) adoption of self-talk and self-concept based on how others react to the individual’s behavior. This self-concept is then used to create a model for the individual’s future behavior, as he consciously strives to act in certain ways so as to align with his self-image. Therefore, the self is both the “I” that reacts (the subject) and the “me” (object) that is the model for how the individual intends to act in the future, or how she believe others respond to her actions. The interaction between the subject and object selves is a driver of identity development.

**“I”**: The Active Subject

The subject self always exists in the present, though it is not always a conscious process (Mead, 1934, 2012). The I is created when attitudes that we hold about people and objects in the world around us are expressed verbally and non-verbally through gestures. The concept of parallelism describes how both psychological and physiological processes occur in concert, so that gestures and attitudes are not always consciously held and may be rooted in physiological processes, and only rationalized or recognized after they are displayed, if at all. This idea has been demonstrated repeatedly in the social and health sciences; for example, in neurology the L-HPA axis governs how we react to stress in both psychological and physiological ways (Obradović, Bush, Stamperdahl, Adler, & Boyce, 2010). Therefore, consciousness is an “emergent” process in that it stems from a collection of different systems which converge to shape one’s actions in the present. In the same way, culture develops through emergent convergence, as individuals react and respond to one-another and create shared meanings (Mead, 1934). It is in the
interpretation of one-another’s actions that this process becomes “symbolic”, as individuals see one-another’s gestures and responses as representative of meaning.

“Me”: The Categorical Object

If the “I” is not always under the direct and conscious control of the individual, the “me”, conversely, exists as an active reflection, which the individual is constantly shaping, refining, and interpreting. The Me is a categorical description of the self, a way that the individual labels and describes the self, and a tool that the individual uses to align the self with personal ideals and values (Mead, 1934). This is the “object self”, which develops as individuals grapple with the ways that others respond to and interact with them, and value or undervalue certain aspects of their personalities. Children first do this with their parents, as they have repeated interactions in which parents respond in conscious and subconscious ways that either encourage or dissuade certain behaviors. As children explore how others react to them they move through the play and game stages, gradually interacting with more complex cultural systems. Through these explorations individuals develop role-taking, or the ability to take the perspective of others around them (for example, the softball player has a mental map of the roles that each of the other players play). Role-taking helps the individual to see him or herself from the perspective of others, and as this ability develops, it become internalized and shapes how the “I” acts and reacts based on the expected reactions of others. By adolescence, individuals move beyond simply playing with their social worlds, as they do in childhood, and begin to explore external contexts in which they may actually take on and experience different roles within their community (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001). Adolescents also take on much more agency in this process, self-selecting into certain social and cultural contexts, and grappling more consciously with their own self-concepts (Harter, 1999).

The Generalized Other

Out of the various contexts in which the individual finds him/herself, a mental map for the “whole” of the community is created (Mead, 1934). The generalized other is this amalgamated community. The individuals with whom one interacts on a daily basis are representatives of this community. The reactions of external persons help to shape the generalized other. The subject-self interacts with external persons as if they were the
generalized other – our past experiences with others shape our future expectations for interactions. The generalized other functions as a map, through which we navigate the social world. The extent to which the individual can function in the community is the extent to which this mental map is an accurate representation of his external world. An individual functions in society by “playing by the rules”: in the same way that the softball player knows her position and options for play through referencing the other players on the team, each individual knows her social position through referencing the others in her community (Mead, 1934). Exposure to a wide variety of others within the community helps the individual form a more “complete” generalized other from which to reference his judgment of the self.

The reliance of the individual on the shared meanings created by the community creates social control, which Mead saw as the process of the individual judging his or her self from perspective of the community and acting in reference to his or her understanding of community expectations (Mead, 2012). Even when one acts in defiance to the community, she is still referencing the community expectations by intentionally violating them. Social control is a particularly strong force in adolescence, when individuals take notice of and even overestimate how much others think about and judge them (Harter, 1999). Through the development of the generalized other and social control, individuals around the developing adolescent become a part of his internal map and self-concept. The Symbolic Interactionism literature has a long history of exploring the possible negative outcomes of this process, including the social construction of stigma through boundary work.

**Boundary Work and Stigma**

Boundary work is the process of differentiating one’s self from others (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Boundary work is a crucial practice in that it helps the individual define where he or she ends and others begin, and it also helps groups define their members. Symbolic boundaries serve to reflect cultural norms and differences and are used to define the self and the group socially. Symbolic boundaries crystalize to create social boundaries, which are widely agreed upon and determine the differential distribution of resources and status. While boundary work in and of itself is a healthy and
developmentally appropriate activity, when groups with more social power create boundaries to maintain their power at the exclusion of others this process can be detrimental. This can happen through “othering”, or dehumanizing groups or individuals. The interactive process of creating and maintaining stigma is a form of boundary work (Morris, 2012).

According to Goffman’s (1963) foundational work on the topic, a stigma is an external or obvious characteristic that marks a person in the eyes of an observer as “not quite human” based on race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, or any other characteristic that is not “normal”. “Normal” and “stigmatized” roles vary depending on context, as well as the amount of time an individual spends in the role. Goffman refers to “a normal” as a non-stigmatized person in a given context. Because such variation exists in the situations in which stigma plays out, Goffman’s original definition is still used today as a general model that is refined within specific, contextualized interactions.

Stigma is a societal-level process, creating systematic disenfranchisement of entire groups (Link & Phelan, 2001). It is socially constructed in individual interactions as well as in commonly held norms and ideals. “Normal” individuals (Goffman’s term) and groups create stigma theories to rationalize the supposed inferiority of the stigmatized individual. For example, in social class relations higher-SES individuals may label a poor individual as lazy or unintelligent, which rationalizes the idea that both groups have deserved their social location. Stigma theory can be used to justify animosity and even violence between stigmatized and “normal” individuals and groups.

Even in the absence of outward violence between groups, interactions between stigmatized and “normal” individuals can be strained (Goffman, 1963). Because attitudes can be subconscious, stigma theory can be subconsciously created, leading to deeply held notions of superiority that the normal individual may not consciously acknowledge. This often happens because the outward markers of stigma can be physically or emotionally upsetting – as when seeing a disabled person makes us question our own mortality or seeing a member of a minority makes us feel an uncomfortable level of guilt at being in the majority. This leads to profiling, or responding to an individual differently based on one’s judgment of another’s outward appearance. Thus, the “normal” person becomes a
stigmatizer. The conscious and subconscious attitudes associated with profiling create gestures that signify the stigmatization of the individual. As the stigmatized individual processes how others react to her, she can adopt these negative attitudes into her own self-concept through the mechanism of the generalized other (Link & Phelan, 2001). Thus, stigma moves from an outward characteristic used by others in “boundary work” to an inward definition of the self.

Adopting stigmatized statuses into one’s self-concept on a conscious or subconscious level can create negative outcomes for the stigmatized individual (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigma consciousness occurs when an individual is aware of his or her stigmatized status and acts warily around potential stigmatizers as a form of self-preservation (as when marginalized low-income youth may shy away from interactions with higher-SES individuals, thus putting themselves at further disadvantage). Stereotype threat occurs when individuals are reminded of their stigmatized status and then unconsciously act out the stereotyped behavior associated with the stigma (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When individuals are reminded of stereotypes based on identity statuses such as race (Steele & Aronson, 1995), gender (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999), and social class (Croizet & Claire, 1998) they do more poorly on tests intelligence and skills tests than control groups. Finally, complementary behavior is the response of an individual to an interpersonal interaction in a way that “complements” the other person’s style (aggression to submission, reciprocity to generosity, etc.) (Markey et al., 2003). For example, if young African American males are “profiled” as more violent, they can be disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and receive more harsh judgments (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). The awareness of this threat and the early punitive treatment in the school system may cause them to dis-engage from education and display more externalizing behavior (Noguera, 2003). Responding to interpersonal or societal stigmatization in these manners can create a downward spiral of further stigmatization, as the stigmatizer’s beliefs about the individual are seemingly confirmed through the interaction.

Because of the importance of peer relationships and increasing focus on interactions outside of school and family during adolescence (Steinberg, 2005), stigma
can be an especially strong force in adolescent interactions. Fishkin (1993) presents a case of stigma/boundary work in action within a group of adolescents. In a sample containing 77% of all of the 7th and 10th-graders in the Los Angeles metro area, Fishkin identified “high-risk” students generally recognized by themselves and others to be within the same social group. Youth outside of this group judged those within it more harshly than youth within the group judged themselves. When asked about drug use, participation in school and extracurricular activities, parental approval of drug use, and pursuing white vs. blue collar employment, teens outside of the high-risk group assumed that “high-risk” youth participated in more negative behaviors than the group members themselves reported. It seems that these youth were targeted for “boundary work” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), in an attempt by other high school students to disassociate themselves from negative identities.

In the Producing for the Future study, some low-income youth in Mountainside felt that they had been negatively stereotyped (Lile, 2014). These youth might have been experiencing stigma (Goffman, 1963), the connotation being that adults in the community avoided engaging with them because of this stigma. If low-income youth perceive negative stereotypes about themselves at a community level, it may cause them to further isolate or differentiate themselves by acting with stigma consciousness (Link & Phelan, 2001) to minimize the negative emotions attached to the stigma, or with stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and complementary behavior (Markey et al., 2003) to engage in further anti-social behaviors because they feel they have nothing to lose. It is important to understand how communities create stigma around certain statuses (such as low-income youth) and how stigma contributes to identity development in its targets.

**Limitations of Symbolic Interactionism**

There are areas in which the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and stigma have room for additional exploration. In his discussions of the construction of the generalized other, Mead does not directly address how the opinions of others are “weighted” by the individual, or that some interactions are more meaningful than others (Harter, 1999). It would seem that the amount of time spent with each individual would determine his or her influence on the creation of the self, but there may be certain
individuals whose influence is stronger than others, or certain interactions in which the individual is more vulnerable to external judgments. Interactions taking place repeatedly over a sustained time period may have a stronger influence on identity development. Important adults may prove to play a powerful role in the youth’s development of the generalized other, as they represent a sustained interaction with a representative of a more powerful group (adults, as well as potentially higher-SES individuals).

Where symbolic interactionism is critiqued for not being specific enough, stigma is critiqued for being overly individualized and lacking a broader perspective. According to Link and Phelan (2001), researchers who use the term often place emphasis on the study of the stigmatized person rather than on the society that has created it. Thus, it is rare for researchers to explore the “sources and consequences” of stigma at the societal level. An exploration of how a stigmatized status is created by the community, experienced by the individual, and changed through different types of interactions will place emphasis on the multiple levels in which stigma occurs.

Based on the theoretical background it seems that symbolic interactionism presents a suitable lens through which to study youth identity development within socially disadvantaged or stigmatized contexts. Recent work focusing on identity formation across life span development has framed adolescence as a crucial time for the emergence of conscious and active construction of the self-concept.

**Identity Development in Adolescence**

Identity is an overarching construct in psychology and human development (Leary & Tangney, 2013). From the symbolic interactionism perspective, identity is a process of creating the self by mirroring and interacting with the socio-cultural milieu (Mead, 1934). Several different perspectives within the study of identity are helpful in guiding this research, including stage-based models of identity development, socio-cultural processes of identity development, positive youth development, and adult influences on adolescent identity development.

**Stage-based Models of Identity Development**

While Mead (1934, 2012) described the development of the self through the play and game stages which occur in early and middle childhood, he did not expand his
discussion to adolescence, perhaps because of a lack of study of this life stage from a developmentally positive perspective at the time (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). As individuals move through childhood and adolescence the concept of the “me”, or object/narrative self (McAdams, 2001) becomes more distinct from the “I” or the active self. Harter (1999) more deeply explores the development of the self through a stage-based perspective supported by extensive empirical evidence. Harter interviewed a large number of youth from across the country during several different studies. She solicited narrative descriptions from respondents in her study in order to explore the development of identity-related themes. From a symbolic interactionism lens, exploring identity content can help researchers understand how individuals make meaning of the symbols around them (Kroger, 2007; Mead, 1934). Asking for narrative descriptions of an individuals’ self-concept can provide insight into the content of the person’s identity. Harter’s findings suggest that adolescence can be divided into three stages: early, middle, and late adolescence. Harter explored how self-concepts crystalize through these ages.

In Harter’s (1999) study, early adolescence extended from approximately ages 12-14. Individuals began early adolescence with a high sensitivity to the judgments of others and to different contexts, as their conception of the generalized other (Mead, 1934) had not yet crystalized across contexts. In this stage the individual’s self-concept and self-worth are both highly situation-dependent, and he is prone to over-generalizations about his own characteristics based on situational determinants. Harter refers to this as “black or white thinking” as when an early adolescent claims “around my friends I am cool and outgoing, but in school I am a total dork.” Students in Harter’s study seemed aware of, but overly not concerned with, these contradictions. While this stage may be experienced differently by different adolescents depending on cultural expectations for responsibility and obligations, in Harter’s North American sample, early adolescents’ identities were not yet crystalized and stable.

In middle adolescence (ages 15-16), individuals started to do the work of “mapping” context-dependent descriptions into a consistent self-concept (Harter, 1999). This caused some uncomfortable cognitive dissonance for teens in this stage, as they perceived conflicting selves in different situations and spent much thought and effort
trying to understand what their “true” self was. To some extent, the middle-adolescent is still stuck in “black or white” thinking, and may become obsessive and unhappy as he sees himself expressing conflicting personality traits and feels that he is not honest or cannot understand his true self. Harter’s example is of adolescent who wonders how she can be outgoing in one group, but reserved in another, and feels that she should have one defining characteristic rather than incongruity in her character. The middle adolescent can also over-emphasize the generalized other (Mead, 1934), creating the “imaginary audience” or “personal fable” (Harter’s terms) in which others are constantly judging him and care as much about his self-concept and characteristic consistency as he does. For adolescents in Harter’s study, this was a vulnerable time, as it represented the early and often unsuccessful attempts to adopt a rational and consistent identity.

In late adolescence (ages 17-19 and into early adulthood) context-dependent characteristics merged into more solid and overarching self-concepts (Harter, 1999). This process is referred to as “crystallization” of the self-concept. The individuals in Harter’s sample began to distil the generalized other into a “self-guide” or “map” of personal values and beliefs about the world, focusing more on aligning the self with these values and beliefs than with the judgments of context-specific others. While context-dependent behavior may still exist, the late-adolescent seems better able to apply overarching categories that can hold inconsistencies. For example, “I am outgoing with friends and reserved in school” becomes “I only speak out around people I can trust”, a description of an over-arching characteristic based on personal values. Late adolescents in Harter’s study relied more on their own value judgments of themselves than on their perceptions of the judgments of others. In Harter’s study, adolescents’ grasp on the object-self became tighter and more reliable – they were better able to predict what they would do in a given situation, based on their past actions and their more stable self-concepts. Harter’s findings suggest that the generalized other is more fully internalized by late adolescence, and is heard as the internal voice that guides individuals’ actions. Youth in Harter’s study reported that more of their decisions at this point were based on their own conception of values and morality, as opposed to what they thought others
would think of them – showing that they had adapted their expectations of others’ reactions into their own self-concepts and object-selves.

Though Harter’s findings only extended to age 19, Cote and Levine (2002) lay theoretical groundwork for the identity formation in early adulthood based on several studies with college students and other young adults in America. The findings from this research suggest that if individuals enter early adulthood with a strong sense of self, they are more likely to create “resolved” and stable identities. However, if there is confusion during late adolescence, it can lead to continued “searching” or even “drifting” and unresolved self-concepts and unstable lifetime trajectories (Cote & Levine, 2002).

Increasingly diverse and ill-defined trajectories during early adulthood lead to a wide variety of outcomes for young adults (Cote & Levine, 2002). This has led to the modern conceptualization of “emerging adulthood”, or a prolonged period during the late teens and early twenties in which identity development is still not yet fully achieved (Arnett, 2000). However, other researchers point out that in low-SES contexts, a prolonged identity exploration is not always possible because of family and community constraints (Côté, 2014; DeLuca, Clampt-Lundquist, & Edin, 2016). Socio-economic status (SES) and other contextual factors are highly influential in determining whether identity is resolved or left open during early adulthood.

Hendry and Klope (2010) interviewed 38 youth aged 17-20 who were not enrolled in higher education about their experiences of adulthood. Respondents identified the markers of adulthood as being independent from parents, being in a committed relationship, having a full time job, having responsibilities, and feeling “adult.” Three subgroups were identified among respondents: emerging adults were following the process of prolonged identity formation and had not achieved markers of adulthood; prevented adults had serious financial and personal barriers to achieving the markers of adulthood; adults had already achieved the markers of adulthood. Other researchers have explored the consequences of adolescents feeling “adult” by the time they enter their twenties. Deluca and colleagues (2016) interviewed youth respondents from the Moving to Opportunity study in their teenage years and again in their twenties. Many of their respondents took an expedited path to adulthood, in which they achieved several markers
of adulthood during or directly after high school because of their families’ financial needs. However, many of these youth had relinquished educational and personal goals to do so, and at their final interview expressed a sense of regret that they had been forced to give up a sense of identity in exchange for more financial stability. Carr and Kefalas (2009) also discovered that a sense of regret was common for youth in their mid-20s who had pursued work right after high school. These young adults were experiencing fewer financial gains relative to their more educated peers, because while minimum wage appeared to be a substantial amount in their late teens, their salaries had stagnated, and they now did not feel financially equipped to raise a family. The sense of regret that may come with “expedited” adulthood can lead to unsatisfactory identity formation, including prolonged “searching” or “drifting” identities (Cote & Levine, 2002).

Given the previous literature on stage-based models of adolescent and young adult identity development (Cote & Levine, 2002; Harter, 1999), as well as empirical evidence that low-income youth might pursue the markers of adulthood early rather than engaging in prolonged identity development (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; DeLuca et al., 2016), late adolescence seems a critical time in the identity development of low-income youth. If stigma is incorporated into early adolescent context-specific self-concepts, it may influence the later crystallization of over-arching identity. As low-income youth in middle to late adolescence are grappling with incorporating their context-dependent self-concept into a solidified sense of identity, they are also potentially considering how to take on the roles and markers of adulthood. Therefore, low-income youth may be doubly vulnerable at this age. Vulnerabilities to their self-concepts are presented by their potentially stigmatizing environments, as well as in their early adoption of adult roles and potentially truncated identity development. It seems that middle to late adolescence is a crucial period for understanding how low-income youth incorporate their social contexts into their personal sense of identity. Given the adversity and vulnerabilities that low-income youth may face, it is also important to consider how they might form positive and resilient identities that can buffer their future developmental trajectories.
Positive Development and Resilience in Adolescence

Some traditional perspectives on adolescence have emphasized the difficulties and challenges that youth face during this time. For example, Hall (1931) wrote about adolescent development as a period of “storm and stress”, meaning that he saw adolescents as being more sensitive to emotional and social stressors, and more likely to react negatively to these stressors than individuals of other ages. Over the last century, research and popular media has focused on negative outcomes for youth such as early sexuality and pregnancy, substance abuse, and failing educational trajectories (Damon, 2004). Positive Youth Development (PYD) is seen as the antidote to these negative views of adolescence. PYD can be conceptualized as: 1) a natural process that youth go through as they age into adulthood and gain positive skills and traits, 2) a set of principles which drive research in adolescence and emphasize healthy outcomes and processes over models of risk and disorder, and 3) PYD practices, or the application of these principles in real-world settings in order to facilitate healthy developmental processes (S. F. Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). An important driver of development during adolescence from the perspective of PYD and other developmental approaches is the individuals’ interactions with external contexts. The research base on PYD can inform research related to youth identity development in context.

There are several different models of positive youth development. The Search Institute reviewed positive youth development literature and created a list of 40 developmental assets which help youth form thriving and healthy identities and behaviors (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011). These include several different types of social relationships and interactions, such as positive family communication, feelings that the community values youth, positive adult role models, feelings of personal power, and sense of purpose. Several of these concepts are mirrored in other work.

One perspective on positive youth development is the “Six C” model, which includes confidence, competence, character, connection, caring, and contribution (Lerner et al., 2015). The six capacities in this model can be summarized as feeling generally capable and having self-esteem, feeling skilled in specific areas, having values and aligning them with behaviors, having frequent and consistent positive interactions with
others, being treated with compassion and feeling compassion towards others, and finding ways to give back to others in the community. The Six C model was developed through a national study with 4-H members as they progressed through childhood and adolescence. The capacities described by this model contribute to positive identity development, and can be incorporated into the self-concept.

The concept of spark (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011) is an important factor in positive youth development, and in models of youth identity. Spark is a motivating focus in a youth’s life, providing a source of fun, passion, and energy. When youth in a large online sample said that they experienced spark, their outcomes across developmental domains (cognitive, social, behavioral) were improved over those who did not experience spark (Scales et al., 2011). “Youth purpose” is a similar construct relating to the experience of having a “beacon” or set of values to live up to. Deluca and colleagues (2016) found results related to spark and youth purpose in the qualitative portion of the Moving to Opportunity study. A theme emerged in this sample of “identity projects”, or hobbies and activities into which youth devoted considerable time and energy and from which they derived a positive sense of identity. Respondents participating in identity projects were more likely to be “on track” after high school, meaning they pursued work or education and avoided participating in illegal activities. Identity projects which linked youth to an institution or to adults were more likely to support healthy outcomes than those which were carried out alone or only with peers. These findings suggest that contexts can provide positive sources for identity in adolescents, and that adolescent identity work can contribute to positive developmental outcomes.

Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents can experience positive development even in contexts of adversity, if they experience positive developmental assets. In a multi-sited study carried out in impoverished neighborhoods of Chicago, Elliot and colleagues (2006) describe how adolescents view their own trajectories in terms of positive developmental indicators. The respondents in this study largely experienced positive markers of development, regardless of the impoverished communities they came from. In addition, having positive supports from parents, schools,
and neighborhoods was more influential on youth from more impoverished contexts. This work has been influential in changing how researchers view development in context (Mortimer, 2009), and had made a case for the potential for positive developmental outcomes even in disadvantaged circumstances.

In exploring the identity development of low-income youth, a useful concept from the field of positive psychology is resilience (Masten, 2015). Masten defines resilience as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (p. 10). Resilience does not simply mean “bouncing back” from adversity, but can be conceptualized as any positive movement in adaptive functioning in a context of risk. The definition of positive movement or adaptive functioning can include both a lack of psychopathology, as well as the presence of competence and success in “age-salient developmental tasks” (Masten, 2015, p. 16), the later of which aligns with positive youth development. Resilience is supported by both internal capacities and external supports, and can be shaped by social contexts.

Social support is a major contributing factor to resilience (Masten, 2015). Research on “social support” suggests that it includes interpersonal interactions marked by positive affect, affirmation of self-worth, and tangible aid (Antonucci & Sherman, 1997). Researchers at the Search Institute studied “developmental relationships” that youth had with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and program leaders (Roejlkpartain et al., 2017). Individuals within these relationships supported youth by expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities; different relationships were more likely to provide different kinds of developmental support. It can be beneficial to identity development if adolescents build sustained interactions with positive and supportive people who care about them and want them to succeed.

Given the recent emphasis on positive outcomes in adolescent development (Damon, 2004; Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011), it seems important to take a positive view of identity development in low-income youth. Additionally, given that many of the strengths and capacities that youth develop during this stage stem from their interactions with adults through developmental assets (Benson et al., 2011), sparks (Benson et al.,
2011), youth contribution (Lerner et al., 2015), and resilience (Masten, 2015) it seems important to further explore the influences of adults on youth development.

**Adult Influences on Adolescent Identity Development**

Adolescence is marked by interactions with increasingly diverse people and places, as the adolescent moves out of the realms of family and school to explore contexts of adult life (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001). As youth explore the roles (Mead, 1934) available to them in the adult world, they take on “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), or context and interaction specific ideas or models of what their future selves might look like. Possible selves are based on both positive and negative role models (Erikson, 1994) and serve as “working models” which are adjusted on a daily basis as an individual changes their perception of what they will do in the future (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Possible selves create a “bridge” between the present and the future, by providing a mental map of what the individual needs to achieve or avoid. Harter (1999) stresses the importance of supporting individuals through the process of self-identification during adolescence, as adopting negative perceptions into one’s self-concept may create life-long feelings of low self-worth. In Harter’s study, supportive adults helped adolescents create positive self-concepts through reinforcing the positive opinions of others, and focusing on the “possible self” as it appears in positive, supportive contexts as the “true self”.

As adolescents explore diverse contexts outside of the home, it can be helpful to have an adult guide to provide support and advice, and help them make sense of the broader world. Relationships with non-parental adults become normative as adolescents age (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). In a study of 243 11th graders, half of whom were low-income, Beam and colleagues found that 82% had experienced a relationship with a “very important adult” (VIP). VIPs were defined as non-parental adults of at least 21 years of age, who had a significant influence on the participant, or whom the participant could count on in times of need. About half were family members including older siblings, aunts/uncles, and grandparents; half were non-familial. Only 23% of these relationships were “compensatory”, having developed after a negative life event; the majority served as supportive relationships aimed at positive development.
Some researchers study the influence of important adults as “mentoring”, or sustained, positive relationships between youth and non-parental adults (Allen, Eby, O’Brien, & Lentz, 2008; Rhodes et al., 2006). Non-parental important adults in adolescent’s lives may be found in the family (e.g. Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Kogan, Brody, & Chen, 2011), in classrooms (Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005), within specific programmatic settings at youth-development organizations (e.g. DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Pedersen, Woolum, Gagne, & Coleman, 2009; Renick Thomson & Zand, 2010; Sipe, 2002), and across contexts in naturally developing relationships (“natural mentoring,” e.g. Beam et al., 2002; Black, Grenard, Sussman, & Rohrbach, 2010; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2006; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006; Sykes, Gioviano, & Piquero, 2014). The outcomes of relationships are generally positive but can be context-specific, meaning that the context of the youth-adult relationship can influence the outcomes for youth (S. F. Hamilton et al., 2006). For instance, engagement with important adults in work and service positions enhanced youths’ vocational skills and self-confidence (among other outcomes) while mentorship in religious organizations enhanced youths’ self-responsibility, optimism, and connectedness. If relationships with non-parental adults across a range of contexts are seen as normative, it is important to understand how these relationships may be particularly salient in the lives of more vulnerable youth.

**Adult Influences on Youth Identity in Vulnerable Contexts**

Important adults can be especially supportive in helping at-risk youth develop capacities for resilience attain positive developmental outcomes. Researchers have identified positive influences on youth identity provided by important, non-parental adults across cognitive, behavioral, emotional/psychological, and social domains, and some have explored the aspects of youth-adult relationships that impact these outcomes.

Research supports the relationship between the presence of important adults, adolescents’ goal seeking or self-regulation, and positive behaviors like educational attainment and reduction of risky behaviors (DuBois et al., 2011; Sipe, 2002). Rohdes et
al. (2006) theorize that youth-adult relationships can support adolescents to align their aspirations and expectations for the future, in order to more effectively pursue and attain their goals. In a meta-review of mentoring programs, these researchers found several reports of increased “stick-to-it-ness” in mentored youth and scaffolding for goal completion in youth-adult relationships, leading to improved problem-solving skills and academic success for youth. Empirical evidence supports the influence of important adults on at-risk youths’ development of personal motivation and goal attainment. Sykes, Gioviano and Piquero (2014) conducted a study sampling over 95,600 youth aged 14-17 from the 2012 National Survey of Child Health, including high representation from black and Hispanic youth and those with incarcerated parents. In this group, adolescents reporting a relationship with natural mentor scored significantly higher on self-control scales(Sykes et al., 2014). Self-control is related to self-regulation, a process that helps individuals adjust to their contexts across the life course (Aldwin, Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Taylor, 2011). In a 3-wave model with 345 rural African America high school seniors, Kogan, Brody, and Chen (2011) found that mentoring relationships supported these vulnerable youth to develop more self-control and goal orientation, resulting in a decrease in externalizing symptoms. It seems that improvements in cognitive processes like self-regulation and self-control may be important mediators in the relationship between youth-adult relationships and positive behavioral outcomes.

Important adults can also support global psychological well-being and intrapersonal emotional outcomes for adolescents in contexts marked by risk and adversity. Hurd and Zimmerman (2010) conducted a longitudinal study with 93 adolescent mothers, beginning in their senior year of high school and spanning five years. In this group, the presence of a natural mentor was correlated with reductions in depressive symptoms over time, and weakened the relationship between perceived stress and mental health outcomes over time. The authors posited that these results showed mentoring to be a form of social support that would lead to increased capacities for resiliency, as it seemed to enable participants to better cope with high-stress situations. The same authors conducted a larger study of 396 young adults with lower than average educational attainment (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014). Through a latent class analysis, it was
discovered that 53% reported the presence of a natural mentor since the age of 14, and those in mentoring relationships were statistically more likely to report fewer depressive symptoms. It seems that supportive mentoring relationships can play a key role in youths’ emotional health.

The psychological outcomes of positive relationships with adults can lead to resilient trajectories for adolescents. For example, Bernard (2002) describes “turnaround teachers” who supported high-risk students’ resilience in education and social-emotional processes by providing caring support, high expectations, and opportunities for student participation and contribution. In another study of youth transitioning out of foster care who were paired with adult mentors, participants reported that emotional support and concrete life skills developed through these relationships helped them succeed during the transition to independent living (Osterling & Hines, 2006). MacTavish and colleagues (2008) interviewed eight women living in rural trailer parks in Mountainside. These respondents reported that relationships developed earlier in life contributed to their resiliency, and for six of these women support during adolescence and young adulthood came in the form of mentoring relationships formed in church or with surrogate parents (Notter et al., 2008). Emotional and psychological support can give adolescents positive experiences and help them develop resilient and positive identities.

Within the social realm, important adults can enhance vulnerable youths’ perceptions of social relationships by serving as an attachment figure and a model for positive relationships. For example, in a cross-sectional study of 259 African-American 7th-9th graders, Hurd, Varner and Rowley (2013) measured how relationships with important adults correlate with parenting style and adolescents’ psychological well-being. In adolescents without strong non-parental adult relationships, “involved-vigilant” parenting styles were significantly correlated with better psychological well-being. However, in adolescents with high-quality mentoring relationships, the correlation between parenting style and higher psychological well-being was reduced to non-significance. This finding suggests that important adults were more influential in the lives of more vulnerable youth with weaker parenting relationships.
In their evaluation of *Project: Youth Connect*, conducted with 205 youth aged 9-16, Thompson and Zand (2010) studied the long-term effects of a mentor-matching program. Higher-quality interactions between youth and adults were statistically correlated with increased parental attachment, friendships with adults, and self-disclosure to adult at eight months after the program’s end. This finding suggests that the relationship a youth forms with a mentor can serve as a positive model for other social interactions.

These studies provide evidence that the relationships and attachments that youth form with their adult mentors can impact their social relationships across diverse contexts. In many of these studies, the quality of youth-adult relationships moderates the outcomes that youth experience, so an investigation into what denotes quality in youths’ relationships with important adults is necessary.

**Indicators of Quality in Youth-Adult Relationships**

Though youth-adult relationships are increasingly normative during adolescence (Beam et al., 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001), there are distinguishing characteristics of these relationships which can make them more or less influential on positive identity development. Work in the “convoy model” of social support suggests that the length and quality of social relationships is more influential on positive outcomes and resilience for individuals than the quantity of such relationships (Antonucci, Ajrouch, & Birditt, 2014). Though relationships between youth and adults are bi-directional, meaning that both parties are responsible for establishing and maintaining the relationship, adults must often take the brunt of responsibility for maintaining these relationships (Sipe, 2002). The outcomes of youths’ important relationships with adults are moderated by processes including adults’ approaches to youth-adults relationships, the length of these relationships, and the characteristics of individual youth.

Characteristics of adult mentors and their interactions with youth are arguably the most important factor in youth-adult relationships. Important adults are most influential on youth when they focus on relationship development, rather than targeting youth behavioral change (Rhodes et al., 2006). Affectively positive and harmonious relationships between African-American youth and their mentors were the most likely to
create positive change in cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Kogan et al., 2011). Perceived emotional closeness between youth and important adults (including authenticity, empathy, and companionship) are crucial relational aspects that help build youths’ positive capacities and identities (Rhodes et al., 2006). In a detailed overview of several youth mentoring programs active during the 1980’s and 90’s, Sipe (2002) found that trust between youth and important adults enhanced outcomes for youth. Trust was also built when adults engaged in developmentally appropriate relationships that mixed boundary-setting and high expectations with youth agency and joint decision-making. Greenberger, Chen and Beam (1998) found that, in a sample of 201 11th graders, relational warmth and support on behalf of a “very important adult” was associated with decreased internalizing and externalizing behaviors in girls and boys, respectively. Shared interests and commonalities between important adults and youth also lead to closer and more impactful youth-adult relationships (DuBois et al., 2011). The ways in which adults approach supportive relationships with youth influence youths’ interest in and commitment to these relationships.

The length of the relationship between youth and important adults can also moderate youth outcomes. Sustained interactions with important adults can lead to deeper and more impactful relationships, but shorter interactions may be detrimental to youth. Across several program evaluations, the most important characteristic in a mentor was that they could make a sustained and consistent commitment to their youth mentee (Sipe, 2002). In a study of over 1100 youth in Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, matches lasting over a year led to the greatest amount of improvement in school-related, social, and emotional outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). In this study, the shortest relationships (of three months or less) saw statistically significant negative changes in self-worth and perceived scholastic competence for youth participants. It may be that these youth saw themselves to blame for the termination of a mentoring relationships, and adopted these negative perceptions into their self-concepts. Length of relationship should be taken into account when considering how important adults influence youth.

Relationships between youth and adults are bi-directional interactions rooted in relational-developmental systems (Lerner, 2006), and so youth actively shape these
interactions as well. Due to cultural factors, some youth may experience more opportunities for important relationships than others, as when Sykes and colleagues (2014) found that African American youth were more likely than Hispanic or White youth to experience “natural mentor” relationships in community, neighborhood, and extended family context. DuBois et al. (2011) found that the most effective programmatic contexts for youth-adult interactions were those that included youth with more behavioral risk factors and samples with higher proportions of males. However, these groups were also the most susceptible to attrition, and tended to self-select out of programmatic settings and adult relationships. This finding suggests that mentoring may act as a buffer for vulnerable youth who are “differentially susceptible” to risk factors (Belsky & Pluess, 2009), serving to slow or moderate canalization processes (Blair & Cybele, 2012) that lead to negative outcomes for those at highest risk. Therefore, those youth who are most vulnerable may receive the most positive benefits from relationships with important adults. However, it is also apparent that some vulnerabilities may limit or prevent youths’ exposure to important adults.

**Income and Limited Exposure to Adults**

As youth age into adolescence, they naturally seek out and are exposed to learning and engagement opportunities that help them prepare for the world of adult work. However, the exposure that one can garner from external environments is socially constructed, and social class can afford or constrain opportunities throughout childhood and adolescence. Lareau (2003) describes how, in a sample of elementary-school-aged youth, socio-economic status (SES) was an important determinant of how parents and families socialized their children, preparing them for certain kinds of interactions with adults. Middle- and upper-SES children were exposed to more adult interactions, and were more likely to interact with adults in a variety of settings like after-school activities and professional environments. They felt more comfortable questioning adults because their parents modeled reciprocal interactions with authority figures, and they had more experience interacting with adults in reciprocal settings than did their lower-SES peers.

Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider (2001) interviewed more than 1,000 middle-school and high-school students from diverse school settings around the United States
about their interactions at school and at work or other non-school settings. In this sample, youth living in low-income neighborhoods had fewer opportunities in which to develop concrete professional skills. The availability of opportunities to learn or practice work-related skills was correlated with income. However, the largest “jump” in the availability of opportunities for developing work-related skills was seen between youth from the lowest and second-lowest SES neighborhoods, suggesting that a small amount of community resources could be leveraged to create meaningful change.

Given the potential benefits of relationships between youth and adults, as well as the barriers that lower-SES youth may experience to relationships with important adults, it seems evident that income can shape youths’ identity development processes as they relate to adult relationships in the social world. Exploring the quantity and quality of youths’ important adult relationships can help uncover aspects of their identity development, as well as positive traits and capacities they may glean from important adults. However, the broader social context may also have an impact on youth, outside of their interactions with individual adults. Previously described literature on rural contexts, in particular, describe how these environments may pose unique opportunities and barriers to identity development.

**Development in Rural Context**

Theories of human development emphasize the importance of context to individual development (Lerner & Overton, 2008). Models of identity development recognize the importance of context and social interactions in shaping individuals’ self-concepts (Erikson, 1980; Mead, 1934). Interactions with both *ecological* and *interpersonal* contexts help to shape how in individual conceptualizes their sense of self (Neisser, 1988). If the individual develops a sense of identity based on interactions with others in their social world, contextual factors are important in understanding the opportunities that the individual has for identity development. Rural contexts present a unique supports and barriers for adolescent identity development.

Rural contexts are unique, but “rurality” is not a monolithic identifier. The United States Congressional Research Service defines urban areas as those with greater than 1,000 residents per square mile, and suburban areas as any with greater than 500 residents
per square mile adjoining an area with greater than 1,000 residents per square mile (Womach, 2005). Areas which do not meet these criteria are defined as rural. Rural communities are often shaped by their interactions with resources and amenities (L. Hamilton, Hamilton, Duncan, & Colocousis, 2008). In a survey of over 8,000 residents of rural places, Hamilton and colleagues developed a typology of “four rural Americas”: those rich in amenities for tourism and new growth, those dependent on declining natural resources, chronically poor communities, and those with declining natural resources but potential for amenity-based growth. Communities in these different categories have different experiences of rurality.

Differing definitions of rurality are also shaped by social history and popular media. The definitions of rural in historical American media include pastoralism and reliance on natural resources to generate wealth (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Today, Americans hold varying views of what “ruralness” means. In a survey of 242 urban and suburban residents, respondents held positive views of rural places that emphasized natural beauty, social harmony, a deeper sense of family and self-reliance (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). However, the industrial revolution brought changes in the ways that natural and agricultural resources are cultivated, and also shifted population toward urban centers (Theobald & Wood, 2010). In the twentieth century, popular media has often included stereotypes of rural places and people, associating them with backward-thinking and lack of intelligence (Theobald & Wood, 2010). These opposing viewpoints, as well as the realities of rural life today, influence how youth develop identities and interact with their home communities.

**Rural Identity and Social Support**

For youth, living in a rural community can shape the development of the *generalized other* and likewise, their understanding of their own identity. Kitayama and Markus (2014) describe how identity development can be more or less reliant on perceptions of the *generalized other* (Mead, 1934) and on the *roles* available to the individual (Mead, 1934) based on cultural backgrounds. For example, in some non-Western cultures, the end goal of identity development is not *independence*, but
relational maturity, or an understanding of how one fits into family and community structures and the responsibilities those entail.

It has been hypothesized that rural communities also encourage interdependence in identity development, based on highly inter-connected social networks. The authors of *Habits of the Heart*, after interviewing 200 middle-class adults in the early 1980s, also pointed out that rural communities may be more close-knit than urban areas, and may also foster development of a stronger sense of inter-dependence (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007). In their study of rural adolescents in farming communities of Iowa, Elder and Conger found that social supports and social networks were close-knit but robust, and that those youth living and working on farms had the most sources of social support (Elder & Conger, 2000). Access to natural resources and community-level investment in schools and children were cited by low-income rural families as important features of the rural places in which they lived (Howley, 2006). For youth who out-migrated and then returned to their home communities, factors related to family and feelings of home were important reasons for coming back (Artz & Yu, 2011). Thus, for youth in a rural community, there may be an emphasis on the development of identity within the family context and interdependence with family, rather than the meaning of identity being rooted in independence and search for personal meaning.

Rural families and communities can also support agency and independence for youth, but possibly at some cost to the family’s sense of interdependence and connection. MacTavish and Salamon (2006) showed how, for 10 youth living in a rural trailer park, agency and family support to make choices that distanced them from their low-income home environments helped some to access resources and adult connections and “flourish” rather than “flounder”. However, these youth and families had to invest heavily in opportunities outside of the trailer park, and for many in the study such investments were not possible. In communities where resources are scarce, family and social connections can serve to buffer and strengthen individual outcomes. The development of interdependence and strong sense of community may be a crucial capacity in rural and geographically isolated communities. Thus, maturity, adulthood, and social connection
may have different meanings for youth in rural places, and an exploration of these factors in identity development is important.

**Rural Youth Outmigration and Impacts on Identity Development**

Youth outmigration from rural places is a much-studied phenomenon (Gibbs & Cromartie, 1994). Factors causing rural youth to out-migrate include awareness of the prejudices that surround rural places, as well as a desire to pursue educational and occupational opportunities that tend to be more prevalent in population dense places (Haller & Monk, 1992). The “brain drain” of young adults from rural places is of concern to many researchers, although this concern applies primarily to youth from higher-SES families (Artz, 2003). Carr and Kefalas (2009) identified four categories in the migration patterns of youth in their rural sample: *achievers, stayers, seekers,* and *returners.* Youth who had achieved more in high school were more likely to leave their rural home town in order to find more challenging and prestigious educational and occupational opportunities in larger cities. Additionally, youth may feel compelled to leave rural places because they are perceived as “outsiders” due to developmental tendencies to chafe against communal conformity (Jones, 1999). The loss of higher-achieving young people in a community, coupled with negative perceptions from both youth and adults, can create bi-directional influences in community perceptions of youth and youth perceptions of community.

Just as they can seek to venture from their rural roots and participate in more global identities, youth can also actively choose to reject modern ideals like global citizenship and mass-produced knowledge in favor of more local patterns of knowing and being (Corbett, 2007). MacTavish and Shamah note that young people who are able to develop “place-based knowledge” can leverage this learning as a form of capital that can help them succeed within their community (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009). In this way, the rejection of urbanized or globalized ideals in the creation of identity can be an informed and rational choice on the part of the adolescent. For youth in rural contexts, participation and engagement in school is a loaded concept, because it may mean the eventual separation of the youth from their home community and dissolution of their interdependent identities. “Opting out” of school in favor of place-based knowledge may reaffirm interdependent identities, but comes with its own risks. Patterns of rural youth
outmigration and rejection of educational pursuits are influenced by the cultural and economic contexts in which rural youth find themselves.

**Rural Poverty: Limited Resources and Stigma**

While rural communities are praised for high levels of support for their children and youth (Howley, 2006), limited social and financial resources can create differential investment in and support for adolescents. It is difficult for rural schools to marshal the funds needed to create challenging and engaging coursework for all of their students, and even when they can it is not associated with a reduction in young-adult outmigration patterns (Haller & Monk, 1992). As they followed youth and young adults in a rural town in Iowa, Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that there was a perceptual differentiation between “stayers” and “leavers” – those perceived to have the talent and skills to thrive outside of the town, and those perceived to lack internal motivation to succeed. “Leavers” seemed to invest in education, while “stayers” tended to drop out of or disengage from school and pursue early employment, thus diminishing their future potential. This was a problematic differentiation, as those who were perceived as likely to succeed often also tended to be children of higher-SES families. Community members took great pride in their best and brightest, and saw them as ambassadors to the rest of the world. The town invested heavily in these “leavers” across their childhood and adolescence but lacked the additional resources to invest in high-quality programs and supports for the “stayers”, creating differential canalization of trajectories for these two groups and a self-fulfilling prophesy. In some rural towns, negative perceptions of poor families can cause a lack of opportunity for their children, creating intergenerational patterns of poverty and disengagement (Duncan & Coles, 1999).

However, it is important to note that the leaver/stayer framework is not necessarily universal, and different patterns exist across rural towns in their ability and motivation to provide support to their impoverished members. In their study of three rural communities, Duncan and Coles (1999) found that segregation or integration between SES groups in rural communities was a crucial factor in the trajectories of youth and families. In communities where segregation between a small number of land owners and a large number of low wage workers was a historical trend (including a rural agricultural...
community and a mining community) there was persistent prejudice and lack of engagement between the upper and lower classes, which crossed even racial lines. This led to intergenerational poverty and entrenched segregation along class lines. However, in a mill community where there was a historical middle-class of well-paid workers, a more egalitarian ethos created less segregation and more community supports between the upper and lower classes. In this less segregated community, inter-generational poverty was less common because connections with supportive adults helped youth escape impoverished circumstances. Therefore, historical contexts seem an important indicator for present-day patterns and perceptions of community life.

Several researchers have invested time in understanding the processes influencing rural community investments in youth. Because rural towns tend to be small and close-knit, it can be hard to escape communal knowledge of an individual family’s situation. Stigma and determinations made about the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor seem to influence how social resources are distributed in rural settings. “Boundary work” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) can conducted along and between class lines in impoverished rural settings, as class differences and divisions are engrained into individual development.

In an impoverished Appalachian community, Morris (2012) described a process of “internal othering” through which certain community members are ostracized based upon class markers. Even in a context of rural poverty, there were still perceived differences between the “good poor” and the “bad poor”: those impoverished families who seemed to “choose” the markers of poverty (shabby dress, cluttered yards, etc.) were labeled “rutters” by other community members (a term derived from a low-income family of the same name). Youth often pointed out or labeled others as “rutters” in order to differentiate themselves from these individuals. The term “rutter” was never a self-identifying term, rather it was used as an identity foil, to describe the characteristics that the youth did not have. Ironically, some of these youth were themselves labeled as “rutters” by other community members. In this way, youth in a rural, high-poverty
context engaged in “boundary work” to create an identity at the expense of others even as their community attributed negative characteristics and stigma to them.

Sherman (2009) extends the idea of “boundary work” in rural communities, revealing that the determinants of SES and social boundaries were not always created by income differences. In a small resourced-strapped community in northern California, Sherman found that the lack of financial resources lead to the valuing and trade of “moral capital”. This form of capital placed emphasis on reputation, rather than on financial wealth. Individuals and families were seen as having strong moral capital if they were able to engage in paid or subsistence work, or if they relied on family help. Reliance on government assistance or on illegal activities were seen as decreasing moral capital. Individuals could “trade” on their moral capital to receive support from others. Moral capital is an important consideration in judging how the community responds to an individual, and how the individual internalizes these perceptions.

After an exploration of the literature relating to youth identity development, influences of important adults on youth identity, and youth development in rural contexts, research questions emerged which guided the design and findings of this study.

**Research Questions**

Identity development is an interactive process that occurs between the adolescent and their surrounding environment. Influential adults in an adolescent’s life may help shape positive identities by serving as role models and helping to scaffold identity concepts. Rural contexts can shape this process by providing an additional layer of either positive or negative meaning to a low-income youth’s experiences. The literature and theoretical perspectives collected here suggest that the impacts of important adults on adolescent identity development within rural, low-income towns can be explored further. Based on the background literature, two questions emerge that guide this research study set in the small, rural community of Mountainside:

1. How is meaning constructed around “low-income youth” in a rural setting by those who interact with low-income youth, and low-income youth themselves?
   a. How do community service providers and adults who work with families and youth construct meaning around “low-income youth”?
b. How do low-income youth themselves construct meaning around “low-income youth” based on their own experiences and their understanding of community meaning?

2. How do the meanings of “low-income youth”, as well as interactions with specific important adults, influence low-income youths’ development of identity and sense of self?

These questions take a symbolic interaction approach to ask how the generalized other and development of the I/Me are affected by the social status of low-income youth, and what significance important adults play in the youths’ identity development within a rural context.
Methods

This study explored the effects of mentoring experiences on identity development for low-income youth in a rural town. The research approach taken here differs from previous approaches in a few key ways. This project takes a case study approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Zussman, 2004) to explore how social processes related to rural places and low-income youths’ identity development. Data collection included qualitative interviews with community key-informants, low-income youth, and non-familial adults identified by youth as important influences. Similar approaches have previously analyzed youths’ own experiences of their development in rural and small-town environments (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Childress, 2000; Elder & Conger, 2000) as well as community perceptions of poverty (Sherman, 2009) and community supports for families in poverty (Duncan & Coles, 1999). However, this study is unique in that it collects both community and youths’ perceptions of low-income youth and youth identity development. In this way, the context for youth identity development can be more carefully explored and the influences of important non-parental adults in this context can be better understood. The following sections discuss the community context, sampling and recruitment strategies, data collection and data analysis strategies that characterize this study.

Community Context

Mountainside, Oregon, is a rural town with a population of under 9,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). It is located in a county with a population density of roughly 50 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The school district that feeds Mountainside schools is roughly 1,000 square miles and serves 10,000 residents (Oregon Explorer, 2014), making the population density of the Mountainside school district2 roughly 10 people per square mile and qualifying it as “rural” under the Congressional Research Service’s definition (Womach, 2005).

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2 The school district is used to delineate the geographical region under study because youth respondents were recruited primarily through the school system, and some lived outside of the borders of incorporated Mountainside.
Mountainside is nestled in the side of a forested mountain range, and the white community there traces its roots to the logging boom of the second half of the 19th century. According to the local historical society, it was once a major junction on roads and railroad lines between the East and West sides of the state. The town was once filled with mills and warehouses that supported the timber industry and provided family-wage jobs for many residents.

Many families in small towns in the Pacific Northwest once relied on the timber industry for their livelihoods, however changes in the industry including mechanization and depleted natural resources have led to gradual declines in forestry jobs over the last century (Dumont, 1996). After the second world war, mechanization in the logging industry led to rapid increases in harvests, so that deforestation occurred faster than reforestation (Robbins, 2006). At the time, this rapid resource use provided stable, working-class wages that supported vast numbers of families in the Pacific Northwest. However, as over-harvesting led to reduced yields and mechanization increased further, blue-collar timber jobs began to vanish (Robbins, 2006). In the 1990s the timber industry faced an additional crisis, as protection of the spotted owl and the old growth forests it relies upon for habitat became a national focus (Doak, 1989). The industry came under harsh criticism at this time and was forced to adapt its practices to emphasize conservation and sustainable management. Many communities that once relied on timber have since placed blame for their circumstances on conservationists, claiming that they put human lives at risk to save engaged species (Robbins, 2006). However, by this time unsustainable harvesting practices and mechanization had already caused irreversible changes in the industry (Robbins, 2006). Because of these changes, logging is no longer seen as capable of providing stable employment to a wide number of families in the area; this industry has been in decline in the Northwest for at least three decades (Robbins, 2006).

Within Mountainside, the evidence of the decline of the logging industry is clear: in a central part of town near old railroad tracks, an abandoned timber mill spans several blocks. The other mill in town still functions, but at severely reduced capacity. Past attempts at bringing new industry to the town, including a reservoir designed to provide
recreational opportunities, have not succeeded in alleviating the economic stress caused by the declining timber industry (Smith & Steel, 1995). Current efforts in the community are directed at leveraging nearby recreational activities to foster tourism business in the town, but as of the time of this study none of these endeavors had yet been implemented.

Mountainside is grappling with the economic fallout of the changing timber industry that it once relied upon, and the resulting disparities that disproportionately impact certain youth and families. Table 1 presents relevant data for the community, including income and education, in comparison with state-level averages. (Data for the 2013 reporting year were most widely available, so will be used unless otherwise noted.) Average incomes in Mountainside are much lower than the state, and all poverty rates are higher. The “extreme” poverty rate, or percentage of those living on less than 50% of the Federal Poverty Line, is more than twice the statewide average. Slightly more adults are unemployed in Mountainside, and more people receive federal nutrition assistance than state averages. The 4-year high school graduation rate is much lower in Mountainside, although the 5-year graduation rate nearly catches up to the state-wide rate. (This may be due to a program that provides college credits during high school for free, while students are still enrolled in high school for a fifth year.) These graduation rates are promising, as they show that Mountainside may be catching up with the rest of Oregon. However, the percentage of college-educated adults in Mountainside is much lower than in Oregon generally, while the rate of adults without a high school diploma is slightly higher. Overall, the data on Mountainside youth and families demonstrates disadvantage relative to state averages.

Table 1: Demographic Data in Mountainside and Oregon (citations provided in footnotes).

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<tr>
<th>Demographic Data and Year</th>
<th>Mountainside</th>
<th>Oregon state-wide</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate²</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child poverty rate²</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ (Oregon Explorer, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013)
Table 2 reports on the changes in the economy and industry of Mountainside compared to state-level employment changes, and Figure 3 shows these data visually. The American Communities Survey and the 1990 U.S. Census asked individuals to self-report what industry they were in. In 1990, the most common industries were Production and Transportation (which would include factory work or trucking), Construction/Extraction/Maintenance, and Farming/Fishing/Forestry (the largest of which is Forestry in the geographic region of Mountainside.) These industries have all decreased dramatically. To take their place, Sales/Office, Service, and Managerial/Professional industries have all increased in Mountainside, as well as state wide. The state has seen a much larger increase in professional and managerial positions, while Mountainside has seen a larger increase in sales and service industry. Employment in the service industry, or sales and hospitality work, can force individuals to patch together low-paying jobs with odd hours and no benefits (Golden, 2015). Thus, the community (and the state, to a lesser extent) has lost a large number of working-class, family-wage positions and gained unstable, low-wage service and sales employment.

Table 2: Labor Share of the Market by Reported Occupation in Mountainside and Oregon, 1990 and 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production and Transportation</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction/Extraction/Maintenance</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2011)
5 (Oregon Department of Education, 2014; Oregon Explorer, 2014)
6 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990)
The picture that these data paint is one of disadvantage for the community of Mountainside. While declines in the timber and associated industries were the primary cause of the economic problems that Mountainside now faces, the town shares other problems that confront rural towns nationwide. Reductions in manufacturing and other stable middle-class “careers” have left the under-educated residents of Mountainside behind. State wide and in population centers like Portland and Salem, increases in managerial and professional careers have outpaced blue-collar positions, meaning that college degrees are increasingly valuable as the market adjusts to a post-industrial economy. However, in an isolated community like Mountainside there are few opportunities for white-collar work, leaving less stable, low-income jobs to fill in the gaps.
Based on the characteristics of Mountainside, it appears to fit into the “declining natural resources” category of the typology of four rural Americas (L. Hamilton et al., 2008). While the natural resources of the location have been historically vital to the town’s economy, the limits on the forestry industry have created at least three decades of declining jobs. The town is adjacent to natural amenities that could create tourism opportunities, but has been unsuccessful in developing these amenities. Given its current trajectory, Mountainside is in danger of becoming a “chronically poor” community, although it is currently in the process of attempting to re-define what a working wage looks like. Mountainside is suffering from a convergence of macro-level economic forces which align its characteristics with other rural communities in decline.

Sample and Recruitment

Three different groups were sampled for this research project; they are listed here by chronological order of recruitment. Group 1 includes the service providers and key informants sampled for the Growing Up Mobile research study, in which I participated as a graduate research assistant. Group 2 includes low-income youth recruited primarily through the school system. Group 3 includes mentors and non-familial important adults identified by these youth.

Group 1: Key-Informants

This study incorporated data gathered in the Growing Up Mobile in a Rural Trailer Park research project (“Growing Up Mobile,” (MacTavish, 2007), which is situated in the town of Mountainside. Specifically, data was gathered as part of a 10-year follow up to original data collection with families in rural trailer parks and community key informants. I took part in conducting many of the key informant interviews for the follow-up study, along with two other student researchers and the principal investigator, Katherine MacTavish. The rationale for including Growing Up Mobile key informant data in the current study is that these key informants have a unique perspective on the experiences of low-income youth in the community, as well as knowledge of the supports and barriers presented to these youth. Most are educated professionals who represent the middle class of Mountainside and hold information on the community-wide perceptions of low-income individuals. Their interviews help to triangulate the experiences of low-
income youth and the community perceptions of youth. The follow-up phase of Growing Up Mobile is included because it represents a similar time frame to the rest of the data in this study.

Recruitment

Potential key-informants were identified and recruited by Growing Up Mobile researchers. Researchers identified key informants based on the individuals interviewed for the first wave of the Growing Up Mobile study, as well as identifying additional non-profit, government, and business professionals through online searches. Many of the key informants were service providers at organizations offering support to low-income youth and families in the community, while others were community leaders or elected officials. Eighteen individuals were identified as potential key informants and were contacted using letters, email, and phone. Fifteen of these individuals agreed to participate in the study.

Sample

Fifteen key informant interviews were conducted for the Growing Up Mobile follow-up study between Spring and Fall of 2015. One interview was not used because the respondent was a trailer park manager and did not share insights about youth in the community. Table 3 presents a list of Growing Up Mobile key informants, their roles, as well as the pseudonym which identifies each respondent. Two of these individuals were identified by youth respondents as important adults (see Table 4).

Table 3: Key Informant Identifying Characteristics and Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (approximate)</th>
<th>Community Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mid 50s</td>
<td>Family agency staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mid 70s</td>
<td>Foster parent/agency volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mid 50s</td>
<td>Local government staff / community parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Police officer / community parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Youth pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Elementary school teacher/ community parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 In most cases, age is estimated based on life experiences and timelines that respondents provided.
Group 2: Low-income Youth

To answer the question of how low-income youth form a sense of identity, I recruited low-income youth from the community of Mountainside to participate in this study. Youth aged 15-21 were recruited in order to capture information on the identity formation and crystallization processes of middle to late adolescence (Harter, 1999). For this study, low-income was defined as either 1) a family income of no more than 200% of the 2015 Federal Poverty Level, or 2) the youth living on their own without parent support, or 3) the household relying on some form of government or local assistance (possible sources listed included TANF, SNAP, use of local food bank or a local clothing bank, or support from family and friends to pay for rent, utilities, food, and clothing.)

Recruitment

Recruitment flyers included age and income requirements for the study, and also offered youth a $25 research incentive for their participation in the form of a gift card to a local store of the youth’s choice. A screening guide was also used to ensure that youth met age and income requirements before beginning study participation. All recruitment and screening materials and procedures were approved by Oregon State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Recruitment flyers were handed out by key informants, teachers, and service providers in the community. I asked key informants and contacts in the community to distribute flyers to youth whom they thought might meet the income requirements. Throughout the project youth and adult respondents were also asked to pass along recruitment flyers to others they might know. I also visited 13 classes at the school to
describe the study and hand out flyers in person. In the first class I visited, I asked interested youth to write down contact information, but I soon realized that this was not a strategy that would work with the time I had in each class. Once youth received recruitment materials, they were asked to call, text, or email me to express interest. I then filled out a screening form with them either over the phone or (in three instances) in person, to assure that they met the age and income requirements, and to schedule interviews. Thirty-three youth expressed interest via sign-up sheets and by contacting me directly. Nineteen youth sustained contact with me in order to follow through with the screening process, and 17 youth completed assent forms. One youth recused himself after the first interview, and his data were not used.

Sample

Sixteen youth participated in two interviews and comprise the final sample of low-income youth. Table 4 includes the pseudonyms of youth and their identified mentors (described in Group 3, below).

Table 4: Identifying characteristics and mentors for youth participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Identified mentor/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(not used)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wendy, Sally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>David, Tina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Wendy, neighbor, homeroom teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Vince, Rob (KI), teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Rob (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ranch owner, older friend, Jr. High teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Matthew, teacher, teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Counselor, teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izzie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Wendy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Cynthia, band teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tina, Shelly*, Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>David, Key Club leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Aaron, Mark (KI) and Rob (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Bud, Shelly*, Choir teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Youth pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Youth pastors, online school teacher, boss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note that some of these youth were connected to one-another, which was influenced by snowball sampling. Nicole and Gwen were roommates, and Gwen was recruited into the study through Nicole. Rose and Diana were friends, and Alex and Rose were ex-romantic partners. At the time of recruitment, both Dianna and Alex knew of Roses’ study participation, but contacted me separately after I visited their classrooms. Kelly and Paige were sisters and were interviewed within the same week, but I did not realize their connection until their second interviews because each contacted me individually. To my knowledge those are the only connections between youth participants, though some may have been acquaintances (for example, Alex, Cara and Michael were all in Theater, but none mentioned knowing or being friends with one-another.)

Table 5 provides demographic data for the youth respondents. All youth were at least 16 years old and no older than 18, meeting the age requirements for the study and representing middle to late adolescence. The majority were female and white, with four reporting their race as a mix of Native American and white. All youth were enrolled in some form of education including high school, alternative high school programs, and GED programs operated by either the high school or the community college. GPAs trended toward the middle of the scale. There was a broad range of number of years spent in Mountainside, from two years to the youths’ entire life; most youth had spent the majority of their life in Mountainside. Most also had small or medium sized households; all but one youth lived with fewer than six other people. Over a third of the youth worked regular hours for pay.

Table 5: Demographic data for youth respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>μ=16.9, SD=.77</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>11 (68.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed (Native American/White)</td>
<td>4 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: Enrolled in high school/equivalent</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0-2.5</td>
<td>5 (31.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-3.5</td>
<td>9 (56.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5-4.0</td>
<td>1 (6.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Mountainside</td>
<td>μ=10.56, SD=5.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number in household</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>11 (68.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>1 (6.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours working per week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (62.5 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-30</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The screening process described above meant that all youth reported falling into lower socio-economic status categories by some measure, either income, living situation, or presence of support sources. However, IRB requirements meant that the screening form was not used as data, so the characteristics of youth which identified them as low-income have to be inferred from demographic surveys and youth interviews. Many youth were unable to report their income at the time of taking the demographic survey, so income data were not reliable (see Figure 2). Six of the youth reported not living with their parents at the time of the interview, including four who lived independently from any family (see Figure 3). Thirteen of the youth reported knowledge of their household receiving support from outside sources, with the most prevalent support source being SNAP (see Figure 4.)

Figure 2: Yearly Household Income Reported by Youth.
Multiple support sources could be identified by each respondent. Sources listed are in addition to paid work.
**Group 3: Youth-identified Mentors**

Group 3 was sampled through snowball techniques in order to recruit the individuals whom youth participants identified as their mentors. This enabled the recruitment of “natural mentors” (Rhodes et al., 2006) and important adults for youth respondents, rather than targeting specific roles in the community. Youth were asked to identify their most important adult relationships, and provide that person or persons with study recruitment materials. Some youth identified individuals already included in the key informant sample; these adults were not interviewed a second time due to time constraints. Youth provided their adult mentors with a letter from me explaining the study and asking them to participate. I also sent these letters directly to each adult identified if I could reach them. Some adults never responded or failed to arrange a time to meet after multiple attempts. Table 6 provides a list of Group 3 respondents, the youth who identified them as a mentor, and their roles in the community.

Table 6: Mentor Identifying Characteristics, Youth(s) Mentored and Community Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Youth(s) mentored</th>
<th>Community role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bud</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Teacher/club leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Alex, Michael</td>
<td>Teacher/club leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>(youth dis-enrolled)</td>
<td>Special ed. teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Alex, Luke</td>
<td>Teacher/coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vince</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>Teacher/club leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Ben, Jared</td>
<td>Special ed. teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample**

All adults in group 3 self-identified as white. Five reported a household income over $60,000; two reported household incomes of between $40,000 and $60,000; one reported a household income of between $30,000 and $40,000. Six reported a graduate degree, one reported a bachelor’s degree, and one reported an associate’s or technical

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9 Sally was interviewed because of her mentoring relationship with the youth who left the study. Her data was preserved because it included useful insights on the community.
certificate as their highest education level. One reported receiving social security support, two reported receiving help from friends, and six reported receiving no outside support in their households.

This sample reflects the literature in some ways. Although the response rate for mentors identified in the study was low, the high rates of response from adults associated with the school is consistent with findings that, for low-income youth, connections to community organizations are more rare than connections to school teachers (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001). Close relationship with school teachers can enhance youths’ educational attainment and school attachment (Black et al., 2010). Additionally, the lack of resources in rural communities means that there is a limited availability of adults to serve as coaches and volunteers (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Thus, it is representative of the rural environment that most of the adults identified in this sample serve as both teachers and club or activity leaders. These adults, being middle-income and educated professionals, also represent (along with the key informants) a perspective on the low-income youth from an outsider.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected via demographic surveys, interview transcripts, interview field notes, and researcher field notes. All data collection techniques were approved by the Oregon State University IRB; adults provided written consent and youth aged 15-17 provided written assent for their participation.

**Key Informant Interviews**

The 2015 follow-up data for key informants from the Growing Up Mobile study were used in this project. Data collected from this group took the form of audio recordings and field notes that detailed interviews and observations. Key-informant interviews focused on the role of the key informant with their organization or official position, the changes they have seen in that role and in the town at large in their time there, their experiences with low-income youth and families (both within and outside of the local trailer parks) and their perceptions of the issues and challenges that low-income youth and families face in the community. Interviews generally lasted one to 1.5 hours. Appendix A includes the full Key Informant Interview Guide.
Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) describe the process that was carried out in order to collect this data. During each interview, all researchers present took “jottings” (Emerson et al., 2011) of the descriptions of participants, the tone and content of the interview, and the setting in which it took place. We also made audio recordings of each interview in order to capture the content more accurately. After the interview, researchers refrained from discussing their reactions with one-another, and created field notes as soon as possible in order to most completely capture the data. We made an attempt to record both the sensory details of the interviews as well as including our own impressions and reactions to the respondents as. Field notes were structured in a systematic way to include: background and entering, interview content, and exiting. Writing field notes in this manner has allowed us to capture the events, tone, and content of each interview.

Participant observation (Emerson et al., 2011) was used as an additional data collection strategy. We recorded field notes about our experiences in the community, including driving around the town, eating at local restaurants, and walking between interviews. These field notes were used in the analysis to inform a more holistic view of the community.

One researcher present at each interview used the audio recording to create more detailed notes on the content of the interview, and other researchers added notes on the tone and contexts of the interviews. The field notes created using audio recordings are not verbatim transcripts, but sometimes use verbatim quotes from participants where particularly salient or emphatic responses were provided. Between three and 11 pages of field notes were written for each interview, dependent on the length of the interview. Audio recordings of each interview were maintained in the event that they needed to be reviewed.

**Youth Interviews**

Two interviews were conducted with each youth participant. Youth were given the option of meeting at a local restaurant (where I offered to buy them a beverage) or in a conference room at the school. These choices were intended to provide different levels of privacy, depending on youths’ preferences. A local restaurant was offered as a choice in an attempt to reduce perceptions of adult-youth power hierarchies (Delgado, 2006) that
might exist at the school. When youth first arrived at the interview location they were asked to review the informed consent or assent. I read through the document and asked if they had any questions. I then asked them to sign if they agreed to participate, and indicate their assent to be audio recorded. After youth signed assent forms, I asked them to fill out a demographic survey. This survey asked for information such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and socioeconomic indicators. A full list of youth survey questions is provided in Appendix B.

Interviews with youth averaged between one and 1.5 hours in length, with the second interview usually being shorter than the first. Interview 2 occurred two weeks after interview 1 when possible. Several youth said that this was helpful, because something had occurred to them after the first interview that they shared at the second. Full lists of interview questions for youth interviews 1 and 2 are provided in Appendices C and E, respectively.

Interview Topics

Youth interviews focused on the perceptions of youth relating to their community and their own identity development, and their interactions with important adults. Table 7 provides a list of interview themes, supporting research, and interview questions representing each theme for each of the youth and mentor interviews.

Table 7: Interview Questions and Related Themes and Supporting Evidence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Theme</th>
<th>Supporting Research</th>
<th>Youth Interview 1 Questions</th>
<th>Youth Interview 2 Questions</th>
<th>Adult Mentor Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General descriptions of self and community</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,2,3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,2,5,13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifts in identity, past five years</td>
<td>Kroger et al., 2010</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spark/ Identity</td>
<td>Scales et al., 2011</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10 A major exception to this was my second interview with Rose. She had not returned my calls to arrange a second interview, because of family and personal challenges. I later recruited her ex-boyfriend Alex and her friend Dianna into the study by visiting their classrooms. Alex gave me Rose’s new phone number, and I was able to schedule a second interview with her roughly two months after the first.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project/ Youth Purpose</th>
<th>DeLuca et al., 2016; Mariano &amp; Going, 2011</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible selves</td>
<td>Markus &amp; Nurius, 1986</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal power and perceived control</td>
<td>Benson et al., 2011; Borowsky, Ireland, &amp; Resnick, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2012</td>
<td>7,8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of community support</td>
<td>Benson et al., 2011</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community perceptions of low-income youth and beliefs about stigma</td>
<td>Goffman, 1959; Lamont &amp; Molnár, 2002</td>
<td>10,11</td>
<td>7,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eco map” of supportive relationships</td>
<td>Antonucci, 1986</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length, setting, and focus of adult relationships</td>
<td>Grossman &amp; Rhodes, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2006; Rhodes et al., 2006</td>
<td>13, 14</td>
<td>9,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support from important adults (affect, affirmation, or aid)</td>
<td>Antonucci, 1997</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youths’ contexts and influences on identity</td>
<td>Mead, 1934; Harter, 1999</td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self esteem</td>
<td>Benson et al., 2011</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of the Generalized Other</td>
<td>Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934</td>
<td>6,7,8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>Lerner, 2006</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring identity development processes</td>
<td>Pedersen et al., 2009; Molpeceres et al., 2012; Philip &amp; Hendry, 2000</td>
<td>1,2,3,4, 9, 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Youth identity questions focused on how youth view themselves, and their own “identity projects” (DeLuca et al., 2016) or the “spark” (Scales et al., 2011) that they invested time and energy in, and explored their “sense of purpose” (Mariano, Going, Schrock, & Sweeting, 2011). Mariano and colleagues (2011) describe youth purpose as a
“beacon” or direction to work towards, while Deluca et al. (2016) illustrate how youths’ identity projects keep them from engaging in illegal activity, and can connect them to adults if the project is institutionally supports (like an extracurricular activity.)

Identity questions also probed whether youths’ sense of identity had “shifted” in the last five years, which is a typical pattern during middle adolescence (Kroger et al., 2010). This included an exploration of youths’ “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), i.e. the well-defined version of the self should it succeed or fail at certain endeavors in the future. I attempted to explore the idea of the possible self as a goal or as something to avoid, in order to understand what influenced youth to believe that certain outcomes were more likely.

Interview questions also explored youths’ feelings about the future and their perceived sense of control over their own trajectories. Control and “personal power” are considered a positive asset for youth development (Benson et al., 2011). Low-income youth are less likely to perceive having control over their future, and may engage in more “fatalistic” and unsafe practices because of a lack of perceived control over the future (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2012). Exploring youths’ sense of control helps clarify how their low-income status might make them feel more vulnerable.

The settings and contexts of identity development and social relationships were also of interest in the design of this study. I asked youth to take me on a “virtual tour” of their day and then describe places they spent time in and avoided in the town. This question reflects the idea that identity development happens in context (Mead, 1934), and that adolescents are in the process of aligning their self-concepts across different contexts (Harter, 1999). Therefore, exploring the contexts youth find themselves in on a daily basis can help gain a more complete view of their identity. Questions also probed whether youth experienced different “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) across different contexts, and I asked them what individuals in what contexts supported or impeded positive self-identities (Harter, 1999).

Youths’ interactions with important adults and their communities were also explored. I asked youth to describe how they think the community responds to young people and their perceptions of community support, which is considered a developmental
asset (Benson et al., 2011). Questions focusing on community perceptions of low-income youth, specifically, allowed youth to provide their own ideas about low-income youth as well as what they perceived others to think. These questions are designed to implicitly and explicitly explore youths’ perceptions of the stigma (Goffman, 1959; Lamont & Molnár, 2002) that they may believe low-income youth face, while also allowing them to reflect positive views of youth and low-income youth that may be held by the community. They also explore youths’ personal interactions with stigma and whether they intentionally change their behaviors to avoid it or engage in “boundary work” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In asking about identity and community, I also included a positive youth development perspective to explore what youth believe about contribution (Lerner, 2006) and the potential of youth in their community.

In order to explore the proximal adult relationships that influence youth directly, I asked them to fill in a visual “eco map” (See Appendix D) which is modeled after Antonucci’s (1986) tool for mapping social relationships. We used the instrument to discuss their most important positive and negative adult relationships, respectively. The focus of these questions was on important non-family adults, but sometimes youth wanted to talk about family and friends, as well. Topics explored in probes included the outcomes of important adult relationships, as well as aspects of the relationship that might influence outcomes including the length (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) and setting (S. F. Hamilton et al., 2006) of the relationship, activities engaged in and the focus of the interactions (Rhodes et al., 2006). The questions probed the types of social support offered by important adults including positive affect, affirmation of self, and tangible aid (Antonucci & Sherman, 1997). I also asked explicitly about negative adult relationships, based on the finding that relationships with adults or mentors may be more influential on youths’ outcomes than positive relationships (Eby, Butts, Durley, & Ragins, 2010).

**Mentor interviews**

Mentors identified by youth were interviewed once. Mentors were interviewed in a location of their choice, including in their classroom, at a local restaurant of their choice, or (in one instance) at their house. The process for beginning each interview was similar to that described for youth interviews, including reviewing and signing informed
consent, and filling out demographic surveys. Mentor surveys differed slightly in questions about educational and professional activities. A full list of mentor survey questions can be found in Appendix F. Mentor interviews lasted between one and 1.5 hours.

**Interview Topics**

Mentor interviews focused on their perceptions of the mentoring role, perceptions of the community, and their own identity development processes related to mentoring. See Appendix G for a full list of questions from the mentor interviews; see table 7 for a list of interview themes, supporting research, and interview questions representing each theme.

Some mentor interview questions mirrored questions asked of youth about identity. Identity questions were asked of adults because the literature suggests that adult mentors go through identity development processes (Molpeceres et al., 2012; Philip & Hendry, 2000) and that mentors’ own early experiences can shape their outlooks on mentoring relationships (Pedersen et al., 2009). Mentors were also asked to describe their perceptions of community support for youth (Benson et al., 2011), and their perceptions of community stigma surrounding low-income youth (Goffman, 1959; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Mentors were also asked to describe the contexts of their interactions with youth, and important features of the mentoring relationship such as the length, setting, and activities that interactions involve (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; S. F. Hamilton et al., 2006; Rhodes et al., 2006). Finally, mentors were asked how interactions with low-income youth had changed their perceptions of low-income youth, a question which explores the bi-directional relational process of mentoring (Lerner et al., 2015) as well as the influence of youth interactions on mentors’ perceptions of the generalized other (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

**Participant Observation**

During my time in Mountainside, I audio recorded and wrote notes on my interactions and observations. These interactions and observations occurred primarily as I was recruiting for, waiting for, or leaving interviews; I did not attempt to attend events or activities outside of the scope of recruiting and interviewing study participants. However,
when I visited the schools, community agencies, or businesses, I took “jottings” (Emerson et al., 2011) and recorded audio field notes of my interactions, as well as taking field notes of the tone and setting of each interview. As I commuted home from each day of interviewing, I also recorded “memos” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) about the themes and patterns that I began to see in the data.

**Data Assembly**

Data were transformed in to written format in various ways. Youth and mentor interview data were recorded and transcribed verbatim, unless the respondent did not want to be recorded. Five youth opted out of recording and allowed me to take field notes during their interviews; for each of these interviews I took extensive notes and then wrote field notes later. Key informant interviews were transcribed by Spring of 2016, while youth and mentor interviews and field notes were transcribed by Summer of 2016.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative analysis is described as an “ongoing, iterative process that begins in the early stages of data collection and continues throughout the study” (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007, p. 1760). Writers on qualitative methodology tend to agree that within qualitative work, both theory-driven deduction and inductive analysis can and generally do take place alongside one another (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Emerson et al., 2011). In qualitative coding, a researcher’s theoretical background will often determine what themes occur to her or him. With this in mind, I carried out my analysis via constructing field notes, creating memos, and conducting open and then focused coding, during the final stage of which I returned to my own research questions to see how they fit the data.

As I conducted this analysis, I applied the concepts of *symbolic interactionism* perspectives to the data. Specifically, I sought to understand how *meaning* was created around the concept of “low-income youth”, and whether “low-income youth” became a *symbol* (Mead, 1934) for respondents. I attempted to identify whether the meanings of “low-income youth” influenced how adults, in particular, acted towards actual low-income youth (Blumer, 1969). I hypothesized that if youth take on the same *meanings* of “low-income youth” as the important adults in their lives share, it could impact how they construct their own identities. I also sought to understand how individuals in my study
were influenced by their understanding of the generalized other (Mead, 1934), and how the generalized other was created. I wanted to know how big of a role important adults play in defining the generalized other.

**Key Informant Interview Analysis**

Initial analysis of key informant data occurred first, during the spring of 2016 while I was transcribing the mentor and youth interviews. Key informant data took the form of field notes for each interview. I conducted analysis on this data with support from Dr. MacTavish and other researchers in the Growing Up Mobile research project. I first read through and created memos about the content of the interviews, focusing on how respondents spoke about low-income youth and families. This initial read-through helped me to identify salient themes (Bradley et al., 2007) of the key informants relating to the guiding question of descriptions of low-income youth and families. I then created participant summaries (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) for each key informant that applied the research questions to the data. Based on these summaries and the research questions, I created an “axial” coding system (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and applied this to the data in order to conduct preliminary analysis and explore key informants’ themes. The final analysis of the Growing Up Mobile key informant data occurred after I developed my final coding system, discussed below.

**Youth and Mentor Interview Analysis**

Because I conducted all data collection for the youth and mentor interviews, I was able to conduct my own analysis for this data from an early stage. Field notes are the first data collected, and they are also the first way in which analysis takes place (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Field notes often contain both descriptive and contextualized observations, as well as ideas and connections that represent the researcher beginning to explore analytical themes. Jottings (Emerson et al., 2011) during audio recorded interviews helped me to remember the salient themes of each interview and enabled me to reflect youths’ words back to them during the second interview.

As I collected interview data I also recorded and wrote memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to explore my preliminary thoughts and analysis of the data collection process and findings. Corbin and Strauss point out that analysis happens in the minds of
researchers as they are in the field and working with their data, so it is important to jot these ideas down in the form of memos to save them for later and deeper analysis. The observations and memos I recorded about my interactions with the youth, adults, and community members of Mountainside formed my preliminary analysis, and some of the themes presented here can be traced back to those early memos.

After collecting and compiling all data, I read through each transcript in order to immerse myself in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and record early themes (Bradley et al., 2007), or recurring ideas and unifying statements about the data. This portion of the analysis was largely inductive, as I looked for overarching, unifying concepts shared by the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Next, I created participant summaries (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). These summaries included information about the interview, the salient themes of the interview grouped into ecological contexts (self, family, important adults, school, activities, work, friends, and community), and how the information from the respondent addressed the research questions. This systematized approach allowed me to summarize and synthesize my understanding of the participants’ viewpoints and narratives which served to answer the research questions. (See Appendix H for the template used for youth participant summaries.) The incorporation of the research questions into the participant summaries made this stage of analysis deductive (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), or guided by a research question/hypothesis. Bloomberg and Vlope (2008) suggest that doctoral candidates should approach their qualitative data with research questions in mind, in order to focus on findings relevant to their field of study.

After creating participant summaries for each of the groups of respondents, I reviewed their contents and developed a coding system based on my summaries of how each participant’s narrative answered the research questions. Applying codes (Bradley et al., 2007) to data enables the researcher to carefully categorize data based on overarching themes. My approach to the coding system incorporated a mix of deductive and inductive reasoning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The initial coding system was grouped by research question. Within each research question I first developed a list of themes and patterns in the data. I then summarized each theme by using a single word or phrase to create a code.
Codes were then grouped conceptually around major codes to create a nested organizational coding system. See Appendix I for a list of all the major and sub-codes in the final coding system.

Some major codes were based on my prior understanding of the literature, including theoretical lenses relating to stigma, agency, role modeling, resilience and positive youth development. Other themes developed emergently through a more inductive process, as I aggregated the data and made connections across participants’ stories. These emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) included findings about family, conflicting norms, gender, compassion, school, community background, mental health, abuse and neglect, adultification, and adult behaviors. Sub codes were nested within these major codes to further deconstruct and categorize participants’ responses. The list of major codes and sub codes was largely complete before coding began, however during the coding process the code list underwent some minor changes and adjustments, as I reconsidered how codes fit together.

I used Max QDA software to facilitate the coding process. The final coding system was applied to youth and mentor interviews, key informant interviews, field notes, and memos. After applying codes to all of my data, I again stepped back from the data to consider what story or major themes were being described. The principal investigators for both of these research studies, Dr. Richards and Dr. MacTavish, were instrumental in helping me to identify overarching themes that aligned my findings to the literature. These overarching themes help to organize the results section.

Results

The research questions for this study served as a guiding framework for the analysis, and a few major themes emerged which organize the results and answer these questions. The research questions, again, were:

1. How is meaning constructed around “low-income youth” in a rural setting by those who interact with low-income youth, and low-income youth themselves?
   a. How do community service providers and adults who work with families and youth construct meaning around “low-income youth”?
   b. How do low-income youth themselves construct meaning around “low-income youth” based on their own experiences and their understanding of community meaning?
2. How do the meanings of “low-income youth”, as well as interactions with specific important adults, influence low-income youths’ development of identity and sense of self?

The first theme that emerged was that the low-income youth in this sample reported many strengths and positive capacities in their own lives, and seemed to hold largely positive self-identities. The development of these strengths and capacities were supported by important adults, both within their immediate families, and in mentoring and community roles.

The second major theme was that, while these youth identified their own strengths, the adults in this sample held more pessimistic views of low-income youth at large. Adults and youth reported on the conflicting norms that surrounded low-income youth, which served to separate them from upper-income members of the community. Adults often portrayed low-income youth as problematic in the community, and expressed stigmatizing views of the activities that low-income youth engage in. They also expressed pity and concern for low-income youth, especially in terms of youths’ home lives and families. Youth also echoed these subthemes, sometimes using stigma to “other” and distance themselves from the stereotypes about low-income youth, and sometimes reporting how they interacted with their own stigmatized statuses.

The third major theme showed how the stigma and pity held by adults was reflected back onto youths’ experiences and their identity development. While youth held positive self-concepts, many of them had past experiences that constrained their futures. Youths’ stigmatized positions in the community, and the subsequent lack of support they experienced throughout their lives, caused many to disengage from community institutions and activities as they grew up. Because of this disengagement, they now lack critical supports as they enter the transition to adulthood.

Subsequent sections explore each of these themes in detail. The first section explores the positive strengths and healthy capacities that youth incorporate into their own identities, and how adults talk about and support these capacities. The second section explores adult and community views of youth which incorporate conflicting norms, stigma, and pity. The third section explores youths’ sense of their constrained
Youth identify healthy capacities that they felt they had developed over time. They also identified ways that important adults in their families and in mentoring relationships have supported them to develop these strengths and capacities. The strengths and supports youth identified mapped conceptually onto the “Six C” model of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005), as well as the concept of resilience in human development (Masten, 2015). Table 8 lists the codes that contributed to the development of this theme by respondent. Each of the subsections below describes these codes and themes in depth.
Table 8: Coded Segments in Youth and Adult Interviews relating to Youths' Positive Strengths and Capacities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>College: “Skills to go”</th>
<th>College: “Worth it”</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Pushing</th>
<th>Praising</th>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Transparency</th>
<th>Caring</th>
<th>Contribution potential</th>
<th>Contribution Outcomes</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Resilient processes on resilience</th>
<th>Resilient Stories</th>
<th>Adult influences</th>
<th>Building Character</th>
<th>Resilience</th>
<th>Resilient Role Models</th>
<th>Supportive Adults</th>
<th>Supportive Family</th>
<th>Surrogate Family</th>
<th>Community Supports</th>
<th>Community Supports</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor Count</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key informants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Youth: Alex, Ben, Cara, Dianna, Elizabeth, Gwen, Helen, Izzie, Jared, Kelly, Luke, Michael, Nicole, Olivia, Paige, Rose

Mentors: Aaron, Bud, Cynthia, David, Sally, Tina, Vince, Wendy

Key informants: Ann, Barb, Dan, Gary, Kathy, Linda, Mark, Mary, Matthew, Richard, Rob, Sandy, Shirley, Steve
Support for Positive Youth Development.

Youth spoke about how their experiences with adults in the community lead to positive developmental outcomes. The descriptions that youth gave about their positive traits and capacities mapped conceptually onto Lerner’s Six C model (Lerner et al., 2005) which includes confidence, competence, character, connection, caring, and youth contribution.

Confidence and Global Self-esteem

The ways in which youth spoke about and demonstrated confidence included labeling themselves as being confident or self-assured, feeling a sense of control over their lives, having firm goals and a feeling that they would succeed, and not fearing judgment. Thirteen youth spoke about adults supporting their development of confidence. Youth described how adults pointed out positive things about them, helped them see that they had options, and encouraged them to follow their dreams. Adults also supported youth specifically with praise, consistency, and emotional support.

For example, Elizabeth portrays two different adults who serve as sources of confidence in her life. At home, she lives with her grandmother, who is a consistent and emotionally supportive figure for her. She describes how her grandmother provides moral support: “I’m constantly down on myself, and it drives her absolutely crazy. I get yelled at about it all the time. But in a good way….it’s kind of like, someone cares, you know. Someone’s there for you.” Her grandmother’s voice seems to influence her thoughts about herself, and build up her self-esteem.

Another source of confidence for Elizabeth is the owner of the ranch where she boards her horses. The ranch owner supported Elizabeth’s sense of confidence by pushing her to do what she did not think she could. Elizabeth talks about how she was afraid of horses, until the ranch owner put her on the back of one:

She kind of didn’t let me be afraid. Like, before I could freak out about having the horse trot with me, we were gone….My parents were expecting a horse to come back without me. I mean, she doesn’t really give you room to feel a certain way…to be totally honest, if it wasn’t for that push, even though most people can’t handle that kind of push, but if it wasn’t for that push I would probably still be scared of horses.
For Elizabeth, it was helpful that her grandmother served as a strong source of “nurturing” support at home, so that she could be more comfortable with “pushing” support in her extracurricular activities. Other youth echoed how multiple adults in their life provided either “nurturing” or “pushing” support, which shows the value of having multiple positive adult influences and mentors outside of the home.

*Competence in Specific Skills*

Displays of competence included youth describing their skills and talents and holding goals related to specific skills and interests. Interactions with specific adults or with programs and institutions run by adults (school, clubs, work) were sources of competence for *every* youth in the study. Youth built competence by finding success in certain subjects in school, by learning skills through hobbies and extra-curricular activities, by realizing that they can pursue educational or professional goals beyond high school, and feeling successful at work. Youths’ long term goals were not always aligned with their current competencies. For example, Michael expressed a high level of competence in theater, but wanted to be a neurosurgeon, and Izzie felt competent in her writing but was considering occupations in welding or munitions for the National Guard.

Many of the youth did report some kind of “spark” or activity that they participated in regularly, and that was a source of identity (see table 9 for details). For eight of these youth, their primary hobby or interest connected them with institutions in which they interacted with important adults. For example, Alex, Cara, and Michael all participated in Theater which connected them to David. Helen described how her work at an after-school program is meaningful to her because she wants to study child development and her supervisors there praise her. However, half of youth respondents were not connected to important adults as part of their identity project. These youth engaged in activities like drawing or playing video games by themselves or only with peers (similar to descriptions from DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2016).

Table 9: Youths’ Self-Identified Spark/Identity Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Activities and hobbies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Theater, skating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Music, drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>Theater, Choir, Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianna</td>
<td>Hiking/wilderness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Horses, Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Work (factory), Driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Work (after-school program), TV and video games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izzie</td>
<td>Writing and drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>Video games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Band, Cheerleading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Working on car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Theater, Leadership Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Her dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>Writing daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Church</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adults supported the youths’ development of competence by opening up their eyes to new hobbies and interests, giving them praise and positive feedback, pushing them to do better, and helping them figure out educational and occupational goals towards which to strive. Kelly was a great example of how interactions with adults through school and activities supported competence for youth. She plays in the band and is also a cheerleader, and hopes to study dentistry at the University of Oregon. She described receiving constructive feedback from her band teacher and her cheerleading coach, and how they helped her feel she will continue to improve with practice. Both tell her that she is getting better, and encourage her to keep trying when she feels discouraged. Just the prior speaking with me, Kelly’s band teacher had pushed her to follow through on her commitment to the group:

He’s always telling me that I’m really good, and that I should never quit, but sometimes I threaten to quit because I get tired of it. Cause yesterday, we had to do a performance in front of the class in our groups, and I’m the only alto saxophone…and I hated it, because I hate being on stage by myself…and so I was threatening to quit band, I was like, I’m just gonna quit. He was like, no you’re not, you’re not going to quit.

Kelly went on to explain that her goal is to play in the University of Oregon pep band, which she has wanted to do for several years, since seeing them play on television. The important adults in her life make her feel that she can achieve this goal if she works hard
at it, and encourage her not to give up when she is learning new skills and finding new competencies.

Competence and Confidence in Context: Youths’ Adoption of Post-secondary Educational Goals

All of the youth in this sample were enrolled in some kind of educational activity, including regular high school classes, alternative or “credit retrieval” classes, GED programs at the high school and community college, and in one case, an online charter school. School and education was a major part of these youths’ development of identity. In some of the cases presented above, youth respondents realized competence through education, which sometimes also served to connect them to adults and teachers. One identity outcome of these two positive development domains was that some youth developed new ideas about post-secondary education. For several youth in this sample, adults at the school helped them see themselves as “college material” and envision ways to pay for education. This impacted their identities as students, their future “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and their personal level of engagement with education.

For most, but not all, of the youth in the study, college or post-secondary education was a goal. Many were supported by adults in their exploration of college as an option. Youth often described how at one point in their life (usually between junior high school and freshman year of high school) they had not seen college as an option, but that changed for many of them as they realized that they had the skills and the financial support to attend college, and that college was “worth it” or an option for them. Ten youth described coming to the realization that they were actually capable of attending college or post-secondary education. Nine youth described realizing that they had access to financial support for college, including the dual credit partnership between the high school and the community college. Finally, three youth described realizing that college was “worth it” or a good option compared to the other options they had for working after high school because of their interactions with important adults.

Several youth mentioned that high school counselors and the school’s college and career guidance counselor in particular were influential in their exploration of college options. Mountainside high school has a system where students must set post-secondary
goals, and they receive guidance and support on planning to achieve these goals. For many, this process helped them realize that they could apply for federal financial aid and scholarships because of their low-income status. In my field notes, I recorded how Olivia described her post-secondary goals. She wants to major in business and attend a two or four year college. She said she developed this goal only “very recently” because she did not think she had the skills or money to go to college previously. She says the career guidance counselor, Shelly, has helped her apply for scholarships and find a career path. Olivia was one of the higher-achieving, more engaged students in the sample, but her identity as a student had, until recently, been confined to her high school career. Now, she sees herself as more competent at academics and as more confident in her ability to obtain support for college.

*Character: Values and Behaviors*

Youth developed and expressed character by determining their own values (loyalty, honesty, kindness, positivity, tolerance, independence, emotional maturity, work ethic) and living up to them, taking a positive view of themselves, making decisions that would benefit their futures, and choosing their peer groups and activities carefully. Thirteen youth said that adults in their life supported their character development. Youth described important adults in their lives supporting character development by pushing them to “be a better person” or “be myself”, and by praising them for making healthy choices.

Praise and Pushing

Three youth spoke about the power of praise from important in shaping their development of character. Luke demonstrated the power of praise from adults when he told me about receiving a small amount of praise from Shelly, the career and college advisor at the school. He said that she helped him learn to care about grades and attendance, and that when the seniors did mock interviews, she told him he “did very good.” Even though he knew she repeated this to many students, this small bit of praise made him very proud. Tears came to his eyes when he spoke about this interaction. He said that Shelly makes him want to be “a person who comes to class.” This example
illustrates how small amounts of praise can stick with students and boost their sense of character and healthy behaviors.

Five youth spoke about feeling “pushed” by adults around them to make positive decisions. These positive influences came from important adults at school or in their clubs and activities. Helen described how multiple important adults support her in different ways, and how she has come to learn what to expect from the different adults around her. Ms. Smith has taught Helen’s make-up classes to help her get back on track after failing, while Ms. Jones is her guidance counselor. Helen referred to the praise and positive support Ms. Smith had provided her, which helped her finish her course work on time. However, in describing the support Ms. Jones provides, she said:

[Ms. Jones] is like, only straight forward and direct. Like, she will tell you exactly what you need to do, and if you’re doing bad, she’ll tell you that she’s not happy with you, and you’re being crappy, and you need to knock it off, haha… Like, Ms. Smith is closer to me, but I feel like Ms. Jones is there to push me harder, and doesn’t go easy. She doesn’t sugar coat it. That’s the right way to describe Ms. Jones.

Helen went on to describe how this kind of strict support makes her want to “try hard the first time” and be self-motivated in the future, so she does face the same problems with her grades again. It seems that the team-like approach that Helen has experienced, with one important adult providing support and another providing praise, has helped keep her motivated and enthusiastic about finishing her school work. She describes adopting both of these voices into her own self-concept, and wanting to push herself to do better in the future.

Mirroring these youths’ comments, six of the mentor respondents described “pushing” the youth that they worked with, while two mentors and one key informant described providing “praise” to youth. Vince self-identifies as a “hard ass”, and at least one of the youth in the study complained about him as a teacher, while others enjoyed his strict teaching style. He describes an interaction he had with a young man working at a gas station, who recognized him and said, “You were my favorite teacher! I failed all your classes, but you were the only one I learned anything from!” Vince acknowledges
that his style is not the “den mother”, and that other teachers at the school do better with emotional support and praise.

On the other side of this spectrum is Steve, who works at an after-school program. He describes revising the conduct system so that they provide more praise and rewards for good behavior. He says he wants youth to “feel that they have self-worth, to be of value and to feel of value”. Vince and Steve portray two ends of a spectrum of ways to support youth in their character development. As Vince and Helen both point out, having multiple influences from multiple sides of this spectrum may provide the best support to help youth learn how to make healthy decisions.

Negative Role Models: “I don’t want to end up like my parents.”

Ten youth described “negative role models” who shaped their positive character development through providing examples of character they disliked. Common traits that youth saw in adults around them and attempted to avoid included anger, substance use, and lack of commitment to education. Most youth named family members as negative role models, including both nuclear and extended family. For example, when asked what a bad possible future might be, Dianna cited behavioral outcomes like “getting in trouble more”, or wasting money on alcohol. When asked if this was likely, she laughed and said no, because “I don’t want to end up like my parents”. Youth sometimes said that they made the conscious decision not to interact with negative role models and bad influences, which was another demonstration of character; however some youth lived with negative influences. Many also said about negative role models that they had some good qualities and were not “all bad” people.

Ben describes his older cousin, who is in his early 20s and is into “thug life” as Ben puts it – he dropped out of school, is selling and using illegal substances, and breaking into cars. In his first interview he spoke about the depths of his cousin’s drug habit: “I've seen him in four years of doing that, I seen him twice, he almost died twice cause he passed out in his own puke. That's one reason why I don't want that to happen.” In his second interview, he elaborated on how seeing his cousin’s behavior has shaped his own outlook:
The way I see him act has pretty much gotten him nowhere except kicked out of his house and arrested more than once, so it’s kind of changed the way I act, cause I used to be the type that didn’t care, just like him, and didn’t really respect anyone. Now I, cause I’ve seen how, what it’s gotten him, I changed that, cause he’s been kicked out of his house three or four times and arrested more than four, so...I see that kind of stuff, and I try to change as fast as I could.

Ben saw a “possible self” and a negative role model in his cousin’s example. Many of the youth in the study had similar examples of how they shaped their own behavior and choices based on others’ less successful outcomes.

*Connection to Others: “Teachers are people too”*

Every youth but one described ways in which adults helped them feel more connected to the town, or feel a sense of belonging. Most youth spoke about feeling supported or accepted by adults in a general way. Many youth also described adults in their lives who supported them to participate in community and school activities, by being role models, encouraging participation, or providing concrete support including transportation (an important support for youth from low-income families). For example, Paige told me that another family had just offered to pay for her sister’s
t equipment and fees for cheerleading. The other family also offered to pay for the girls’ school books, dance lessons for Paige, and Christmas presents for their whole family. She said that this made her feel like “I’m getting a connection to [Mountainside] a little bit” because she felt more supported by the community.

Six youth spoke about adults who were able to enhance the youth’s sense of connection by being transparent and “humanizing” themselves. Because of these mentoring relationships, some youth now felt that adults were easier to approach and relate to. By making themselves available and accessible to youth, mentors helped youth realize that other adults around them were also available for help and support. Nicole explains how getting to know her teachers Mark and Rob at the alternative school

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11 Paige’s sister is Kelly, also in the study, but because Paige told me this story I am using her words.
program has been “a whole ‘nother experience‖. She explained that she likes to interact with teachers on a personal level and learn about their lives, and I asked her to elaborate:

Interviewer (I): Is that something that’s always come easy to you, or something that you kind of realized along the way?
Nicole (N): Uh, it’s something that I realized after I actually went to [the alternative school program], because they’re the only teachers that have ever put forth the effort to get to know someone personally… whenever I went there I was kind of scared, you know, I don’t know how they’re gonna feel about me being here, are they gonna judge me, kind of thing. And then no, it was just two old, happy men, that were just like, ‘Oh, hey guys, how’s it going,’ holding the door open for you, it was awesome, honestly, yeah.
I: Ok, so it made you feel more comfortable?

Nicole realized that adults were more approachable than she had previously thought, which enhanced her sense of connection and belonging because it made her more willing and able to talk to adults. Both she and Dianna referred to Rob as “like a grandfather‖, and similarly, Jared referred to Wendy, his social skills teacher, as “like an aunt.” The close connections that these youth had with their teachers led them to feel a sense of family and belonging.

Mirroring the comments shared by Nicole, eight adults (seven mentors and one key informant) described ways in which they were “transparent” with the youth they taught or mentored. For example, Tina, who teaches at the high school, describes doing cross fit and cross country running with teens, and using it as a way to bond by facing challenges together. “I’d run with them, and that’s a great way to just chat, and to talk to ‘em. You know, you’re running next to ‘em, and ‘oh my gosh, we’re gonna die. Are you gonna die? You’re not gonna die. Ok, I’ll keep going.’ ” The teens in this sample recognized when adults made themselves more accessible, and it helped them realize adults are approachable and available to help.

Expressing and Receiving Care

Youth exhibited caring by expressing compassion and concern for others, or expressing ways in which they felt cared about and supported. Eleven youth reported that adults in their life supported their development of caring and compassion. Adults
supported compassion in youth by treating them with kindness and modeling empathy for others. Seven youth reported that an important adult served as a role model by helping others in the community, or by helping the youth when they did not have to. Elizabeth expresses how grateful she is to her grandmother, and why her grandmother is a role model for her:

Interviewer: How is she a role model? What do you see about her?
Elizabeth: …She took in a child that wasn’t even hers. Took it in, raised it. And she’s a grandma, she didn’t have to do any of that for me. She did it for me because she wanted to, not because she had to… And she’s now, because of that, now she’s working two jobs, and she can’t retire for the rest of her life, because of that, and I kind of feel bad, but at that same time, I couldn’t have asked for anyone nicer.

Nicole also noted how a role model for caring has shaped her own sense of concern for others. A counselor she had in junior high school made her want to study psychology for a time, so that she could serve as a support for others in similar situations:

She actually made me want to be a counselor, in junior high. I really, like, that’s what I wanted to be… I wanted to be the person that someone can come to for answers, you know. And like, that someone could come to and talk to about their problems, instead of like, me talking about mine… I don’t talk about my problems enough, you know, so I want other people to be like – to know that there’s someone, you know, that they can come to and talk to, whenever.

Youth found role models for compassion and caring in their families and at school, and the compassion they experienced from important adults influenced them to express caring for others.

*Contribution: Giving Back and Engaging*

Some youth and adults spoke generally about the un-tapped potential of low-income youth to contribute to the community. Eight youth and nine adults described a belief in the power of young people to contribute to the community. Some of the youth mentioned an event in May where the entire high school goes out to pick up trash, and said they thought that young people could do more to beautify the community, and give back through volunteering or fundraising. Adults described youth as having creativity and potential, and three teachers also mentioned that they had seen global improvements in
their students’ pro-social peer groups, academic engagement and educational goal setting in the last few years.

Youth themselves spoke about several ways in which they contributed to their community, and every youth felt they contributed in some way: through volunteering with groups and with family, through their work or special projects that they did for the school, or through the goals that they held for future career paths that would contribute to the community. Eight youth spoke about the ways that adults supported them to contribute to their families and communities. Youth spoke primarily about opportunities they had to contribute which were created or supported by adults, and some youth also described how adults had pushed them to volunteer, or role modeled volunteering by participating with them. Three youth who were very involved with the school mentioned ways that they were able to contribute: Michael served as the president for in a service-oriented school club, Olivia helped to cater for a school event, and Cara served on a committee to make improvements to a high school building. In my field notes, I recorded that Olivia says she feels like she has had a lot of involvement in the community because of these experiences. She said that volunteering “created a positive vibe” in the community, and that it “shows older people we’re not delinquent.” Other youth also linked the opportunity (or lack thereof) to participate in community service with stigma, and mentioned contribution as a strategy for avoiding stigma.

**Resilient Processes and Outcomes for Low-Income Youth**

Several youth and adults in this sample described low-income youth in their community as having the capacity for resilience. Resilience is the capacity to overcome risk and adversity in development (Masten, 2015). Adults were hopeful about the potential successes of youth and their future capacities for resilience, while many youth had themselves already experienced resilient outcomes in their lives. Youth and adults saw ways that low-income youth in Mountainside are supported to realize resilient outcomes, through role models and support from important adults, other youth, or community members.
Perspectives of Resilience in low-income youth

Adults and youth spoke differently about how they envisioned resilience in the lives of low-income youth. For many adults, resilient outcomes were envisioned as future outcomes, in which low-income youth would eventually overcome their impoverished backgrounds and find success in work and family life. For many youth in this sample, on the other hand, resilient outcomes had already happened, and they felt they had already overcome hardship. Resilience was a part of many youth identities. The following subsections present adult portrayals of resilience in low-income youth trajectories, followed by youths’ descriptions of their own resilience and an example of youth resilience in the domain of education.

Future Success: Diamonds in the Rough

Ten adults spoke about what “success” looks like in low-income youth12, which revolved around escaping or overcoming poverty. Vince, a teacher and club leader, characterized resilient youth as “diamonds in the rough” when he spoke about students who, he felt, only saw their potential once they were in the right environments. Many adults used phrases such as being “stuck” in poverty vs. “making it out” to indicate that they thought that not being in poverty any more was a successful outcome. Several said that they did not necessarily think that “success” meant going to college or being rich, but they referred to lower-reaching aspirations including being in the work force, and being happy with one’s decisions in life. For example, Mark is an alternative high school teacher that describes seeing a high number of low-income students, as well as students with vulnerabilities such as family dysfunction and homelessness. He said the message he tries to send to students is, “if you don’t drink too much and don’t get addicted to a drug, you’ll probably be ok. You will probably live a good enough life. I’m not saying you’ll be rich, but you’ll make it.” He then laughed, saying that he has set a low bar, but that it is realistic. Mark believes his students can be “resilient” and find success by avoiding

12 Because I asked “What does success look like for low-income youth?”, this topic came up in most mentor interviews.
negative behaviors. He sees success as a potential future outcome for his students, despite the vulnerabilities that poverty creates for them.

Youths’ Resilient Identities: “I’ve been through a lot”

Many of the youth shared stories of resilience in challenges they had already overcome. Twelve youth described overcoming some hardship, including returning to school after suspensions or plans to drop out, overcoming serious mental health issues and suicide attempts, separating themselves from negative peer, partner, and family influences, and overcoming substance abuse. Nicole described herself as “strong”, and when I ask why, she said, “Cause, I’ve been through a lot.”

Two youth also spoke about “building character” as an outcome of resilience for low-income youth. They spoke about how being in poverty and in difficult circumstances can help youth build strengths and capacities. For example, Elizabeth says:

I mean, the ones who tend to be, uh, hard workers are the ones who’ve been put through hard stuff…most of them be the low class kids…either they go one way or the other. One’s the bad road and the other one, they learn how to be a hard worker, they learn how to take care of their stuff, they learn how to handle people and they know how to just buckle down and get the job done. And a lot more people need to learn how to do that.

In contrast, no adults spoke about the idea that youth in poverty might build character because of their experiences in poverty.

Resilience in Context: Educational Turn-Arounds

Many of the youth in this sample had experienced a prior period of disengagement from school, but had found ways to re-engage with education, so schooling was a part of their self-identification with resilience. Nine youth described a period early in high school where their grades dipped, they were not attending classes often, and some dropped out for a period before returning to get their GED or finish an alternative school program. Few youth identified a reason for this pattern, although in my field notes I described how Luke felt a lack of support during the transition to high school, and a lack of motivation to finish. When I asked Luke, now a senior in high school, what school was like, he said the beginning of high school was “horrible.” He was making Fs and Ds until the second trimester of his junior year, when he “turned it
around” and started getting Bs and Cs. I asked why his grades were low earlier; he replied that he was not sure, but he thinks the transition from junior to senior high school was challenging. He described feeling like he had just adjusted to junior high school when he had to transition to senior high school. He said that after this transition, he was “over it,” meaning school. He thought school was “stupid” and “didn’t see a point to it.” However, the support he has received from teachers and counselors has motivated him to try to improve his grades.

Aaron, a teacher at the junior high school, perceived there to be a lack of challenge at the high school which negatively impacted youth. He said that former students of his would visit from the high school and complain that they did not feel challenged or supported to engage in education there. He describes a former student who visited recently when her mother came for her younger siblings’ parent conferences:

We were talking about books, and then I asked her a question, ‘what do you think this means?’ and she said, ‘nobody asks me what anything means anymore!’ like, ‘I don’t know, I can’t, I haven’t figured out what anything means in a long time!’

Aaron felt that the environment at the high school was not academically challenging, and was letting talented students slip through the cracks.

The fact that some youth were able to change their trajectories by engaging with adults and institutions in their communities demonstrates that they have capacities which contribute to resilience. Clearly, however, one area in school where youth were lacking support was in the transition from junior to senior high school, and in the motivation to finish school. Whether this stems from lack of engagement in learning, lack of early realistic goal setting, or lack of safety in the high school setting is difficult to say. The school placed high emphasis on college as an option for students, but many of them did not themselves see college as a viable option until well into their high school career. This may have contributed to the high numbers of youth who went through a period of failing classes early in high school. In this sample, all youth re-kindled their motivation for school and experienced resilience in educational trajectories. However, this sample represents a relatively highly engaged and motivated group of students. It is possible that the modest amount of support offered to youth in this sample combined with their
existing psychological capacities was enough to help them re-engage with school, but that I missed representation from other youth in the community who might have disconnected from school entirely.

**Supports for Resilience**

Adults and youth also described different processes that they thought contributed to low-income youths’ resilient outcomes. Three youth mentioned ways that adults (in these cases, parents and family) supported their resilience directly through their actions. When I asked Izzie what was important to her, she said “family”, because “I have put them through a lot and they have never given up on me.” Youth described ways that they saw the adults in their families serve as positive role models for resilience, by overcoming their own barriers and sharing their stories with youth. Conversely, adults in this sample described the importance of supportive adults in helping youth achieve resilient outcomes, often with an emphasis on overcoming vulnerabilities in the family context. The trend of “surrogate family” in helping youth respondents cope with homelessness serves as an example of how non-parental adults supported youth resilience. Youth and adults also both spoke about how the mutual supports that they saw and experienced low-income youth providing to one-another supported youth resilience. Finally, youth and adults also both described community supports that related to resilience, including help from organizations and agencies.

**Role Modeling Resilience**

Among youth, it was common to identify that adults had supported their resilient outcomes through role modeling. Nine youth described resilient adults or older people; for all nine these role models came from within their families. Four of these youth mentioned adult siblings whose resilient outcomes were inspiring. Siblings were important role models because they had often experienced the same household challenges as the youth in the study. Cara described how she looked up to her older brother and sister, because they had pursued higher education, formed families, and seemed to have “made it” in life despite her family’s poverty. She describes how her brother attained a bachelor’s degree in theology, by applying for scholarships at a state university. Cara’s siblings also both deal with anxiety, so seeing what they achieved helped her handle her
own mental health issues. Their examples help her push through school and work on her mental health challenges.

Seven youth listed parents as models of resilience, as well. Many described how they saw their parents as overcoming difficult situations. Three youth mentioned parents with substance use issues who had found sobriety, and three described single parents or guardians whom they saw as strong and capable. Paige explains why she looks up to her mother:

She’s a single mom of three, sometimes she takes on other people’s kids, too, which makes it terrible, but she – she’s like my mom and my dad… that’s why she’s like a big role model to me, because I guess, like I said last time, if she can do it, I know I can do it. Paige has found in her mother a strong role model for resilience, which will hopefully help her overcome her own anxiety and depression issues and impoverished home life. For many of these youth, even though they may have challenging circumstances and home, they also see models of resilience in their family members.

Supportive Non-familial Adults

Four adults spoke at different points in the interview about their belief that supportive adults can help youth develop resilience, and noted that having a positive relationship with an adult and getting a “step up” could help youth escape poverty. In each case, adult respondents spoke about support coming from outside of the youths’ birth family. Barb has been a foster parent for “hundreds and hundreds” of youth in Mountainside over several decades. When I asked what Barb thinks has allowed some of her foster children to do well, she chuckled and said emphatically, “support!” Two adults also mentioned the work of Dr. Donna Beegle, a poverty educator who had given a local talk recently. They echoed Beegle’s message that, for youth in poverty, sometimes breaking ties with family and forming stronger connections with mentors provides the best chance at success (Beegle, 2007).

Homelessness and Surrogate Family

Six youth in the study had experienced homelessness in some form. One youth described living on the streets for a time when she ran away from home, but for the rest homelessness occurred in the family context. Four adults (one mentor and three key
informants) also described youth homelessness they had witnessed in Mountainside. Mark, the alternative high school teacher, noted that in 2013-14 he had eight homeless youth, and in 2014-15 he has three. He also noted that for most of these students, it is difficult if not impossible for them to finish school because of all of the other stressors they experience in life. Other adults described the visibility of low-income youth in the community, and perceptions of a lack of support for homeless youth (as well as for homeless families). Two youth also described homelessness in peers, rather than in their own experiences. For adults and for youth describing homelessness in youth, this theme was associated with compassion and pity for these youth. However, family homelessness was also sometime a stigmatizing trait, as it was a marker of family instability.

In this sample, most youth experiencing homelessness left their family of origin to find shelter in another house. Five of the youth in the study described having to leave their own families at one time before turning 18. Two were currently living together as roommates, one was living with her ex-boyfriend’s mother, and two more had lived with friends for a time while their parents were homeless. Three youth participants described how their friends had come to stay with them for periods of time, and I overheard a girl at lunch offering another girl a place to stay at her house. Some of the youth in this sample were quite familiar with homelessness, and if they had not themselves experienced it they were likely to have friends who had.

The surrogate families and non-parental important adults who took some of these youth in made a large positive impact on their lives and their resilient outcomes. Three of the youth in this sample lived with non-family adults for some period while their parents were unable to support them, and three more had families who were willing to take in other teens. This trend reveals a strong sense of mutual support among the families of Mountainside, and a strong concern for youth among low-income families and parents.

Mutual Support

Three youth and five adults mentioned the idea that low-income youth support one-another, which helps them to be resilient. Some adults recognized that youth support one-another in challenging times. Tina, a teacher and sports coach, describes low-income youth as “the group that accepts anything.” Cynthia explained that she believes she sees a
lot of low-income youth on the Cheerleading squad she coaches: “I tend to get a lot of low-income kids, and I think it’s because cheer is not... one of those big popular kid things [in Mountainside]”. She added that she sees the girls on the squad helping one-another: “I don’t know if it’s just a girl thing, but they’re pretty good about taking care of each other, like sharing clothes, or, you know, whatever, pulling each other in”. Similarly, youth participant Izzie explained she believes that some adults think all high school students are “drug dealers”, but said, “we’re all just close to each other”. For example, she described how, when someone has food stamps, they buy food for friends and bring it back to class. She thinks teachers might see this as wasteful, but she sees it as treating friends like family.

Community Supports

Some youth and adults described ways in which the community as a whole supported low-income youths’ resilience. Ten youth, all eight mentors, and thirteen adults mentioned community supports for low-income youth. These supports included the local school system’s universal free breakfast and lunch program, free or sliding-scale electives and sports activities, and the local network for families in poverty, called the Youth Services Team (YST). Respondents also named community programs and organizations like local churches, the local Boys and Girls Club, and local agencies like the Food Bank as the most supportive organizations for low-income youth and families. Some respondents described counselors at the school and the alternative school programs as major supports for non-traditional low-income students. Many also noted a community-level interdependence that they observed in Mountainside, which they thought supported low-income youths’ resilience.

Gwen spoke often and fondly of the supports she had received in Mountainside, and how they contributed to her sense of resilience. She mentioned a speech she gave at the school about receiving a food box from the school food drive, and receiving wood rounds from the woodshop teacher to heat her house. Having lived in a larger town for a time as a young teenager, Gwen said that she preferred Mountainside because she perceived the community as more friendly. She said that her experiences of support shaped her sense of reciprocity:
I am not ashamed to need help, and when I think about the people that helped me, it makes me wanna help them, and be nice to them as well, so living in a home community like this can actually help.

Gwen shared the perception that community connections in Mountainside contributed to her sense of being supported, as well as to her positive outcomes.

**Summary of Youths’ Positive Strengths and Capacities**

The youth in this sample experienced many positive sources of identity development. Youth explained how adults around them supported their development of confidence and competence, especially through educational engagement. They also experienced adult influences on their development of character, connection, and contribution. Youth described several ways they had developed resilience, and adults in youths’ families and communities supported this resilience. It was clear that, in this sample, many youth held generally positive outlooks on life and had many positive ideas about their own self-identities. However, when asked how they would describe low-income youth, generally, both youth and adults held more negative and mixed views and participated in stigmatizing this group as a whole.

**Norms and Stigma in the Definitions of Low-Income Youth**

While all of the youth in this sample identified positive strengths and capacities in their own lives, these capacities were often overlooked when adults spoke about youth, and when youth were asked to describe low-income youth as a group. General descriptions of what respondents believed to be the realities of low-income youth, and respondents’ feelings about low-income youth, were tinged with stigma. Respondents’ gave conflicting reports of community norms and values, which impacted how youth saw themselves as fitting into community. Participants described ways that community members stigmatize low-income youth through identifiers, assumptions, and granting youth agency (or lack thereof) in their actions and behaviors. Adults and youth also sometimes spoke with compassion or pity about the experiences of low-income youth, which was not always perceived as helpful to youth themselves. Table 10 lists the codes that contributed to the development of this theme by respondent using them. Each of the subsections below describes these codes and themes in depth.
Table 10: Norms and Stigma in Youth and Adults' Descriptions of "Low-Income Youth"

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There was much discussion from respondents about what is “normal” and the community norms for families and youth in Mountainside. Youths’ and adults’ descriptions of community norms were grouped primarily around two primary domains: income-based norms, and gendered norms. Both of these sets of norms and values appear to impact the identity and experiences of low-income youth.

**Income-based norms**

The sample for this study included educated professionals in the community, as well as low-income youth themselves. However, there was not a clear division in how youth and adults saw the community. Both youth and adults shared conflicting views on how income-based norms shape their social environments in the town. Two different ideas emerged regarding norms: the first is that being low-income is fairly “normal” in Mountainside; the second is that there are “two Mountainsides”, and that lower and higher income groups rarely mix. Additionally, several adults mentioned that, since working with impoverished youth and families, their idea of what “normal” looks like has changed.

**Low Income is Normal: “The armpit of Oregon”**

When asked whether low-income youth faced problems that were different than other youth in the community, many youth and adults shared perceptions that because the whole community is low-income, the experiences of low-income youth are normalized in the town. Five youth, seven mentors, and seven key informants echoed this sentiment. A few of the youth respondents did not perceive that low-income youth experienced different pressures and challenges than other youth in the community. Others compared the community to other towns they had lived in or visited, and characterized Mountainside as a generally disadvantaged community when compared to wealthier places. Some adults shared stories about their personal realization that economic challenge was common in the town. Tina shares a story about a popular, outgoing boy who (she later discovered) slept in the same room as four younger siblings, causing him difficulty in finishing his homework. It made her realized that low-income youth are
interspersed in all populations, in all groups” and that even kids who appear to be popular can be hiding economic disadvantage.

Respondents also spoke about how they perceived the families of low-income youth to experience economic challenges. Three youth and eight key informants spoke about the barriers to financial stability that many lower-income families faced. Much of this discussion revolved around the lack of middle-class jobs since the closures and labor reductions at local lumber mills and manufacturing plants. This discussion is primarily present in the key informant interviews because these interviews asked more questions about the overall demographic characteristics of the town, rather than more personal-level interactions with low-income youth. For example, in an interview with Mary, a staff member at a local agency supporting people in poverty, she said this about low-income community members: “There are those people who are like, ‘Those people should just get a job’, and the question is, where? Mountainside is the armpit of Oregon for job availability”.

A few adults spoke in broad terms about the mentality of the community, based on historical facts and their own feelings about the town. Dan, a city administrator, said that he believes that Mountainside has a “can-do attitude”, and that people may seem and “resistant to change”, but he believes this comes from a sense of independence and a “don’t tell us we can’t do because we’ll show you we can’ attitude”. Richard, the owner of a local business, echoes this sentiment, labeling the town as having a “bootstraps mentality”. He adds that he believes that substance abuse may be prevalent in the community because, in the days when the mill was active, people used alcohol and other substances to relax after hard work. “This is an old logging culture, work like dogs for six days a week and come in and get drunk and everybody just looked the other way. They had a hard life, they worked hard, they played hard.” Richard and Dan’s remarks demonstrate how some respondents believe in a strong working-class mentality in the community.  

Two Mountainsides: “No middle class in Mountainside”

More youth and adults spoke about cultural and physical barriers between the wealthy and the poor in Mountainside. If divisions between the rich and the poor exist in
a small town, community members on different sides of this divide may be more likely to “other” and distance one-another, meaning low-income youth may be less likely to make positive connections with the educated professionals working in school and service agencies (Duncan & Coles, 1999). It is relevant to a study on youth identity development to see whether interactions between classes within the community serve to restrict youths’ experiences and limit their interactions with adults.

Nine youth, three mentors, and 11 key informants spoke about a divide between the classes, and how this experience affected youth. When asked how he would describe the town, Vince said there is “…no middle class in Mountainside… it is, demographically, one of the highest millionaires per capita of any place in Oregon, and the highest poverty rate of anywhere in Oregon.” Some youth and adults described the town as a “logging town” and mentioned the local families who have made money in logging and became wealthy.

In my field notes for Alex, I recorded his reaction to the question, “what do you think of when I say ‘low-income youth’?” He said that he thinks of his friend, whose family is low-income and lives in a “crappy house”. He says there are two kinds of houses in Mountainside, either “run down dumps” or “expensive houses”. He adds that there is a fine line between rich and poor in Mountainside, and when “poor kids” like his friend cannot afford new clothes he thinks people look down on them. He perceives that the markers of low income are apparent, and that there are definite divisions between the rich and the poor here.

Some teachers also pointed out how economic barriers can impact school achievement, and how these problems are intensified over time for youth. Two teachers spoke about how, at the high school, they see that differences in academic achievement are often also split along income lines. Kathy, a teacher and mother, spoke about her experiences with preschool (with her own children), and how Head Start was the only option for low-income families, but their academic preparation was not as good as a more expensive, private preschool. This disadvantage starts early and compounds, as Vince notes, “They have two tracks, honors classes, and regular classes. But it’s social-economic[sic].”
If youth identify themselves as low-income, have the experience of being “tracked” into lower-achieving groups at the school, and perceive a divide between the poor and the wealthy, they may struggle to reach out to higher-SES adults in the town. They also may miss out on relationships with higher-SES peers if their social circles are limited to other low-income youth. Furthermore, this “divide” could affect adults’ willingness to reach out to low-income youth, if they perceive lower-income families to have different norms and values from their own. If social barriers prevent positive social networks, it could be detrimental to the positive identities and resilience of low-income youth.

Reconsidering What “Normal” Looks Like

Some adults also spoke about their own experiences with poverty, and how those shaped their current perspectives on low-income youth. Only two mentors mentioned personal histories of poverty in their own families, and three others mentioned times in their childhood or early adulthood where they saw the effects of poverty in peers or the community. Four mentors and five key informants reported that their work with low-income youth and experiences in Mountainside had changed their views on poverty and impoverished people. Sally, a special education teacher, describes how her perception of “normal” has changed since working with her population of high-needs, learning disabled and autistic youth at the school:

… my way of thinking about things has changed… I grew up middle-income, and there was always food, and I had both parents, although they fought like cats and dogs, they both lived in the house…It’s changed the way that I think about what normal looks like. Cause normal for me was nothing – I mean, what these kids consider normal is 11 people in one bedroom.

Sally describes a realization that the circumstances that young people grow up in shape what they think “normal” looks like. She demonstrates how she and others came to the realization that, in a rural, impoverished town, some youth might not have experienced anything but poverty.
Gender Norms: Strong girls and Boys in Black

There were a few instances of respondents describing interactions between gender norms and youth development in Mountainside. Among the youth, three girls described ways in which their families or teachers seemed to hold traditional gender role expectations, and how they felt others tried to limit their behaviors based on gender roles. For example, Dianna describes her opinions of her grandma’s traditional views: She believes that women are supposed to stay at home and clean while the guy goes out and pays for the bills and stuff. So, I don’t really like that. That’s kind of one thing I really hate about my grandma. Like, that’s wrong.

When I asked Izzie, “What has shaped your goals?” she said that one thing is “not wanting to fall into ‘normal’.” She added she thinks a lot of women take female dominated jobs, and men take male-dominated jobs. She explained that her family told her that she could not “do” cars and metal shop, that they thought she would hurt herself, but this has not stopped her in pursuing these interests.

None of these girls seemed to feel limited by traditional gender roles. Rather, they seemed to feel that it gave them something against which to rebel and form a non-gender conforming identity. Dianna took up softball and loved it, and spoke about choosing to live with her boyfriend against her grandmothers’ wishes; Gwen spoke about her love of cars and how not wanting to feel incapable or helpless has pushed her to learn more about them; Izzie spoke about her enjoyment in metal shop has led her to pursue working in munitions or welding for the National Guard. For each of these girls, the message of feminism has out-weighed messages about gender norms, and they see being a strong, confident woman as a goal to live up to.

Among adults, the discussion of gender was focused on males, rather than females. Four adults described ways that boys seemed to be lagging behind their female peers, in educational and professional attainment. David described the “boys in black” in the classes he teaches, who wear black and seem to be disengaged academically and socially. Aaron described the masculine script he sees boys engaging, and the “anti-intellectualism” that seems to accompany it:

There’s stereotypes, tons and tons of stereotypes about, you know, the Mountainside, masculine, macho-type male. Um, you know,
Aaron expressed concern for this viewpoint, and shared his own counter-example of being a teacher who enjoys reading and discussing literature as well as hunting and the outdoors.

Key informants Sandy and Linda shared stories about the experiences of growing up and living in Mountainside that also supported the idea that gendered scripts exist in the community. Sandy said she thinks that many of the boys she works with at the school are more connected to the natural environments around Mountainside and prefer classes like Metal and Wood Shop at the high school. She thinks, however, that they have a harder time finding successful careers in these fields and do not have the academic records to attend college.

Linda, now a police officer, spoke about the messages that she and her peers received when they were growing up, 20 to 30 years ago:

Growing up there were very strong scripts: if you were a male, you were going to go work in a mill. If you were female, you would either marry a logger and have a lot of kids, or if you were smart you would go to college. College wasn’t the big push, but that changed in the 90s.

Linda’s remarks explain how the male script might have evolved into an anti-intellectual message, if higher education was seen only as an alternative for people who were not physically able to work in the logging industry (i.e., women). Regardless, the result seems to be that boys have dis-engaged from school at a higher rate than girls, while girls explore “strong woman” scripts and strive to break down stereotypes.

**Stigma and “Othering” Low-income Youth**

Stigma, stereotyping, judgments and assumptions about low-income youth were common themes in this sample. These ideas were often used in respondents’ descriptions of how they think others in the town see low-income youth. Youth and adults respondents also sometimes themselves expressed stigmatized views of low-income youth. Vince, a
teacher, relates the common perception that many in the community look down upon low-income people:

Vince (V): I hadn’t heard this term, except on movies, until I moved back up here. – “I’m not racist, but” – I hear that -
Interviewer (I): In Mountainside?
V: All the time! And it’s – “Oh, I’m not being prejudice, but…”
I: Yeah. And who are they talking about? Because there’s not a lot of racial and ethnic diversity there?
V: It operates the exact same way on the socio-economic class.
I: Yeah, with income?
V: They see the poor as, I gotta be honest, as a racial slur.

Respondents described the evidence that is used to profile low-income or high-risk youth, assumptions that community members hold about low-income youths’ behaviors, families, and experiences, and the stigma present in beliefs about how low-income youth make choices.

Identifiers of Stigmatized Low-Income Youth

Youth and adult respondents were asked, “What do you think of when I say the phrase, ‘low-income youth’?” and also, “how do you think other people think or feel about low-income youth?” These questions prompted descriptions of low-income youth which often aligned across respondents, and included stigma. Stigmatized traits that respondents associated with low-income youth included outward signals in youths’ dress and demeanor, as well as particular places that low-income youth were thought to congregate.

“Profiling” Low-income Youth

The term “profiling” describes how individuals are marked with stigma through their identifying traits or characteristics (Goffman, 1963). When asked “what low-income youth look like”, youth and adults in this study identified characteristics that they believed might mark a young person as low-income. Some of these characteristics had negative connotations, while others held more neutral connotations for respondents.

Eight youth, two mentors and six key informants spoke about sensory cues that indicated that youth were low-income. These cues served to stigmatize youth, because assumptions were made based on identifying characteristics. Youth described how they
felt that wearing dirty or old clothes as opposed to “cool” or new clothes made them feel outcast socially, and made adults think that they were untrustworthy. Gwen describes a teacher who she felt judged her negatively because of her appearance, when she was working night shifts in a dirty factory without time to change before coming to school:

He’s one of those teachers, he’s really hard to get along with, because if you show up late, he’s gonna assume – and if you show up in raggy clothes, you know, and you’re late, and you’re dirty, he’s gonna assume that you’re one of those kids, you know, because that’s what they look like.

Adults had more nuanced descriptions of low-income youth which showed their stigmatized status, including smelling like cigarettes or marijuana, wearing hooded sweatshirts, having lice, or having a lack of personal hygiene. One adult mentioned that they could identify homeless kids because they walked around town with backpacks. Another identified “skaters” with “gauged ears” and long hair as a stereotype for low-income youth in the town. Some of these identifiers may be difficult to avoid, like “raggy” or dirty clothing, while others like “gauged ears” may be active choices by youth to participate in counter culture. Regardless, these visual and sensory cues seem to be markers of stigma for low-income youth.

Places

Youth and adults identified the places that low-income youth congregate. Rose describes how certain places in town can have a stigmatizing affect: “Yeah, cause people, they drive around and they see ‘em hanging out in certain spots, and they just automatically assume that they’re not good kids.” Fifteen youth, stigmatizing places included Hemlock Street, which had low-income housing, as well as a few of the local trailer parks that had higher percentages of low-income residents and were in poor repair. Several youth respondents reported living either on Hemlock Street or in trailer parks. Rob, a school counselor, explained that he goes out of his way to avoid looking up where youth live when he receives their files, because he is afraid he might judge them – a self-awareness of bias that he says he gained during college.

Youth and adults also mentioned places where youth congregate in their free time. One after-school care program for youth held some stigma for being a low-income
service agency, and Steve, a staff member there, explained how, before major changes had been made to the program, he would not have sent his own children there. However, the most stigmatizing places were those where youth spent time without direct adult supervision, including the skate park and Douglas Park, near the school, where youth were assumed to be skipping class and using substances. Douglas Park, in particular, received 26 mentions across eight youth and three adults. Some youth and adults talked about it not feeling like a safe place, or not wanting to take others there. Several youth speak about “avoiding” the park, which comes across as a way for them to also avoid stigma and being stigmatized. Many of the youth had former or current friends who “spend time at the park”, which seemed to be a euphemism for getting into trouble, using substances, and truancy. Nicole shows how the park, to some, was synonymous with doing drugs, and how avoiding the people there was a way for her to express agency and avoid stigma:

I used to hang out at the park, over at Douglas, and I actually used to be good friends with a lot of those people, until they started doing drugs. And, probably 90 percent of them are all doing heroin, or meth. So, I quit hanging out there, cause you know, you are who you hang out with kind of thing, and I wasn’t down for that.

Douglas Park, among other places in town, served as a physical marker of stigma. Most youth in the study actively avoided these places, while a few visited them but recognized their stigmatized status. Izzie describes going to the park between classes or at lunch to “get her blood pumping”. I did not clarify what this meant, though Izzie reported a history of prescription drug abuse and I could smell cigarette smoke on her when we met. It may be that some youth like Izzie do not engage in substance abuse and truancy at the park, and only visit between classes or after school to get fresh air and visit with friends. However, if this is the case, it sounds as though these youth may be risking their reputations to stigma.

**Assumptions**

Many respondents spoke about the assumptions that adults and community members make about low-income youth. Eight youth, three mentors, and four key
informants mentioned general assumptions that they witnessed in others or possessed themselves. Youth described their parents pointing out kids in the street who they identified as doing drugs, and their teachers assuming that if a student was out of school, they were doing drugs or getting into trouble. Some adults also expressed stigmatizing viewpoints themselves, such as the idea that low-income youth volunteer less and participate less in extra-curricular activities (the school has many elective classes including wood shop, theater, and the newspaper which allow youth from all income brackets to participate in these activities) and the idea that low-income youth do not do well academically. Teacher and theater advisor David describes his academic assumptions about low-income youth: “A poor kid, um, you know, doesn’t necessarily have an opportunity to shine in an academic class, because they’re really – but they have opportunities to do great things in a Theater class, or in a play.”

Some youth described experiences of feeling singled out and shunned because they were low-income. Ben did not provide a specific experience, but described how he feels singled out in the community for living in a trailer park and receiving government assistance: “Usually people don't talk about that, but sometimes some people - I feel like they don't like me or any other people because of the way we live.”

Aside from these general assumptions and judgments that respondents reported community members holding, there were several specific examples of stigma-related assumptions that respondents reported in Mountainside. These included perceptions and realities about low-income youths’ involvement with crime and drugs, beliefs about the family and home lives of low-income youth, and beliefs about low-income youths’ experiences of shame.

Crime and Drugs

Fourteen youth and 13 adults spoke about crime and drugs as part of life in Mountainside. Some of this discussion was general and not targeted at specific groups; when asked what negative aspects they saw in the town many respondents described high rates of substance abuse. However, many respondents mentioned underage substance use as a specific problem. Substances mentioned included alcohol and marijuana use as well as heroine, methamphetamine, and prescription drug abuse. Youth refereed to
“tweakers”, meaning those abusing methamphetamines, as well as to “stoners” abusing marijuana. Youth also said that adults around them used similar labels, especially their parents; there were two instances where a youth reported that a parent referred to young people on the street as “stoners”.

Most youth ascribed the high rates of drug abuse to other youth in the town. Michael labeled the group engaging in substance use a “noisy minority”. Most youth agreed that while substance use is an issue in the town, it is also possible to avoid and there are many young people who do not do drugs. However, they perceived a stereotype associating young people and drugs, which many attributed to adults in the community. Cara describes what her father has said about teenagers:

Interviewer (I): Have the important adults in your life expressed any thoughts about young people in the community?
Cara (C): Um, my dad being the person that he is, obviously has very strong opinions.
I: What does he say?
C: Just mostly, like, “oh, all those kids are just wasting their lives, smoking weed at the skate park.” I mean, not the skate park, but that is a pretty sketchy place, um, at Douglas Park. And, “why don’t – why aren’t there any police out” and just general stuff like that.

Some youth in the study also described their own interactions with substances. Five youth described cutting ties with past friends who were now using substances. Three youth spoke about personal experiences using substances. Gwen used marijuana to self-medicate for ADHD, Izzie used to use “pain pills” but had stopped. Alex mentioned that his father took him to his uncle’s marijuana farm in California, because he wanted to “educate me on what it looks like, so I can avoid it.”

Adults in the study also described youth drug use, particularly marijuana. Mark mentioned that sometimes he can “smell pot on” the students he works with in the alternative high school program, while Sally described a youth in her class as being “foggy brained” and Vince complained of a parent at the school advocating for their child’s use of marijuana to treat ADHD. Richard and Gary both mentioned a recent rise in heroin use. My field notes from Barb, a local foster parent and youth services volunteer, describe a particularly salient section in which she shows how crime and drug
use are often conflated with income and morality in the community, a trend that she only mentions because she has seen a recent change. She described how recently, “kids from good families” and kids that she knows from church have been getting into drugs more – parents who seem to be doing as much as they can still see their children engage in these behaviors. Barb explained that this did not seem to be a problem when her own children were in school, but in the last 10 or 15 years it seems to have gotten much worse. A lot of the kids she has fostered have had substance abuse issues, and they can get these substances at school. She lamented that “it’s one thing” to see these problems with kids in the foster care system, it is another to see it in families she knows (families like hers) and kids she has known since they were little. Barb’s comments show how the stigma surrounding youth drug and alcohol use can blur the lines between the “good families” and others in the town. All of these examples from youth and adults show how substance use as a sign of stigma is often attributed to low-income youth in Mountainside.

Family

Youth and adults spoke at length about family, and about how they perceive family as affecting the lives of low-income youth. Overwhelmingly, these descriptions were negative, and incorporated stigma and assumptions about the lives of low-income families as well as perceived differences about the norms of lower-income compared to higher-income families. Participants described beliefs about what low-income families do, which included family instability and dysfunction. They also sometimes mentioned stigma theories (Goffman, 1963) for how low-income families transmit poverty through their value system. Interestingly, youth often spoke about their own families in generally positive terms, but they gave families of other low-income youth less favorable descriptions.

Instability and Dysfunction: “Needles all over the carpet”

Seven youth and 18 adults spoke about the instability and dysfunction that low-income youth experience in the family setting. Youth and adults spoke about families of low-income youth exhibiting the following characteristics: poor or neglectful parenting, physical abuse, drug use, family homelessness or substandard housing, single parenting and relationship instability, domestic violence, living with grandparents or other non-
parental family, parents working odd hours, lack of parent engagement with school, youth taking on adult roles in the house (working, caretaking), incest, and parents using their children to get child support or government assistance.

Sally is particularly graphic and lengthy in her descriptions of the families of some of the autistic and learning-disabled students she works with, describing one family in which the son sleeps in the same room as his parents “except in the summer, when he sleeps in the yard, in a tent”. Another student of Sally’s is described as hiding the fact that her mother was on methamphetamine and their power was shut off, and trying to bring her clothes in to wash in the home economics room at the school. Matthew, a local youth pastor, used the graphic visual imagery to describe low-income youth as “crawling out of the trailer” and their homes with “needles all over the carpet.” Some adults seemed to have more specific knowledge of the home lives of low-income youth, while others seem to use more general descriptions and stereotyped portrayals of low-income families.

Youth and adults also describe how issues faced by low-income youth are rooted in their family’s instability and dysfunction. Youth problems that respondents attributed to family dysfunction included: not paying attention in school, poor school attendance, bad behavior, drug use, and delinquency caused by not wanting to be at home. Rose describes how she has heard adults refer to youths’ behaviors being caused by their family situations:

At our church we have a lot of kids that come from places that they don’t have, you know, good parents, they live in really run down places, um, sometimes they don’t really get that much food to eat, so that’s why we have dinner there at the church, and breakfast there. And, they’re usually not very well behaved, so I’ve heard some older people in the church making remarks about like, “oh, their parents are never there to take care of them and that’s why they act like that”, or a lot of times their parents are on drugs or something similar to that, where they just stop caring, and I’ve heard ’em make comments about that kind of stuff, too.

Rose’s comments show how she has absorbed some of the messages that adults around her share about low-income youth, and how she sees these families with both compassion and disapproval. Ironically, Roses’ own family was facing homelessness because of
economic challenges, but she still uses stigmatized descriptions involving substance abuse and apathy when she describes the families of other low-income youth.

*Family Patterns and Culture of Poverty: “[College] is not a thing you need to do”*

Stigma about low-income families also included beliefs about how poverty is transmitted inter-generationally. Four youth and 16 adults used ideas about the transmission of poverty, values, and behavior between low-income parents and children. Mary summarizes the trends she sees when asked about how things have changed in Mountainside in her time working for a non-profit here: “I don’t see us running out of hungry families, I really don’t. One of the things that does concern me is the cyclical pattern of generational poverty”. She describes wondering if intergenerational poverty is a mindset, a culture, or a problem with the system (or a mix of these things).

Much of the discussion about the transmission of poverty revolved around school, and how low-income parents are seen as not holding high educational expectations, and transmitting apathy about education to their children. Adults in the sample perceived that youth are sometimes forced to choose between their families and their schooling, because families put competing demands on their children. Youth respondent Helen describes how she thinks that apathy about education and work can be transmitted from parent to child:

…Lack of motivation to do much, because their parents didn’t do much… either they graduated high school and didn’t do anything afterwards, like find a good job or anything, or go to college, or sometimes they just dropped out of high school… or they did that, and then they were semi-successful, they’re average, and then they’re like, “well I did it without getting into college, so you can do it without going to college, so I’m not gonna tell you you have to.” So the kids aren’t gonna be like, “oh, that’s something that needs to be done,” they’re just like, “oh, well, it’s only if you can, only if you want to, it’s not like a thing you need to do,” or, it’s not important, I guess, to them. Because their parents don’t see it as that…

Helen also described that she saw this trend in her own family, because her mother seemed content to work in minimum-wage jobs that she did not seem to like.
Helen expressed frustration that her mother and older sister seemed to have apathy about their low-income situations.

Among the adults, there was also a common theme of believing that low-income families have a sense of entitlement to government support. At least half of the adults describing the transmission of poverty demonstrated a belief that over-reliance on benefits is cultural mindset among the poor in Mountainside. Many of these statements were made in apologetic ways, with amendments such as, “I hate to say it, but…” Vince presents a prime example of appearing to believing in a sense of entitlement:

The apathy level on those kids is so huge, because they, I hate saying it, they don’t see a bottom to a pit. They know that there is a base-level safety net. ‘Grandpa hasn’t worked in 40 years. He’s still eating and got a TV. You see my new phone?’

Vince demonstrates that he views over-reliance on government support as a problem, and thinks that some individuals may not chose to put effort into work or school if they think they can receive government assistance.

Belief that cultural values, at least to some extent, were at fault for the transmission of poverty was common among study participants. However, this idea runs counter to the historical perspective of Mountainside’s economy. The timber industry in this community has been in decline for at least three decades, long enough for multiple generations to experience poverty and constrained choices for work within the community. It may be that Mountainside’s image of itself as having a “bootstrap mentality” is out of date, but that community members still hold on to the idea that hard work and effort will pull individuals and families out of poverty.

Shame

Adults often made the assumption that low-income youth and young adults experience shame about class differences. Eight adults and only one youth expressed the idea that low-income youth might experience shame, or that one goal of programs targeting low-income youth should be to normalize their situation. Dan, a local government official, recalled dropping off donations at the community food pantry. He said that he saw young men in their mid to late twenties who would not even make eye contact with him. He sensed that they probably felt bad that they were getting food from
the food bank, and that they were ashamed that here he was dropping off food that they
could likely be taking home with them. He said about the interaction that it was “not a
‘Hey, hi! How’s it going? Hey, can’t wait to see you out on the lake.’ It was just more or
less they just dropped their head and went about their business.” Mary, who worked at
that same food pantry, described offering snacks like candy, packaged pastries, or
“Lunchables” to kids as a way to help them feel more “normal”. Several of the adults
mentioned a perception that universal free meals at the schools helped give low-income
youth a normalizing experience. For these adults, their own perception of what “normal”
looks like is often different from the low-income youth they work with. This can interact
with their stigmatized perception of low-income youth, to create a belief that these youth
must feel shame about their stigmatized status.

Agency: “Your actions define you”

Youth and adult respondents both described ways that youth expressed agency,
and also lack of agency. Discussions of agency involved the good and bad choices that
low-income youth make, as well as those things that constrain their choices. The agency
that was attributed to low-income youth was marked by stigma: few respondents cited the
good choices that they saw low-income youth make, more cited bad choices. Some
respondents also thought that certain stigmatized personal traits also influenced youths’
choices and decision making.

Good Choices

Descriptions of the good choices that low-income youth make were somewhat
limited. Five adults and one youth spoke about low-income youth making positive
decisions. Generally adults spoke about the capacity for youth to make good choices even
if they come from an unsupportive environment. Teacher Vince summarized this
sentiment well. When I asked what he has learned from the kids he’s taught, he replied,
“That you are not defined by where you come from, or what you look like, you’re defined
by what you do. Your actions define you.” This speaks to his underlying belief that low-
income youth have agency and can change their circumstances.

Bad Choices
Equal numbers of adults spoke about youth making good and bad choices, while more youth spoke about peers making bad choices than good. Mentors were more likely to describe “good choices,” while key informants were more likely to describe “bad choices”. Nine youth spoke about low-income youth making bad choices and decisions. In five instances, descriptions of bad choices overlapped with the “limited options” code, signifying that some respondents believed that low-income youth made bad decisions because they had limited options to make positive ones. For example, when asked about the support young people receive, Rose responds:

There’s not a lot of youth support. It’s mostly, you know, you get caught doing something you’re not supposed to, and then you get in trouble, and then you just get yelled at and then no one ever looks at you the same. And that’s just how it goes, you know. There’s no really help, it’s just negative, you know.

Two youth also described feeling that the adults around them judged them for their own poor choices in the past, making it difficult for them to make progress or healthy decisions in the future.

Other youth respondents were more critical of their low-income peers, asserting that their bad choices were due to personal agency rather than constrained options. Eight youth spoke about the harmful or anti-social decisions they saw others as making, including avoiding school or using substances. Several youth respondents agreed that others had earned their bad reputations by engaging in negative behaviors. Nicole describes this attitude when I ask her if there are negative perceptions of youth in the community:

Interviewer: Do you think there are any stereotypes or negative ideas about young people here in Mountainside?
Nicole: Uh, probably – ha, well this is, like, they’ve done it to themselves, though. The kids at Douglas Park, I can’t believe I used to be a part of that, though. Because they, like, literally just let themselves just go, and that’s – Douglas is stereotyped with drugs now, because, that’s who hangs out there…

Five adults spoke in terms of youth making bad decisions, and I also recorded hearing three different groups of adults discussing bad decision-making in my field notes. Interestingly, more discussion of bad decision-making arose in the key informant group,
where the code was used in four different interviews; only one adult mentor spoke about poor decision making as being a source of problems. This could have been because the key informant sample was more representative of the “general public” than the mentor group. Key informants identified as using the “bad choices” code included two police officers, a foster parent, and a staff at a local non-profit.

Tina, a teacher from the mentor group, contrasts the idea of difficult circumstances and poor decision-making, emphasizing her belief in a youth being able to change with corrective support:

…it’s almost like they don’t wanna move forward, or they don’t see a way to move forwards, when they’ve had that in their past. And so yes, I completely agree, sometimes you don’t see where they’re coming from, but at the same time, um, you’re not allowed to be a turd just because you’ve had these other things, you know? I mean there’s – and a lot of that is an education thing, and a conversation of, “this would be a better way to handle it.”

It seemed that, for some community members, low-income youth and people in general were seen as having poor decision making skills and as not using their time and energy wisely to help themselves out of their difficult circumstances.

Personal Traits

Seven youth and nine adults spoke about low-income youth having personal traits that limited their agency, or that pushed them to make good or bad choices. Some youth respondents described how adults seemed to label youth as “bad” or “good”, while other youth themselves described some of their peers as “bad”. Youth respondent Elizabeth describes her apparent belief in the power of personal traits this way:

“Um, I will admit that a lot of my generation, especially here, are very rude and disrespectful. And so, that kind of makes the elders, you know, reflect the same behavior. And they’re not disrespectful or anything, but they have that stereotype that they think all teenagers are disrespectful. And, um, it’s not the best.”

These youth seemed to use the poor character traits that they saw in others around them as a foil against which to define their own identities. Luke, Izzie, and Elizabeth in particular all described others they knew as bad people, immature, and disrespectful. This conceptualization of others is “boundary work” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) for these
youth, who frame their own positive characteristics off of the negative traits they see in those around them.

Adults tended to be more specific, ascribing attributes to youth including “having no motivation”, “being slackers”, “apathy”, and “obstinance”, versus positive attributes, e.g. “valuing an education”. Richard, a local business owner, coined the term “right DNA” to describe what pushes some to try harder than others:

In [two other small towns in Oregon] there’s enough parents that are motivated and enough kids with the right DNA that they’re willing to go try stuff and push themselves a little bit. Here, they slog their way through school through the school day and then go stand out there and wait for the bus. Go home, play video games and watch their mom drink beer or whatever. I think, what would it take to get kids to try stuff?

While Richard is speaking from a place of concern for the youth and families in his community, his words belie a belief that this is just the “way kids are” in Mountainside, and that he believes these barriers to youth engagement might be insurmountable.

**Compassion and Pity**

There were a few ways that youth and adults described community expressions of compassion and pity for low-income youth. Four adults and two youth spoke explicitly about their perceptions of compassion or pity in the community, or themselves expressed compassion and concern for low-income youth. Key informants spoke most often about compassion as a motivating factor in the work that they do. Mary spoke eloquently about her understanding that the work she does at a non-profit agency is “sticking a band aid” on the problem of poverty in the community, but she feels she is doing what she can:

But if I would choose to not do anything because it’s not doing anything good, then I would have a personal issue with that. Especially when I know that what we’re doing here directly impacts the lives of so many people, and so many children.

For adults in the sample, it is unsurprising that they may be motivated by compassion, because working with youth and families was often their chosen career path. Rose notes that she thinks some people look at low income youth and say, “Oh, we gotta help them!”
She thinks her youth pastors are motivated by helping the less fortunate. However, Rose thinks that this can be a hypocritical viewpoint, as well: “Then they see ‘em and they’re like, wow those kids, they’re getting up to no good.” In Rose’s perspective, pity and compassion might motivate the adults around her, but it does not extend to treating youth with kindness when they make transgressions.

Compassion and pity may be more positive ways to view low-income youth, but they do not always align with youths’ own sense of self, nor are they always helpful to youth. The youth in this sample had generally positive views of their own identities, and had strong experiences of resilience in their personal narratives. For youth like Rose, who have experienced redemptive stories of re-engaging in school and working to support their family, the perception from others that she needs help may be frustrating. Additionally, if she thinks that others believe she needs help, but that they do not actually provide the kinds of help she believes she needs, she may perceive that they are hypocritical. This could leave her feeling disconnected from sources of support, because she perceives them as stigmatizing by pitying her but also shaming her choices.

**Summary of the Definitions of Youth**

These results show that community members who work with youth and youth themselves hold mixed views about low-income youth. Both youth and adults identified conflicting community norms for individuals and youth based on income, pointed out the ways that youth are stigmatized and “othered”, and held compassion and pity low-income youth. All of the participants’ views were complex and multi-faceted, and many acknowledged their own stereotyping thoughts and stigmatizing behaviors. Youth generally held positive views of themselves and their peers, and thought that negative views of low-income youth were over-exaggerated. However, low-income youth respondents also participated in stigmatizing and “othering” youth who had more negative behavioral outcomes and environmental circumstances.

Adults often saw low-income youth as a problem in the community, contributing to negative community stereotypes about crime and substance use and making bad choices. However, adults also placed emphasis on the circumstances of youth which they saw as negative influences, and on the traits that they believed youth possessed that
caused them to make bad choices. Some of these adults contradicted themselves by both granting and removing agency from youth. Some adults also spoke with compassion and hope for the low-income youth they worked with, but the some youth saw this compassion as pitying and hypocritical. The question arises of how youths’ identities are impacted by these messages from adults, and how low-income environments and experiences of stigma may influence identity development in low-income youth.

**Constrained Outcomes for Youth Identity**

There were several ways that respondents described low-income youths’ identity development options and outcomes as limited or constrained by their circumstances and interactions with adults. Some of these limitations were created by the impoverished circumstances in which these youth lived, or by past experiences like family trauma, which contributed to both their current circumstances and their identities. Other limitations were created by youths’ interactions with adults and stigma in their environment, and youth described ways that they responded to this stigma in defensive or self-destructive ways. These constraining factors are grouped in four domains: youths’ barriers to achieving positive identities and developmental capacities, youth’s interactions with community which limited their options, specific supports and challenges for youth in the domain of mental health, and youths’ responses to experiencing stigma. Table 11 lists the codes that contributed to the development of this theme by respondent. Each of the subsections below describes these codes and themes in depth.
Table 11: Constraints Outcomes for Youth Identity Reported by Youth and Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to PYD</th>
<th>Interactions with community</th>
<th>Mental Health</th>
<th>Responses to Stigma</th>
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The above table summarizes the constraints outcomes for youth identity reported by youth and adults, focusing on various barriers and responses to stigma.
**Barriers to Positive Youth Development**

Some of the youth respondents’ stories fit into a framework of barriers to positive youth development. Similar to the ways in which positive youth identity mapped onto the “Six C” model of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005), the ways that youth described feeling limited by their environments also mapped onto this model. Youth reported barriers to confidence, competence, character, connection, caring, and contribution. Respondents described adults in their families, schools, and communities as creating these barriers through intentional and unintentional action, lack of support, or inaction.

**Barriers to Confidence: Lack of Control**

Ten youth described barriers to confidence related specifically to adult influences. Barriers to confidence were often described when I asked what makes youth feel less in control, and what makes them challenge or doubt how they feel about themselves. These barriers were primarily mentioned in regards to youths’ families; one youth described barriers to confidence outside of the family (at work) and one described a general sense that “people” in her life do not believe in her. Most youth reported that they felt a lack of confidence because of the role models they saw around them, or because adults expressed negative judgments of them.

**Role Modeling Lack of Control**

Some youth described important adults who they saw having challenges and barriers to success because they were low-income, which shaped these respondents’ views on their own trajectories. Michael described how his older brother went into the army and came out with emotional issues, a “changed man”, which makes him feel a lack of control over his own life because he cannot always predict what consequences will follow his actions. Cara explained how her father’s inability to find well-paying work even though he attended college makes her feel she will be unable to find a job in her chosen field, theater. These are two examples of high-achieving youth who are still impacted by their family’s low-income status and lack of choice, and feel a lack of confidence because they are not sure they can overcome the external barriers that their family members experienced. Although Cara and Michael’s family members did not
intentionally make these choices, they still served as “negative role models” for these respondents, because there were examples in their life trajectories that youth did not want to follow.

**Negative Feedback and Fear of Judgment**

For other youth, negative messages about their abilities came more directly from adults with whom they were close. These could be damaging and cause youth to undermine their own confidence, or to change their behavior in order to avoid rejection. Helen describes how her father makes her feel she cannot express herself: “when I told him my overall GPA’s a 1.9 he just kind of laughed at me, and was like, “well that’s your fault”… I don’t think that was cool, and I cried, but I didn’t let him see that, because then he would probably laugh some more.” Dianna talks about how she perceives her grandmother to lack faith in her abilities, because of her juvenile record and past failings at school:

**Dianna (D):** My grandma makes me feel like I’m less in control…she believes I don’t think I can do what I put my mind to, until, I told her the other day, I got a job, and she’s like, “oh, yay”, and I’m just like, screw you. You didn’t think I could do it.

**Interviewer:** What did she say that made you think she thinks you couldn’t do it?

**D:** Just, having that record at first, she’s like, you know, “nobody’s gonna hire you,” yeah… I’ve seen people with records get hired. I mean, yeah, it’s definitely gonna be harder, cause I live in a smaller town, and I got some stupid stuff on there, but…

For Dianna and Helen, fear of judgment, lack of adults’ confidence in them, and negative role models all had a negative effect on their sense of confidence in their own abilities, talents, and ambitions. Sources of positive role models and supporting adults are particularly important for youth with these experiences, and they sometimes must look outside of the family to find those sources.

**Barriers to Competence**

Twelve youth described barriers to competence created by adults, which were primarily centered around school. Youth described several different barriers to finding success at school, including difficult classes and lack of support from teachers, difficult home life and lack of support from parents for education, and administrational barriers to
taking the classes they wanted or finishing on their time line. A few described barriers to working or to seeking the kind of occupational support they needed, such as a lack of support from counselors at the high school for non-academic or “trade school” trajectories, and an inability to find work in the community when they wanted to.

Some mentioned barriers to their sources of competence in extra-curricular activities. Dianna described how her difficulties at home and in school lead to losing her main passion in life, softball. She had enjoyed being on the softball team, and coaches and friends had encouraged her to pursue college scholarships (I noted in my field notes that she looked like a softball player, with a tall, muscular build and seemingly natural athleticism.) When I asked what makes her feel good about herself she said without hesitation, “softball.” She added: “I just felt like I found something I was just really good at, cause like, you know how someone always has the talent, they’re really good at, and I found mine.” However, her home life was severely unstable, and she spoke about homelessness and parents’ substance abuse. She described a trailer park that they lived in for less than a year when she was in junior high school as the safest and most secure she ever felt, and losing that home (because her father was not able to pay rent) was a major blow for her. After moving out, Dianna experienced homelessness with her family and couch surfed with friends. During this time it was hard for her to go to school because she felt anxiety about being around people. She was called in to a conduct hearing due to poor attendance, and describes how the person overseeing the hearing seemed overly harsh and would not believe her story. This drove her to withdraw from school and enroll in the GED program, which she describes as a good choice because she is now more motivated to attend school (thanks, in part, to the support and encouragement of Rob, a guidance counselor at the school). However, it also meant that she had to give up softball. When asked if there was anything she was focused on and passionate about, she said, “not anymore” and described how softball had been a driving force in her life and she had wanted to pursue a scholarship, and now she did not know how to pay for college. She had a moderate interest in working with animals or the environment somehow, but seemed somewhat disconnected from goals aside from finishing the GED program and moving out of Mountainside in order to find work and support herself. If Dianna had
experienced a more stable home life or supportive school environment earlier in her school career, she might have built up her sense of competence through softball and formed a more stable identity around that activity.

Rose also had several barriers to competence in her life, despite being a smart and goal-oriented person. She was juggling finishing school through online classes and working 20-30 hours a week to help support her family. Rose had gone from a 4.0 student to someone with truancy concerns because of housing instability and mental health problems from the death of her grandmother. At the time of the first interview, Rose was facing homelessness with her family. She described how, when life got particularly stressful (for example, when her grandmother died) she would stay with a friend for days or weeks at a time to avoid being at home. She loved her family, but their low-income housing situation made being with them a challenge. At the time of the second interview, her family lived in a small trailer, with her younger brother sleeping in the living room, a situation she described as “stressful”.

The difficulties Rose faced at home compounded challenges at school, where she had an apparent lack of support in navigating the system. She had enrolled in online classes at Mountainside High School so that she could work to help support the family. However, in the middle of this school year the school ended its online program, which Rose did not realize until after the semester started. She scrambled to find an online charter school, and when she did, her new teacher said that her credits were calculated incorrectly, and she had unnecessarily repeated or skipped classes. Rose’s home life posed significant barriers to her schooling, and miscommunication with the school served to compound those issues and caused additional stressors. Rose’s case is one of a seemingly competent student struggling because of a complicated home life and disconnection from school.

For both Rose and Dianna, it seemed that they were navigating the school system alone, with minimal family support. It is not necessarily accurate to say that either their family or the school presented specific barriers to their sense of competence, but rather that insufficiencies in both of these systems exacerbated one-another: their family home life created mental health issues and their school environment left them frustrated and
confused; lack of family advocacy around their education left them struggling to navigate school, and lack of school support for their mental health and family instability led to greater impacts on their educational trajectories. Family instability creates challenges for a school system, and the school and the community was ill-equipped to support these youth before major problems arose.

**Barriers to Character: “I should have tried”**

Four youth noted ways in which they saw negative influences on their character development from the adults around them. Olivia and Izzie both mentioned that their parents had negative personality traits including anger and controlling personalities, and they could see those negative traits reflected in themselves. Two others described how adults outside of the family impacted their character development. Gwen said she felt that seeing adults on the street who were clearly homeless and addicted to substances was a bad influence on her own morals, because it made her not want to try to succeed. Luke shared that the transition from junior high to high school was difficult because he was not comfortable with his new teachers, and he “gave up” for two years. He now regrets this, saying, “I should have tried”. Although it was rare for youth to point out barriers to their own character development, there were youth who attributed these limitations to interactions with the adults around them.

**Barriers to Connection**

Eleven youth reported that an adult in their lives created a barrier to feeling connected to others, some in multiple ways. Some of these barriers came from within youths’ families, including trust issues from past abuse or unsupportive family members. Outside of the family, youth spoke about feeling encouraged to leave the town, which created disconnection, as well as feeling increasingly disconnected from religions communities as they grew older. A small part of the sample seemed to lack much connection to adults at all.

**Abuse and “Trust Issues”**

For at least four of the youth in this sample, having mean or abusive adults made them reluctant to connect to others. Paige explained that she is “scared of men” because her father abused her when she was younger, and she thinks this fear may hold her back
from getting married. Elizabeth echoes the idea that her mother’s abusive behavior when she was young gave her “trust issues” around adults. The consequences of abuse for youth is discussed in more depth in the subsection on Mental Health, below.

“Too Good for This Town”

Six youth expressed ways in which adults in their lives pushed them to leave the town. This was usually a positive push – they reported that mentors and important adults encouraged them to seek educational and occupational opportunities elsewhere, because they perceived these to be lacking in Mountainside. Also, the youth described how the perception of high rates of drug use and crime in the town pushed them to want to leave it. Gwen describes how she thinks important adults influence her opinion of the town and her connection to it:

They tell me I’m too good for this town, sometimes. They tell me that I’ve got a little too much going for me to stick here my whole life. They want me, you know, they said that it’s good that I grew up in a small town, but it would be really beneficial for me to get the heck out of here. Cause there’s nothing here to progress with, there’s nothing here to make yourself better.

Youth like Gwen felt that the adults in their lives pushed them away from the town, giving them more reasons to leave than to stay.

“Churchy” People

Three youth in the sample also spoke about how people at their church made them feel less connected to community. Gwen and Dianna stopped attending church because of a lack of faith and a perception that people were “hypocritical” there. For some youth in the study, church was an important weekly activity. However, even for Rose, who attends regularly, there was a perception that she could not share certain things with “churchy” people, and that she has to step carefully to avoid being stigmatized by them: “They’ll support, but it’s only support if you’re doing what they want you to do. If you do something that they’re not really liking then they kind of just, not really disown you, but they kind of just step away.” Rose sensed that she had to carefully manage her image at the church in order not to be stigmatized there, and also expressed that her mother did not want her to share certain things about their family’s homelessness or poverty with her
youth group leaders. For some in the sample, church was an important source of belonging, but for others their experiences with church led them to feel less connected to the community.

Going It Alone

Two youth in the sample shared details about themselves that made me think that they lack much connection to important adults. Izzie and Dianna both seemed to reject the idea that they needed much help and support from important adults, and both were fiercely independent.

For Izzie, it seemed that past experiences with teachers led her to believe that they were not on her side: she said that in first grade, she had a bad experience with a teacher who did not seem to like her. Izzie says that since then, she has not gotten along with teachers and says she can be “stubborn”, though she likes a few of her classes for the subject matter, not the teachers. She says her mother is like a “friend, not a parent” and that she does not respect her stepfather. She has not spoken to her father in over five years. She even complained about Rob, the counselor that several of the participants cited as a positive influence, because she says he “dis-enrolled” her for attendance issues during sophomore year. (She has done better in school since she was homeschooled for a year and then returned to the high school last year.)

Dianna’s personality is less defiant, but still independent. She has a strong bond with Rob, who has helped her recover her poor grades. However, most the other adults in her life have either let her down (her father, who was not able to support her and her brother) or been judgmental (her grandmother, who has said negative and hurtful things to her.) When asked what her influences were she said that she felt like she “influenced herself” to be a good person, and she said one of her biggest drivers was to “make herself proud”.

Izzie and Dianna have somewhat defiant personalities. However, it was early experiences that shaped both of their mentalities about adults. Their defiant and “stubborn” personalities may get in the way of interacting positively with adults, but some of their lack of connection can be attributed to her past negative experiences with important adults in their lives.
Barriers to Caring

It was difficult to find examples of youth describing barriers to caring, possibly because it is a trait that it hard to identify an absence of. Youth whose home lives were either abusive or emotionally stressful reported their sense of connection to adults was impacted (see above), and having less connection to adults might have also impacted how they see adults as caring or how adults help them develop a sense of caring. For example, when Helen discussed how her father’s negative comments made her want to disengage from him (pg. 105), this could have also impacted her sense of reciprocity and mutual caring for others. Only one youth explicitly described a negative role model for caring: Rose described extended family on her father’s side who had money to help them, but were not willing to actually provide support. However, she did not describe how this impacted her sense of self or community.

Barriers to Contribution

Similar to the Caring code, few youth spoke about barriers to contribution in their own lives (again, possibly because it is difficult to describe a lack of contribution). Three youth described ways they felt that their own ability to contribute was limited, and each of these barriers was created by adults in their lives. Rose and Elizabeth expressed frustrations about perceived age barriers to volunteering; Elizabeth could not approach the bar when she volunteered at a philanthropic event, and Rose assumed that she and her friends were too young to volunteer at a local food bank. Gwen was frustrated by her family’s lack of confidence in her, and felt that she could not contribute to the family by helping raise her nephew, who she dearly loved and missed. Each of these youth felt that their age limited their ability to contribute in one way or another.

Interactions with Community

Youth and adults identified some ways in which the community limited youths’ options for identity development. Subsequent sections discuss how the perceptions of community need and the limited options for youth engagement effect youths’ identity development, in particular making them feel the need to mature early and leave behind “fun” activities and hobbies.
Community Needs

Some youth and adult respondents mentioned their perceptions of the needs of the community, especially in regards to low-income youth. Four youth and 13 adults mentioned ways that they community could improve its supports for low-income youth. Common themes included that the town is “low-resourced” generally, and the school and social service agencies lack the funds needed to help all those who need support. Some adults also described a need for more engagement programs at the school – opportunities including service learning or apprenticeship programs that would encourage more community engagement for youth.

Many adults also shared thoughts about how the school could do a better job of serving low-income youth. Three teachers spoke about the lack of funding for special education, even though the school has a high rate of special needs students. Multiple teachers also described feeling discouraged about the school, because they felt the culture of the administration was insular and resistant to change. There were also multiple complaints about the four-day school week, which left many low-income students with nowhere to go on Fridays. Aaron, a junior high school teacher, was the most critical of the ways that the school supported low-income students, saying that the four-day school week was arguably detrimental to “neurological development”.

From these descriptions, Mountainside is an example of a community with limited resources to invest in youth. If a low-resourced community invests differentially in youth who are expected to succeed, it can create a self-fulfilling prophecy of disconnection and isolation for low-income youth (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Limited Options: “Minimal Attempts”

A major theme shared by both youth and adults was a perception that youth have limited options for work, volunteering, engagement, and fun in the community. Much of this discussion revolved around how limited options for youth restrict their agency, because they may be left with a small number of poor choices to make. This theme seemed to contrast the idea that youth can make good or bad choices (presence of agency) and respondents portrayed circumstances as limiting youths’ potential.
Fourteen youth spoke about the limited options that they perceive youth having in the town. Many of these quotes were stated in response to questions about the town; several youth echoed the idea that “there’s nothing to do here” in regards to fun activities, and noted that others “go to the park” [i.e. engage in drugs and delinquency] because there are no other options. As Cara put it, “I guess it's like, either you do nothing, or you do drugs.” Several also spoke about how their circumstances constrained their ability to work or engage in community life: Dianna felt her juvenile justice case\textsuperscript{13} prevented her from getting employment; Helen felt that she could not participate in sports because her family could not afford the gear for her to practice at home. Several youth also spoke about the unavailability of jobs, or the fact that a small number of service-sector jobs were taken by others who were older, with more experience.

The “limited options” code was identified in 16 adult interviews, and in one of my field notes. The adults in the sample echoed the idea that there is severely limited employment for youth, and that there is a lack of services for low-income people generally because of limited resources in the town. For example, when I asked, “how do you think Mountainside responds to or supports its young people?” Wendy (a special education teacher) responded, “with minimal attempts.”

Interestingly, the 63 times that the “limited options” code was used in youth interviews, the code occurred most often in a small handful of youth. Seven youth spoke at least four times about their limited options in the community and Rose spoke about this theme 11 times. Rose’s case was interesting, because she had seen how options can constrain choices first-hand in her family’s experience of poverty, and the necessity for her to focus on work instead of school or hobbies, which has severely constrained her choices. Likewise, Gwen (who was recorded speaking about limited options nine times) has had to move away from family and work to support herself and her roommates, and is attempting to finish her GED while working. Both these youth have faced very challenging circumstances, and though they themselves are attempting to finish school

\textsuperscript{13} Dianna was in juvenile court because of a fight that she got into with her younger sister two years prior to the interview.
and make good choices at this point in their lives, they both have seen their past selves and their friends give up on school and engagement and turn to drugs and delinquency under these circumstances. Their use of this narrative to describe youth’s choices in the school shows a level of social consciousness about the needs of low-income youth in the community.

Limited Options Example: Participation in Sports

Many adults shared the idea that sports programs at the school are excellent, and the school rallies around youth involved in sports. Vince, a teacher, echoes this sentiment:

Mountainside is so centered around that school…sports programs are top notch…one of the things that amazed me when I got up here was, Mountainside has, oh my gosh, a 20 year tradition of top swimming teams in the state.

Youth and adults both mentioned the support that students in sports receive – youth mentioned scholarships and popularity as outcomes for students involved in sports, and adults mentioned the high level of resources invested in the school’s track and the swimming pool. Four of the adults in the study were coaches for sports activities.

A few adults noted that they saw a void of programming and engagement for youth with non-traditional interests (e.g. those that were not interested in sports, or in hunting and fishing.) Many adults recognized that these “non-traditional” activities, including drama and computer clubs, were used by low-income youth as alternative engagement opportunities. This mirrored the sample of youth surprisingly well. Of the 16 youth in the sample, only one currently participated in sports (Kelly in cheerleading). Seven youth spoke about having once participated in sports, or about the fact that they were unable to participate due to certain issues – for example, Gwen said she never did sports because of her “C average”, while Dianna lost her ability to play Softball, her main interest in life, because she switched to a GED program at the school. A few youth stated that they left sports because of health or personal issues, while others did not give a reason for leaving. Most youth who quit participating in sports did so during junior high school, or in their freshman year of high school.
When asked about the different experiences of low-income youth in Mountainside, Helen explained that she thought a lack of time and proper equipment to practice could make low-income youth in sports programs feel inferior to their peers. She explained how she thinks her social anxiety about participating in sports may have been linked to her low-income status:

Mostly, it was because I didn’t like doing stuff in front of people, because I didn’t feel like I was as good as other people in it, cause – but then again, that’s cause they could practice more, and they had more time, and their parents actually, like, helped them and practiced with them.

For a community that seems to invest a lot in youth sports, low-income youth in this sample were surprisingly disengaged from this opportunity, possibly because of fees, or because of a perception that sports are an expensive pass time. If the community identifies sports programs as a primary support for its’ young people, and low-income youth feel separated from these activities, this theme may represent low-income youths’ lack of support and disengagement from the community, generally.

*Maturing Experiences: “Get it, get it, get it”*

The poverty and limited access resources that youth in this sample experienced led many of them to have early experiences of feeling responsible for themselves and others. Some of the youth in the study described ways that they had maturing experiences early, in high school and sometimes before. Eight youth described maturing or adultifying experiences including household responsibilities and caretaking for young or elderly relatives, worrying about finances and making ends meet, working outside the home to support self or family, and witnessing violence. These were often not positive experiences, as youth shared that they felt pushed into responsibilities before they were ready. For some financial worry and early maturity did not impede their identity development, while for others the necessity to mature early had a drastic effect on their life choices and daily behaviors.

For Cara, financial worries included not having internet at home to complete her online classes, having to move with her family because their house was being foreclosed on, and not being able to see a psychologist regularly for her anxiety (although she was
on prescription medication and spoke to counselors at the school.) Despite these challenges, Cara is confident about her ability to succeed at college, she sees herself as “talented”, and describes her family as loving and stable. She is relatively optimistic about the future, and thinks that her family may move to Eugene and that she can stay with her grandparents to finish her last year of school in Mountainside.

Dianna’s early life was much more unstable and chaotic. Her family moved from place to place and experienced homelessness. Her parents were separated, and both dealt with substance abuse issues. She describes feeling an early sense that she needed to mature in order to care for herself and her family:

When I was 13 I guess I didn’t really – I don’t know, most 13-year-olds my age didn’t really worry about, you know, what they’re gonna do. When I was 13, I mean, I was worried about driving, I was worried about getting a job, on getting started for it, and focusing on, like, what my career’s gonna be.

Gwen, who also dealt with family homelessness and family substance abuse from a young age, echoed similar sentiments when she said about low-income youth in Mountainside, “you have to be ready to get it, get it, get it, and be ready to do everything that I’m doing by the time you’re 18.” “Get it” refers to putting in lots of effort and energy to make ends meet and fending for yourself – Gwen lives with roommates and works to support herself while finishing her GED.

For these low-income youth, poverty and family instability created the necessity to think about, plan, and participate in maturing experiences that would generally not be expected of a youth before age 18. In some ways, these maturing experiences may have been a source of pride for youth, who felt more able to contribute and more responsible for themselves. Gwen and Rose, the two participants who worked in order to support themselves or their households, expressed a sense of pride in this level of responsibility. However, both of these participants also expressed that they felt they lacked time or energy to participate in other hobbies. Their example illustrates a link between the lack of community support for youth and their families, the limited options that these youth have for engaging in the community, and the early maturing experiences that they have.
Mental Health

Mental health concerns were common in this sample of youth. Nine participants mentioned experiences with (often overlapping) mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, eating disorders, anger, and high stress levels that were challenging and often limited their social and academic activities. Youth had difficulty coping with these issues, and described skipping school, living with friends, using substances, and suicide attempts as ways that they had responded to unmet mental health needs. For most of these youth, a single cause of their psychological distress could not be pinpointed, because they experienced an array of both biological and social factors which contributed to mental health issues. Youth spoke about household instability, the loss of loved ones, stress at school, and balancing competing demands at work, school, and home as contributing to their stress and mental health issues. Gwen spoke about how she has gotten “anxiety attacks” from having too much responsibly at work, school, and home. While her goal is to continue working and attending community college, she describes the stress that she expects will come with it as a potential barrier to continuing education:

It’s going to be hard. It’s going to be something where if I’m working five days a week, I’m not gonna wanna go take classes. I’m gonna wanna go to bed, eat and sleep, you know, and I’m gonna have to try to do the same thing I was doing when I was young – find time for school, find time for food, find time for friends, and find time for this. And that’s a really destructive way to live. I gotta tell you, it really is. You just constantly live in stress, and it’s all you think about, all day every day, and it’s hard to think about yourself and what you need to be successful and actually relax and have a good day to yourself. You need that, you really don’t think you do, but you do.

Gwen related how much of a struggle it was to provide for herself while trying to finish school, and she sounded close to relinquishing her educational goals because of the stress they could cause. While she received support for finishing school from Rob, a guidance counselor, her anxiety issues have gone largely undiagnosed, and her main coping mechanism is to use marijuana to relax after work and school. Youth such as Gwen often seem to feel that they have to cope and deal with their struggles privately and are not aware of or able to access community mental health supports. Table 12 describes
which youth discussed mental health issues, and what specific disturbance and support 
sources they named.
Table 12: Youth Mental Health Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Reported mental condition(s)</th>
<th>Contributing factors (adult influences bolded)</th>
<th>Support sources (adult influences bolded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Anger issues</td>
<td>Anger, Autism spectrum</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Anxiety, panic attacks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>Eating disorder, anger, PTSD</td>
<td>Early abuse</td>
<td>Grandmother, activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianna</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Anxiety, ADHD</td>
<td>Living situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Social anxiety</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izzie</td>
<td>Anger issues</td>
<td>Social anxiety, Autism spectrum</td>
<td>Positive family role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Anxiety, panic attacks</td>
<td>Living situation</td>
<td>Rob, Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>Anxiety, depression, PTSD</td>
<td>Early abuse</td>
<td>Therapy, journaling, Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Periodic depression</td>
<td>Death of grandmother, living situation</td>
<td>Peers, Youth Pastor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several adults also spoke about the mental health issues that they have witnessed in low-income youth, particularly. Seven adults mentioned issues including anxiety, depression, bipolar, learning disabilities, and general stress from living in a low-income environment. Mary, who works at a local food bank, describes how she sees the impact of poverty on youth in the community:

When you drive through you see kids who are just trying to be kids, and they can’t even be kids, because they’re just so…they’re not worried about their food, per see, they’re just stressed. And when you have that kind of thing going on you’re going to have kids that are getting involved with law enforcement, with drug abuse…
Some of the adults in the study realized that low-income circumstances can contribute to mental health issues, and some youth also found supports for their mental health needs in relationships with adults. A few key sources of disturbance and support in youths’ lives that seemed to be created by adults are described below.

**Sources of Emotional Disturbance**

Youth and adults described where they thought that youth mental health issues stemmed from, for many youth respondents there were multiple contributing factors but in some one primary source of trauma or stress was identified. Sources of emotional disturbance included traumatic experiences, household instability, and genetic factors like Autism spectrum disorders.

For some of these youth, their mental health issues were seen as directly caused by adults around them. Three youth described extreme household instability that caused stress because of unsafe and over-crowded living conditions. Two youth described early abuse and neglect that contributed to PTSD issues, including anger and stress at school, and three others described how stress from home or life caused anxiety or depression about school. Paige has been in therapy for her PTSD from early abuse by her father, which seemed to contribute to stress at school. When I asked why she does not enjoy school she had a hard time answering, going back and forth between the homework and the people. After she talked about PTSD, I asked if she thought that contributed to her stress at school. She said that yes, it might, because groups of people often cause stress for her. She then went on to describe how she gets angry and frustrated during class and wants to leave:

Paige (P): Just stupid people. They don’t know how to sit still, they don’t know how to just not argue with the teacher, like you don’t have to, you can just sit there and be quiet!
Interviewer: So that makes you feel kind of – does it make you feel really tense? Or just really frustrated?
P: Both. Both. Cause it’s just like, I donno. I don’t know what it is but if you can’t keep quiet or keep still, I’m just gonna, I will lose it!

It seemed that for Paige, a better awareness of her own mental health needs and better support from her teacher would help her to manage her PTSD.
Six adults in the study shared insights into how they thought youths’ low-income circumstances may contribute to their mental health issues. I recorded in field notes how Barb spoke poignantly about the youth she worked with in the foster care system, many of whom had experienced transience and family disruption growing up. When describing the low-income youth she’s worked with, she stated, “It seems like there’s a lot of loss in their lives.” When I asked what kinds of loss, she said loss of family members, possessions, friends, and of who they are. “If you have a family that moves around a lot, the kids will experience a lot of loss.” She says she has met a lot of children with mothers who have gone to jail due to drugs, they do not know their fathers or they have several stepfathers or mothers’ boyfriends, they lose possessions because they are stolen or they have to leave them behind when they move. She added that she thinks youth do not know how to process this sense of loss, and it results in depression and anger issues. Barb sees transience as having a negative effect on the youth that she works with through the foster system, and several of the youth in the sample echoed this idea: Rose, Cara, Gwen, and Nicole in particular described how family stress from fear of or experiences of homeless created anxiety and depression issues for them. While these issues were not caused directly by adult actions, they were consequences of the circumstances that these youths’ parents and adult family members were in.

Mental Health Supports

Six youth described specific adults who supported them with their mental health needs, either by providing an outlet to talk about stressful emotional topics, or serving as a safe space to visit when they were having severe anxiety issues. For example, Nicole and Cara both identified Rob, one of the school counselors, as serving a vital role in their struggles with anxiety attacks at school. For both, he helped them realize that they were dealing with anxiety issues, identify the sources of these issues, and make a plan to deal with anxiety attacks in the future. Nicole describes how Rob intervened when he noticed her losing weight from severe anxiety:

And then he was just like, “well, we need to fix this, I’m sorry but I can’t sit here and watch this anymore, you look sickly.”…He gave me a place to go when I was having – you know, someone to talk to, he would literally walk around the school with me, just
calm me down, you know, and that was more support than I got from [doctors] – he just gave me support.

Five mentors and one key informant also spoke about providing mental health supports to youth, including both supporting them through severe mental health issues, supporting day-to-day maintenance of mental health, and providing positive emotional experiences. For example, Aaron describes a student who he saw as very gifted, but also very troubled. After a suicide attempt, he visited her in the hospital, because he was the only person she would allow there. “I spent probably dozens and dozens of hours listening and talking to that child after school…trying to be supportive of somebody who I knew was both a wonderful kid, and also on the brink of self-destruction.” Aaron’s role is a teacher, but he was willing to step in when a youth came to him with severe mental health needs.

Sally, a special education teacher, described how she supported day-to-day mental health for her students, by providing a quiet and friendly place for them to eat lunch. She had noticed some of her Autism spectrum disorder students skipping lunch because of social anxiety in the cafeteria, so Sally now works with students to create a plan to help them eat, such as leaving class early to get their meal and bringing it back to her class. She said they “just need a place to feel safe” and she is happy to make arrangements for them. In these examples, Aaron and Sally help youth avoid or recover from serious mental health issues, and can help them participate more in school and activities once their mental health needs are met.

**Responses to Stigma**

Youth respondents described a few different ways that they responded to the stigma that they experienced in their environments. Some of these responses led youth to choose “normalizing” behaviors and attempt to fit in with main stream society, which is a form of “boundary work” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Others reported an opposite response to stigma, which was the urge to engage in “complementary behavior” (Markey et al., 2003) and participate more in stigmatizing behaviors. Both of these responses to stigma help form youths’ identities, by leading them to form identities either in alignment with or in opposition to “mainstream” values.
Avoiding Stigma

Nine youth described strategies they used for avoiding stigma and fitting in with main--stream society. These included ways they dressed or presented themselves, ways they acted, and activities they focused time and effort on. For example, Helen spoke about how she sees engaging in school as a strategy to avoid stigma from adults:

I did better in school cause I want people to -- cause, I’m not gonna say who, but, certain kids have their parents, they work here or something, and uh, if they see you have bad grades, then they’re like, “don’t talk to my kids”, and so, I wanna be able to have people like me, and if their parents like me, and they work here, then maybe they’ll tell their kids, “oh, hang out with her, she’s cool.” And if I have an F, that’s probably not gonna happen, haha.

Most of these low-income youth were managing their image and reputation in one way or another. Two spoke about wearing nice clothes because they did not want to be seen as “lazy” or “dirty”. Rose explains that that because she attends church twice a week she feels that she does not receive the same “looks” as her peers who do not attend church. However, when she spends time with her friend Dianna (who has a juvenile justice charge) she thinks she’s seen as “guilty by association” and recounts an incident where they were stopped by a police officer while taking a short cut home through a field. Some youth have to carefully manage their image in order to participate in activities with different groups of people.

Complementary Behavior: “We’ll be that kid that you think we are”

Complementarity is a psychological pattern in which a person responds to the ways that they perceived they are treated by others, and align themselves with others’ views of them (Markey et al., 2003). Five youth and one adult saw this trend in the low-income youth they knew. Youth and adults pointed out ways that youth might respond both positively and negatively to others and engage in complementary behavior. Gwen illustrates the idea of complementary behavior on behalf of youth:

When we feel somebody that’s above us be nice to us, we’ll show you respect. But when you’re mean to us, we’ll sit there, we’ll blow that drag of our cigarette in your face, ok? We’ll be that kid that you think we are, before you gave us the chance to prove otherwise. We’ll be that kid, if that’s what you want. If that’s what
you think we are, then fine. That’s what the kids here in Mountainside do. When they’ve been faced with a teacher or a parent that thinks, ‘oh, you’re a bad kid and that’s all you’ll ever be’, then boom! That’s all I’ll ever be...that’s how those tweakers get built, is from being told they couldn’t be anything else, and not really dug into, and really tried to be helped, and teachers really just kinda let ‘em off at this point. Cause they expect, ‘oh, they’re just too far gone, they’re not coming back’.

While Gwen sees ways that adults fail to “earn” youths’ respect and fail youth by not giving them a “chance”, Helen describes the positive side of this pattern. I asked Helen what youth have to offer to the community and she responded this way:

If people wanted us to go help, cause I feel like they don’t – they’re like, oh, we’re teenagers, we’re not actually gonna get anything done, haha. So I feel like, if they actually tried, there could be a lot of volunteer things we could do, more than we have.

Both of these quotes show how youth respondents saw themselves and their peers as reacting to adult influences and adult beliefs, either directly, or through the opportunities that are available to them. They also demonstrate that youth perceive that they can recognize the ways that they are treated, and that they act accordingly, either with “respect” and the urge to contribute, or with disrespect and disengagement.

Summary of Constrained Outcomes

The stigma and barriers placed on youth by adults led youth to experience constrained outcomes. Many of these youth experienced barriers to positive youth development, both in their families of origin and in the adults around them. Adults and youth described the lack of support that they perceive youth to experience in the community, and youth described how lack of community support can lead them to disengage from institutions and have premature adultifying experiences. Mental health issues were prevalent in this sample, and youth cited adults as sources of both disturbance and support for mental health needs. Finally, youth described ways that they respond to stigma by either avoiding it, or engaging with it as an identifying personality feature. The discussion connects these findings to previous literature in order to show how youth identities are shaped by important adults and by stigma in this small, rural town.
Discussion

This study sought to understand the barriers and supports that low-income youth faced in developing identities and positive self-concepts in a rural town in Oregon. The symbolic interactionism framework (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) helped to clarify how youth create and sustain their self-concepts through their interactions with others. Through this process, youth reflected how adults influenced their trajectories. Youth and adults both reported ways that adults support youths’ positive development and resilience. However, youth and adults also identified ways that community norms, stigma, and pity influence youth in this small rural community, and negative influences on youth identity development that stemmed from these experiences. The reports of these youth and adults align with and expand upon literature related to stigma, youths’ interactions with rural places, the benefits of important adult relationships, and the ways in which youth contexts shaped their healthy and unhealthy decision making. Limitations of the study and implications for future research and policy are also discussed.

Stigma in the Meaning of “Low-income Youth”

Youth and adults presented portrayals of what it means to be a low-income young person in Mountainside. Both youth and adult respondents reported and exemplified a degree of stigma in their descriptions of low-income youth. While low-income youth shared their own stories of developing positive self-concepts, strengths, and capacities, adults often ignored these healthy outcomes when they described their own meanings of “low-income youth”. Youth also included negative connotations in their own meanings of “low-income youth”. The meanings that study respondents held reflect the literature on rural places, as well as the creation of the self through processes identified in a symbolic interactionism perspective.

Mountainside’s Roots: Bootstraps Mentality

The history of Mountainside aligns with towns that Cynthia Duncan (1999) spent time in for her book, Worlds Apart. Similar to the mill town that Duncan followed, Mountainside had a historically large working class that found stable employment in the local timber industry. It has been historically dependent on the timber industry, but now declining natural resources and a lack of other options for working-class wages put the
economy in danger of chronic poverty (L. Hamilton et al., 2008). Many of the families who were on the edge of poverty when the mill was operational are the same who experience intergenerational poverty now. Richard, a local businessman points out the “work hard/play hard” mentality that he believes the working class here developed. He and Dan, a city administrator, both described the community as having a “bootstraps mentality” and belief in self-sufficiency. However, these community mentalities seem unable to prevent the inevitability of job loss.

When the mill closed and the forestry industry contracted, as Linda highlighted, one could adapt by seeking education, but many were not able or willing to do so. Linda and others described what they saw as a “culture of poverty” in the community, related to disinterest in education and over-reliance on social support. Jennifer Sherman (2009) describes how rural poverty can create a moral hierarchy in which those who receive government assistance or engage in substance use are viewed with contempt. Many respondents in my study echoed the ideas that receiving welfare and using substances were seen as stigmatizing behaviors for the poor. Now, many perceive that “two Mountainsides” exist in the rich and poor sides of town, and “othering” of those in poverty on behalf of the higher-SES group may be detrimental to individual and community wellbeing. Each group of respondents expressed stigmatized views of families, individuals, and youth in poverty, including images of family dysfunction, substance abuse, and over-dependence on social support.

In contrast to the belief in a “culture of poverty” in Mountainside, some respondents pointed out how the whole community has become impoverished, and “low-income is normal”. These sentiments align with research on severely low-income neighborhoods carried out by Wilson (1996) for the book, When Work Disappears. Wilson found that, contrary to popular opinion, there was no “culture of poverty” for the urban poor he worked with, who held the same beliefs about the role of honesty and hard work as higher-income community members. However, a lack of jobs and inability to find work constricted Wilson’s respondents’ ability to develop the skills and work history needed to find jobs. This created a negative spiral of work availability in the inner city, and created a stigmatized view of urban African American males, in particular. This same
pattern may be in effect in Mountainside, where the availability of working class or labor jobs has dwindled over the last three decades. Now, young poor men in particular are stigmatized for their inability to find work, but youth also describe a lack of work an engagement opportunities in which they could develop work-related skills. Similarly, low-income rural youth enrolled in a community college reported that their own families do believe in the importance of education (contrary to the culture of poverty beliefs), but that they lacked the knowledge and cultural capital to help their children access college (Lile, Ottusch, Jones, & Richards, 2017). Many of the youth in this sample reported that their family members were supportive of their education, but that they still had barriers to success in school because of lack of communication and lack of understanding of expectations.

Beliefs about a “culture of poverty” can be understood “stigma theories” (Goffman, 1963) used to explain how stigmatized individuals are intrinsically different from “normal” individuals. When stigma about the abilities and interests of the poor are contrasted with low-income youths’ inability to find work and engage in the community, it may galvanize youths’ identity development and influence their perceptions of social support.

**Stigma and Creation of the Self**

This study demonstrated how experiences of stigma shape how youth act from moment to moment (the “I”) as well as their self-concepts (the “me”) through the adoption of the views of those around them (the “generalized other”) (Mead, 1934). The generalized other can exist in the form of adults, who create and share ideas about who youth are and what they do. Several youth spoke about how adults around them expressed stigmatized views of youth, labeling them “stoners” and questioning their life choices.

Goffman’s (1963) theory of social stigma describes how individuals and groups create stories to explain the inferiority of stigmatized groups. Adults and youth in this sample modeled this process when they described stigmatized portrayals of low-income youth that included images of drug use, parental abuse and neglect, and youth making bad choices as well as carrying personal traits that they cannot change, and that dictate
their life directions. Emphasizing personal traits as a source of youths’ unhealthy behaviors and the bad choices that low-income youth make fails to recognize or reward instances of resilience and potential that the youth themselves know they possess.

Outward identifiers lead adults to profile (Goffman, 1963) low-income youth, ascribing them stigmatized trajectories. Adults and youth spoke of several stigmatizing experiences, places, and activities in the community, including Douglas Park, the cliques that form at the school, and even how participating or not participating in church activities can be a double-edged sword. In fact, these low-income youth seem to have few places where they can “be” in the town without experiencing stigma. Childress (2000) notes a similar idea in Landscapes of Betrayal, Landscapes of Joy, pointing out that as a society, we tend to push youth to congregate in age-segregated spaces instead of inviting them into community spaces. In Mountainside, the community seems to profile youth they see in public, at the parks and on the streets, as “up to no good”, rather than assuming that it is natural for youth to share and use public spaces.

Youth respondents in this study took these messages of stigma to heart, as is evident in their stories. Youth engaged in boundary work (Link & Phelan, 2001) in various ways, working to differentiate themselves from the “bad crowd”. Michael spoke about the “noisy minority” of low-income youth who were “hooligans”, using substances and disrupting class, and pointed out that he did not think that his friends who were low-income were like that. Many spoke about dressing or acting a certain way around certain people, like around adults at the school, so that they could differentiate themselves from others. Luke did not even identify himself as low-income, although his large family lived below the federal poverty line. Additionally, he admitted that he held negative stereotypes about other low-income youth. Many youth in the study attributed more negative characteristics to a small minority and differentiated themselves from those youth. (The limitations section explores how youth in my sample may have differed from other low-income youth in Mountainside.)

It was evident that “low-income youth” were a stigmatized group, in part because of other respondents’ tendencies to judge them more harshly than these youth judged themselves (Fishkin et al., 1993). Adults were more inclined to “lump” low-income youth
together, attributing negative or stigmatized characteristics to them as a group. Again, this ignores the healthy and resilient trajectories that many of the (also very low-income) youth in this study were on, including Olivia, who was active in choir and wanted to study business, Kelly, whose family was receiving help from another family so that she could pursue her passions of music and cheerleading, and Michael, who wanted to be a neurosurgeon and whom I jokingly endorsed for public office. These youth are low-income, and are also on generally positive trajectories. They are receiving support from important adults, but those same important adults might not pick them out as “low-income” if asked. In the Moving to Opportunity Qualitative Study (DeLuca et al., 2016), having goals and moderate successes around education was the norm for respondents. Elliot and colleagues (2006) similarly discovered that most youth in their high-poverty, inner-city sample held positive identities. Often, though, it seems that community members do not recognize low-income youths’ successes in the moment. In the adults in this sample, the emphasis on resilience was placed on future successful outcomes. Youth, on the other hand, identified current capacities associated with resilience, including strength of character and mutual support. The youth in this sample all held goals and positive developmental assets, but when asked what “low-income youth” look like, adults put emphasis on deficits in schooling and family life rather than the strengths that at least some of the low-income youth in their community possess.

Some of the youth in this sample faced more negative outcomes related to their stigmatized statuses. For a few of these youth, being stigmatized has made them want to disengage from the community. Izzie thought that the town of Mountainside was “immature” and preferred the much smaller neighboring community where she lived, but was not engaged in activities that might lead her to feel welcomed by the community. Dianna had lost her “spark” of softball, and without it she just felt the need to leave the town and not look back. Gwen loved the community, but saw it as a wholly negative

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14 After a long, impassioned and thoughtful monologue about the needs of youth in the community, Michael apologized for going on a tangent. I told him it was fine, adding, “I’d vote for you for president, or mayor!”
influence on her and felt that she needed to leave to find success. She had also stopped attending church (where she had many positive role models) and used controlled substances regularly. These three youth have in common that they were some of the most disadvantaged – Dianna and Gwen had experienced regular family homelessness, and Izzie and her family lived in a mobile home parked on someone else’s property, where a common chore was hauling water. They may have lost their interest in engaging in the community through their experiences at school and in activities. They were displaying signs of “stereotype threat” (Link & Phelan, 2001) or “complementary behavior” (Markey et al., 2003), where they took what adults said to heart, and rather than proving themselves, chose to opt out of the community.

On a larger level, stereotype threat might have played out in the school. The majority of the youth in the sample reported facing major challenges and disengagement in late junior high or early high school, which could have been caused by a period of “internal othering” (Morris, 2012) which caused them to disconnect from teachers and academic goals. Adolescence is a period when the opinions of others weight more heavily on ones’ own self-concept, and early to middle adolescence can be a confusing time of discontinuity between different parts of the self (Harter, 1999). Stigma during this period could have led youth to disengage from school, thinking that academics were not an important part of their future because they are low-income. By the time they were in mid to late adolescence, many of the youth in this study regretted their past behaviors, and had realized that academics were important to their goals. However, these stigmatizing experiences had already potentially limited or constrained their possible futures.

Youth’s Self-Concepts of Rurality

The literature depicts two alternative narratives for youth interactions with rurality and rural places, both of which were represented by youth in this study. Youth reported, alternately, feeling pushed to leave the town, or feeling a sense of connection and “place based knowledge” (Corbett, 2007; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009).

Some of the youth in the sample felt “too good for this town”, echoing the desire to distance themselves from the stigma of being low-income in a small community. Others recognized that they are the “best and the brightest” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) and seemed
destined to leave for better opportunities. Many youth recognized the necessity of post-secondary education, whether in order to achieve a degree or a certification. Even the nearest community college was over an hour away; thus many youth understood that pursuing post-secondary education would lead them away from Mountainside.

For several of these youth, a sense of connection to the town came not only from the adults around them, but also from access to natural resources and recreation, the community’s investment in schools, and family ties to the community. This is similar to what many scholars have pointed out about the perceived advantages of living in rural places (Artz & Yu, 2011; Howley, 2006). Elizabeth is a good example of “place based knowledge” (Corbett, 2007; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009) because of her strong love of raising horses and her preference to train horses for a living rather than “sitting at a computer all day”. Luke likes working on cars, and wants to follow his father and brother into the auto industry; their house has several old Fords outside which he and his friends work on. Ben and his family love the quiet of Mountainside compared to a larger town they used to live in, and he wants to be a commercial truck driver so that he can balance travelling with living in a rural area. All three seem to see themselves in and around their families and Mountainside in the future. However, the simple truth was that the lack of opportunities in Mountainside means that most of these youth may have to leave. Even for Elizabeth, Luke, and Ben who enjoy living in Mountainside, their specific career goals mean that they will probably have to find work elsewhere, or stay in Mountainside and develop alternative goals. This is a dilemma faced by many rural communities, where shifting economic realities have eroded prospects for stable, working-class employment (Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Identity Development: Support and Unmet Needs

This study demonstrates the ways that identity formation of youth is shaped by the adults around them, and by the contexts in which they find themselves. For these low-income youth in a rural community, interactions with adults and institutions shaped identity in several ways. Youth spoke about how their identity and cognitive development was supported by adults through identity projects and support for educational goals. Many respondents hinted at the overlap between agency and character
development. Emotional health for youth was a primary concern in this study, and respondents described emotional supports and unmet mental health needs. Social ties to important adults enhanced youths’ resilience. Youth and adults also described stigma in youths’ environments, and the potential for environmental support of youth contribution.

**Adult-Supported Identity Projects**

Lareau (2003) points out that low-income children and youth tend to have fewer interactions with adults in institutional settings, and are rarely coached by parents and families to prepare them for these interactions. Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider (2001) noted that youth from the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods had fewer positive interactions with adults, and were the most at-risk compared to other groups. Deluca and her colleagues (2016) point out that while having an “identity project” (such as an interest in sports, art, or participation in a subculture) led youth in the MTO study to avoid “the street”, having one that linked them to an institution (school, clubs, activities) led them to be twice as likely to be “on track” in work and education after high school.

While all of the youth in my study were low-income, economic data were incomplete, so it is hard to estimate which households were the most disadvantaged. Thus, a detailed comparison between income and engagement was difficult. Identity projects, “sparks”, hobbies, and extra-curricular activities were common in this sample. For some youth, mentors and important adults presented role models for “spark” and identity projects. Important adults modeling and supporting “spark” included Sally, who showed her students pictures of her husband’s hobby car, or Aaron, who was Nicole’s motivation to learn how to play guitar.

However, other youth were not engaged in identity projects that linked them to an institution, or to regular adult interactions. As Deluca et al. (2016) point out, while it seems that “luck” that a youth should choose one type of identity project over another, it is also a sign that the institutions around them are not actually meeting their needs. As I mentioned previously, Dianna, Izzie, and Gwen seemed to be some of the most disadvantaged participants because of their experiences with family poverty, parental substance use, and instability in their home and family environments. Each of these youth also had ways in which the adults and institutions around them had failed them –
Dianna had to quit softball, the primary activity that gave her life meaning; Izzie had early experiences in school that lead her to believe that teachers did not like her; Gwen felt disconnected from her church, which had previously been a source of belonging. Rather than it being “luck” that they did not have identity projects which included adult interactions, these youth were explicitly or intentionally limited in their adult interactions by boundaries imposed either by themselves or by others.

**Educational Goals and Paths to Adulthood**

Research in youth-adult interactions suggests correlations between mentoring relationships, goal seeking or self-regulation, and educational motivation (DuBois et al., 2011; Sipe, 2002). In this sample, mentors encouraged goal setting behavior in low-income youth by presenting positive role models for goal setting and “pushing” them to attain goals. Goal setting and “pushing” youth through obstacles is one way to encourage “stick-to-it-ness” (Rhodes et al., 2006) and “grit,” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) or the motivation to attain goals in the face of challenge. Twelve youth described how adults helped them develop a belief that they had the skills to attend college, that college was financially feasible, and that attaining post-secondary education was worth the investment. Helen described how multiple important adults in her life encouraged her to find self-motivation in setting and reaching her educational goals. (While adult support for college-related goals was high in this sample, the actual trajectories of these youth are less clear and may include future challenges and barriers to completing their educational goals.)

Recent literature on late adolescence and the transition to adulthood speaks of the growing trend of “emerging adulthood” in which young people may spend upwards of a decade forming concrete education, career, and family identities after high school (Arnett, 2000; Cote & Levine, 2002; Settersten & Ray, 2010a). In this study, a few of the youth planned to enter 4-year colleges, including Cara and Kelly, who planned to pursue white-collar or artistic careers, but had less concrete ideas of what their career paths would be. This trajectory of college and prolonged identity formation is consistent with the emerging adulthood literature (Arnett, 2000; Settersten & Ray, 2010a).
However, pathways for youth in lower-income samples trend towards “expedited” adulthood (DeLuca et al., 2016) in which youth and young adults feel the need to form identities and meet the markers of adulthood early. Despite influences from adults about the prospects of college, the goals of most youth in the sample placed them on an “expedited” trajectory, because they felt pressure to adopt the markers of adulthood early. Most of the youth in this sample had a clear idea of a career path, and many had goals of living on their own and supporting themselves, often out of necessity created by family poverty. Their career paths were seen as easy to reach in a short period of time, and often chosen for practical reasons rather than being based on their interests. For instance, Ben loved to draw and was interested in music but saw it as something he might do if he could not make a career out of driving commercial trucks. Nicole was an award-winning writer and had previously intended to study psychology, but after her panic attacks and period of disengagement from school, her plans changed to studying at a community college to be a florist. Many youth in the study planned to work while attending community college, or wanted to find employment out of high school and apply to college later. These youth are pragmatic about their options for education, because they lack access to (or knowledge of) financial assistance to support full-time study at a university. They also often recognized that their earlier disengagement from school was now constraining their options because of low GPAs. Their family, academic, and economic realities push them to pursue a truncated version of emerging adulthood, and these limited options force them to miss out on an extended identity formation process which has, arguably, become a marker of modern society (Settersten & Ray, 2010a).

Scholars point out that low-income youth are often forced on to expedited paths because they lack resources to participate in a drawn-out transition to adulthood (DeLuca et al., 2016). However, missing out on opportunities for higher education and extended identity formation can leave them lagging behind their peers economically, and many enter mid-adulthood wishing they had been able to attend college earlier (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; DeLuca et al., 2016; Settersten & Ray, 2010a).

Some adults in the study also described a perception that disengagement from school was moderated by gender, and that boys tended to have a higher rate of disinterest
in academic pursuits, possibly because of cultural beliefs linking intellectualism with femininity. While the boys in this study did not seem to exhibit the same trend, there is basis for gendered beliefs about academics in the literature. In his ethnography of low-income youth in London, Willis (1981) described how low-income males rejected education and embraced working-class roles as a form of counter-culture and protest. This depiction of agency in rejecting education also surfaced for Corbett (2007) in his ethnography in a rural coastal town of Nova Scotia. Corbett described a rejection of higher educational goals, in favor of “place-based knowledge” and roles that would keep youth closely connected to their communities. The idea that males, in particular, may reject education in favor of place-based knowledge and working class roles contributes to the understanding of the adult respondents in this study who felt that “boys in black” and “macho” identities were preventing males from engaging in the education system.

Research using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health suggests that older subjective age and early feelings of maturity are more common in teens and young adults growing up in low-resourced households, as well as those who witnessed violence or felt unsafe at school growing up (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Several of the youth in this study reported recognizing financial hardship in their families, as well as having experiences of early maturity. These “adultifying” experiences tended to disengage youth from school, because significant family barriers got in the way of attending class or completing homework.

Thus, competing factors in the youth respondents’ environments created both “push” and “pull” factors for disengagement with academic or educational goals. They felt “pushed” into early maturity and older subjective age by their early experiences of adversity. They also may have felt “pushed” away from higher education by their schools’ lack of support in their interest in place-based knowledge. They felt “pulled” towards early attainment of career and educational goals by the need for financial independence and self-reliance created by family poverty. These factors caused some youth in this study to self-identify with adult roles earlier, and reject the “normative” pathway of prolonged identity formation through participation in higher education in emerging adulthood.
Agency, Choice, and Character Development

The balance of agency and structure is a core concept of human development, and expressing agency in one’s surroundings is an important part of developing a positive self-concept (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Youth in this study had a clear balance of agency and structure in their lives which played out in their identity development, causing both confidence and self-doubt. Concepts involving agency and decision making were incorporated in discussions about low-income youths’ character development.

Important adults sometimes supported youth’s character development by helping them align behaviors and values in order to make “good choices”. This is an important step in developing youths’ sense of self-control and helping them manage their behaviors for long-term rewards and goal attainment. The research supports the idea that self-control and self-regulation may be outcomes of mentoring and positive adult relationships (Aldwin et al., 2011; Sykes et al., 2014). For youth in this sample, negative role models helped identify what “not” to do, but positive role models gave them models for their own character development. For example, Ben had negative role models in his family that engaged in substance use and difficulty controlling emotions. However, several important adults in his life also gave him positive examples of goal attainment and engagement, such as Wendy, who provided college and career advice in class and modeled “helping behavior”, making him want to help others in the future.

Many respondents characterized low-income youth by the unhealthy decisions and “bad choices” that they say youth making, including substance abuse and truancy. Some respondents portrayed these choices as a way that youth expressed agency as well as poor character development. Respondents also identified “personal traits” that they felt some youth possessed as markers of negative character development. The implication of these kinds of descriptions was that youth were set in their negative character traits and lacked agency to make positive decisions.

However, others saw youth making unhealthy decisions as an outcome of the circumstances in which they found themselves. Both youth and adults recognized that low-income youth are restricted by their surroundings, because being low-income restricts options for extracurricular activities and family engagement with school. These
respondents depicted “bad decisions” as a natural outcome of low-income environments. This portrayal also connotes a lack of agency, because it assumes that in certain situations, youth will naturally make certain choices.

Some respondents pointed out how stigmatized views of low-income youth can lead to “complementary behavior”, (Markey et al., 2003) whereby youth embrace stereotypes and engage in actions that will further distance them from community norms. Complementary behavior is an example of agency within structure, as youth see the limited options created by stigma and chose to play the “role” that they see as available to them. Gwen describes complementary behavior as the experience of feeling disrespected by adults who do not expect her to succeed, and choosing to disrespect those adults in turn. This is one of the few portrayals of low-income youth which acknowledges both the agency they possess in making their own decisions and choosing identity outcomes, as well as the structure that limits their choices through the negative and stigmatizing views of others. Research on “non-complementary behavior”, or acting in ways that disrupt the social script, suggests that it can support clients’ behavior change in a therapeutic setting (Friedlander, 1993). This research supports Gwen’s assertion that she will act the way she is treated, and may present a novel model for adult interactions with vulnerable youth.

**Mental Health**

From a developmental standpoint, early to middle adolescence is a time when mental health issues should be most prevalent, because of the “crisis” of identity and anxiety caused by attempting to reconcile different context-specific identities (Erikson, 1994; Harter, 1999). In a nationally representative sample of over 10,000 adolescents aged 13-18, the rates of any lifetime mental health disorders and severe mental health disorders were 46% and 21% respectively (Merikangas et al., 2010). However, collected research on the prevalence of mental health concerns using SES indicators as correlates suggests that children and adolescents exposed to indicators of poverty are between two and three times more likely to experience mental health disorders during adolescence (Reiss, 2013).

Data from this study support the national trends. Though the research questions were not designed to diagnose or collect data on mental health outcomes, the theme of
mental health concerns and experiences emerged inductively. Nine out of 16 participants reported a negative mental health experience, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, eating disorders, anger, and high stress levels. Youth often reported that the sources of these symptoms were related in some way to poverty, either through stress created by family instability, financial worry, and early experiences of maturity, or through early abuse and exposure to violence. Research on “adverse childhood experiences” supports the idea that exposure to early trauma or family instability can lead to mental health disorders, as well as over-use of substances and other unhealthy behaviors as coping mechanisms in adolescence and adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998).

For many of these youth, the severity of mental health issues sometimes kept them from participating in school or engaging in activities in the community. Five of the youth experiencing mental health issues also experienced academic “turnarounds”, meaning they had disengaged academically at one point and then re-engaged with school and non-familial adults. These findings support the family stress model, in which financial stress for the parent negatively influences the parent-child relationship and leads to increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children and adolescents (K. J. Conger, Rueter, & Conger, 2000; R. D. Conger et al., 2002).

The role that early maturity and “adultifying” experiences contributed to mental health for the youth in this study was also rather large. Burton (2007) presents a model for adultification in low-income youth, based on five ethnographic studies with low-income youth and families. Her model includes four “levels” of adultification within the family, including precocious knowledge, mentored-adultification, peerification/spousification, and parentification. Similar trends are evident in the stories of youth in this sample: Alex reported that his father showed him a marijuana growing operation (precocious knowledge); Rose reported that her salary at a fast food restaurant went to pay family rent and utilities (peerification); Dianna reported that at 13 she had felt the need to become responsible to support herself and her younger sibling (parentification). Not only had these youth experienced family stress which shaped their early development, but youth like Rose, Gwen and Nicole were now taking on adult roles
in order to support themselves and their households, while attempting to finish secondary education.

For youth in this sample, mentors and important adults often provided support for their emotional needs. Important non-parental adults are theorized to help youth reduce depressive symptoms and find positive coping mechanisms (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Youth in this study had a surprisingly high rate of mental health challenges and concerns in their stories. In this study, mentors supported youths’ emotional and psychological development by providing safe places and helping them express emotions in healthy ways. Several adults spoke about the importance of creating safe environments. Sally, Tina, Wendy, and Cynthia all spoke about ways that they try to create safe and nurturing environments in their interactions with youth, both in school and during activities. Several youth spoke about how adults enhanced their sense of connection and belonging by being welcoming and non-judgmental.

Adults also helped youth express and deal with negative emotions, and adopt more positive outlooks on life. Alex spoke about how Tina helped him when he was frustrated with his other teachers. Rob provided specific mental health support to both Nicole and Cara when they had panic attacks, helping them to cope with their frightening experiences and providing a safe space and listening ear. Importantly, both Rob and Sally described making plans with youth to deal with future issues, so the youth know where to go when they are in distress. These adults create important safe spaces and safe routines, which can help youth with mental health needs participate and engage in school. Several youth mentioned that adults modeled a positive outlook, which helped them feel resilient and hopeful in times of stress. When mentors adopted nurturing and emotional support tactics, they positively impacted youths’ psychological wellbeing.

However, many of the youth in this sample still experienced untreated mental health concerns, or were prone to unhealthy responses to negative life events. Adults in this sample generally recognized that youth had mental health concerns and needed mental health support, but did not always realize the severity of that need. In the context of severe mental health concerns, discussions of youth “agency” seem irrelevant: without the support to process negative emotions, youth may turn to unhealthy choices in order to
cope. Classifying these youths’ actions as “bad choices” may serve to further distance them from the support they need. For example, Rose stayed with a friend and avoided school after her grandmother died, and then was penalized for truancy concerns. Gwen used marijuana to “treat” her ADHD and calm her anxiety, while Vince specifically complained of a student in his class doing the same. It is troubling to think that the very behaviors that youth engage in to self-medicate and cope may be the same ones that serve to distance them from caring adults who could support them. Some of the youth in this study seemed to think they had to “go it alone” and grow up fast in order to cope with life. They may be left with unresolved mental health needs that fester later in adulthood.

**Resilience**

Many youth respondents framed their stories around the idea of resilience (Masten, Obradović, & Burt, 2006) or overcoming past obstacles and challenges to find success (or at least normalcy). Most of these stories revolve around schooling, because a period of disconnection from school was common in this sample. There are also stories of overcoming family hardship, including homelessness, substance use, and family abuse. For these youth, their resilient personalities are sources of positive identity: several described themselves as strong or resilient. Youth also spoke about how their connection to others supported their resilience. Parents, family members, peers, and mentors served as supports that helped them overcome hardship.

Most youth in the study developed a sense of caring and connection through relationships with mentors and important adults. Past research supports the idea that youth may develop “attachment” relationships with important adults to help them overcome past trauma and develop their capacities for future relationship building (Hurd et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2006). For some youth who had negative or abusive relationships with adults, there was evidence that connections to mentors helped them overcome those past experiences. Paige developed a strong bond with her youth group leader; Elizabeth looked up to her grandmother as her biggest role model, and Helen spoke about how adults who praised her made her realize that her father’s words were mean, not true. A few youth also reported positive impacts on peer relationships: based on relationships with important adults, they had limited their peer group and stopped
engaging in activities that might endanger their futures. Additionally, several youth reported that their mentor helped “humanize” adults and make them more approachable, supporting the idea that mentoring relationships can enhance youths’ connections to other adults (Thomson & Zand, 2010).

Youth in this sample were often heavily reliant on family, even when those same family members were the ones who had introduced stress to their lives. Family members most often served as role models for resilience, as well as providing emotional support. For example, Paige describes her mother, who is raising her and her two siblings alone after fleeing an abusive husband, as “strong” and hopes that she can live up to her mother’s example of strength. This illustrates how family connections are not “black and white” and how strong connections to family can be for low-income youth. Youth can derive emotional and moral support from family members who, at the same time, have major challenges in their own lives. The strong connections that youth respondents have to family members indicates that they have developed a sense of “interdependence” in a context of tight-knit community (Elder & Conger, 2000).

The idea that resilience can stem from a sense of inter-connectedness with family and neighbors is a common theme in rural America (Bellah et al., 2007). Several youth and adults in this sample mentioned that they feel Mountainside has a strong commitment to supporting youth. An example of community supports for youth was found in some youths’ experiences of surrogate family that stepped in to provide shelter for them. A sense of resilience and interdependence complements the “bootstraps mentality” or independent attitude that Dan identified in the community, and that other researchers have pointed out as a marker of rural America (Sherman, 2009). A sense in youth that they have faced adversity and persevered seems to suggest that they have adopted the community mentality of “don’t tell us we can’t because we’ll show you we can”. At the same time, these youths’ strong sense of interdependence and interconnectedness with their families shows that their personal identity is strongly linked to their social networks. Their sense of personal resilience is developed through their connections to others, and they model the resilient stories and messages of the adults closest to them.
Environments: Limitations vs. Contribution

The environments in which youth found themselves often served to constrain their options for healthy identity development. The lack of opportunities for community engagement in Mountainside created barriers to youth engagement and constrain youth agency. Childress (2000) points out that in many communities, youth are “segregated” into large buildings (schools, youth centers), and the erosion of downtown spaces in favor of strip malls is a hindrance to community participation for youth who lack transportation. These two factors make visible youth in the community more marginalized and stigmatized, because they are unable to interact with public spaces in “normal” ways (e.g. walking through parking lots because they do not have vehicles, or spending time on street corners because they do not have money to spend in a store.) This trend is at play in Mountainside, where being in sight has a stigmatizing effect on youth, because it is assumed that they are not doing what they should be. Thus, when youth are seen at the parks or walking around town, they are presumed to be getting into trouble and given labels of “stoner” and “homeless”. Cara described her father pointing to youth on the street and calling them “stoners.” Nicole described how she enjoys walking in parks with her dog, but she has to avoid Douglas Park because of its stigmatized status. In this way, she feels her participation in the community is policed, and she is limited in engaging in positive activities because of community stigma.

In Lerner’s (2011) model of positive youth development, youth cultivate capacities that help them thrive in the present and the future. The model originally used “Five Cs” of confidence, competence, caring, connection, and character to categorize the interactions that youth have with their surroundings. In this study, the majority of youth all shared ways that their interactions with adults helped them build the “Five Cs”, and most youth saw their own trajectories as positive, despite community stigma. This finding supports prior research including work by Elliot and colleagues (Elliott et al., 2006) that suggest that even in the most disadvantaged contexts, positive youth development is the norm rather than the exception.

Lerner’s model was also particularly useful for this group of youth because of the addition of a “Sixth C”, contribution, which illustrates how youth can give back to their
communities and participate as community members (Lerner et al., 2015). Though all participants experienced some form of positive developmental outcome due to interactions with important adults, building contribution through interactions with adults was a less common outcome, with only half of youth reporting that they had these experiences. Some youth were contributing, and many spoke about their desire to contribute more to the community, whether through helping beautify the town, or doing service for those less fortunate. More ways for youth to be seen positively engaging in the community could include participating in apprenticeships, conducting regular community service in town, or seeking “place-based knowledge” by engaging with the community for educational purposes. Such activities might help dissolve the stigma associated with seeing low-income youth, if those same youth were encouraged to participate in the community in positive ways. There is a clear need for adults in this community to support youth to contribute to the community actively and often, and to embrace their present capacities rather than focusing on deficits and future outcomes. (The Implications section describes examples of ways in which communities might come together to support youth.)

**Limitations**

Constraints existed in this research project which limited the generalizability of the findings. Sampling issues and time restrictions meant that youth respondents were drawn from a relatively shallow pool, which limited the perspectives that this study could explore. The intention was to recruit youth through school and community agencies. Recruitment flyers were distributed through local non-profit and religious organizations with a request that key informants and service providers distribute them to selected individuals who might qualify and be willing to participate. However, the school was the only site from which youth were successfully recruited. Successful recruitment at the school took the form of direct referrals from guidance counselors, visits to regular classes, and visits to GED and alternative program classrooms. Additionally, two participants joined the study because friends or siblings had participated.

The sampling approach that I was able to take meant that the youth respondents were all still relatively connected to the school. Although several were in alternative
programs or had dropped out for a period and returned to get their GEDs, they were engaged in pursuing an educational goal of some sort. It is possible that these youth display higher goal-seeking behavior than some of their peers, who are less connected to school. I had hoped to find youth who lacked positive mentor or adult interactions, but it was difficult to access this group exactly because of their lack of connection to adults. I was not able to access youth in this age range who had dropped out and not returned to school. When youth in my sample speak about their adult experiences and their positive youth development sources and outcomes, it is important to remember that most likely had relatively privileged experiences compared to some of their peers. Safety concerns also limited my access to youth in areas where they might congregate, such as Douglas Park. If more time and resources had been available for this project, ethnography and interviews with youth recruited from other sites could have added a new perspective to the results.

Mentors in my sample were also a surprisingly difficult group to access. Most of the youth identified mentors with the school; these were the most accessible adults in the study, reflected in the fact that all but one adult in the mentor group are teachers. There were a few teachers who were difficult to access, and after repeated attempts to contact them, I concluded that they were choosing to opt out of the study. It was also difficult to access religious youth group leaders, one youth’s supervisor at work, and one youths’ teacher from an online school program. The high rate of response from Mountainside’s teachers could have biased the mentor responses, because these individuals are trained in youth development and mentoring skills to some extent. Their answers may not be representative of all of the adults with whom youth interact on a regular basis, including parents and adult family members, employers, and community business owners.

The results presented here focus on what community service providers, youth themselves, and those non-family adults closest to them hear and believe about low-income youth. This project does not explore the perspectives of the community as a whole, nor does it take into account narratives of individuals who do not interact with low-income youth on a regular basis. In order to develop a more complete view of community perspectives I would have needed to pursue more key-informant and mentor
interviews with parents, church staff, business owners and employees, retirees, and other adults living and working in the community, as well as with youth at the school who were not low-income. I would have also needed to engage in more participant observation in the various around town where low-income youth interact with different types of community members. This endeavor would have been more time-intensive, but would have led to a more well-rounded community perspective.

**Implications**

This study explored how stigma and mentoring shapes identity as it is expressed in late adolescence for low-income, rural youth. Implications exist in programming and policy realms, as well as in future research on the transition to adulthood for low-income youth in rural communities. Further research and programming support within school, family, and community contexts for low-income youth are discussed.

**Education**

For American youth in late adolescence, life revolves largely around finishing high school and establishing a trajectory for what will come next. Youth in this age bracket are also solidifying ideas about their own identities (Harter, 1999). Therefore, the school context can have a major impact on youth identity development. For the youth in this study, connections through school were especially helpful for understanding and navigating the future, as they came from families with lower than average educational attainment. Most of these youths’ parents grew up at a time when they did not need a college education to gain stable employment. However, for adults like Linda and her peers, and for the parents of youth in this study, instability in Mountainside’s job market meant that they were now struggling to seek higher education, or were un- or under-employed. This left youth with the idea that college or post-secondary school was important, but a lack of knowledge in their family about how to navigate college. The Oregon state graduation or transfer rate for community colleges is around 24% (Atkins & Blackmer, 2015), showing that navigating community college is an important but overlooked need. For youth in this study, connections to important adults, especially those at the school, had potential to help them navigate the institutional requirements to pursue higher education.
For some youth, connections to a few key adults at the school helped them form concrete plans for college or post-secondary education. Shelly and Rob were two adults who helped with this, and other adults also served as career and educational role models. Mountainside High School had a strong goal setting program in which sophomores and juniors explored career options, and credits were required in “career learning experiences”. The school also had strong ties with a local community college, and participated in a program where students could enroll in community college classes for dual credit, with financial support. With these supports, it was unsurprising that nearly every student in my study saw post-secondary education as a possibility, if not a goal.

However, there were clear holes in student support systems at the school. The high numbers of students in this sample who had experienced academic problems in late junior high and early high school suggests that there was some disconnect for students during this time. There were varying reports on what students struggled with at this age, including feeling shy or overwhelmed at the high school, not feeling academically challenged, and feeling discouraged about their long-term trajectories. Past research suggests that the transition from junior high to high school can be difficult for youth when their sense of self-confidence in education is challenged (Eccles, 2008). Clearly, early adolescence is a vulnerable time for low-income youth. In Mountainside at least, some of the needs of low-income youth have gone un-met, as evidenced by the high rate of disengagement from school during the transition from junior high to high school. The high rates of mental health disorders related to childhood trauma and household stress suggest that a “trauma-informed” system be implemented with teachers and administrators in the school (Ko et al., 2008). Recognizing that youth are dis-engaged because of trauma, rather than because of their “bad choices” or personality traits, might help adults to overcome stigmatized portrayals of youth as dangerous. Adults in this study had a wide range of responses to low-income youth; while some were sympathetic, others had high and sometimes unreachable expectations. Universal training on trauma-informed care for educational and youth development program staff could help community service providers learn how to better connect to and support youth throughout their school careers.
Youth experiences of and discussions about *contribution* in this study, though limited, showed that low-income youth are interested in engaging in community and willing to contribute. Rural schools like Mountainside High School tend to be under-resourced and lack opportunities for the most disadvantaged students to connect and engage. A better network of community agencies supporting youths’ positive development trajectories could help buffer youth outcomes, and support the under-resourced schools. In the county that Mountainside was in, there were a few such programs, including Youth Corps, where at-risk students transitioning from high school could gain work skills and social capital, and a program that supported youth to address environmental issues. There was also a community service club at Mountainside High School, which Michael served in. More community effort to engage youth in unique ways could help rural places like Mountainside. For example, 4-H programs across the country are re-envisioning ways to engage marginalized youth (Russell & Campen, 2016) and strengthen youth-community bonds. Other ideas include apprenticeship programs run by city councils and chambers of commerce, and volunteering programs for youth run by networks of local social service agencies. Networks of community agencies that are committed to creating positive trajectories for low-income youth could enhance the work of the school system in supporting youths’ positive identity development.

**Family**

In this sample, youth saw family members as role models for resilience, strong sources of support, and avenues for the expression of agency. Even for youth in stressful situations, such as Nicole and Dianna, family members who played the biggest roles as sources of their stress often also served as supports and role models in other ways. Family is a complicated issue for some of these youth, and they often derived equally supportive and damaging influences from family members.

On the other hand, the adults in this study, as well as poverty educators like Dr. Donna Beegle (2007) and even research like Deluca et al. (2016) and Masten (2015) speak about the families of low-income youth in much more black-and-white terms. (Two adults cited Dr. Beegle specifically, as she had recently visited a nearby community on a speaking tour.) Comments about the families of low-income youth from mentors and
key informants were overwhelmingly negative. Even youth themselves, when asked questions about low-income youth, generally, identified family as a negative influence, regardless of whether that true in their own lives. Adults echoed Dr. Beegle (2007) in describing low-income family environments as detrimental to development, and expressing hope that youth would “escape” these environments. This same sentiment arises when Deluca et al. (2016) adopted the term “crabs in a bucket” from the young adults they interviewed, who described family challenges as endangering their chances at success. This outlook on family denies the potential for family resilience, and the strengths that some of these families possess in their inter-connectedness and mutual support for one-another. It also denies that some youth, including Nicole or Paige, may derive moral and emotional support from parents while needing other types of support from other sources. As the proverb goes, “it takes a village to raise a child.” Supporting low-income families may mean accepting that they have strengths and positive capacities to offer to youth.

While describing the families of low-income youth as sources of stress and negative influence may be helpful for researchers studying individual development and social work strategies, when viewed through the lens of stigma this is a potentially damaging discourse. Stigmatizing a person’s family can serve to stigmatize them by extension. Families are often a source of emotional support, and offer youth a sense of belonging, commitment, and loyalty. When asked to choose between education and family, a youth may opt out of education and pursue work, in order to contribute to the family rather than achieving personal goals. Rose experienced this choice when her work hours made online schooling necessary, which put her at a disadvantage in communicating with school administrators. Middle-class scripts may dictate that the family should put adolescents’ goals and education first, but lower-income families do not always have this luxury. Schools and youth programs could benefit from research that puts youth voice first and highlights the benefits that low-income youth can receive from families. Educational practitioners would benefit from learning ways to engage with low-income youth that do not require dismissing and disparaging family connections. It is
important to remember that positive youth development occurs across many contexts, and every context has the potential to help youth build healthy capacities and identities.

**Community**

Struggling rural and resource-dependent communities like Mountainside have an array of issues which threaten economic and social prosperity. The list of potential improvements that respondents envisioned for Mountainside was extensive, and included housing, employment prospects, community supports for youth and families, and government intervention. Some respondents also felt that there were certain strengths in the town already, including a strong moral obligation and social cohesion among some groups of higher-income and church going populations\(^\text{15}\). The town has participated in development-related projects in the past, but none of these as of yet has resulted in major economic improvement.

In the lives of low-income youth in Mountainside, mentors and teachers clearly play a big role in supporting healthy outcomes. However, these mentors are often “stellar” examples of teachers who go above and beyond the necessities of their position. Many teachers in the sample joked that all of their volunteer time is at the school or with youth, volunteering as sports coaches and or receiving minimal stipends to serve as activity advisors in their off-time. While the commitment of specific adults can provide strong supports for specific youth, administrative and community deficits can create barriers for others. Rather than a few adults standing out as exemplary resources and champions for youth, communities like Mountainside require community-wide commitment to success for all youth. Networks of community agencies, collaboration, and wrap-around support would help at-risk youth find more success. Groups like the Youth Services Team, which is comprised of local and county service providers and meets with one family every two weeks, serve in this capacity for a limited number of youth and families who are in the highest-need brackets. However, the reach of these

\(^{15}\) The respondents who perceived these strengths tended to be mentors such as Vince and Tina, who saw the support that the school provided some youth in the form of activities and sports, or youth such as Elizabeth, Ben, and Luke who had strong family support and “place-based” goals to tie them to the town.
groups is limited by their scope and capacities. It may take a creative re-imagining of “community development” in order to truly support low-income youth in places like Mountainside.

One example of such a re-imagining is the school district in Veronia, Oregon. After a flood in 2007 which destroyed the school building and caused a major loss in the student population, the community seized the opportunity and leveraged grants and a tax levy to re-design a new school (Townsley, 2012). The school now houses grades k-12, a community center with adult education classes, a library, and child care center in a sustainably-built building (Doussard, 2011). The school is designed to be a “sustainability lab”, where students learn about sustainable forestry and ecology practices. Such an intensive redesign may not be possible everywhere, but this example shows that when a community engages creatively they can design new ways of looking at problems including natural disaster and rural outmigration.

Specific policy recommendations are outside of the scope of this project, which focused more on the proximal contexts of youth. Others (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Childress, 2000; DeLuca et al., 2016; Duncan & Coles, 1999) have studied community-level factors that can influence youth and young adult identity, career, and educational trajectories. However, much of this research is focused around risk and disadvantage. While it is necessary to understand the structural inequalities that youth face, an exploration of positive youth development should extend outward to positive community development, as well. Just as youth can harness strengths to find success in the face of risk, communities can explore their own strengths and create strengths-based community identities. Strengths-based research can be conducted in every sphere, and more creative approaches to solving structural disadvantage could lead to strengths-based programming and policy on the community level. Examples of strengths-based research approaches to community include tools like asset mapping (Santilli, Carroll-Scott, Wong, & Ickovics, 2011) and research approaches such as Community Based Participatory Research (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Examples of strengths-based programing and policy work include networking approaches, coalition building (Woolworth, 2010) and developing natural resources for tourism and entrepreneurship (Kline, Hao, Alderman,
Kleckley, & Gray, 2014). Future directions for myself and others in the field can focus on strengths-based community endeavors which lead to positive outcomes for youth, both at the individual and at the aggregate level.
Conclusion

It is clear from this research that there are still misconceptions about the realities and needs of low-income youth in rural America. Stigma and community norms have a large role to play in shaping the identities of low-income youth, but so to do positive youth development indicators including supportive relationships, strong identities, and opportunities for resilience, engagement, and contribution. Mentors and adults had positive things to say about the youth that they worked with, but they also demonstrated a tendency for othering and marginalizing low-income youth generally. Some youth also took on negative views of “low-income youth” themselves, and engaged in “boundary work” in order to distance themselves from stigma.

However, the strong positive outlooks and resilience that youth demonstrated presents a wealth of untapped potential for creating better opportunities for engagement and identity development. Youth were ready and willing to contribute to the community and to have their contributions be valued and encouraged. Ideally, further research into the possibilities for positive youth development in low-resourced, high-needs communities can help generate programs and policies that support these youth throughout their adolescence and transitions to adulthood. The goal of economic development and school reform should be to create communities that support all community members, regardless of income level. However, if rural low-income youth are not supported to find healthy identities and thriving trajectories, problems like rural outmigration and “brain drain”, generational poverty, and economic depression will continue to erode civic life in places like Mountainside.
Bibliography


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Appendix A

Key Informant Interview Guide

Tells us about your program/organization.
What is your role in the community?
How long have you been in this position?
What are the main tasks of the position?
How, if at all, have things changed for your program or your professional role over time?
How long have you lived in [MS], and what have you done here?
How, from your perspective, have things changed in [MS] over the time you have been in the community here?

Our focus has primarily been on the families living in the local trailer parks. What kinds of interactions do you have with the youth and families who live in the local trailer parks (or with low-income youth and families generally)?
How from your perspective do the experiences of youth and families from the trailer parks (or those of low-income youth and families generally) compare to the experiences of young people growing up in [MS] in general?
What does the general community think about the trailer parks and the people living in them?
Appendix B
Youth Demographic Survey

1. ID#: [Participants were guided to make a unique ID number.]
2. Age:
3. Gender: (Circle one)
   Female  Male  Neither/ Prefer not to say
4. Race/Ethnicity: (Circle all that apply)
   African American  Asian American  Latin American
   Native American  White  Other (please describe):
5. Highest level of education:
   Some HS, still enrolled  Some HS, left early  Finished HS
   Enrolled in college/post-HS (Where?)
6. What is/was your High School GPA?
   1.0-1.5  1.5-2.0  2.0-2.5  2.5-3.0  3.0-3.5  3.5-4.0
7. How many hours do you work for pay each week?
   None  5 or less  6-10  11-20  21-30  31-40  41 or more
8. How long have you lived in Mountainside?
9. What best describes your living situation?
   With one parent  Parents married/with both  Parents divorced/with both
   Living with non-parent family  Living with friends  Living by myself  Other:
10. How many people are in your household (including family and roommates)?
    Only me  1-3  4-6  7 or more
11. What level of education did your mother (/stepmother/other female parental figure) finish?
    Did not finish high school  High school  Some college  Associate's degree or certification
    Bachelor's degree  Graduate degree  I don't know
12. What level of education did your father (/stepfather/other male parental figure) finish?
    Did not finish high school  High school  Some college  Associate's degree or certification
    Bachelor's degree  Graduate degree  I don't know
13. What is your approximate yearly household income?
    Less than $20,000  $20,000 - $30,000  $30,000 - $40,000  $40,000 - $60,000
    More than $60,000  I don't know
14. What forms of financial assistance do you/your household receive?
    TANF  SNAP  WIC  HUD  Food bank  Community meals  Clothing bank  Utilities  Rent  Transportation
    Child Care  Help from family  Help from friends  Other:
Appendix C  
Youth Interview 1 Guide  
[Pre-interview: Fill out Demographic Survey]  
Q1: Tell me a little bit about yourself.  
   How long have you lived here?  
   Are you in school? What is school like for you?  
   What do you do outside of school – sports, work, volunteer, fun?  
   What is your family or home life like?  
   What are your friendships like?  
Q2: Describe [your community] as you see it, in a few short sentences.  
   What do you like about where you live?  
   What bothers you about where you live?  
Q3: Describe yourself in a few words or a short sentence. Think about your most  
   important negative and positive characteristics – all the things that make you “you.  
   What is important to you?  
   What influences how you think about yourself – places, activities, people?  
Q4: Do you think the way you see yourself changed in the last 5 years?  
   Have you had any important experiences that have shaped who you are in the last 5  
   years?  
Q5: Do you have an activity, hobby, or interest that you are really focused on and  
   passionate about?  
   What is it?  
   Why is this an important part of your life?  
   What people, places, or activities support this focus?  
   What people/places/activities get in the way of this focus, or make you feel unmotivated  
   or apathetic about it?  
   What goals do you have related to this focus?  
Q6: Based on how your life looks now, think about the different paths your life could  
   take, and the different things that you could be doing 5 years from now.  
   Where do you hope to be in 5 years?  
   What makes you believe that this would be a good life?  
   What would need to happen for this to become a reality?  
   What kinds of things make you believe that this will happen? (People, activities, places,  
   etc.)  
   Would you say this is a goal? How long have you had this goal?  
   If your life went in a bad direction, what is the worst possible life you could have in 5  
   years?  
   What makes you believe that this would be a bad life?  
   What would need to happen for this to become a reality?  
   What kinds of things make you believe that this will happen? (People, activities, places,  
   etc.)  
Q7: Is it easy or difficult to talk or think about the future? Why?  
Q8: Do you feel like you have control over what will happen to you in the next 5 years?  
   How much/in what ways?  
   Where do you feel a lack of control?
What kinds of people, places, or activities impact the amount of control you feel like you have?

What makes you feel like you have more control? Why?
What makes you feel like you have less control? Why?

Q9: How does your community respond to or support young people (think about people aged 15-21, or high school/college-aged people)?
Does the community “value” young people? How do you know?

What makes you feel like you have more control? Why?
What makes you feel like you have less control? Why?

Q10: In a few words or sentences, what do you think of when I say the phrase, “low-income youth”?
What do they usually look like, or what kinds of things do they do?
What motivates them to do well? What causes them to do poorly?

Q11: How do you think other people feel/think about low-income youth?
Is it different from what you think?
Where do you think this description come from?
Do you think this description is true? Why or why not?
Is this a negative or positive way to see kids?
Do you think this helps/hurts kids?
Do you fit this description? Why or why not?

Q12: Do you do anything on purpose to change the way that people see you?
What do you do?
Why?

Q13: I’d like to ask you some questions about the kinds of people in the community that you interact with. I want to focus on adults, who are not your parents. By adults I mean older people who are not friends or family members your age, and not boyfriends or girlfriends. We’re going to use this tool with circles on it to “map out” the different interactions you have with adults on a daily basis. [Refer to Eco Map].
If you think about you as the center of this diagram, where would you place various adults in your life right now? Who is most important, and who is less important but still influential?

Who do you interact with on a regular basis? Where/under what circumstances?
Who do you interact with less regularly, but is still important to you?
Are these positive or negative interactions?
Do you act differently with some adults than with others? Who and why?
Is it more difficult to interact with some people? Why?
Who are your positive role models?
Who are your negative role models?

Q14: Now let’s talk about your strongest connection to an adult who isn’t your parent.
What kind of connection do you have with this person? Is it positive, negative, or mixed?
How long have you had this connection?
Where and when do you usually see this person?
What kinds of things do you do with this person?
How does this person help or support you? What can you rely on them for?
- Are they just generally nice to you?
- Do they encourage you or help you see positive things about yourself?
- Do they help you solve problems or give you concrete resources?
What have you learned from this person?
Think about how you feel when you are spending time with this person. Who do they make you want to be? Who do they make you want to avoid being?
How do you think your life would be different if this person was not in it?
[Repeat Q12, ask about other important adults.]
Q15: Are there any adults who have been strong negative influences on you? Or with whom you have a negative relationship?
Who are they?
How is the relationship negative?
How does it make you feel?
What is your role in the relationship – how do you interact with the person? Does this make it better or worse?
Stepping into the other person’s shoes for a minute, what do you think that they think about this relationship? (Are they trying to help you, or are they just being selfish?)
What would help fix or avoid these negative interactions?
Q16: Is there anything else, positive or negative, that you’d like to share about you, your community, or the adults in your life?
Appendix D
Eco Map
Adult Connections: If you think of yourself as the center circle of this diagram, what adults (besides your parents) would you place in each circle – based on how often you see them, and how much they support or influence you?
Appendix E
Youth Interview 2 Guide
Q1: I’d like you to take me on a walk around town. Show me a few of the places that you spend time, or that you think are important to you, or to the town. For each place:
   Who do you normally see at this place?
   What activities normally happen here?
   How much time do you spend here?
   Why is this place important?
   What do you like about this place?
   What bothers you, or needs improvement or work about this place?
Q2: In our last interview, you said you would describe yourself ___________.
   Do you have anything to add?
   How did you come to this?
   What kinds of places/people/activities shape how think about who you are?
What kinds of places/people/activities challenge or make you doubt the way that you describe yourself?
What kinds of places/people/activities make you feel good about yourself?
   Who’s opinion of you is most important to you? Why?
Q3: Do you like the way you describe yourself – do you like the person you’re describing?
   What do you like most about yourself?
   What would you change about yourself and why?
Q4: In our last interview, you said that your best possible future in 5 years would look like:_____.
   Is that still true for you right now?
   Do you have anything to add?
   What has shaped your goals – who or what has been important for you?
   When or where do you feel the most supported to reach your goals?
   When or where do you feel the least supported to reach your goals?
Q5: In our last interview, you talked about your connections with the important adults in your life. I’d like to ask you a few more questions about these people. Lest start with [person 1].
   Have your interactions with this person changed how you feel about other people?
   Friends/family/teachers/people you work with/other adults?
   Has your connection with this person changed the way you act around other people?
   Has it changed the way you think about yourself?
   Does your connection with this person support your “spark” or driving purpose?
   Does your connection with this person make you feel more or less in control?
Do you have anything else to add about what you get out of interactions with that person, what kinds of things that person does for you, or why you like that interacting with them?
[Repeat Q5 for other important adults, positive and negative.]
Q6: In our last interview, you said this about your town: ____________.
Do you have anything to add?
Do your relationships with important adults [list] affect the way you think about your
town? How?
Do you think that your relationships with the important adults in your life [list] have
changed the way that you see yourself as fitting in with your community? How?
Q7: In our last interview, you said this about young people in the community:

Do you have anything to add?
Have the important adults in your life [list each one] expressed any thoughts about young
people in the community?
Do your interactions with the important adults in your life [list] affect the way you think
about young people in your community?
Q8: In our last interview, you said this about low-income youth: ________________.

Do you have anything to add?
Have the important adults in your life [list each one] expressed any thoughts about low-
income youth, or low-income people, in the community?
Do your interactions with the important adults in your life [list] affect the way you think
about low-income youth?
Q9: What do you think your community needs to support young people like you?
Q10: What do you think that young people like you can give to your community?
Q11: Is there anything you have to add that we haven’t talked about yet?
Appendix F
Adult Demographic Survey

1. ID#: [Participants were guided to make a unique ID number.]

3. Gender: (Circle one)
   Female   Male   Neither/ Prefer not to say

3. Race/Ethnicity: (Circle all that apply)
   African American   Asian American   Latin American
   Native American   White   Other (please describe):

4. Highest level of education:
   Did not finish HS   Finished HS   Some College
   Associates/Professional Certificate   Bachelors   Graduate/Professional
   Degree:

5. What is your profession?

6. How many hours do you work for pay each week?
   None   5 or less   6-10   11-20   21-30   31-40   41 or more

7. How many hours do you volunteer each week?
   None   5 or less   6-10   11-20   20 or more

8. How long have you lived/worked in Mountainside?

9. How many people are in your household (including family and roommates)?
   Only me   1-3   4-6   7 or more

10. What is your approximate yearly household income?
    < $20,000   $20,000 - $30,000   $30,000 - $40,000   $40,000 - $60,000
    >$60,000

11. What forms of financial assistance do you/your household receive?
    TANF   SNAP   WIC   HUD   Food bank   Community
    meals   Clothing bank   Utilities   Rent   Transportation
    Child Care   Help from family   Help from friends   Other:
Appendix G
Mentor Interview Guide
[Pre-interview: Fill out Demographic Survey]

Q1: Tell me a little bit about yourself.
   How old are you?
   How long have you lived here?
   Who lives with you at home, or who is in your family?
   Do you work or volunteer anywhere?
   Do you go to church?
   What else do you do for fun?

Q2: Describe yourself in a few words or a short sentence. Think about your most
important negative and positive characteristics – all the things that make you “you”.
   What is important to you?
   What influences how you think about yourself – places, activities, people?

Q3: Do you think the way you see yourself changed in the last 5 years?
Have you had any important experiences that have shaped who you are in the last 5
years?

Q4: Do you have an activity, hobby, or interest that you are really focused on and
passionate about?
   What is it?
   Why is this an important part of your life?
   What people, places, or activities support this focus?
What people/places/activities get in the way of this focus, or make you feel unmotivated
or apathetic about it?
   What goals do you have related to this focus?

Q5: Describe [your community] as you see it, in a few short sentences.
   What do you like about where you live?
   What bothers you about where you live?

Q6: How does your community respond to or support young people (think about people
aged 15-21, or high school/college-aged people)?
   Does the community “value” young people? How do you know?
What kinds of activities do young people do in town?
   What kinds of options are available for work, volunteering, or other ways to do things in
the community?
   Are there stereotypes or negative ideas about young people?
   How could the community improve its supports for young people?

Q7: In a few words or sentences, what do you think of when I say the phrase, “low-
income youth”?
   What do they usually look like, or what kinds of things do they do?
   What motivates them to do well? What causes them to do poorly?

Q8: How do you think other people feel/think about low-income youth?
   Is it different from what you think? How?
   Where do you think this description come from?
   Do you think this description is true? Why or why not?
Is this a negative or positive way to see kids?
Do you think this helps/hurts kids?

Q9: I’d like to ask you some questions about the kinds of people in the community that you interact with. I want to focus on young people aged 15-21, who are not your children.
   Who do you interact with on a regular basis? Where/under what circumstances?
   Are these positive or negative interactions?
   Do you interact differently with some teenagers than others? Who and why?

Q10: You’re being interviewed because of your connection with [person x]. I’d like for you to describe that relationship for me.
   What kind of relationship do you have with this person? Is it positive, negative, or mixed?
   How long have you known them?
   Where and when do you usually see this person?
   What kinds of things do you do with this person?
   How do you help or support this person? What can they rely on you for?
   Do you feel like you can meet all of their needs for support and guidance?

Why?
   Where can they go to get the other supports they need?
   How do you think they see this relationship? What do you think they would say they’ve learned from or gotten from you?
   What have you learned from this person?
   How do you think your life would be different if [person x] was not in it?
   Where do you see them being in 5 years?
   Do you think that you have had a role in shaping their goals?

[Repeat Q10, ask about other youth]

Q9: How do you see yourself as a mentor or role model– how does that fit into your identity?
   What kind of mentor or role model are you?
   What motivates you to help young people?
   What is easy about supporting young people?
   What is hard about supporting young people?

Are there differences in young people that encourage or dissuade adults from supporting them?

Q10: Growing up, what kinds of relationships and support did you have from adults?
   Who was most influential on you?
   How did they influence you then, and how did they shape who you are now?
   Have they influenced the ways that you interact with young people?

Q12: Thinking about what you said earlier about how you and your community see low-income youth, has your connection with [person x] changed your ideas?
Do you think that having a relationship with [person x] has changed the way that you see low-income youth as fitting in to your community?
Do you think youth are important in your community? Why?
Does your community do a good job of supporting young people? Why/ how could it improve?
Q13: Is there anything else, positive or negative, that you would like to share about your relationship with [person x], your community, or yourself?
Appendix H
Sample Participant Summary
Respondents name/ID:
Contact date:
Today’s date:
Summary of interview: (Where/when was the meeting, who was the respondent, major themes of interview):
Summary of information from interview (major themes of self, community, school, work, family, friends, mentors/important adults)
Self:
Family:
Important adults:
School:
Activities:
Work:
Friends:
Community:
Potential Sub codes:

Additional information needed from respondent:

Synthesis in answering research questions:
1A: How do adults talk about low-income youth?
1B: How do low-income youth talk about low-income youth?
2A. How do important adults shape youths’ self-identity?
2B: How do important adults shape youths’ sense of community?

Other interesting findings/questions/implications:
Appendix I  
Code System and Number of Coded Segments

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Resilience

- Current Capacities: 1
- Supportive adult: 4
- Building Character: 2
- Mutual Support: 13
- "Success": 18

Agency

- Good Choices: 10
- Bad Choices: 39
- Limited Options: 99
- Personal Traits: 32
- "complimentary behavior": 9
- Agency misc.: 2

Family

- Culture of poverty or patterns: 49
- Instability/Dysfunction: 60
- Economic challenge: 28
- Reputations: 13
- Support: 3
- Tradition: 3
- Youth homelessness: 8
- Family Misc.: 2
- Surrogate family: 4

Stigma

- Stigma against town: 5
- Assumptions: 23
- Sensory cues: 24
- Places: 72
- Crime and drugs: 9
- Labeling: 17
- Who does it: 61
- Shame or: 23
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| Gender                 | 16                     |
| Religion               | 1                      |
| traditionalism         | 3                      |

| Compassion             |                        |
| "charity case" or worry| 15                     |
| Adult Experiences with Poverty|          |
|                         |                        |
| Personal               | 5                      |
| Community-job          | 13                     |

| Mental Health compassion | 16 |
| Community supports      | 101 |
| community needs         | 37 |

| Positive Youth Development | 24 |

| School                  | 47  |
| Community background    | 10  |

| Q1 Misc.                | 14  |

**Question 2: Adults’ influences on youth identity and community development**

<p>| 6 C model               | 1   |
| Confidence              |     |
| Confidence Sources      | 24  |
| Adult sources           | 32  |
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