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# Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Social Environment

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore and then narrate the lives of women of color from South Carolina and their personal experiences with regard to their social environments. Much adverse childhood experience research is focused on the immediate family system, and research regarding the social environment is typically broken down into segments, failing to address a more holistic approach to promoting child well-being. Using the ecosystems perspective as a framework for exploration, the researchers used a semi-structured interview schedule, the BFRSS ACEs Survey, and a resilience scale to collect data with participants. Using Facebook as a recruitment tool, the researchers collected data with a convenience sample of five women. Interviews ranged from 18 to 34 minutes in length and occurred in various locations of choice for participants. After data collection, the researchers used case study analysis to identify emergent primary, secondary, and tertiary themes. Brief contextual profiles of each participant are provided to give background information about each individual. Qualitative data reveal themes of internal and external social pressures, coping mechanisms, values, and life-shaping experiences among participants. ACEs Scale data and Resilience Scale data are provided. The primary and secondary research questions, methodology, findings, limitations, and implications of the study are shared, and next steps are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Each year people across the United States are dying from diseases that are preventable. In 2016, more than 633,842 people died from heart disease alone (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Other public health issues such as obesity, drug abuse, mental health issues, and sexually transmitted infections and diseases are becoming more prevalent. Many public health issues' beginnings can be found in an individual's lack of preventive measures. However, questions surrounding why certain individuals are more likely to experience major health issues have led to more research in understanding why some individuals experience more sickness and disease in comparison to others. Recent research has begun to provide an answer, an answer that lies within an individual's childhood and the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) they endured.

Adverse Childhood Experiences as a research topic first came about after Felitti et al. (1998) conducted a study that explored the relationship between abuse and household

dysfunction and health outcomes in adulthood. The research team developed the ACEs Scale, a scale that explored adversity and psychological, physical, and sexual abuse; violence against the participant's mother; substance abuse in the home; mental illness or suicidal tendencies; or exposure to members of their family being imprisoned. After having each participant complete standardized medical evaluations and the ACEs survey, Felitti and colleagues compared both tools and found that, as the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) increased, the number of health-risk behaviors and chronic health issues also increased (Felitti et al., 1998). ACEs survey questions (see Appendix A) had a strong focus on the immediate family system and what took place within the home.

Flaherty, Thompson, Litrownik (2009) conducted a study with 805 high-risk children by evaluating them at ages six and twelve, using similar concepts from Felitti and colleagues' ACEs study. Flaherty and colleagues found that ACEs are very common, even in the earliest years of childhood.

### *ACEs and Diverse Populations*

The original ACEs study was limited in nature due to the population sampled. Though the original ACEs study had a very large sample size (N = 9,508), an overwhelming majority of participants were white. Because the original ACEs study was limited in scope in terms of diversity, there have been studies conducted to get a better understanding of vulnerability for more racially diverse populations. For instance, Kenney and Singh (2016) conducted a study that examined ACEs among participants who were Native American or Alaskan Natives between the ages of 0 and 17. Native American youth were more likely to have a parent serve jail time or witness domestic violence compared to white youth. The likelihood of Native American youth experiencing an ACE was much higher compared to their white peers (Kenney and Singh, 2016).

Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual have also been interviewed to study adverse childhood experiences among people who are members of sexual minority communities. Andersen and Blosnich (2013) used Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) surveys from multiple states to create a total sample size of 22,071. Within the sample, 1.2% self-identified to be gay/lesbian and 0.9% self-identified to be bisexual. Andersen and Blosnich found that while sexual minority participants made up only a small percentage of the total sample, these participants were twice as likely to experience physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in their childhood. Bisexual participants were three times more likely to experience sexual abuse than their heterosexual peers. Overall, gay/lesbian and bisexual participants were found to have experienced more ACEs than their heterosexual peers (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013). Although the original ACEs study consisted of a large heterogeneous sample size, additional studies have been conducted to provide insight on how ACEs can affect minority communities.

The original ACEs study has created a shift in the way health outcomes and adversity are viewed and has opened pathways for a more holistic understanding and approach to health. However, much of the ACEs literature is

limited due to the fact that the primary focus is on the immediate family system. Because of this point of view, one can miss the potential adversity that is experienced within the entire social environment. Other systems within a child's social environment can be physical institutions such as schools, systematic oppression, such as disproportionate poverty or racism, and harmful ideologies such as rigid gender roles and beauty standards. Depending on the severity of various systematic or social adversities, a child could experience ACEs from the environment in which they live. Felitti and colleagues' ACEs study provided a base to discuss the importance of healthy childhood, but further investigation is needed to help promote child wellbeing in all areas of life.

## **METHODS**

### *Methodology*

In the social work profession, there is a strong focus on understanding the person in the environment and how people interact within the various systems within their environment. The ecosystems perspective, a foundational perspective in social work education, brings together both systems theory and ecological theory. Hutchinson (2008) describes the systems theory as a "perspective that sees human behavior as the outcome of reciprocal interactions between people and their environments, focusing on their interconnectedness of all life" (p. 2). Hutchinson also discusses ecological theory as a theory that focuses on interactions between organisms and their many environments with a strong focus on how organisms adapt to their environments. Using both systems theory and ecological theory, one is able to see the individual is able to adapt with multiple systems influencing them. Understanding these perspectives allows one to develop a fuller understanding of childhood adversity by examining one's reactions to internal and external relationships. This study applies the ecosystems perspective by exploring the social environment, which was not addressed in the original ACEs study. Additionally, this study explores how individuals cope with adversity

and provides additional voices to the discussion of childhood adversity.

#### *Research Questions*

The primary research question for this study is: *How do women of color describe the social environmental factors and experiences of their childhood?* The first goal of the research is to explore how women of color from South Carolina describe their childhood social environments and their experiences in these environments. This primary question is designed to allow the author to develop a deep understanding of the participants' childhoods. The secondary research question is: *What role do adverse or traumatic childhood experiences within the social environment play in the lives of women of color?* This question was designed to explore what adverse childhood experiences may have stemmed from participants' social environments.

The researcher used a qualitative-based research design to allow individuals to describe, in detail, their childhoods with an emphasis on childhood adversity and coping. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to develop a thorough understanding of individuals' social environments, resilience factors, and childhood adversity. Qualitative data gives information that cannot be collected from polls or questionnaires. Using interviews, the researcher is able to gather emotional reactions and the tone of each participant in addition to the vast amount of data that is gathered. Qualitative research gives room for participants to speak on issues that they find important, empowering them to speak up and speak out about experiences that may go unnoticed in quantitative inquiries.

#### *Research Design and Rationale*

Using a mixed-methods approach with a focus on the qualitative portion of the study, the researcher strived to identify what strengths and barriers exist in South Carolina for women of color by empowering women to share about their childhood experiences. In addition to in-depth interviews with clients, guided by a semi-structured interview guide, the researcher used a demographic questionnaire, the BFRSS ACEs Scale, and a Resilience Scale to collect additional data. After the instruments were developed and assembled, the researcher obtained approval

from the Winthrop University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and began recruiting participants who identified as women of color and resided in South Carolina at the time of the interview.

#### *Sampling*

The original inclusion criteria for this study required participants to be women of color who were born in South Carolina. Using Facebook as a means of recruitment, the researcher posted to multiple Facebook groups, on an individual Facebook timeline, and allowed other Facebook users to share the post to reach out to more people. The researcher did not reach out to particular people to recruit participants, but allowed individuals to come forward and chose to participate on their own. Having participants who were wanting to participate in the study allowed for a richer interview and to prevent any potential bias in gathering potential participants. However, due to an initial low yield, the researcher modified the IRB application to widen the potential pool of participants. After changing the sample inclusion criteria to include women who were not born in South Carolina, but were living in South Carolina at the time of the interview, the researcher allowed interested participants to contact her via social media to notify her of their interest in participating. There were no screenings for women to participate. Interviews were organized through mutual agreement by both parties and took place in a variety of settings such as coffee shops and participants' homes.

To begin each interview, the researcher started the data collection process by briefly explaining what the study was and discussed confidentiality. The researcher emphasized how the materials would be stored, who would have access to the data, and allowed the participants to create a pseudonym for themselves. After explaining the informed consent form and allowing the participant to read the informed consent form and ask any questions they may have had, the researcher emphasized that participants were in a safe space and that anything that the participant said would be looked at in a non-judgmental way. The researcher provided the participants with a

demographic questionnaire and asked them to self-identify where they were from, their gender, their highest educational attainment, and their race/ethnicity. Upon completion of the demographic questionnaire, the researcher then began the interview process. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule that included eight broad questions which allowed the participants to interpret the questions in their own way. The researcher provided prompts and clarification for participants as needed. The interviews lasted between 18 and 30 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness to share and the overall depth of their responses. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and were later transcribed by the researcher. After the interview, the researcher then provided the participant with the BRFSS ACEs scale (see Appendix B) and the Resilience scale (see Appendix C), in that order. The completed surveys were then placed in an envelope and labeled with a case code. The surveys were completed within approximately 10 minutes by each participant.

In addition to the data that was gathered from the interviews and surveys, the researcher also took notes during the discussion. The notes allowed the researcher to highlight important parts of the conversation or document reactions of the participants towards different parts of the conversation. The notes were taken during the interview but were not taken into detail. The notes served the researcher as a reminder of major topics or events throughout the conversation.

#### *Data Analysis*

Throughout the interview, the researcher took various notes that provided clarification on the discussion, emotions, and topics that stood out to the researcher. After completing each interview, the researcher transcribed the discussions. Both the digitally recorded interviews and the hand-written notes served as data to be analyzed in this study. Creswell's (2007) case-study analysis framework was used to analyze the qualitative data. According to this framework, each interview can be thought of as an individual case and the five total interviews can be thought of as the

collective case for this study. The steps involved in Creswell's framework for data analysis are as follows:

1. Read each case
2. Provide a detailed description of each case
3. Re-read each case
4. Identify themes within each interview case
5. Develop assertions – an interpretation of the meaning of the cases, lessons learned

After transcribing each interview, the researcher read each interview and created a broad, detailed description of each case. The researcher then re-read each interview and made a more comprehensive and detailed description of each case. After completing two rounds of case descriptions, the researcher then identified themes within each case and created a bulleted list for each case that consisted of various topics, phrases, and potential themes. Using the bulleted list, the researcher identified themes within each individual case. After identifying themes for each individual case, the researcher then compared each case to see if there were any common themes across cases. The researcher also had a second coder for reliability purposes who followed the same data analysis process outline above. After the researcher and second coder finished identifying common themes within cases, the coders then compared their findings. After comparing the themes and identifying quotes that served as evidence, the coders grouped themes by significance, creating primary, secondary, and tertiary themes. After establishing themes, the researcher reviewed the primary and secondary research questions and identified assertions that are rooted in the data that was gathered through the participant interviews. In case study analysis, assertions can be thought of as take-away messages from the data.

## **FINDINGS**

Data from the qualitative interviews as well as participants' surveys provided rich findings related to the adverse childhood experiences and social environments of women of color in South Carolina. In an effort to

contextualize the qualitative data, brief contextual profiles for each participant is provided. Additionally, demographic, ACEs, and resilience scores are presented within the contextual profiles. The ACEs score is out of a possible 10 while the resilience scale is out of a total of 70.

#### *Contextual Profiles*

**Holly.** Holly Day L. is 19-year-old Black female and is currently attending a small liberal arts college in the South. She had an overall positive view of herself at the time of the interview, but said that she never felt good enough for people, which she believed stemmed from a childhood filled with abuse. She was either too much or not enough for people, which had a major impact on her. She believed that she developed an alter-ego very young to cope with the difficulties that she faced in her home. Holly's ACEs score was a seven out of eleven and had a resilience score of 63 out of seventy.

**Nancy.** Nancy D. is a 42 year-old, Black female and describes herself as very family-oriented. She has two degrees and is currently working on her third degree. She described her childhood as privileged because her parents were able to be involved in her life and were very supportive, while other children were not as fortunate. She discussed how her two sisters served as her "backbone" in difficult times and though she was not raised in an extremely religious home, she was taught to pray and reflect on difficult situations. Nancy's ACEs score was zero out of eleven and her resilience score was 69 out of seventy.

**Sierra.** Sierra J. is a college graduate from a large, liberal arts college in the South. She is a bi-racial woman (Black and White) but feels that she identifies more with her "black side" because she was around Black people more as a child. She believes that there were many cultural differences in her families that allowed her to be a more well-rounded person. Her conversation focused primarily around race and family. Sierra's ACEs score was a three out of eleven while her resilience score was 70 out of 70.

**LaKrisha.** LaKrisha R. is a Black female and a student at a small liberal arts

school in the South. She described herself as studious and inquisitive. She is involved in a sorority and is studying to enter a helping profession in the future. Throughout the conversation, her passion for her education was evident and she spoke about her belief of the importance of teachers. She also discussed the roles that social workers played in her life and how that influenced her to go to college and study social work. LaKrisha's ACEs score was one out of eleven while her resilience score was 65 out of seventy.

**Kathy.** Kathy R., is a 43 year-old black female and is a very family oriented person. She is married and is a devote Christian. She described her childhood as fun and family-oriented with parents who were education advocates. She discussed that she did not have everything growing up, but had just enough. She graduated with an associate's degree and married young. She discussed how her experiences surrounding bullying and losing a close friend affected her. Towards the end of the conversation, she reiterated that she had a good childhood, but it was not perfect. Her interview focused on the positive parts of her childhood; however, towards the end of her conversation she discussed how her life was not perfect and how there were many difficulties her family faced. She mentioned at the end of her interview that her mother was a partier and a heavy drinker, that she had siblings who were abusing drugs, and that her sisters all had children while they were teenagers. Although her ACEs score was four out of eleven and her resilience score was 70 out of 70, she revealed that there were additional adversities in her life in the interview.

#### *Emergent Themes*

After analyzing the data, two primary themes were established. The primary themes that were identified were external social pressures and protective/promotive factors. Focusing on the External Social Pressures, -isms are identified as a secondary theme. Three tertiary themes are identified under -isms and these themes are racism, sexism, and classism. Racism, sexism, and classism were discussed directly and indirectly by the participants. Out of all five conversations, Sierra focused the

most on racial issues and colorism. Sierra discussed how being bi-racial was difficult for her because she did not fit the mold of what a typical mixed girl would look like.

*I definitely got teased about being too skinny or being too pale for mixed person. But I wouldn't say that. . . I definitely wasn't a hated person. . . I wasn't constantly bullied but of course there is always teasing even though we would laugh and I would tease back. Things I'd be teased about I was really insecure about but I didn't like let it get at me on the outside but on the inside a tear me apart.*

Sexism was another tertiary theme that was identified by the researchers. Holly Day had many experiences with direct sexism and injustice as a child. Some of her experiences were directly related to sexism while others were more subtle. She described her experiences as a young woman going through puberty:

*Like 8th grade this guy told me, I'll never forget, I was sitting at the lunch table across from him [and he said] you're really cute I said thanks. He said that guys would really like you more if you talk less. The next year I didn't talk a lick. I stayed quiet unless someone spoke directly to me. I didn't talk did not say a peep.*

*I remember one time this guy you know you know middle school to start getting your boobies and everything. . . he punched me in the tit for no reason. . . the middle of a conversation and he punches me! I was like what excuse me and then he did it again. So I broke his nose. And apparently they don't consider that sexual harassment they consider that a fight. Girls get zero respect.*

Additionally, classism was discussed briefly by Nancy. Nancy was afforded the privilege to grow up in a middle-class family and experience many of the benefits that come with this privilege. She discussed how other students who were in her classes as a child were not given the same benefits or help due to the fact that their families were poorer and parents

could not be as active in the child's life like her parents were:

*Because they [the teachers] knew my parents I think I was able to get away with things that kids whose parents who were working and didn't have the opportunity to be in a school setting. . . they weren't afforded the same types of things.*

Additionally, Nancy discussed how her middle-class background created barriers for her in regards to developing relationships with her black peers in particular.

*I was open to being friends with whoever. As long as you treat people with respect and kindness I didn't care. And that for some people was difficult. They felt like everyone should have kind of been segregated. You stick with yours, I stick with mine. And like I said it was more of the African American kids then it was with the white kids. And even when I came to college I had that same situation. People judge me based in the car that my parents drove before they even took the time to get to know me.*

Although not all of the participants discussed race, sex, or class in their conversation, these were some of the major topics that were voluntarily discussed. The second secondary theme that was identified by the researchers was Coping Mechanisms. Coping Mechanisms were skills that the participants developed to help the deal with difficult circumstances in their lives. Underneath coping mechanisms are three tertiary themes that identify ways in which the participants handled difficult experiences and circumstances: bottling up feelings, religion, and reliance on family and friends. Throughout the conversations with some of the women, the theme of relying on themselves or bottling up their emotions was subtly hinted on. Holly Day talked extensively on how she was forced to hold in her feelings or thoughts:

*So I guess I kind of ignored it a little bit. If it was really bad I talk to my grandma about it but in the end I just kinda had to ignore it.*

*Like, you ever just giving yourself an alter ego it's like I didn't go through that someone else went through that I'm cool.*

Additionally, LaKrisha stated how she would cry or hold in emotions when she faced difficult situations that she did not understand:

*When I was a child like, when I was younger and there were things I didn't understand. . . I would question a lot. And I tended to cry that was a big way that I handled stuff. I still do that today. that was a big one though. I also kept things in. Especially things that were.... I did that more and middle school and high school. Things that bother me or that were said to me, I'd wear a straight face.*

The importance of religion was discussed on many levels in the conversations with the participants. Participants had varying levels of religious devotion and had many ways in which they used religion to cope with difficulties.

*We weren't a family that necessarily with the church every Sunday [but] my dad pushed us to pray and really think about and reflect on what we could do to change the situation. – Nancy*

*As I've grown and matured, the way I've handled things has changed drastically. I still do cry, but I've grown more of a spiritual faith. So I pray which especially helped me since I joined my church and 2013. I got baptized and saved and establish my faith more. That's really been the number one focus. - LaKrisha*

*Through all that I guess it made me who I am today. It made me stronger. It made me to value family, value your friends. It made me get close to God. It made me pass it on to my kids. Even the good and bad things that occur during that time that I was thought was so bad, I realized they wasn't as bad as it was. You know what I'm saying... like it could have been worse. – Kathy*

For these participants, religion was used to help guide Nancy's plan of action, used to help provide comfort for LaKrisha in difficult circumstances, while Kathy developed a stronger faith through trials. Additionally, Sierra discussed the role of religion in her life; however she discussed her conversation from Christianity rather than how religion was used to cope with difficult circumstances.

Finally, the third tertiary theme under coping is reliance on family and friends. Both immediate family and extended family played a role in helping the participants cope with difficulties. Sierra discussed how she would discuss what she was dealing with to her friends and receive advice from her older siblings:

*I might talk about it to a friend who is my age but that's not really good advice. I don't know, I didn't. . . I wasn't very open with my mother. Not that we don't have a close relationship, I just didn't tell her about deep stuff. I guess, well I would say that there was some older siblings or friends that I would rely on. So I talked to them.*

Additionally, Nancy would turn to her father to discuss what she was facing:

*I'm very family-oriented and I always went and talked to my dad when things were going on.*

Finally, Holly Day talked about how she would turn to her grandmother to receive support even though her grandmother living far away:

*I'd always go to my grandma. My grandma is in Maryland so I don't know if you know but that's 9 hours away so I didn't get to see her as much. But we talked on the phone a lot so talking to my grandma. . . like I said if I needed to cry, cry on the shower because if I cried for any other reason. . . oh I'd get a reason to cry.*

The first primary theme that was identified was External Social Pressures with two secondary themes, -isms and coping. A second primary theme was also established that highlights the internalized and externalized protective



influences in the participants' lives. Internalized and External factors have been identified as the secondary themes within the primary theme of protective/promotive factors.

Internalized factors are divided into two tertiary themes, Immediate Family Members and the value of education. Immediate family members planned a large, supportive role for most of the participants in the study. Nancy discussed extensively on how she would turn to her family and was supported by them. She discussed her father as well as her sisters:

*We were each other's backbones so we constantly talked about things even though. . . we pretty much always stuck together. We were each other's sounding boards and just kind of helped each other. We still do.*

She also discussed the role of her father and their close relationship:

*When I think about growing up my dad and I was very close. So close that he would get me up in the morning, get me dressed for school do my hair fix my breakfast. So like I have a very close relationship with my father. I'm a huge daddy girl.*

Along with the impact of immediate family, the women also discussed how the value of education within their family affected them. For Kathy's parents, education was the key to success. Kathy stated in her interview:

*We didn't have much the older economically, money-wise. But we had a lot. We grew up in a Christian home. My father was a deacon my mother was a Deaconess. We went to church. They [parents] always provided our needs. Education was the key. They didn't push, I'm the only one who has a college degree which is two years, but they pushed high school education.*

Additionally, Kathy stated:

*It was God, family, education, work for what you want, and the rest will come. That's what my child who was about.*

Nancy also stated that her parents were very active in her education and that allowed her to have a better educational experience:

*My parents were very involved in school. My mom volunteered, She was a stay-at-home mom so the teachers knew my mother. My father was a SSC chair so they knew my father. Because they knew my parents I think I was like to get away with things that kids whose parents we were working and didn't have the opportunity to be in a school setting... they weren't afforded the same types of things. I think I was given extra help on things when I needed it but those kids who probably needed it more than I did. . . weren't privy to the same types of situations. And again I think it was mostly because my parents were so involved in every aspect. My mom chaperoned on field trips. I mean every little step of our education they were there.*

The immediate family system played a large role in these women's lives and their family created an environment in which education was highly valued. Additionally, these women discussed how protective external factors supported and influenced them to push through their obstacles. The tertiary themes identified under external factors consist of extended family, the role of teachers, and for two participants, life-shaping experiences that propelled them into their career.

Firstly, extended family played a large role in support for the participants. Sierra discussed the role of her godfather and her extended family had in her life and the impact that they made:

*I can touch on my godfather. He was a big part. Now he's married and has an almost three-year-old. So, that's my little brother. So when I say all my siblings, I'm the youngest of my father's kids. I didn't know this until I graduated high school, but if anything had happened to my mother I would have gone to his brother and wife. They have two kids and my cousins. So I'm pretty close to his family, they treat me like their own family.*

*I found out I had all these siblings didn't know I had . . . and nieces and nephews. A whole big family I never knew I had. But once I met them and start going there every summer, that played a really big part and who I am today.*

Furthermore, LaKrisha talked on how her grandmother has held an important part in her life:

*I can tie it back to family because I really prize family, being as traditional as I am. My paternal grandmother and my dad's mother. She's been very influential went to me. She gives a lot of good insights. I really cherish and love her. Even though she's the only grandmother I have left. I just wish we talked more and that I could see her more*

The second tertiary theme that was identified focuses on the role of teachers. The participants discussed the value of education, however they also discuss the role that teachers and other educators played in their lives. LaKrisha stated this in her interview:

*I keep referring back to school but the teachers I had in the primary elementary levels. . . I had really good teachers that work with me, they really truly believed in me and help me break out of my shell. I think that shaped me to be who I am.*

*Yeah it starts in the home but it continues with them. That chain that connected me and really push me forward.*

Additionally, Holly Day highlighted the fact that her teachers were a support for her while she was facing issues in her home.

*I always have teachers who I really loved and even when things are tough back home or in general some of those teachers were just always there for me.*

Finally, another tertiary theme surrounding major life-shaping experiences that two participants discussed. LaKrisha and Nancy both discussed two experiences that helped

open the door to their prospective/current fields. For Nancy, a major life-shaping experience came from being exposed to her uncle who had a disability:

*I had an uncle that was born with Cerebral Palsy. He was a twin he was the only one that survived. So that really shaped who was because you see lots of people who have family especially back then who would just put them in home and you really didn't see them much. And although my uncle was putting a home with my grandma got sick it was still one of those things where I got to see him as much as possible. He was here for my graduation. So because of all the experiences of visiting the hospital and getting a chance to interacting with other residents that was there I think that really shaped what I wanted to do with my life so I really went towards the social side.*

LaKrisha also discussed the role that social workers played in her life and how the social workers helped her find a career path into social work:

*My grandma died with Alzheimer's. One thing I want to advocate for as a social worker is Alzheimer's disease. The devastating toll that it took my grandmother's life, and especially at the awkward age when everything didn't make any sense, I was twelve I didn't make any sense then. And in January of 2012 my Aunt Mae which is my mother sister had a stroke. And a medical social worker worked with our family and helped her get into occupational speech and physical therapy for her to gain her strength and got her into a rehab hospital in my town. And just those two experiences really affected me and they shaped me to being a social work major.*

## DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

After examining the data, the researcher then referred back to the primary and secondary research questions that guided the study. The primary question, *how do women of color describe the social environmental factors and experiences of their childhood?* can be answered in many ways by the data provided by the five women. Many of the

women described their social environments as supportive. The five women who were interviewed were in different areas of South Carolina, yet there were support systems in place that allowed each of the women to thrive, even in the face of adversity. Support systems included immediate and extended family, supportive friend groups, and teachers who helped each woman navigate and overcome difficult experiences. Many of these women did not focus on the negative factors in their childhood, but instead focused on the positive aspects that existed within their social environments.

Although the women described their environments as supportive, the participants discussed many obstacles that they faced. Holly discussed the role of institutionalized sexism within her environment and how there seemed to be few adults to advocate on her behalf when she experienced sexual groping and hateful words from her male peers in middle school. Nancy discussed how she felt that because she came from a middle class family she faced difficulties making friends because people would assume that she thought that she was better than them. Her peers had a difficult time relating to her and would often assume that she was “boujee” (stuck up). The third participant heavily discussed the role of race in her life. Being biracial, she felt that she had more well-rounded experience compared to those who identify as only one race. However, due to her very light skin and being skinny, she was often picked on for not looking like a “mixed girl.” Though she acted as if comments based off her racial identity did not bother her, she admitted that comments really affected her.

The secondary research question is *What role do adverse or traumatic childhood experiences within the social environment play in the lives of women of color?* Traumatic childhood experiences played a unique role in the development of the five women who were interviewed. Many of the difficult situations that the women dealt with would have not been acknowledged by the ACEs questionnaire alone. The ACEs questionnaire focuses heavily on the immediate family structure while the data collected from each woman through the interview focused on

the experiences that allowed the women to develop a better sense of themselves. For example, participant five, Kathy, discussed how she experienced bullying due to her weight; although it was difficult to deal with, she was able to find value in herself. She did activities such as trying out for the cheerleading team or running for class president, something that she felt was odd for a young girl who was struggling with her weight to do. Additionally, Sierra dealt with bullying due to her not looking “mixed” enough. Both of these participants overcame these experiences in different ways and allowed them to be more confident and secure with themselves. For many of the participants, their childhood had many difficulties but they did not view their childhood as traumatic or having much adversity. However, there were undertones of racism, sexism, and classism that permeated through the conversations with the women. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants highlighted the strengths and protective factors in their childhood. These positive factors such as family, friends, faith, and education helped them persevere throughout the difficulties.

Although the majority of the participants discussed their childhood in a positive light, Holly Day discussed her experiences in a different way. Due to the abuse that she faced as a child in both her home environment and in school, she felt that her sense of self was constantly being remodeled to please others. “*I was always trying to please someone else. That really affected me a lot I think*” she stated in her interview. She never cried out and her grandmother, who lived in Maryland, was her primary source of familial support. However, she had one teacher who believed in her potential, who she described as one her favorite teachers. Since she has entered college, she has felt a sense of freedom since she no longer lives with her father, who she described to be the primary source of abuse. Additionally, college has provided her with knowledge to better understand herself. At the time of our interview, she was receiving counseling and therapy and said that she is in a good place.

### *Limitations*

This study was organized to allow individuals to tell their stories about their childhood and how adverse experiences in their social environment affected them. However, there are some setbacks that limited the study. The first setback is the lack of diversity within the sample in terms of race and the highest level of education completed. The sample size was limited due to the study being a convenience sample. Additionally, the use of Facebook limited who would have known about the study, as only those who used Facebook and were friends with those who shared the Facebook post would have known about the study. Some may feel that the sample size (n=5) was a limitation; however in qualitative study, data is not meant to be generalizable, so the sample size is not a limitation.

### *Conclusion*

This study highlights many strengths in the women's lives such as a strong support system in their family, friends, and educators. The study also notes that the majority of the participants did not face adversities that were identified in the original ACEs study, but still struggle with societal expectations and an oppressive culture that created obstacles for the women to overcome. Additionally, the study provides an additional lens to look through when exploring and discussing ACEs and human behavior. Understanding what causes individuals to act and react to their environment is important to move forward in developing a comprehensive understanding to use in research and practice. Although research has been conducted that examines how individual factors in the social environment (such as race, sex, education, and family) can impact individuals, families, and communities, more research is needed to provide a fuller picture of adversity and resilience. As stated before, this study is an exploratory study that is not meant to be generalizable. Nevertheless, this study can provide additional information about childhood adversity and the social environment. Additionally, this study uses foundational social work education to assess and understand human behavior in the social environment.

In the future, I plan to continue to develop a deeper understanding of the five women who participated in the study by delving into related literature to provide additional evidence. Additional evidence from other research would allow me to compare my finding to other studies. Additionally, this research has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the social environment. I would like to continue furthering my education about ACEs to be a better advocate for children and their families by continuing researching topics related to ACEs, but focus more on resilience promoting factors rather than the adverse experiences.

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### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Demographic Questionnaire**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your highest level of educational attainment?
5. Where were you born?
6. Where did you grow up (Birth to 18 years)?
7. Where do you live now?

### **APPENDIX B**

#### **Interview Schedule**

1. Tell me about your childhood
2. Outside of your family, what other factors or experiences from your childhood/youth do you feel shaped the person you are today?
3. In what ways did those experiences affect you?
4. How, if at all, did you cope with difficult experiences when you were a child? When you were an adolescent? Now?
5. In general, tell me about your current health status.
6. What else would you like to share with me that you have not already shared?

### **APPENDIX C**

#### **ACEs Scale**

1. Did you live with anyone who was depressed, mentally ill, or suicidal?

2. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic?
3. Did you live with anyone who used illegal street drugs or who abused prescription medications?
4. Did you live with anyone who served time or was sentenced to serve time in a prison, jail, or other correctional facility?
5. Were your parents separated or divorced?
6. How often did your parents or adults in your home ever slap, hit, kick, punch or beat each other up?
7. Before age 18, how often did a parent or adult in your home ever hit, beat, kick, or physically hurt you in any way? Do not include spanking.
8. How often did a parent or adult in your home ever swear at you, insult you, or put you down?
9. How often did anyone at least 5 years older than you or an adult, ever touch you sexually?
10. How often did anyone at least 5 years older than you or an adult, try to make you touch them sexually?
11. How often did anyone at least 5 years older than you or an adult, force you to have sex?

### **APPENDIX D**

#### **Resilience Scale**

1. I believe my mother loved me when I was little
2. I believe that my father loved me when I was little
3. When I was little, other people helped my mother and father take care of me and they seemed to love me
4. When I was a child, there were relatives in my family who made me feel better if I was sad or worried
5. When I was a child, there were relatives in my family who made me feel better if I was sad or worried
6. When I was a child, neighbors or my friends' parents seemed to like me

7. When I was a child, teachers, coaches, youth leaders or ministers were there to help me
8. Someone in my family cared about how I was doing in school
9. My family, neighbors, and friends often talked about making our lives better
10. We had rules in our house and were expected to keep them
11. When I felt really bad, I could almost always find someone I trusted to talk to
12. As a youth, people noticed that I was capable and could get things done
13. I was independent and a go-getter
14. I believed that life is what you make it
15. How many of these 14 protective factors did I have as a youth (how many of the 14 were circled “Definitely true” or “probably true”)

Of these circled, how many are still true for me?