The primary purpose of this study was to further research and theory development in the area of risk and resilience by exploring factors associated with academic success among former foster youth—a group at high risk for developmental failure. Using data obtained from in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 former foster youth currently attending a 4-year university, the study described in this article explored factors related to their academic success. Results indicated that factors at the individual, family, and community levels and encompassing more than 1 system at a time were integral in understanding developmental pathways of these youth. Results further suggested that resilience in 1 developmental or functional domain was not necessarily reflected in others. Findings are discussed in terms of conceptual and theoretical directions for further research in the area of resilience and the transition to young adulthood, with a particular emphasis on former foster youth.

Leaving adolescence and taking on adult roles is a critical transition for all youth (Block & Kremen, 1996; Furstenberg, 2000; Ward & Spitz, 1992). Although youth who have been raised in foster care and those raised in the general population may face the same challenges during this developmental transition, research on the effects of child maltreatment on developmental outcomes suggests that the long-enduring effects of parental abuse and neglect, as well as the accompanying stressors (e.g., the removal from and/or loss of parents; turbulence stemming from multiple transitions in school, at home, and with peers and caretakers; the impact of institutional care; the stigma related to being in foster care; poverty; and the lack of contact with birth parents and family), may make youth raised in foster care more vulnerable to developmental difficulties during this period (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Cicchetti, Rogosch, Lynch, & Holt, 1993). There has been very little research on youth exiting the foster care system. The studies that exist have identified primarily negative outcomes for former foster youth. Studies show that a disproportionate number of former foster youth are homeless, dependent on public assistance, and unemployed (Cook, 1991; Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, & Matsuada, 1993) and that they are less likely to attend and graduate from college than other youth (Cook, 1991; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 1998).

However, not all youth who have experienced child maltreatment and its accompanying stressors have succumbed to developmental disruption (Cicchetti et al., 1993; Conte & Schuerman, 1987; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; McGloin & Wisdom, 2001). To date, little is known about the experiences of well-functioning youth and young adults who have grown up in the foster care system. An understanding of resilience—the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity—can reveal specific protective factors and the mechanisms through which they operate, which can guide intervention efforts with others at risk (Cicchetti & Garvey, 1993; Luthar, 1993; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, Best, & Garvey, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Studying resilient individuals can also tell us whether unusually high levels of resources are necessary to achieve success in spite of adversity and whether adaptive functioning is achieved at a psychological cost, as some research has suggested (Luthar, 1993; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Parker, Cowen, Work, & Wyman, 1990; Werner, 1989).

Taking a fine-grained approach, the current study examines a group of former foster youth attending a
4-year university and explores factors related to their academic success. Though academic achievement is only one way to measure resilience and successful developmental adjustment during the transition to young adulthood, it may be a particularly salient marker for former foster youth (Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, & Wyatt, in press). Postsecondary education is becoming essential for all youth, with recent statistics indicating that the number of college-level jobs will grow faster than the number of jobs for people with less than college education during the years 1998–2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Although former foster youth are among those least likely to attend college, the attainment of a college degree could contribute to their future financial stability and the promotion of enhanced developmental outcomes throughout adulthood.

The primary purpose of the current study is to further research and theory development in the area of risk and resilience by exploring factors associated with academic success among former foster youth—a group at high risk for developmental failure. The specific objectives are (a) to further understanding of the dynamic process of resilience by examining the mechanisms that underlie resilience: how factors related to adversity, the individual, the family, and the community interact to enable youth raised in foster care to achieve academic success; and (b) to use insights gained from this exploratory study to make suggestions for further research on resilience and the transition to young adulthood, with a particular emphasis on former foster youth. Given the lack of research on developmental outcomes and resilience among former foster youth, we chose a qualitative approach for this study rather than relying on hypothesis-driven methods. In addition, qualitative methods, because they are integrally focused on understanding the meaning people ascribe to events and circumstances in their life (Cohler, Stott, & Musick, 1995), allow us to study the contextual and individualized nature of the adaptive and developmental processes.

Resilience and Maltreated Youth

Because of the lack of research on young adults who have grown up in the foster care system, it is not clear what impact maltreatment, growing up without parents, and other factors related to life in the foster care system have on the developmental trajectories of former foster youth. On the basis of research on infants and young children, it appears that major tasks of development during childhood are in jeopardy, signifying possible compromise of subsequent developmental periods. Investigators focusing on infants and young children have suggested that maltreated children exhibit developmental difficulties related to problems in the functioning of the parent–child relationship and have detected signs of disorganization, problems in the attachment relationship, and delay in self-development, including the regulation and integration of emotional, cognitive, motivational, and social behavior among maltreated toddlers (Cicchetti & Carlson, 1989; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989).

Although research suggests that problems become more severe and differences between maltreated and nonmaltreated children become more pronounced with age (Cicchetti, Toth, & Rogosch, 2000), other studies indicate that maltreated children do recover (McGloin & Wisdom, 2001). A small body of research exists suggesting that maltreated children can become effective parents, thus achieving one of the major tasks of adulthood. Congruent with characteristics of resilient children in diverse situations (Masten, 2001), the literature on maltreated children suggests that those who become good parents have one or more of the following characteristics: a good relationship with a caregiving adult in childhood, high IQ, special talents, physical attractiveness, social skills, a supportive spouse, current financial security, social supports, strong religious affiliations, positive school experiences, and therapy (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Kaufman & Zigler, 1989; Quinton, Rutter, & Liddle, 1984).

Resilience as a Process

An important development in research on resilience has been a shift away from isolating correlates in the form of risk and protective factors to understanding the processes underlying the development of resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). The basis of this more recent process-oriented approach is the belief that individual vulnerabilities and protective factors may shift with developmentally related changes in cognition, emotion, and the social environment and may also vary with the cultural context (Masten et al., 1991).

Recent theories about maltreatment, as well as empirical data from studies on vulnerability and resilience, point to the importance of conceptual models that encompass multiple systems in dynamic interaction as they influence and are influenced by individual development (Cicchetti et al., 2000; Masten & Wright, 1998). In the literature on vulnerability...
and resilience, a commonly held view is that processes influencing individuals’ psychosocial development operate at several broad levels, including those related to the individual, to the family, and to the community (Luthar & Suchman, 1999; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Werner & Smith, 1992; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Consideration of forces within each of these levels and encompassing more than one system at a time is integral in understanding developmental pathways and, thus, in ultimately designing interventions to foster positive outcomes among at-risk individuals. On the basis of this perspective, dynamic process multifactorial models allow for the possibility that the same characteristic may function as a risk factor for some outcomes and a protective factor for others, as a risk factor for one child and a protective factor for another, or as a protective factor at one point in development and a risk factor at another (Masten et al., 1999; Masten & Wright, 1998; Radke-Yarrow & Brown, 1993).

Although the literature has identified the need to explore the processes through which resilience appears to operate, there is currently a dearth of studies focusing on the processes that lead to resilience among maltreated children (Cicchetti et al., 2000), and none has focused on adolescents and young adults who have grown up in foster care. There is a need to focus on the protective factors and processes that underlie resilience for the field to understand the mechanisms that promote successful adaptation in the face of adversity. For example, recent research suggests that there may be many ways children influence the quality of their own resources (Cicchetti & Tucker, 1994; Masten et al., 1999)—an area that merits further study, as it holds promise for interventions focused on empowering children and youth. There is also a need to understand the contextual and individualized nature of adaptation as well as development—how factors work, for whom, and under what conditions (Masten et al., 1999).

Combining the recent literature on maltreatment, young adult development, and resilience and using the multifactorial approach we have described, we constructed a dynamic process model to serve as a framework for examining the mechanisms that underlie resilience. Two critical conditions in the study of resilience are required: the exposure to significant threat or severe adversity, and the achievement of positive adaptation despite adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). In our model, childhood maltreatment, in the form of parental abuse and neglect, represents a common source of severe adversity. Factors related to the foster care experience that are commonly cited in the literature include loss of or removal from parents, multiple transitions (e.g., school, home, peers, caretakers), institutional care, and the stigma related to being in foster care (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Cicchetti et al., 1993). Because the youth in our study had grown up in the foster care system and had all experienced abuse and neglect as well as the accompanying factors just mentioned, we synthesized all of the factors into a single factor representing a common source of adversity.

The model includes moderating (protective or vulnerability) factors at the individual, the family, and the community levels, all of which are believed to influence individuals’ psychosocial development. Previous research has suggested that resilience in one developmental or functional domain is not necessarily reflected in others and that adaptive functioning among resilient individuals may be achieved at a psychological cost (Luthar et al., 2000; Luthar & Zigler, 1991). In addition to educational achievement—our marker of resilient functioning—we were also interested in exploring the psychological and emotional adjustment of respondents as well as assessing their hopes and plans for the future, and we included these domains in our model.

Method

Study Design and Procedures

The primary method of data collection for the current study consisted of qualitative, in-depth interviews that lasted 2 hr, on average. An interview guide was designed to collect information on specific dimensions of the respondent’s life, including early family life experiences, experiences in the educational system prior to attending college, pathways through and experiences in the foster care system, external resources (social support and relationships), internal resources (personality traits, coping strategies, perceived strengths), costs and benefits attached to high level of achievement, current life satisfaction, and assessment of future goals, both personal and professional. One primary researcher and one research assistant were present during the interviews. The primary researcher conducted the interview, and the research assistant took notes on both verbal and nonverbal content of the interview. Because of the in-depth and flexible nature of the qualitative interview method, researchers were able to include and pursue issues related to culture and other contextual variations among respondents that arose during individual interviews. All interviews were audiotape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Following the in-depth interview, respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ). The SAQ was designed to collect demographic information as well as
information specific to experiences within the foster care system, and it consisted of measures that have been used in other studies on emancipated foster youth. Areas covered included educational history; employment history and financial support; health status; social support; history of homelessness, substance abuse, and criminal activity; history in the foster care system; and skills training.

**Sampling**

Nonprobability, purposive sampling methods were used. The sample represented a subsample of a larger study ($N = 49$) on the educational needs of former foster youth conducted at a large state university (Hines & Merdinger, 1999). Respondents for the larger study were accessed through student financial aid records. Accordingly, respondents were identified from a “yes” response to Question 42 on the financial aid application and from official documentation in their records. Question 42 is the following: “Answer ‘Yes’ if (1) you are currently a ward of the court or were a ward of the court until age 18, or (2) both of your parents are dead and you do not have an adoptive parent or legal guardian.” If possible, financial aid office staff verified the presence of documentation, so that only those students who had official documentation of their status as a ward of the court were included in the sample. Of the 123 students who were identified as having formerly been in the foster care system, 49 returned completed surveys, for an overall response rate of 40%.

At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to return an attached postcard indicating their willingness to participate in in-depth interviews focusing on their experiences transitioning from foster care to college. Out of the 25 who initially volunteered, several were screened out because it appeared that they were in foster care because of the death of both parents or had immigrated to the United States as unaccompanied minors, and several others were unable to be located through the contact information they had given. A final sample of 15, all of whom had experienced abuse and neglect and had grown up in the foster care system, completed the in-depth interview portion of the study. Respondents were paid $20 for their participation.

**Analysis**

The quantitative data resulting from the SAQ portion of the study were analyzed with SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to provide information on the demographic and foster care placement–related characteristics of the youth in the sample.

Data for the qualitative portion of the study were analyzed via both traditional grounded theory method, in which theories inductively emerge from empirical data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and the extended case method (Burawoy et al., 1991). In the extended case method, existing theories are deductively assessed and refined through comparison with the inductive findings first generated from ethnographic research. By accounting for the case study, the older theory is reformulated and expanded, and a new theory and new concepts emerge. In this study, the in-depth interviews were used to inductively discover new factors and correlates related to resilience. Interview data were organized and coded with Atlas Ti, a qualitative analysis software package (Muhr, 1997).

Before coding the data, one primary researcher and one research assistant listed themes that emerged from the data both during the interviews and through subsequent readings of the transcripts pertaining to indicators of adversity, protective and vulnerability factors, and developmental, psychological, and emotional outcomes. These themes were used as initial codes. Two researchers coded each transcript separately. After coding five interviews, the researchers compared codes and reached a consensus. This process often resulted in the development of new codes or the combination of existing codes. This process was repeated until all 15 cases were coded and no new codes emerged. Corresponding to the first objective of the study, the original dynamic process model was expanded, and a working model was developed via the resulting codes. An analysis of cases was performed to check the veracity of the resulting model.

**Results**

**Characteristics of the Sample**

One respondent was dropped from the analysis because, although he had suffered abuse and neglect and had grown up outside his biological family, he had spent a minimal amount of time in the formal foster care system. The final sample ($N = 14$) was composed of 4 men and 10 women, 12 of whom reported being single or never married. Although the mean age of the respondents was 23.4 years, respondents’ ages spanned a wide range, with the youngest being 19 years old and the oldest 35. The sample was ethnically diverse, consisting of 4 African Americans, 3 Asians, 3 Latinos, 1 White, and 3 respondents who self-designated as other.

The mean age at entry to the foster care system was 9.5 years, and, on average, respondents reported spending almost 8 years in the system, ranging from almost 2 to 17 years. The number of placements in the foster care system ranged from 1 to 15, with an average of 3 placements. Half of the sample reported being placed in nonrelative foster care only, 4 were in relative foster care only, and 3 of the respondents reported having been in both relative and nonrelative foster care. A majority (12) of the youth remained in foster care until the age of 18, at which time they were emancipated from the system. The most recent national statistical estimates for children in foster care (from Fiscal Year 2001) indicate that the demo-
graphics of our sample generally reflect those of children and youth in the foster care system. Statistics indicate that the average age at entry to foster care is 9 years and that the majority (51%) of youth 18 years and older have been in the system for more than 5 years. Many (37%) children in the foster care system have had 3 or more placements, and most youth (48%) are in nonrelative foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003).

Regarding academic achievement, 5 of the respondents reported being in programs for gifted students during elementary school, 11 had participated in college prep classes during high school, and 2 had had some college before leaving the foster care system. Respondents had been in college for 5.5 semesters, on average, and the majority (10) reported being juniors, seniors, or graduate students. It is notable that 10 respondents stated that their educational objective was a master’s degree or higher. Most of the respondents (12) reported being on financial aid and employed while going to school. Finally, only 4 respondents had ever dropped out or taken time off during college, and only 5 reported ever thinking about dropping out.

Our first research objective was to construct a dynamic multifactorial process model representing the correlates of resilience as they apply to our study sample of former foster youth. Figure 1 presents the process model discussed earlier, augmented to include factors derived from results that emerged during our qualitative analyses.

Factors Related to Adversity During Childhood and Adolescence

In addition to the stressors that are commonly cited in the literature, all 14 respondents in the sample reported feeling different from others. While growing up, respondents were acutely aware of differences between their family and those of their peers because of abuse or the chaotic situation of their family. A common theme that emerged during conversations with the youth was their efforts to be normal and to blend in with others around them. A 21-year-old woman, whose father began molesting her when she was in the fifth grade, said,

I didn’t, I didn’t really talk to other people about what was going on at home just because I didn’t know, like, I knew it wasn’t normal. . . . I knew things were different, I, I just tried to, you know, ignore it. I guess I wanted to, you know, make things how everybody else was growing up.

Most were also aware of the stigma related to being in foster care and how it set them apart from other children. Respondents spoke of how they often tried to keep their home life secret and said that, even in high school and continuing into college, friends were not aware of their history in foster care. A 22-year-old man describing an experience he had in high school said,

The police came to my high school and they picked me up in a paddy wagon, it was embarrassing. . . . At this point I was feeling really good because at this point, I felt blended in with the school. I had a good set of friends. Nobody knew I was in the foster care system.

Another 21-year-old woman said, “No one knew I was in foster care during high school. No one knew . . . even my boyfriend of 5 years didn’t know.”

Twelve of the youth reported feeling older and somewhat out of sync with peers. Because of the abuse and trauma they experienced as well as having to assume parenting responsibilities for younger siblings, respondents spoke of having to grow up quickly. A 25-year-old woman said,

Right from the outset, I played a parental role with my younger brothers and kept an eye on them a lot. . . . I just saw it as my responsibility, you know. And probably, around, I’d say around age 8 or 9, I started to take on some cooking and a lot of cleaning the house.

The need to grow up quickly often resulted in the inability to understand and/or relate to peers. As one woman explained,

I wasn’t one to go out to parties and to get drunk and that type of thing. . . . When I’d be in school, I’d always look at certain things that people did and think, god, why are they doing that? I was always very mature and people used to say it to me, too, that I was very mature for my age.

One woman, summing up the dynamics of this experience, said,

I guess there was something about me where all my life as a kid I looked down at people my age. . . . I always felt more advanced, I guess, in the sense than people my age because I felt I went through much more than people my age.

Ten of the respondents reported feeling a lack of connection and common identity with family members. In most cases, respondents had little or no contact with their biological parents during the time they were in foster care because of their parents’ death, incarceration, or institutionalization as a result
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychosocial Adversity During Childhood and Adolescence</th>
<th>Moderating Factors (Protective/Vulnerability)</th>
<th>Outcome: Resilient Functioning Educational Achievement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Common source of severe adversity: childhood maltreatment in the form of parental abuse and/or neglect</td>
<td><strong>Individual Attributes</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Assertive (protect themselves emotionally/physically)&lt;br&gt;- Independent, self-sufficient&lt;br&gt;- Goal oriented/determined/tanacious&lt;br&gt;- Determined to be different from abusive adults&lt;br&gt;- Able to accept help/receptive to encouragement/feedback&lt;br&gt;- Conscious change (willful decision making)/flexible/adaptable self-image</td>
<td><strong>Hopes and Plans for the Future</strong>&lt;br&gt;- High expectations for career and education&lt;br&gt;- Strong sense of social responsibility&lt;br&gt;- Desire for family formation&lt;br&gt;- Desire to set up a household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Related risk factors include: Loss of parents/removal from parents&lt;br&gt;Multiple transitions (school, home, peers, caretakers)&lt;br&gt;Institutional care&lt;br&gt;Stigma related to being in foster care</td>
<td><strong>Family-Related Attributes</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Lack of connection to family of origin&lt;br&gt;- Importance of friends/significant others&lt;br&gt;- Presence of positive parenting figures (foster parents, extended family, mentors)</td>
<td><strong>Psychological/Emotional Adjustment</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Rigidity (difficulty creating a balance in life, difficulty incorporating new ways of being)&lt;br&gt;- Anxiety/internal stress/pressure (school, finances, housing, career, fear of failure, not knowing what the next goal is)&lt;br&gt;- Depression/sadness about the past (loss of childhood, missed events, guilt about the past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling different from others&lt;br&gt;Feeling older/out of sync with peers&lt;br&gt;Lack of connection/identity with family members&lt;br&gt;Concern about stability: housing/finances</td>
<td><strong>Community-Related Attributes</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Role of educational system: alternative to troubled family life&lt;br&gt;- Source of support&lt;br&gt;- Escape and refuge&lt;br&gt;- Role of foster care system: opportunity for better education&lt;br&gt;- Opportunity to form positive relationships with adults&lt;br&gt;- Chance to make new friends</td>
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*Figure 1.* Pathways to resilience for former foster youth—a process model.
of mental illness or substance abuse. One woman, whom her mother was in and out of jail because of drug abuse, said, “I used to see her only on Christmas, Easter, Mother’s Day, my birthday, my little brother’s birthday.” Another said, “It’s like I still don’t really know them, my mother or family on that side. I know more on this side, my foster side.” In some cases, respondents were unaware of who actually constituted their biological family. For instance, one woman said,

I found out it was 8 of us. I thought it was basically 3 of us, but come to find out it was 8. . . . I have like older sisters down south. I have a sister that lives here too and a brother that lives in ___ and 2 more brothers in ___. It’s just weird.

Because of the multiple transitions both within their often-chaotic family and once they entered the system, another major stressor for 9 respondents in the sample was an ongoing concern about stability in terms of housing and finances. One young woman explained,

Well, like as a young child, it wasn’t that great. A lot of abuse. A lot of moving around, different stepdads, my mom has been married 4 times. . . . I’ve moved all over the place, so I didn’t really have any place to firmly plant myself.

Respondents often spoke of being grateful to “have a roof over [their] head,” and they often saw higher education as a way of ensuring stability, in terms of food, clothing, and shelter. These fears often arose as respondents spoke of emancipation, having to leave the foster care system at age 18. As one young man explained, “Fresh out of high school and stuff, the biggest thing was fear of not having somewhere to live.” Another said,

I knew that when I turned 18, I was going to have to leave my foster home, and I didn’t know exactly where I was going to be. So I just assumed that if I got into school, I’m sure there is some way I could take out a school loan or something if I wanted to live on campus, something like that. I knew it was the way for me to make sure I’d have a place to stay.

**Moderating Factors**

Analyses of the qualitative interviews corroborated findings of previous research on resilience by indicating the presence of protective factors among respondents, including intelligence, a steady disposition, an optimistic and resourceful personality type, patience, and the ability to delay gratification. The respondents also engaged in positive activities, such as sports and other school-related functions. The following are additional characteristics that seem to be particularly unique to this group of former foster youth.

**Individual attributes.** All 14 respondents were assertive in protecting themselves emotionally and physically, both within their abusive family and once they were in the foster care system. Several took responsibility on themselves to leave their abusive family or report the abuse to another adult. One woman, who entered foster care at the age of 14, explained,

The day that I left my mom had like punched me and things like that. So I had had it. I don’t know what made me snap. But she left for work. I took my backpack, put my two favorite pairs of shoes in it [laughs], grabbed my bike, and I had called my best friend at the time and I rode my bike over to her place and that was it. That was the last time.

Once they entered the system, respondents explained, they also took responsibility for their placements, schooling, and further education. The same young woman went on to explain,

I decided I didn’t want to be adopted. They were trying to change my whole identity, my whole past, just my whole life. Period. My social worker told my family I didn’t want to be adopted and I guess that was like a stab in the back for them or something because I came home one day and they had all my stuff in the car and they took me back to the shelter.

Another young man, who had been placed with his aunt, explained how he left her home, later to be placed in group foster home:

I felt very uncomfortable living with my aunt because she used to say something like the check didn’t come this month, so you can’t wash your clothes until the check comes, or she would say you eat too much so you should ask your social worker for more money or you can’t stay. And so I just left. I left.

All 14 respondents were also extremely independent and self-sufficient. They explained during the interviews that they were generally left on their own from a young age and felt that if they wanted something, they had to do it for themselves. In essence, they had to become their own parents, doing things for themselves that parents or responsible adults usually do for children. As one young woman explained, “Every since I was like very young, I always been very independent, very . . . like I said I had to take care of
my siblings, I was a young child myself. . . . I didn’t have any support at home.” Another stated,

As a kid, I took care of myself. I woke myself up in the morning, I took the bus alone, you know, I came home alone in the house. I was pretty much just on my own. . . . I pretty much felt I was my own parent throughout, you know, for a big portion of my childhood.

The majority (13) were goal-oriented, determined, and extremely tenacious. Their goals often revolved around school and excelling academically. One woman explained,

I always used to tell my grandmother, the people at my church, I’m gonna be a nurse. . . . I’ve always had the determination to, to do anything and the determination for me to go to college no matter how hard it was for me to, uh, do the work, I was going to go to college.

In some cases, the respondents’ motivation to achieve was related to the desire to prove to family members that they could succeed. One respondent, who was from a family of nine children and who was the first to graduate from high school, said,

I always wanted to challenge myself. I always kept thinking back, the times when my dad would say, “You’re so stupid, you’re so dumb. If someone’s going to fail, it’s going to be you.” I kept saying, “No, I’m going to show him. I’m gonna prove to him, I’m gonna do the opposite.” And that’s what I always kept doing. . . . I just don’t settle, even if I’m happy now, I’m always working on my next goal.

One respondent spoke of the motivation for achievement in school as stemming from a desire not to fulfill negative expectations about being in foster care:

I was extremely driven to the point that I would get up at 5 or 6 in the morning, every morning, just to prove to myself that I could do it. . . . Sometimes I would go to school early in the morning and just get there and study, even before the cafeteria opened and it was still dark out and just read by the lighting outside, just, just to say to myself, I can do this. You know, and part of me that was really angry about being a foster youth and saying to myself, look at what my friends have, I’m doing it too, I don’t care if it kills me.

Eleven respondents reported being determined to be different from abusive families in their efforts not to repeat the past. This finding corroborates and expands on Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, and Egolf’s (1994) finding, derived from a case study in which the determination to be different was emphasized as crucial to resilient behavior among adolescents. In the current study, the determination to be different was, in some cases, directed toward a particular parent. One respondent, referring to her father, said, “He’ll say whatever, and he’s always wrong. And I never wanted to be like that. I’ve tried so hard not to be like him.” For others, the motivation came from not wanting to repeat a specific parental behavior. A young woman described such a situation by saying,

I began experimenting, I guess like most teenagers do, you know. But I never really got into it because I knew that my mom, you know, alcohol was getting ready to almost take her life, so, and it had definitely made ours hell, so I decided not to do that.

She went on to say,

I needed to be better than the image I had in my own head of a foster youth, or the image of someone who came from this abusive family. I needed to be. I had to be. . . . the residential center I went to, the first one, I would sneak up on to the roof and just sit there. Just so I could say to myself that I’m different and somehow I’m different from all this and I’m going to succeed.

In spite of their fierce self-sufficiency, most (10) were also able to accept help from others and realized that this was integral to their ability to survive. Explaining the important role people played in her life, one woman said,

I had a lot of people. I guess I’m kind of like a friendly person, where I know that if I’m going to benefit from knowing somebody, I’m going to hold on to their number and I’m going to keep it and one day I will call them. . . . So whenever people were kind of offering help to me, I always took it.

A young man said, “I know that I always asked for help . . . and I think that’s a lot of the reason I’m where I am today is because I asked for help.” Sometimes the help was in the form of concrete services, advice, or feedback on performance. Respondents were also able to accept encouragement from others, especially teachers and mentors.

Nine of the respondents spoke of making conscious changes in their life, demonstrating the ability to be flexible and adaptable in situations as well as with their own self-image. One woman described her ability to be flexible by saying, “I’ve always learned how to act well. . . . I feel I can do or be whatever I want to basically.” Each described situations in which he or she had responded with almost willful decision making—changing the way things were go-
ing and sometimes even the course of their life. This tendency is illustrated by the following comments of one young woman:

In high school I made a decision, I don’t know how, that I was going to try to act like the popular people [laughs]. I didn’t know any other way and I just decided that I’m going to pretend that I’m not me, and just pretend that I’m somebody else. . . . So long as I pretended that I wasn’t the shy me and I put on an act, then I was able to get along better with my peers, better with the teachers, you know, I spoke up more. And pretty soon some of that act really became me. So that opened my eyes to see that change was really possible.

Continuing, she added,

I made a conscious decision to, whatever I saw that was working for my friends, to take it on and do it myself. And I thought, “I don’t know if this is going to work or not, but let me just try and I’ve got nothing to lose.”

Another woman explained,

and so by the time I went to high school I changed everything I could about myself that I could possibly do: I changed my hair, I told myself everyday to be really happy, and I acted so happy it’s like . . . everybody thought that I was like so bubbly and that’s how I acted because that’s how I wanted to appear to people. . . . After a while it became me too, you know, it was like I adopted it and after a while it wasn’t like I was pretending, it just became part of me.

Family-related attributes. The majority of our respondents spoke of the importance of friends and significant others and the role of positive parenting figures. Only 5 respondents had any connection to their family of origin at the time of the interview. Respondents spoke instead of friends and helpful adults and of consciously and carefully choosing good friends. One woman stated,

Pretty much throughout life, I’ve always kept what I would call a best friend. Somehow, instinctively, I guess I just knew that I needed that. And throughout my life, consistently, these best friends had families that kind of took me in and supported me. . . . In middle school, I had a best friend whose family I went to a lot after school. . . . They always had food in the house and they’d feed me. They had a nice house and I got to go there and play games and sleep over and that was really nice.

In some cases, respondents moved in with a relative or a foster parent who became a significant figure in their life, acting as a parent substitute. One woman, describing her experiences in foster care, stated, “You know, the foster family, they showed a lot of love and outside of mother, father, brother, you know like the grandparents, they were really supportive too, and cousins and stuff.” Another woman, who had been placed with her aunt, explained,

My aunt would always say, why don’t you be a writer. ’Cause I would always write her poems. She loved poetry. “Write me another poem.” She would always do that. . . . So I would sit there and write things for her. She loved that. She’s like, “Gosh, you know you should just be a writer.” And so that would motivate me, and so, of course, I kept writing things.

In some cases, a counselor, social worker, or teacher stepped in to provide assistance.

Community-related attributes. Results indicate that institutions within the larger community, including the educational system and the foster care system, provided protective mechanisms that fostered ties to the larger community and compensated for deficits in the life of the youth.

Role of the educational system. All 14 respondents saw school as a positive alternative to their troubled life. This finding corroborates work by Lynch and Cicchetti (1992) that suggests that attachment to teachers and engagement in school serve as pathways through which maltreated children might achieve developmental competence. Respondents in the current study reported that, throughout childhood and continuing into adolescence, school was often the only stable and supportive place where they were able to find escape and refuge. One woman, describing the support she received at school, said,

I didn’t do very well gradewise because I didn’t have the support at home, but I had a lot of fun in class, so school was always the most supportive place for me. . . . I’d pick favorite teachers and just hone in on their class.

Most respondents had attracted the attention of teachers, were placed in programs for the gifted, and took college prep classes in high school. They spoke of liking school and being motivated to succeed. One woman stated,

School to me was my escape. I loved school. When the summer came, I really thought my parents were lying, I didn’t believe there was a break. I felt that they were holding me from being, you know, in school. And the summers were hard for me. I was always looking forward to going back to school.

A young man, describing how school was a refuge from the institutional life of his group home, said,
"Outside of the group home, like at school, I did really well because it was just me . . . because I was around a lot of peers, I was doing activities, I was learning stuff, I wasn’t being judged."

Role of the foster care system. Several respondents spoke of ways the foster care system “saved” them or changed their life for the better by giving them new opportunities for education, positive relationships with adults, and a chance to make new friends. As one young woman explained,

I think if I would have stayed with my mother, if she was still alive and she would have raised me, I think I would have turned out different . . . I don’t think I would be in college actually. I think I would have a couple of kids right now.

She added, “When I moved in with my aunt, she had a husband, too. So I had like a father figure and he helped me a lot, too.”

It was often the entry into the foster care system that enabled these youth to make the conscious, deliberate changes mentioned in the previous section. Sometimes the move away from family and an impoverished area helped change their life. One respondent, describing how things changed when she went into foster care at age 14, said,

It was like someone rescued me. I noticed that as soon as I was removed it was like an opportunity for me to see other things. I felt like doors opened to new things that I had never imagined that I would be part of . . . I came from, you know, like an area where people are not motivated. You know, they’re living one day at a time. And so when I moved to where people are like, “Well, I’m going to school, I’m going to college, I’m going to have a career.” That was different for me. And so was being in a school where I noticed that everybody, all the students, were like in school doing what they were supposed to do, not getting into trouble, no fighting, not gangs. I thought, “OK, this is good, this is different.”

Another respondent spoke of the high school she went to after being placed in foster care, which had a very high rate of college entrance.

I went to spend the next 2 years in an emancipation group home. OK, and there it was like a culture shock for me because this group home was on the border of and , and the high school that I went to was really ritzy. We’re talking most of the people there were, their families had more income, socioeconomically, they were better. So that was something I had never really experienced . . . and due to all of the help that I got at the home that I lived in and the friends that I just by chance happened to make . . . I did really well in high school my last couple of years. I was really happy about that. Those were the years that turned my life around.

Another woman, placed in foster care at age 14, spoke of how the system provided her a safe environment leading to new opportunities.

Gosh, anything was better than living with my mother. I never had to worry about any abuse or anything like that in my foster homes . . . That’s when I started being, feeling more comfortable and stuff. And then I went out for cheerleading my senior year in high school. I mean that’s when I really started blooming.

Psychological and Emotional Adjustment

When asked about their hopes and plans for the future, most respondents (11) reported that they intended to continue with their education, and 12 of the respondents reported knowing exactly what kind of work they wanted to do in the future. In describing their future plans, they were expansive and had very high goals and expectations for themselves in terms of further education and career choice. Nine of the respondents displayed a high degree of social responsibility and were very concerned about giving back to their community, their family of origin, their foster family, or society as a whole. The majority (10) stated that they wanted to have children—biological, foster, or adopted—but intended to wait until they owned a home, had a career and earned enough money, finished their education, or were ready emotionally. Seven respondents spoke of wanting their own home and of wanting stability and a “roof over their head.” One respondent described wanting “just a place that I can call my own so I don’t have to move, keep moving and moving.”

All of the respondents reported having some degree of difficulty in the area of psychological functioning and emotional health. Ten spoke of problems with rigidity that led to difficulties achieving balance in their life. One woman, describing how her goals of succeeding academically affected her social life, said,

And pretty much, I kept to my rigid way of getting through college, very disciplined, not getting into a lot of social life . . . . I should have taken some time off, but I never gave myself that option . . . a great cost was not developing a social life.

Five of the respondents reported feeling stress, anxiety, and pressure related to school, finances,
housing, and career as well as an overarching fear of failure. Describing her situation, one woman said,

I put too much pressure on myself. . . . I’m expecting too much from myself, I think that’s what it is . . . and that’s probably where a lot of my stress comes from. And I know I do it and yet I continue to do it. So, yeah, I reach major points of anxiety.

Discussing doubts about her accomplishments, another woman stated,

Sometimes I just ask myself, “Why am I here?” I tell my mother, you know, my foster mother, that I’m going to be 20 years old and I haven’t accomplished anything or I haven’t accomplished much, even though out of my real brothers and sisters, I’m the only one to graduate from high school and the only one in college. . . . They tell me that, but it still feels like I should be doing more, doing better.

Five respondents expressed depression or a sadness about the past related to feelings that they had lost their childhood and consequently missed out on a lot while growing up and also during college. As one young woman explained, “I don’t have a lot of the same childhood experiences as some of my friends. They’ll talk about this or that and I’m just like, “Oh,” ’cause I can’t really relate to it, because I’ve never had that.” They also expressed feeling guilt about what had happened in the past. Comparing herself with other family members, one woman explained,

I feel that I’m very fortunate. Very, very fortunate because I look at my brothers and sisters and I . . . I’m very sad to see them live the way they live and I feel guilty sometimes, I feel like I have too much compared to them. And to me these are just average things that everybody should have . . . but I know that I have so much more than them.

There was a continuing lack of connection to the respondents’ past and to their family of origin, some of which stemmed from an ever-present desire not to repeat the past. Speaking about her lack of connection to her mother, one woman said,

So the hardest times that I had was, you know, dealing with the absence of my mom. You know, we don’t have that relationship, that mother–daughter relationship, and I don’t think we ever will. And that is still hard for me. . . . Because I can’t hope for the family, the ideal family.

In some cases, respondents’ parents had disowned them. As one woman described, “My mom lives in . . . , we don’t talk to her at all. It was her choice. She decided that we were dead [laughs].” In other instances, the son or daughter had decided not to have contact with family members, as one young woman described,

And for about a year now, my mom has now called me on the phone and says, “Hey, you are a stranger to us” . . . and I pretty much have nothing to say to her because she wants to tell me all about these negative things that are happening with my brother going to prison and things like that and I feel like I can’t relate to this. This is not my lifestyle. It’s really not... I decided I don’t have to keep in contact with them.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study is to further theory development in the area of resilience by focusing on a group of former foster youth—a group at high risk for developmental failure—at a significant developmental turning point: the transition to young adulthood. The study responds to the call for more research on development that provides qualitative insights to augment the relevance and conceptual comprehensiveness of large-scale quantitative research aimed at testing specific hypotheses related to resilience among children and youth (Furstenberg, 2000; Luthar & Burack, 2000). Though our sample consists of 14 college-attending youth who volunteered for the in-depth interview portion of our study, their demographic and system-related characteristics are typical of foster youth currently in the system, as described by recent foster care statistical estimates. In addition, the respondents in our sample share a common source of adversity, in the form of parental abuse and neglect and experience in the child welfare system.

Our primary objective was to begin to understand the processes by which maltreated youth, specifically those raised in the foster care system, achieve academic success despite severe adversity, in the form of parental abuse and neglect and its accompanying risks. Although academic achievement is but one way to measure positive developmental adjustment, it may be particularly important for former foster youth as a means of obtaining employment and future financial security. Results indicate that individual attributes, including assertiveness, independence, goal orientation, persistence, the determination to be different from abusive adults, the ability to accept help, a flexible and adaptable self-image, and the ability to make conscious changes, were all pivotal factors in the life of the individuals we interviewed. Taken
together, these factors compose what is described in the literature as an “internal locus of control” and have been identified in previous studies as being crucial to resilient behavior (Cicchetti et al., 1993; Herrenkohl et al., 1994; Masten & Curtis, 2000). These characteristics enabled the individuals we interviewed to make a difference in their respective environments and to move out of the realm of chronic abuse.

Regarding the family-level attributes, results indicate that, after leaving foster care, only a small minority of respondents had maintained contact with biological family members. The life stories of the youth exemplify how the individual attributes we have mentioned also enabled these young adults to include competent, caring adults in their life. These adults, because of their willingness and availability to function as substitute parents and positive role models, provided the youth with an alternative reality. This finding is supported by previous research that suggests that the ability to establish a positive relationship with a nonabusive adult is important in promoting resilient outcomes for maltreated children (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Stroufe, 1988; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992). Likewise, for the youth in our study, both the educational and the foster care systems functioned as “safe havens” and places of refuge and escape. In addition, these systems provided new opportunities for educational achievement and the chance to create new relationships with adults and peers. Again, however, it was the individual attributes of these youth that enabled them to take advantage of these institutions and use them as bridges to competent functioning.

These results indicate that the youth we interviewed clearly played an important role in influencing the quality and abundance of resources available to them, a finding that has been suggested by previous researchers (Cicchetti & Tucker, 1994; Masten et al., 1999). The life stories of these youth also illustrate how forces within each of the levels in the process model (individual, family, and community, and encompassing more than one system at a time) are integral in understanding developmental pathways of these youth. All of these levels operated together in synergistic ways, enabling the youth in our study to surpass the expectations of most who work in the field of child welfare and to achieve what the majority of youth growing up in foster care have not—high school graduation and advancement to a 4-year college or university.

Research has also suggested that individuals can achieve adaptation in one developmental or functional domain yet have problems in another (Luthar et al., 2000). At the psychological and emotional levels, respondents in our study reported problems with rigidity that led to difficulties in achieving balance in their life as well as stress, anxiety, and fear of failure. Respondents also reported feeling depressed and sad about their experiences during childhood and adolescence. These results suggest that some of the earlier adversity factors may still be operating in cumulative and multiplicative ways to have long-lasting effects on developmental pathways. It is also possible that moderating factors (e.g., self-sufficiency, goal orientation, the determination to be different from abusive caretakers and families, and extreme flexibility and adaptability) that were protective at an earlier developmental stage are no longer serving as protective factors. It is possible that extraordinary effort and high levels of resources are required to achieve and sustain competence in the face of chronic adversity and that the result is some degree of internal pain or uneven adaptive functioning (Luthar, Doernberger, & Zigler, 1993; Masten et al., 1999). Further research in these areas is clearly warranted.

Studies of resilience support the view that human psychological development is highly buffered and self-righting and that resilient behavior can occur at any developmental stage (Luthar, 1999; Masten et al., 1990). This theoretical perspective holds promise for youth and young adults involved in the foster care system, for it implies that, to ensure positive outcomes, interventions need not be focused solely on the early years. Efforts to promote healthy functioning among former foster youth should focus on the individual, family, and system-related attributes that promote adaptive processes. In particular, the development of programs and interventions that foster individual empowerment and the ability of the individual to influence available resources during the transition to young adulthood may be a promising direction that merits further research.

The little research that exists on outcomes for youth who have grown up in foster care indicates that resilience is not a common phenomenon within this population. A theoretical grounding in resilience and its underlying processes can help guide the development and implementation of new and perhaps more effective programs and policies aimed at furthering positive developmental outcomes among youth who have been raised in the foster care system.
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