

When hunger hurts: A heuristic inquiry into the lived experience of childhood hunger

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2009

M.S., Kansas State University, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Applied Human Sciences
College of Health and Human Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

While the reasons for and consequences of poverty are multifactorial, a lack of money and resources can be insuperable within the family structure. In the United States, hunger is caused by the prevalence of poverty, not food scarcity, and it is this financial circumstance that often forces families to balance the need for food with other basic necessities. In doing so, families often find themselves surviving at diminished levels of food security, wherein accessing adequate food, and the quality, variety, and quantity of their food intake are markedly reduced. Because poverty and food insecurity are household conditions, the occurrence of hunger as an individualized experience is often veiled and largely unacknowledged. Nonetheless, when children experience food insecurity that results in a prolonged, involuntary lack of food that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation of hunger, a complex trauma can develop. Traumatic experiences, whether witnessed or experienced, often manifest in ways that interfere with emotional or physiological functioning well after the event has ended, and the current study seeks to delve more deeply into the individual experience of childhood hunger using heuristic inquiry. In doing so, the researcher endeavors to tell her story and the stories of others in the United States who have experienced the pervasive and persistent phenomenon, known as childhood hunger. By generating a collective narrative from personal accounts of adults who have experienced hunger as children, discussion of this intractable and well-documented hardship highlights the need for it to be considered as a stand-alone adverse childhood adversity resulting in trauma.

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Approved by:

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Dedication

This is for all the people who have arrived at a destination that should not have been possible.

All those that carry their trauma with them— deep inside their cells, their hearts, and their aching souls.

To the ones that have to dig deep inside every single day... just to show up.

To my siblings. Those who have come out on the other side of their trauma and hurt, and those still down in the depths of their pain. I accept you for who you are. I hope you will do the same.

To my husband. The best spouse, father, friend, and partner I have ever seen in real-life. You are a dream come true and a prayer answered.

To the daughter that we all share. You are loved. You consistently remind me that it's not about the blood, but the bond we share.

To my friends, who have walked alongside me through this journey called life.

To the world travelers in my life. The people that showed me there was another way to show up in this world. The ones who inspired me to be the best human and citizen of the world I could be. Especially, my compass- the most generous heart I have held witness to. Un abrazo muy fuerte maja.

This is for all the little black girls- who have been hurt, harmed, and told to be silent because strong little black girls have to grow up to be strong black women. Please protect and be good to your mind, heart, body, and soul, because if you don't make the space for your wellness now, you will be forced to make time for your illness later— because the body ALWAYS keeps score.

Alopecia Areata, Arthritis, Cardiogenic Pulmonary Edema, Stage IV Endometriosis, Poly-Cystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), Primary Ovarian Insufficiency, Diastolic Dysfunction, Mixed Connective Tissue Disease (Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, Scleroderma, & Polymyositis overlap), Right Ventricular Dilation, Sinus Tachycardia, Raynaud's syndrome.

This is for the faithless. Don't give up, for this place is not our home.

“Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfil her promises for her.”

Chapter 1 - Introduction

I didn't starve. But I *was* hungry — all the time.

We ate what we could afford and what was afforded to us by the “Hunger Heroes” —that’s what they called themselves. The people who volunteered at the library on Wednesday mornings from 9:30-11:30 a.m. to distribute commodities, prepackaged boxes of powdered milk and fortified blocks of processed cheese, alongside miscellaneous toiletries. The same folks who traded their Thanksgiving meals, for our meek, yet sincere “thank you” as we reluctantly posed for pictures to be included in their subsequent donor newsletters. I gratefully attended these gatherings... until I stopped.

I stopped going the year I was the co-chair of my junior high Peer Mentor group and we “adopted” a “holiday family,” which unbeknownst to me, would render me, my very own Hunger Hero. The year my peers and I spent months hosting coin wars and pay-to-play spirit days, raising money and collecting canned foods to be displayed in the trophy case in preparation for the big winter reveal. The fall we would all travel together to the home of the single mother of six — four boys and two girls — to deliver the presents and food our entire school had collected over the course of the semester. I stopped going because of the fear and anxiety that had built up over those months, dreading the moment when my mom would open the door to half my school on the yard, delivering the “goodies” to the poor, needy family. Turns out, it wasn’t my family, but the vivid memory still sends a shiver down my spine. Twenty years later it still brings up all the anxiety, fear, and embarrassment that swelled up inside of me over the course of an entire semester. However, the fact remained, we *were* poor and we *were* in need. So, while embarrassed, I would have been grateful for the food that could quell the other sensation I felt more often than not that year, the sensation of my stomach grumbling.

Because stronger than the anxiety, fear, and embarrassment I felt waiting for hours at the food distributions, when people commented on my mom's "monopoly" food stamp money, or each summer day I had to leave my friends to attend the free lunch dispersal, was the tangible awareness that accompanies chronic childhood hunger. The sensation evoked by memories of looking into the cabinet at the beginning of the month, hoping it would be different from the previous month when you just had to "deal." Hoping that by the 20th there would still be food, that month. A sensation that is so pervasive, it hijacks my childhood memories for problematic recollections. Like when I silently hushed my tummy when we were homeless and my mom purchased a hoagie sandwich to be split five ways. As I cut my already diminutive piece in half so that I could have something to eat again, hours later so my stomach wouldn't wake me up during the night, as it had done so many nights before. These are the memories that hold more weight than the memories of my childhood sexual abuse, the witnessed physical and substance abuse in our household, or the dissolution of countless parental romantic relationships. It was and still is the ache I feel deep down in my "tummy" that resulted in the extensive trauma, though now healed, that I still carry today. The learning that I just cannot unlearn. Just as these memories are burned into my brain, they are burned into my body; these memories are why I seek to understand the phenomenon that so many others experience in silence and the shadows. A memory/hurt/pain that has evolved from a necessary, life-sustaining bodily function into a complex traumatic experience that resurfaces, at every meal time.

Unfortunately, my experience is not unique, nor is it as rare as it should be in the 21st century in one of the richest countries in the world. While some children have enough to eat but depend on diets that are nutritionally inadequate, today many children experience hunger because their families are unable to provide sufficient food. Whatever the context, experiences

like mine have become so commonplace, there are innumerable academic articles dedicated to researching it, foundations and organizations devoted to “solving” it, and way too many children enduring it... right now.

This study aims to use heuristic inquiry to reveal the qualitative features, rather than just the quantitative rudiments, of hunger during childhood. Over the last 30 years countless studies have documented the socioeconomic circumstances and negative physical and mental health of children and families experiencing food insufficiency. This study seeks to embody the intention of a heuristic researcher’s quest— to walk alongside their research participants (known as co-researchers) and recreate a full and complete depiction of a lived experience from their own frame of reference. Conducting research in such a way that will allow all of the feelings, thoughts, and memories that symbolize their understanding of this phenomenon, to be front and center.

Need for the Study

Over the last two decades, researchers and mainstream media alike have increasingly acknowledged the influence adverse psychosocial experiences during childhood may have on individual health and well-being over the life course. Adversity is commonly used as an umbrella term that refers to a wide range of circumstances or events that can disrupt a child’s sense of stability and/or emotional or physical safety. Frequently used interchangeably with similar terminology such as trauma, toxic stress, or chronic stress, these intense, repetitive and/or severe exposures to adversity in childhood have the potential to generate negative effects that can persist for years and ultimately compromise adult health and well-being (Larkinm et al., 2012).

Traumatic events, whether witnessed or experienced, often manifest in ways that interfere with emotional or physiological functioning well after the event has ended. In general, traumatic

experiences may present as dangerous, violent, and/or chronic stress inducing events that pose a threat to the life or safety of an individual. However, unlike a singular traumatic event, complex trauma “refers to a type of trauma that occurs repeatedly and cumulatively, usually over a period of time and within specific relationships and contexts” (Courtois, 2004, p. 412), and may or may not present as a violent or dangerous situation. Many occurrences of complex trauma develop from ordinary situations, that progress into traumatic experiences over time. Unfortunately, because children depend almost exclusively on their parents/caregivers for survival, these events may be intensified during childhood due to the child’s inability to protect themselves or because the trauma itself may be perpetrated by a parent or guardian on whom their safety depends. For example, the act of supplying food/feeding is a vital way to foster not only safety, but also attachment between parent and child. Therefore, “when children are not fed reliably, have to compete for food, or do not get enough food, an anxious [attachment] relationship” (Rowell, 2020, para. 3) may develop.

Decades of research on attachment theory has shown that early experiences in childhood not only influence the relationship between parent and child, but also how individuals parent their children (Bowlby, 1951; Sroufe, 2005). As such, attachment may be one of the several reasons many parents work tirelessly to shield their children from the reality of childhood hunger.

Various studies contend that parents generally try to protect their children from food insecurity, or unreliable availability of nutritious food, by reducing their own intake, skipping meals, or seeking governmental assistance in an effort to ensure their children have adequate access to food. Unfortunately, more often than not, their efforts do not meet the needs of their children. Up from previous years, an estimated “1 in 4—17 million— children faced hunger in

2020” (Hake et al., 2020, p. 3), which is consistent with previous research (Mcintyre et al., 2003; Rose & Oliveria, 1997; Radimer et al., 1992) that postulates parents in food insecure households are not actually protecting their children from experiencing food insecurity. Some studies suggest that measuring food insecurity among children may be especially difficult due to discrepancies in reporting from children and their caregivers. In a study comparing adolescent reports to their adult caregivers, the adolescents reported much higher prevalence of food insecurity (Fram et al., 2013), while in another study, researchers found that children reported more frequent occurrences of hunger than their parents recalled (Nord & Hanson, 2012). While it is possible that parents may have no sense of, or honestly do not recall their child’s repeated or cumulative hunger, it is more probable in fact that the child is already engaging in coping strategies to offset the impact of their hunger. In fact, frequently “children know the experience of food insecurity and will often develop coping mechanisms to deal with low food security regardless of whether the parent seeks to protect the child” (Chilton & Rabinowich, 2012, p. 1) or not. In their poignant study exploring the factors influencing food choice, food access, and weight status, Richards and Smith (2007) provide excerpts from interviews with children regarding their coping strategies:

Several children said that they went to bed hungry at night, but had developed strategies to cope with the situation. A couple of children went to sleep to alleviate hunger in the evening. As one child described, “I tell my mom, I’m hungry and then she says, what she goin’ to do about it ... she can’t get nothin’ else ... ya but I don’t be hungry ... when I go to sleep ’cause I don’t wake up in the middle of the night, sayin’ I be hungry. I don’t do that.” A few children dreamt about food as a strategy to overcome hunger. One child said, “I’ll just dream about food ... pizza, cake ...” Another child similarly stated, “... I

go to sleep and I dream about food that I'm eating ... I dream about ooh, ahh, I dreamed about hamburgers and carrots and strawberries and everything else ... and then it makes me full when I get up ... it makes me, I get up, like, why do I have a tummy ache?!" (p. 1577).

Even so, many studies investigating food insecurity or diminished/unreliable availability of adequate, nutritious food merely track the contemptable indicators of an economic, institutional, political, and socio-cultural system in crisis. According to Gallegos and Chilton (2019) academia has consistently become more adept at interpreting and translating complex research issues into "health-speak" that fails to accurately capture the humanity, empathy, courage, and transparency needed to honestly depict and eventually address social issues as nuanced as food insecurity and hunger. Thereby, perpetuating a "serious gap between supposed knowledge sitting with the "experts" from academia, law, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, and other arenas of social and political power, and the realities of people who struggle with food insecurity" (Gallegos & Chilton, 2019, p. 562). As such, the current study seeks to explore chronic hunger from a heuristic lens; one in which the author's personal experience, alongside those of participants (known as co-researchers) that have also experienced the physical and emotional effects of chronic hunger in childhood, will serve as the foundation to explore this often hidden, and infinitely heartbreaking phenomenon.

Purpose of the Current Study

The Notion of Hunger

In the U.S., hunger is caused by the prevalence of poverty, not food scarcity. Stable food access is often blocked for low-income families that struggle to balance the need for food with other basic necessities (Dupere, 2016). Feeding America (2020), the largest hunger-relief

organization in the United States, emphasizes that while “hunger and food insecurity are closely related, they are distinct concepts. Hunger refers to a personal, physical sensation of discomfort, while food insecurity refers to a lack of available financial resources for food at the household level” (paras. 2). This conceptualization of hunger is consistent with the Phase 2 report from the Committee on National Statistics CNSTAT panel (National Research Council, 2006). In recognizing that food insecurity exists at a household-level, the panel considered the definition of hunger as a “consequence of food insecurity that, because of a prolonged, involuntary lack of food due to lack of economic resources, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation” (National Research Council, 2006, p. 47). Despite the fact that all households experiencing food insecurity are vulnerable to the “negative consequences of not having enough food, certain populations are more sensitive and/or experience this challenge more acutely” (RTI International, 2014, 1-7).

In 2018, 11.2 million children (1 in 7), lived in a food-insecure household. The Children’s Health Fund (2017) affirms that “while hunger in the United States does not normally take the form of starvation, nonetheless effects [of chronic hunger] have been proven to jeopardize children’s chances to learn and thrive” (paras. 3) Moreover, not having proper nutrition as a child can negatively impact adult physical and emotional health, as well as limit lifetime potential, as “children who went hungry at least once in their lives were 2½ times more likely to have poor overall health 10 to 15 years later, compared with those who never had to go without food” (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2011).

Nonetheless, one of the most pervasive and well-documented adversities that has been shown to increase an individual’s risk for serious and chronic health conditions like anemia and asthma, increased likelihood of developmental impairments in language and motor skills, and

behavioral problems in school and other social situations, is directly tied to a sensation all humans experience— hunger. Hunger in and of itself, is a necessary and natural bodily response. Unfortunately, when the experience becomes severe, chronic, or prolonged, a form of complex trauma develops within the mind and body. According to McClelland and Gilyard (2019):

when a person experiences a traumatic event, adrenaline rushes through the body and the memory is imprinted into the amygdala, which is part of the limbic system. The amygdala holds the emotional significance of the event, including the intensity and impulse of emotion. Consequently, after trauma, the brain can easily be triggered by sensory input, reading normal circumstances as dangerous (para. 6).

When a trauma develops out of a natural and vital bodily function such as hunger, a unique and complex adversity manifests. Therefore, this study seeks to delve more deeply into the individual experience of chronic childhood hunger using heuristic inquiry. As I and my co-researchers explore the past context and current consequences of a trauma so complex it cannot be captured through standard quantitative dimensions, but rather through a personal, vulnerable, and intentional process of acquiring new insight to better understand the phenomenon that is childhood hunger.

Research Design

Heuristic inquiry is a methodology, or research design, that combines the self-study of a researcher with experiential accounts from co-researchers into a dialogue of lived experiences, ultimately seeking to investigate a specific shared phenomenological experience. First developed by Clark Moustakas in the late 1950s as a way to intentionally and systemically study the phenomenon of loneliness, an experience he became intimately familiar with as a result of his daughter's serious illness, heuristic inquiry seeks to uncover the meaning and essence of human

experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person. Based in the Greek word “*heuriskein*” meaning to discover or find, heuristic inquiry allows researchers an opportunity to organically discover a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon through an internal self-study in combination with interviews from co-researchers who share a similar experience.

Heuristic inquiry is appropriate for this study because I, more than most, understand how influential, memorable, and destructive childhood adversity can be, and its impact across the lifespan. Moustakas’ (1990) assertion that “our most significant awarenesses are developed from our own internal searches and from our attunement and empathy understandings of others” (p. 26), embodies my continual quest for knowledge not only about myself but this pervasive and widespread phenomenon. Because I have spent years healing from the personal trauma of chronic hunger, worked to eradicate it in my community, and now endeavor to tell my story (and the stories of others) I want to accurately represent the essence and humanity of this taboo subject. Hooks (1994) captures the sentiment I feel when considering the work of this study as he affirms:

when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two— that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other (p. 61)

Nonetheless, while a researcher’s lived experience may inform theory and practice, perspectives from their respective discipline also inform the conceptual frameworks and methodologies used to understand any given phenomenon.

Poverty and food insecurity are household conditions, while the occurrence of hunger is an individualized experience. In describing her research on childhood hunger, Cherry Smith

asserts that “qualitative methodologies fill gaps in the literature that are not caught using quantitative measures” (Institute of Medicine, 2011, p. 169). So, while research has shifted over the last decade to capture the lived experience of children enduring hunger at present, little is still known about how adults make meaning out of their experience of childhood hunger, nor the associated learning after the occurrence of childhood hunger. This study seeks to close that gap.

Research Question

According to Bach (2002) “the heuristic model is inherently phenomenological in nature and seeks to uncover the meaning and essence of human experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person” (p. 92). So, unlike other qualitative methods, the heuristic inquiry process begins without a hypothesis or suppositions. Therefore, this study began with an autobiographical search, initiated from a question centered in understanding “How do adults perceive and describe the experience of childhood hunger?” Ultimately compelling me to explore how the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of hunger might in turn contribute to adverse outcomes in such dimensions during adulthood. Moustakas (1990) frames the research question as a way finder, a vehicle to be used by the researcher as a means to arrive at a more complete depiction of the phenomenon being studied:

The heuristic researcher is not only intimately and autobiographically related to the question but learns to love the question. It becomes a kind of song into which the researcher breathes life not only because the question leads to an answer, but also because the question itself is infused in the researcher's being. It creates a thirst to discover, to clarify, and to understand crucial dimensions of knowledge and experience (p. 43).

Because food insecurity played such a significant role in my life and influenced who I am today, I sought to explore the individual experience of chronic childhood hunger. Moustakas validates this type of self-seeking pursuit and concedes that “all heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one's own identity and selfhood” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 26). Geertz (1974) conceptualizes the expression of personhood as “a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole” (p. 45), and it is my search for this “whole self” that has inspired me to actively participate in this process as I seek to reveal the human experience of childhood hunger.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Theoretical Orientation

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1954) frames the human development portion of this study's analysis, in an effort to understand the impact of hunger on the development of the child. Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943) postulates that an individual's needs move upward in a pyramidal channel, beginning with basic needs (food, water, shelter) upward towards psychological and social needs, and ultimately to self-fulfillment needs, known as self-actualization. When visually represented, the higher-level needs sit atop the foundation of the lower-level needs illustrating that an individual must have their most basic needs (those that sustain life) met in order to direct time, energy, and attention to supplementary demands such as safety and belongingness/social needs. By framing food as a lower-level deficiency need that must be met before an individual can focus on any of the growth needs, the experience of chronic hunger can directly impact the individual's path to self-actualization.

Self-actualization is a noteworthy construct as it relates to heuristic methodology. Moustakas explicitly cites Maslow's (1956, 1966, 1971) research on self-actualization as one of the influences in the development of heuristic inquiry, as the genuine individual experience must surface in order for the researcher to make meaning of the communal narrative in relation to the phenomenon at hand. All humans naturally experience hunger, but the occurrence of hunger becomes problematic when the child's physical and nutritional needs are unmet. Heuristic inquiry may be used as a conduit to explore not only the way an individual remembers and makes meaning of childhood hunger, but also their relationship with food into adulthood.

Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory

Conceptualized as a set of concentric systems nested within biological, psychological, and social spheres, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 2005) seeks to explain the ways in which individuals and families influence and are influenced by an ecological environment within the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems. From an ecological perspective, the process of individual development occurs as a result of the inherent interaction among the systems that "extend over the life course across successive generations and through historical time, both past and present" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 3). The "relations in the immediate setting containing the child" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 79) known as the microsystem, articulate and establish the knowledge, and values, that family rules are built upon. Therefore, because families are "adapting to inevitable changes from their near and far environments, families must learn to replace one set of rules with another" (Allen & Henderson, 2017, p. 194). The rules by which families operate, and the meaning a family ascribes to their situation are a "critical component of the coping response which influence behavior and hence, adaptation" (Patterson, 2002, p. 355). As families work to adapt, balance, and make meaning of the ever-present demands of life, two distinct types of outcomes emerge; adjustment wherein the family is able to balance such demands with existing capabilities, or crisis when demands from a stressor exceed capability. When families have adequate capabilities and resources, family functioning is restored. However, when there are insufficient capabilities and protective factors/resources available, individuals and families may engage in formal or informal coping strategies to adapt. While the reasons for and consequences of poverty are multifactorial, a lack of money and resources can be pervasive within the family structure. Circumstances such as under- or unemployment, the transition from a two-parent to one-parent household following a divorce or separation, or even chronic illness or long-term disability, are all reasons a family may

find themselves thrust into poverty (Haider, 2021; McKernan et al., 2019). Moreover, unlike those that find themselves adjusting to habitual economic hardship as a result of intergenerational economic instability, families that experience financial volatility following an event or short-term instability, often experience greater levels of distress because they cannot accurately anticipate their income and must adjust accordingly.

For low-income families and individuals, there is a higher burden of employment-, housing- and food-related insecurity that threaten their livelihood and necessitate adaptation, often through food choice and eating behaviors (Laraia et al., 2017). Families that are food insecure, but not to the level of qualification for safety net/means tested benefit programs administer by federal and/or state governments (e.g., SNAP, WIC) may be stuck in a “limbo” of sorts— in need of support, but unable to fully access it. Strategies outside of these and other charitable food access programs may compel individuals to engage in coping mechanisms such as skipping meals, diluting foods with water, or stealing. Non-standard coping around chronic hunger may develop into disordered food behaviors such as, eating too quickly, sneaking or hiding food, not eating at mealtimes but eating secretly or alone, eating too large/small quantities, or eating only familiar and “safe” foods (Rowell, 2020). Whatever the mechanism or associative learning process—cues, behaviors, or understanding that develops—it becomes a means of coping within the family system; thereby influencing the individual and family.

Storytelling, in line with the heuristic process and method can provide an opportunity to better understand the development of an individual’s associative learning, coping, and maladaptive behaviors related to their experience of hunger during childhood. According to Moustakas (1990) heuristic inquiry provides researchers with:

“guides and methods that can be used in the resolution of dysfunctional behavior, but also in corrections of distorted perceptions and handicapping beliefs. Heuristic processes applied to the symbolic growth experience can lead to enhancement of self-efficacy in decision making and in new creations of life meanings (p. 103).

Another type of coping behavior can manifest when an individual perceives their resources as scarce, as a mental shift triggering an involuntary preoccupation with an unmet need occurs. Laraia et al. (2017) contend that during “conditions of uncertainty and threat, a biological response is mounted, activating stress-, appetite-, and hunger-regulating hormones that signal the hypothalamus and shape eating behaviors. Together, these contribute to a mentality of scarcity, defined as the diminished cognitive capacity to manage challenges” (p. 119), illustrated in Figure 2.1

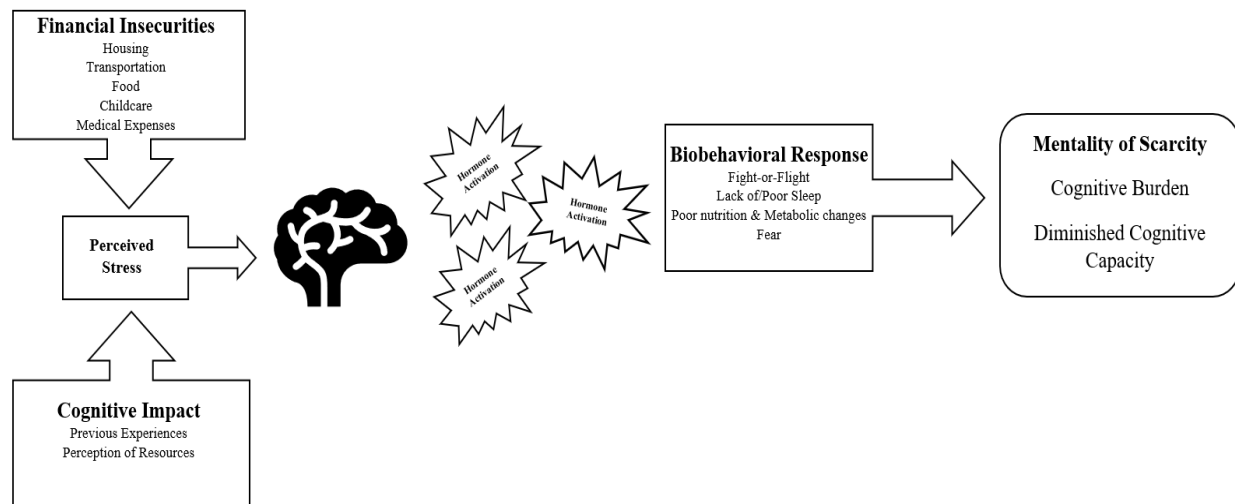


Figure 2.1. How perceived stress contributes to a scarcity mindset. Adapted from “Conceptual framework: how poverty creates environment of scarcity leading to poor dietary quality” Laraia et al., 2017.

This “scarcity mindset” begins to capture an individual’s attention and may impede their ability to focus on other things. It can also be expressed as a fixation on scarcity which can tax cognitive

capacity and executive control, thus diminishing intelligence and impulse control, among other things. Mani et al. (2013) suggests that the very context of poverty, or financial scarcity, imposes such a shortfall of cognitive resources that being poor actually impedes cognitive capacity. Such diminished cognitive function for children in poverty with food insecurity, or diminished/unreliable availability of adequate, nutritious food has been well documented. Most people have a limited amount of cognitive capacity and ability for focus, so they begin directing their mental reserves to the resources they lack (Shah et al., 2012). As such, hungry children focused on getting their nutritional needs met, may experience a breakdown in other areas of their lives, such as schoolwork, socialization, and even play. For example, a cross-sectional study conducted by the Institute for Research on Poverty found that household food insecurity negatively impacted the emotional state of the child, measured as self-control, sadness, loneliness, impulsivity and over-activeness, and social skills (Baker et al., 2010, as cited in Children's Health Fund, 2017). Likewise, a series of surveys sponsored by The Food Research and Action Center known as the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) found that children who were classified as hungry demonstrated increased academic, behavioral, and emotional problems, as well as elevated levels of aggression and anxiety (Kleinman et al., 1998). Additionally, Corso et al. (2008) emphasize a significant "body of evidence indicates that early adverse childhood experiences have a profound effect on a range of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies that lay the foundation for successful learning, coping, and subsequent economic productivity" (p. 1094). Therefore, food security is essential for children to maintain active, healthy bodies and minds. These findings are consistent with the Ecological Systems perspective that concludes "if one of the units as part of the innermost level of the ecological

microsystem is absent, or if they play a disruptive rather than a supportive role, the developmental process, considered as a system, breaks down” (Brofenbrenner, 1979, p. 5).

According to Hughes and Tucker (2018) “a variety of childhood adversities have a root cause in family economic insufficiency, indicating that poverty may likely be the first adversity that many children experience” (p. 124). Toxic stress and the emotional response to poverty as they relate to employment, food, and housing insecurity is regulated by various biological functions within the body, including the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems which can all impact behaviors that inform food choices and consumption (Laraia et al., 2017). Therefore, in order to fully understand how the body and mind respond to the type of stress fostered by food insecurity, as a result of economic insufficiency, we must understand how community level research distills down to the household and individual levels.

Food Insecurity and Hunger

One important aspect in examining the experience of hunger lies in the difficulty of operationalizing the construct itself. Mostly due to the fact that whatever terms and definitions are ultimately used, they have to sustain a level of validity across the multiple contexts in which they are utilized. Today the widely accepted and commonly used definition of food security is a result of various shifts in perception and policy over the last 50 years; “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (Maxwell, 2001 as cited in Crooks & Hadley, 2012, p. 73). Unfortunately, while “the term ‘food security’ has been fairly well defined, a number of other constructs, such as hunger, malnutrition, food insufficiency, starvation, and famine, have been used in place of food insecurity over the years” (Crooks & Hadley, 2012 p. 73). Conversely, although difficulty exists in defining various

constructs related to food insecurity, the determinants and relationships present in a family’s ecological environment (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems) are just as complex, but more easily defined. As depicted in (Figure 2.2), “health outcomes related to food security status for a given household are influenced by a complex tapestry of “risk factors” (i.e., factors, internal or external, that make a household more or less food secure)” (RTI International, 2014, 1-3).

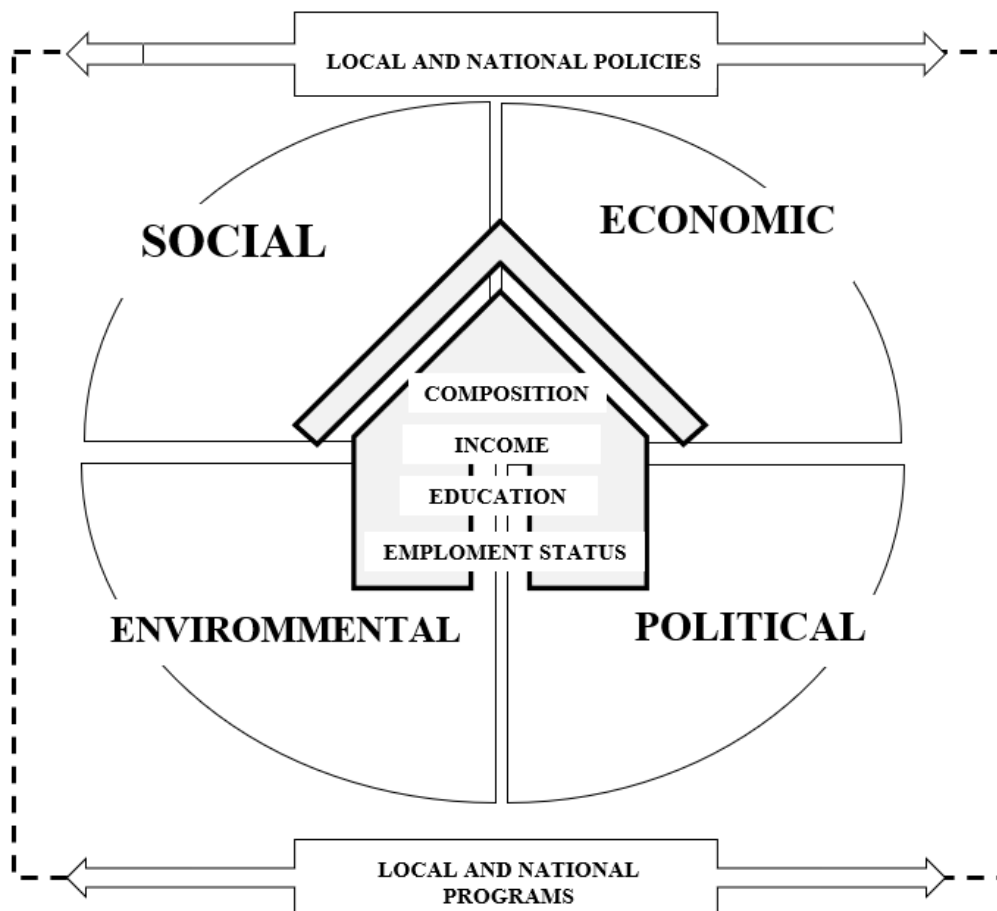


Figure 2.2. Determinants and relationships influencing household food insecurity. Adapted from “The complex tapestry of food security” RTI International, 2014.

Following the passage of the National Nutrition Monitoring Act of 1990, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began publishing annual statistics characterizing the

magnitude, frequency, and severity of food insecurity and hunger in the United States. Utilizing data collected from the Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS) households across the country were organized into three distinct categories, (1) food secure, (2) food insecure without hunger, and (3) food insecure with hunger. Households classified as food secure could demonstrate “access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (National Research Council, 2006, p. 10). At a minimum this would also denote, “availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies” (National Research Council, 2006, p. 10). However, because of considerable debate around the appropriateness of hunger as a range of food insecurity and the delineation of food insecurity categories —particularly the categories ‘food insecure with hunger’ and ‘food insecure with hunger among children’—and the labeling and interpretation of each category” (National Research Council, 2006, p. 2), the USDA charged the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies to assemble a panel of experts to further examine the methodology and feasibility of using a survey to measure food insecurity and hunger.

Midway through the multi-phase 2-year study grounded in discussions, workshops, and deliberations, the CNSTAT panel issued a preliminary report consisting of their evaluation of the food security measure used at that time and additional interim guidance for the USDA in their assessment of food security, food insecurity, and hunger. Following the issuance of *Measuring Food Insecurity and Hunger: Phase 1 Report*, the USDA altered language to be used in the description of households’ access and lack of access to adequate food. Nonetheless, even with the operational progress generated from phase one, the CNSTAT panel wrestled to conceptualize

the notion of hunger as a category on the spectrum of food security. Within the first report, panel members contend:

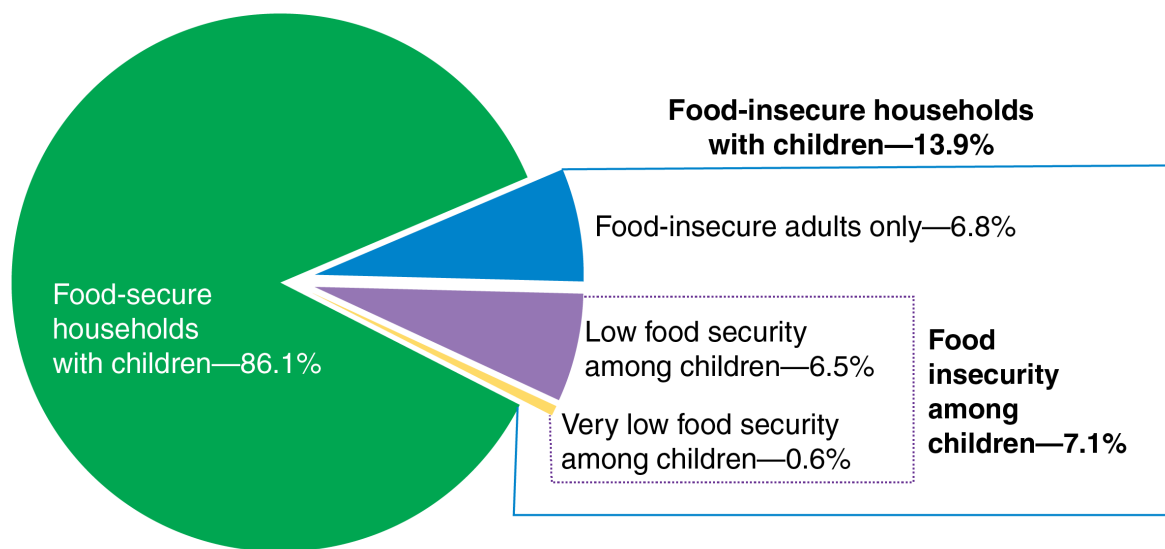
The physiological aspect of hunger is an individual experience, and questions about the experience of hunger should be asked at the individual and not the household level. The socioeconomic aspect of hunger may follow from the economic resources of the household. However, it is not directly linked to an individual's experience of hunger because it is not clear how household-level resources translate into individual-level eating and hunger. The definition of hunger as both a physiological and socioeconomic concept is not made clear. USDA needs a better definition and method for measuring the concept of hunger as well as an improved measure of food insecurity (National Research Council, 2006, p. 4)

Just as the CNSTAT panel expressed a desire to further define and understand the differentiation between food insecurity and hunger, they observed the benefit in extricating hunger from food insecurity. Making the distinction not only between food insecurity and hunger, but also regarding the type of adversity that is chronic hunger, is vital in gaining a better understanding of this phenomenon.

According to RTI International (2014) research “strongly suggests that food insecurity remains a substantial and intractable problem in the United States” (p. 1-6). In the months and years following the great recession (2008-2012) food insecurity rates in the United States significantly rose, with the highest rates consisting of households with children, with racial and ethnic minorities, single-parent households, and people with disabilities (USDA, 2020). Even so, as rates have decreased with little to moderate fluctuation over the last decade, a grim reality still exists for those who struggle with food insecurity. For most households, food insecurity is

episodic and can be categorized as households with low food security or households with very low food security. Very low food security, previously referred to as food insecurity with hunger, is the most severe form of food insecurity, normally characterized by a reduction in food intake and a disruption in normal eating patterns (USDA, RTI International, 2014). On average, households with children experience food insecurity more often than households without children. The prevalence of food insecurity among households with children in 2018 is shown in Figure 2.3.

In 2018, food insecurity affected 13.9 percent of households with children; children themselves were food insecure in 7.1 percent of households with children



Note: In most households classified as having food insecurity among children, low food security among children, or very low food security among children, adults in the households were also food insecure.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Figure 2.3 Food insecurity in households with children

One key factor as it relates to food security measures rests in the fact that they are more often than not, evaluated at the household level. As adults manage unfavorable economic circumstances, such as unemployment, underemployment, and/or a general inability to pay household expenses, children have less autonomy, agency, and ability to improve their circumstances.

Child(ren)

Although the concept of childhood is based on a social construct subject to cultural and historic context, various tangible factors may be used to define and identify a child. Though less concrete, cognitive skill, intellectual ability, general knowledge, and the ability to reason and care for one's self may be used as characteristics that distinguish children from adults. In this study, the term childhood generally references the "middle childhood" through "teenage years" (ages 6-17). Numerical classification, or "age is widely used for definitional purposes in many contemporary societies particularly in western societies. It is calculated in terms of years passed in one's life and as [a] rudimentary source of identity" (Norozi & Moen, 2016, p. 76) and distinct enough to foster an international consensus, as offered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Youth. Using this clear and quantifiable attribute is advantageous as it can represent the most formative years from infancy, adolescence, up through the teenage years when an individual has the potential to learn more quickly than at any other time in their life.

Nonetheless, Mouritsen (2002) offers an understanding of the child in relation to their position to adults, implying that "the view of children, is very much an "adult" projection; we often unconsciously see them as what we are not, as what we fear and what we miss" (p. 34). Offering a perspective wherein children exist as dependent beings with an inherent level of innocence and naiveté to be lost along the journey to adulthood, reaffirms the significant impact

of trauma occurring during childhood (opposed to any other point in a person’s life), and the influence it can have in the development of self. Over the last few decades, more and more “research across biological, health, and social sciences is revealing mechanisms through which adversities trigger neurobiological disruptions that can become embedded as biological traces within interconnected chains of response and development” (Nurius et al., 2016, p. 243).

Childhood Adversity and ACEs

“Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—a term coined by researchers Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and their colleagues in their seminal study conducted from 1995 to 1997—are a subset of childhood adversities” (Barlett & Sacks, 2019). The relationship between ACEs and various negative behavioral and health outcomes in adulthood are well documented in medical and social sciences literature. The groundbreaking CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study (Felitti et al., 1998), continues to serve as one of the largest and most renowned investigations into childhood adversity, and adult health and wellness. The CDC research and numerous subsequent studies have demonstrated strong graded relationships between exposure to the three ACE groups, abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, with increased lifetime risk of chronic diseases, psychiatric illnesses, and even risky behaviors.

By and large, ACE studies use a cumulative sum, commonly referred to as an ACE score, to tally the total number of childhood adversities experienced from birth to age 18. To date, most of what is known about the long-term effects of childhood adversity is based on individual ACE scores, determined as part of the widely recognized CDC 10-item ACE questionnaire (ACEs-10), or calculated as part of one of the many expanded ACE questionnaires surveys (ie. CYW Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (CYW ACE-Q) (Burke Harris & Renschler, 2015) and World Health Organization (WHO) ACE International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ)

(World Health Organization, 2015). Regrettably, both the ACEs-10 and its derivatives uphold substantial limitations as they utilize collapsed ACE categories and a one-dimensional scoring technique. Specifically, in the original two waves of the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, a 64-question Family Health History questionnaire was used to assess child abuse, household dysfunction, and other socio-behavioral factors that embody childhood adversity. However, little information is revealed in the original study regarding why some adversities such as abuse and neglect (i.e., physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect) and household dysfunction (i.e., exposure to mother being treated violently, parental divorce or separation, parental incarceration, or household member with substance abuse problems) (Felitti et al., 1998) were included while others were not.

Items from various scales including the Conflict Tactics Scale, the 1988 National Health Interview Survey, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveys, the Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, and the Diagnostic Interview Schedule of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) were adapted and ultimately included in a male and female version of the original questionnaire. Although shown to have good reliability as part of their original scales, the reliability, validity, and inter-item correlation of these questions when combined as part of the ACE study (Felitti et al., 1998) remains unclear. Moreover, Wave I and Wave II differed, as questions from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire were adapted and added to assess emotional and physical neglect in Wave II and were notably absent from Wave I. In addition to uncertainty related to the study's psychometric properties, it is also important to note that "despite its predictive ability, the [ACE] scale and its component items were not formulated by any systematic process, and there is much reason to believe it could be improved" (Finkelhor et al.,

2015, p. 1). Moreover, despite its evolution from an epidemiological tool to a widely used assessment questionnaire for individuals, popular among advocates and researchers alike, few studies have examined how separate experiences within the ACE categories distinctly contribute to the overall ACE score and the associated long-term negative outcomes.

According to the CDC, physical neglect is gauged in relation to whether or not “there was someone to take care of you, protect you, and take you to the doctor if you needed it, **you didn’t have enough to eat**, your parents were too drunk or too high to take care of you, and you had to wear dirty clothes” (CDC, 2021). The myriad adversities that may stem from the aforementioned experiences are distinct, yet all of which are included as part of the physical neglect consideration on the CDC ACEs-10 questionnaire, which is said to account for food insecurity. To date, “an extensive body of literature from multiple fields has examined the causes and consequences of food insecurity” (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018), but I assert that distinguishing chronic hunger as an indication of food insecurity, should be considered as a singular adversity and distinct ACE.

When an individual, especially a child, is chronically hungry, negative outcomes begin to manifest, which have the potential to impact them (positively or negatively) throughout the rest of their life course. Corso et al. (2008) assert that “recurrent exposure to the stress associated with maltreatment can lead to potentially irreversible changes in the interrelated brain circuits and hormonal systems that regulate stress” (p. 1094). Such enduring hormonal and physiological changes highlight how bodily systems are intricately involved not only in how the body processes threat responses but how they are encoded into the brain as memories.

Brain and Memory

Adverse effects on the mind can be especially problematic during these formative years, as many intellectual, personality and physical changes occur during childhood and adolescence (Rotarescu, 2014). Sustained, accumulating adversity during childhood activates stress-related hormones in the brain which can lead to toxic stress and deficient brain development (Shonkoff, 2016; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Toxic stress generated from chronic and unremitting hunger can negatively affect brain development and functioning, including emotional regulation, information processing, and the formation of autobiographical memory (i.e., memories related to an individual's personal past).

Historically, the amygdala, a collection of nuclei in the medial temporal lobe, has been considered important for emotional processing that contributes to the regulation of social behavior (e.g., Klüver and Bucy, 1939), recognition of emotional facial expressions (Adolphs et al., 1994), and the acquisition and expression of various forms of emotional behavior related to defense and personal protection (e.g., LeDoux, 2015) as cited in (Jacobs et al., 2017).

However, recent work has expanded this view, noting that various parts within the limbic system, including the hippocampal formation, amygdala, and medial prefrontal cortex, regulate cognitive and physiological responses to threats. When a perceived threat is detected, various biological responses within the brain and body activate and mobilize in an effort to cope with and resolve the risk. Following a threat-related or trauma-related experience, the short-term memory is activated until the memory moves from the working memory and is consolidated and stabilized into the long-term memory. Once integrated into the long-term memory, reactivated memories are strengthened in a process called reconsolidation as demonstrated in Figure 2.4. It is also during the reconsolidation process that memories are strengthened or inhibited (Maddox et

al., 2019). In order for a memory to be recollected, it must go through a process wherein it is filtered, encoded, stored, and then retrieved.

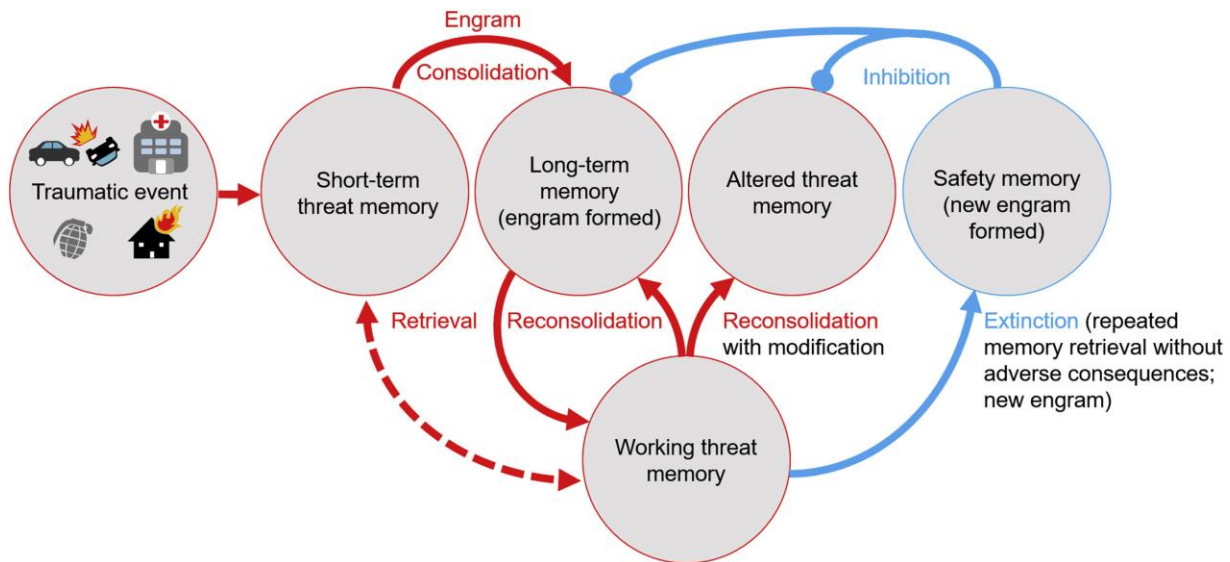


Figure 2.4 Schematic illustration of the main stages of memory encoding following a traumatic event consisting of consolidation, reconsolidation, and extinction. Reprinted with permission from Maddox et al., 2019.

When an individual recalls a memory, the entities, events, and emotions associated with the memory are often “reexperienced” as the body re-activates many of the same neural networks that were initially stimulated when the memory was formed (Jacobs et al., 2017).

Because autobiographical memories require contextual information in order to preserve the experience, some memories end up being recalled as vivid, while others are obscure, and some memories can’t seem to be recalled at all. Various literature related to autobiographical memory has revealed that individuals who experience intense fear, threats, and/or adversity may experience altered memories of the traumatic event, in addition to altered recollections of non-trauma-related memories. Conway and Rubin (1993) suggest that autobiographical memory “constitutes a major crossroads in human cognition where considerations relating to the self,

emotion, goals, and personal meanings all intersect” (p. 103), and it is this behavioral and neurobiological convergence that is explored, as I alongside my co-researchers recall our memories, thoughts, feelings, and relationships related to hunger experienced as children.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions (RTI International, 2014) were used in conceptualizing the family economic standing and levels of food insecurity, as well as the resources used by families to offset the impact of food insecurity. Generally, households are characterized as being food secure or food insecure, but four levels as part of a subcategory of food insecurity exist.

- **High food security:** Households had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food.
- **Marginal food security:** Households had problems at times, or anxiety about, accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of their food intake were not substantially reduced.
- **Low food security:** Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
- **Very low food security:** At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.
- **Household food security:** Access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life; at a minimum, nutritionally adequate and safe foods are readily available and can be acquired in socially acceptable ways (i.e., without stealing, accessing emergency food supplies, or relying on other coping strategies).

- **Hunger:** Defined as the uneasy or painful sensations caused by a lack of food, and occurs when food intake is reduced below normal levels. Hunger is both a motivation to seek food and an undesirable consequence of lack of food.
- **Safety net programs:** Also called transfers, or means-tested benefit programs, the federal safety net, or social safety net, is made up of an array of entitlement programs administered by the federal and/or state governments (e.g., SNAP, WIC). The main goal of the programs is to provide aid to the poor or those vulnerable to shocks and poverty to prevent them from falling into further economic hardships.
- **Socioeconomic status (SES):** SES is an economic and sociological measure of an individual's or family's economic and social standing in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Selecting a Research Method

While my graduate program endeavored to prepare me to conduct high-impact research addressing issues and needs relevant to family and relationship health and well-being, by requiring courses that produced a deep understanding of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, when the time came, I was not exactly sure which methodology I wanted to use for my study. As such, I began reading studies and research that represented the type of contribution I wanted to make to the field. Eventually I was introduced to *The Trauma of Poverty* (Hudson, 2014), and it spoke to me in a way no other academic writing ever had. By telling her story through the lens of Goffman's frame analysis theory, Hudson illustrated how she coped with her memories of hardship, and a stigmatized identity. At one point, Hudson (2014) asserts that "Poverty is more than an income level; it is a socially constructed identity that leaves scars of psychological impoverishment" (p. 111). This observation resonated so true with me, it felt as though I had written it myself. Hudson (2014) used autoethnography to tell her story—which read as if it was also my story—consisting of unforgettable traumas like empty food cupboards, the feelings of social rejection and humiliation, homelessness, and the loneliness of growing up in poverty. The narration of her experience being a poor child, climbing out of poverty as an adult, and then falling back into poverty made me want to tell my story too. However, the autoethnography method felt isolating, and reminiscent of the separation I felt from my peers, as I tried to hide the reality and consequences of my economic circumstances. Therefore, when I learned of Moustakas' (1961) heuristic study into loneliness, I began to see the potential for a method that would recognize both the researcher's experience, in tandem with the experience of others familiar with the phenomenon. Unlike many other phenomenological

methods, heuristic inquiry endorses inquiries into socially and universally relevant topics conducted by those who have a vested interest— researchers with an autobiographical experience with the phenomenon that is felt so deeply, it arouses a central question that cannot be ignored (Sultan, 2019). Therefore, I endeavor to set aside my childhood memories of embarrassment, past feelings of disappointment and hurt, and choose to step into the gratitude and humility I feel for the current opportunity to share my story alongside others who have experienced childhood hunger, using heuristic inquiry.

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry is a facet of phenomenology that seeks to understand the researcher's experience of the phenomenon. Patton (2002) posits heuristic inquiry as a way to answer an enduring and personal question: "What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?" (p.107). In order to accurately recreate the lived experience of childhood hunger for myself and my co-researchers, I employed certain techniques in preparation for conducting a heuristic inquiry. In addition to the six phases of heuristic inquiry, multiple core concepts are fundamental when conducting the investigative process. Much like the circuitous path through the six phases of heuristic inquiry, the process itself is intersectional and non-linear. Designed to foster a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, Sultan (2020) describes the process denoting:

- (a) *identifying with the focus of inquiry*, exploring the research topic and questions using embodied perspective taking; (b) *self-dialogue*, embracing an attitude of wonder (Wertz, 2005) and engaging the topic through discourse with sensations, emotions, or thoughts; (c) *tacit knowing*, knowing without awareness of the experiences upon which the knowledge is based; (d) *intuition*, using perception and observation to sense and infer an

experience; (e) *indwelling*, directing one's gaze inward to attain holistic understanding of an experience; (f) *focusing*, pausing and clearing an inner space within to allow thoughts and feelings to emerge; and (g) *internal frame of reference*, returning repeatedly to oneself to assess perceptions, feelings, thoughts, decisions, and actions and their potential impact on the research process (p. 162).

Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry

Moustakas (1990) describes the basic research design of heuristic research as an unfolding investigation into the wholeness and essence of a phenomenon, guided by six marked phases represented as: 1) initial engagement, a receptiveness by the researcher to engage with the topic, theme, or problem associated with a phenomenon; 2) immersion, engagement and preoccupation with the topic's question; 3) incubation, a contemplative state wherein ideas can surface; 4) illumination, a receptiveness to the researcher's own tacit knowledge and intuition; 5) extensive consideration of the qualities and themes characteristic of the phenomenon; and 6) creative synthesis, a combination of individual experiences into a collective depiction of the phenomenon. The following depictions are derived directly from his work.

Initial Engagement

Moustakas (1990) asserts that "within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem, or question that represents a critical interest area of search" (p. 27). Therefore, the initial task of engagement is to surface the passion and curiosity of the researcher in relation to the topic that demands to be investigated. During this stage, the researcher encounters their true self, through self-dialogue, a review of social relationships, and ongoing evaluation of social context and meanings. A question then emerges from the researcher as they begin to focus in on the topic and open themselves up to fully enter the theme. At that point "the question lingers within the

researcher and awaits the disciplined commitment that will reveal its underlying meanings” (p. 27). During this phase, the researcher employs self-awareness and self-dialogue as a way to look inward and draw upon their intuition and tacit awareness regarding the area of interest.

Immersion

After the question is surfaced and crystalized, a process wherein the question moves to the center of the researcher’s life commences; at this point, the researcher now lives and breathes the question, day and night, even while sleeping. Nonetheless, even while sleeping, the researcher must maintain an awareness and receptiveness to the possibility of meaning around the topic to be expressed. Therefore, almost anything—family members or strangers, public settings or private meetings, nature, books, songs, etc. offer possibilities to connect with the question and better understand the phenomenon.

Incubation

The incubation process requires the researcher to detach from the intense awareness of the question. At this time, the concentration is released and the researcher is no longer gripped by the unrelenting task of interpreting how events, situations, people, and places will contribute to their eventual understanding of the phenomenon. This time serves as a transition, a way to shift into a new consciousness.

Illumination

During illumination, the researcher is receptive to their intuition and tacit knowledge, which allows for a new awareness of the qualities and themes characteristic of the question. This process is natural and cannot be forced, manifesting as a breakthrough into the researcher’s consciousness, so that any distorted understandings or hidden meanings might surface and be illuminated.

Explication

In explication refinements and corrections are made, as the researcher examines what has been revealed in their consciousness. A thorough depiction of the phenomenon is generated by coalescing the various layers of meaning discovered that ultimately represent the essence of the experience. During the explication process, the researcher applies indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure to expand their own frame of reference, and surface their beliefs, judgments, thoughts, and feelings related to their experience with the phenomenon. Moreover, it is during this time that the researcher incorporates the knowledge attained from the participants (co-researchers) to make meaning. By engaging in the process of explication, the researcher is able to yield a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the phenomenon, which is necessary in order for the researcher to put all the components together in the creative synthesis phase.

Creative Synthesis and Presentation of Data

The sixth and last phase of a heuristic inquiry is the creative synthesis, wherein the researcher accepts the challenge of uniting all the components that encompass their inquiry. Intuition is significant during this stage, as the researcher must sense when they can move through a period of solitude and meditation and begin synthesizing the data in a way that reflects the essence of the phenomenon, commonly in the form of a narrative depiction. Nonetheless, even though the heuristic process consists of a handful of phases that seem flexible and self-directed, researchers interested in employing this qualitative method should heed Moustakas' warning, as:

Heuristic research is an extremely demanding process, not only in terms of continual questioning and checking to ensure full explication of one's own experience and that of

others, but also in the challenges of thinking and creating, and in the requirements of authentic self-dialogue, self-honesty, and unwavering diligence to an understanding of both obvious and subtle elements of meaning and essence inherent in human issues, problems, questions, and concerns (p. 37).

It is in fact, not for the faint of heart, but those brave enough to answer the “tantalizing invitation to self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-transformation” (Sultan, 2019, p. 2). Bach (2002) did not mince words when illustrating the portrait of the heuristic scholar, as he affirms that the:

distinguishing quality of heuristic scholars is risk-taking. They are willing to put themselves on the proverbial line, stand for what they believe even when, and it is often the case, the position they hold goes against traditional beliefs and standardized ways of working. Heuristic scholars are self-directed. They follow a personal and solitary path of discovery (p. 100).

Once the personal path of discovery is embarked upon, the question explored and answered, the researcher is charged with presenting the data. In generating a summary, with implications, and outcomes, a thematic illustration comprised of both the individual and collective depiction of the phenomenon is offered as a creative synthesis.

Finding the Why

Because heuristic research is personal, demanding, and extensive, the researcher must enter into their journey for knowledge and understanding with a passion and a search for illumination that will generate puzzlement, intensity, intrigue, and wonder amid growing levels of meaning and excitement (Moustakas, 1990). My journey began well before graduate school, as I was compelled to find meaning in my experience of unreliable availability of adequate, nutritious food and the hunger that ensued. It was my work as a college administrator that first

shed light on the scale in which food insecurity existed around me, hidden in the faces of eager undergrads, determined non-traditional students, and modest staff members. After I was able to grasp its prevalence, my focus turned to advocacy, conceptualizing a centralized food pantry and coordinating like-minded individuals and groups to see it come to fruition—witnessing thousands of visits during my tenure with the program—to eventually seeing my calling morph from action to advocacy and intrigue. I wanted to better understand food insecurity and its impact on those around me (Britt et al., 2017), and how the experience of unreliable/inadequate food and subsequent hunger, impacted individuals in adulthood. While the idea of “crunching” secondary data and churning out various graphs and numbers related to food insecurity was an enticing concession as a full-time- employee, spouse, and parent, my passion, aspiration for self-discovery, and vexing desire to make meaning out of this human phenomenon compelled me to trust my intuition and endeavor upon this methodological odyssey. Sultan (2019) describes the urge as an experience “so deeply felt that it arouses one central question you are unable to ignore” (p. 11). As much as I tried to look for a more straightforward and uncomplicated way to share research related to hunger, I could not shake the feeling that I needed to tell this story. In true heuristic fashion, I found myself preoccupied with the reality of childhood hunger, as the global pandemic became the catalysis for me to step into heuristic process.

The Covid-19 virus was at its height, and I found myself overcome by news stories about families lining up for hours and miles, just for the opportunity to secure food from their local charitable organizations. As adults around the world were struggling to cope with the traumas directly related to the pandemic— fears of infection and death, emotional isolation as a result of shelter in place orders and social distancing guidelines, or even economic adversity or job loss, I was preoccupied with the inevitable impact on the children. As schools closed and households

began to shelter in place, millions of children lost access to the breakfasts and lunches they relied upon, especially those from food insecure homes. It was clear that “despite some creative efforts from schools — such as forming meal pick-up sites, school bus meal drop-offs, and the use of USDA waivers for free meals for students — during a 9-week period in the spring of 2020, research shows 1.15 billion school meals were missed” (Marcus, 2021).

Watching history unfold thrust me into the depths of my very own *Immersion* phase, wherein I found myself tethered to the concept of childhood hunger and my desire to understand the essence of this phenomenon. And so, I began the process of anchoring my personal experience with hunger into the analytical process of depicting this phenomenon, so that it might “reveal itself more completely than it does in ordinary experience...to uncover as many meanings as possible and their relations to one another as the phenomenon presents itself in experience” (Keen, 1975, p. 41).

Over the next few months, I found myself reflecting on the ways in which certain people, places, events, and situations contributed to my understanding of the phenomenon and my personal experience with it. A new bifurcated consciousness—holding space for my own experience, biases, and preconceptions about the phenomenon, while simultaneously knowing nothing at all, but yearning to be part of a process that might reveal a new understanding—developed as I moved through the *Incubation* and *Illumination* phases. Constantly engaging in the internal processes outlined by Moustakas (1990), moving from indwelling to tacit knowing, and trusting my intuition as I worked to build a new internal frame of reference before inviting co-researchers to walk alongside me on this journey of exploration.

Years of self-work, therapy, and healing revealed that my experiences around food, or lack thereof, in childhood had manifested in distinctive memories, thoughts, feelings, and

behaviors— both negative and positive, in adulthood. Nonetheless, it wasn't until my 30's did I realize that so many parts of my identity—myself— were grounded in the experiences associated with my childhood hunger. As I began to better understand my experience of unreliable food access and resulting hunger, I was able to draw connections between the biological, physiological, and emotional processes occurring that would later provide insight into my past memories and current behaviors. This recognition allowed me to begin crafting a question that was representative of the impact I want to contribute to the field of applied sciences.

Heuristic Research Question

A heuristic research question does not simply function as a way to collect evidence and produce findings designed to systematically answer a question based in preformed suppositions and predictions. Instead, it must function to serve the research, as well as the researcher. Letting my intuition guide me, I opened myself up to a process wherein both my head and my heart were receptive to an “awakening of such a question [that] comes through an inward clearing, and an intentional readiness and determination to discover a fundamental truth regarding the meaning and essence of one's own experience and that of others” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 40). According to Moustakas (1990) the heuristic research question has the following characteristics:

1. It seeks to reveal more fully the essence or meaning of a phenomenon of human experience.
2. It seeks to discover the qualitative aspects, rather than quantitative dimensions, of the phenomenon.
3. It engages one's total self and evokes a personal and passionate involvement and active participation in the process.
4. It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships.

5. It is illuminated through careful descriptions, illustrations, metaphors, poetry, dialogue, and other creative renderings rather than by measurements, ratings or scores (p. 42).

The question that settled with me centered in understanding “How do adults perceive and describe the experience of childhood hunger?” Once I was able to find my question, I moved into the next of six phases in the heuristic inquiry process (Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Sultan, 2019), Initial engagement; Immersion into the topic and question; Incubation; Illumination; Explication; and culmination of the research into Creative Synthesis.

Study Design

Moving into the stage, known as *Immersion*, compelled me to turn inwardly and develop an acute awareness of my own thoughts, feelings, reservations, and understanding of childhood hunger. Though operating as the primary researcher, the heuristic process required me to move from the expert role, to that of a learner, bringing more curiosity, imagination, and vulnerability than expertise to the process (Sultan, 2019). Though especially germane in qualitative research, the aspect of vulnerability is inherent to research, as The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (BR) (1978) uses it to describe the categories of research participants that must receive special consideration. Though not necessarily part of a vulnerable population, I recognized that many individuals that may have the ability to speak to an experience of childhood hunger could feel apprehensive about participating in the study.

For many food-insecure individuals and families, there is a level of shame and embarrassment associated with the experience. As such, those who have experienced this challenge become part of a “hard-to-reach” population. Individuals in this research population

have underexplored experiences, not appropriately represented in the literature. As such, I made the decision to keep my inclusion criteria broad, focusing on the essence of the experience rather than their personal demographics. Moustakas (1990) speaks to various data that may be used and collected in the selection of participants (co-researchers) “—for example, age, sex, socioeconomic and education factors, ability to articulate the experience, cooperation, interest, willingness to make the commitment, enthusiasm, and degree of involvement” (p. 46). Therefore, the inclusion criteria were based off of the latter classifications in the aforementioned lists, focusing on participant’s interest and ability to articulate their experience, and willingness to share their story, rather than ancillary demographics such as age, sex, and family structure. By obtaining approval through the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I was able to demonstrate adherence to the ethical values and principles guiding research with humans in preparation for this study and began recruiting individuals within the hard to reach population that I belonged to. After receiving IRB approval (IRB-10673), I was able to begin the participant recruitment and selection process.

Data Collection

Given the sensitive and oftentimes taboo nature of the topic, sampling procedures were intentional and measured, resulting in a purposive snowball recruitment. Individuals were engaged via various social media platforms, listservs, community programs, (including anti-poverty programs, city housing and social services contact lists), and direct inquiry to more than a dozen food pantries within a 60-mile radius.

Criteria for participants (co-researchers) were as follows:

1. Individuals had to be 18-years-old or over; and
2. Able to read and speak English; and

3. Have experienced chronic hunger defined as prolonged (more than 1 month), involuntary lack of food that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation of hunger; occurring potentially as a result of food insecurity or diminished/unreliable household availability of adequate, nutritious food, but never as the result of punishment or torture.

Although seven individuals were identified, five ultimately met the criteria and agreed to participate. As saturation is dependent on the methodological approach, this total was in line with Moustakas' (1990) assessment of participation. While it is possible to conduct a heuristic inquiry with just one participant, "a study will achieve richer, deeper, more profound, and more varied meanings when it includes depictions of the experience of others—perhaps as many as 10 to 15 co-researchers" (p. 47).

Attrition

Two prospective co-researchers decided ultimately not to participate. After communicating with them regarding the criteria, process, and goal of the study, they both discontinued communicating when it came time to schedule their interviews. Neither gave a reason as to why, but both suddenly stopped communicating either by email or phone when asked to schedule a time for an interview. Two follow up communications were sent respectively, but went unanswered. There is no way to know why either individual decided to stop communicating and ultimately chose not to participate. However, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the risk that exists for individuals that met the criteria for this study. Though commonplace, childhood hunger is often veiled and unacknowledged.

Though I was disappointed these individuals decided not to participate, I do understand. I hope that I and the co-researchers that chose to participate, will construct a depiction of

childhood hunger, so accurate in its very essence that it can properly represent the lived experience of all those unable or unwilling to share their stories.

Safeguards

Once each interview was scheduled, every co-researcher received an informed consent form via the Qualtrics survey platform that explained their rights, purpose of the study, and additional details regarding the risks and benefits of participating in the study. Prior to the start of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent and confirmed that a signature was obtained, and reminded the co-researcher of their right to withdraw their consent and discontinue participation at any time. Privacy mechanisms such as password-protected virtual rooms with end-to-end encryption were utilized to protect the privacy of participants. Because virtual platforms do not lend themselves to intimate conversation, I was especially cognizant of body language and eye contact cues that would normally inform the conversation as part of the interview and asked participants to have their cameras on if they were willing and able to, and had an internet connection strong enough to support both video and audio simultaneously. Research questions were generated in such a way that both I as the researcher, and the participants as co-researchers, could embrace an attitude of “open-ended presence to the phenomenon that is unfolding” (Giorgi, 1976, p. 313).

Dialogue

In heuristic research, three conversational dialogue interview methods exist: informal conversation, general interviews, and standardized open-ended interviews. All of which, are designed to be mechanisms for cooperative sharing that generates self-disclosure, empathy, and a sense of “togetherness” as it relates to the shared phenomenological experience.

Therefore, questions in this study were formatted as standardized, open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Interviews proceeded following an initial disclosure by me, the primary researcher regarding my own experience with chronic childhood hunger. Moustakas (1990) highlights both Jourard's (1968) and Buber's (1965) work emphasizing the importance of self-disclosure, as "self-disclosure elicits disclosure" in the process of "cooperative sharing in which co-researchers and primary researchers open pathways to each other for explicating the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 9). While in-person interviews are preferable in the heuristic method, out of an abundance of caution in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted through a virtual video-conferencing platform. Extra attention to rapport building was paid throughout the interview process.

Moustakas (1990) summarizes Jourard's position on the significance of self-disclosure during the heuristic process:

there may be moments in the interview process when the primary investigator shares an experience that will inspire and evoke richer, fuller, more comprehensive depictions from the co-researcher. Dialogue involves cooperative sharing in which co-researchers and primary researchers open pathways to each other for explicating the phenomenon being investigated. This means receiving the other as a partner, accepting and affirming the other person. The persons in the heuristic interview must be willing to say freely what they think and feel relevant to the research question, and what emerges in their awareness when the phenomenon becomes the focus of their attention and concentration. Although general questions may be formulated in advance, genuine dialogue cannot be planned (p. 47).

This point of view was internalized as the standard-open ended questions were the basis and guide for what would ultimately evolve into a conversation during each interview; me the

primary researcher demonstrating vulnerability by sharing parts of “my story” only to have that reciprocated by the co-researcher telling parts of theirs.

In line with heuristic investigations, interviews were not guided by time, as some interviews lasted for an hour while others ran close to 3 hours—only to conclude when the co-researcher has had the opportunity to fully share their story to the point of a “natural” ending. Once we reached a point of natural ending, I offered to initiate a breathing exercise, reviewed the debriefing statement with each co-researcher, and followed up by providing the statement again via email as well. Following each interview, the recording was saved and transcribed.

Organizing and Synthesizing the Data

Once the interviews were complete, I worked to organize and analyze each co-researcher’s raw data. This stage in the *Explication* phase proved to be lengthy, as I was compelled to immerse myself into and then withdraw from the process multiple times as I sought to embody the lived experience of chronic childhood hunger. There is no standardized attainment at this stage in the heuristic process to signify the transition to the next stage. Rather, Moustakas (1990) characterizes the experience as this:

The researcher intuitively and reflectively sees in all the depictions the qualities or characteristic meanings that make the experience what it is and not something else—what enables one to know anger as anger, tranquility as tranquility, fear as fear, and courage as courage. The creative synthesis is the peak moment when the researcher recognizes the universal nature of what something is and means, and at the same time grows in self-understanding and as a self (p. 26).

Eventually I was able to construct a discernable depiction of chronic childhood hunger that captured the collective experience for my co-researchers and me. After each interview I felt more

assured that this was the way I could honor my experience while moving the field of understanding forward. As I reviewed the information surfaced by myself and my co-researchers and looked for themes, I made any necessary corrections to my work before the process of refinement. Though a vital phase of study, this stage differs from many quantitative and even some qualitative methods because it does not have a definite conclusion presented in conventional research methods. Self-as-subject methods such as heuristic inquiry are “quite different from the results sections or chapters of reports of more traditional qualitative doctoral research studies where themes may be serially reported in tubular format and characterized by direct quote excerpts” (Throne, 2019, p. 15). Instead, I utilized intuition to guide my search for knowledge as I developed a higher sense of perception and understanding of childhood hunger. It is during this period the views, explanations, and themes of the phenomena began to coalesce and the puzzle pieces began to form a picture, so that I might form new insights and knowledge about this lived experience. Throne (2019) emphasizes that because “self-as-subject research challenges the traditional assumptions held within doctoral education for new knowledge” (p. 17), it is distinctively valuable; as it disentangles “textual data [via narrative and the individual lived experience] that may not be readily apparent without deep and iterative introspection” (p. 15). After I had the chance to illuminate and explicate, I entered into the final stage of the heuristic inquiry. Finally, the creative synthesis process designed to formally characterize the phenomenon in a way that is authentic to myself and the co-researcher will be presented and published.

Caring for Self

Because the work of heuristic inquiry can be taxing, efforts to care for self through the process are important. As a licensed therapist, I was very cognizant of the similarities between

the heuristic methodology framework, and that of the therapeutic process, so I was careful to not let the research process evolve into a therapy session. As I developed my questions, and even as I engaged in dialogue, my awareness of the pain associated with recalling trauma was front of mind. I endeavored to consistently frame my desire to hear and learn more as a way to facilitate collective understanding rather than as a therapist conducting therapy. Nonetheless, I was always acutely aware of how realizations as a result of the heuristic process could impact the co-researchers. O'Hara (1986) contends that a moment of healing is "a natural consequence" (p. 177) of the progressive search for truth that is heuristic inquiry, but I recognized that not everyone has healed from their trauma, nor would they be in a place to heal simply due to one heuristic dialogue. As such, I attempted to employ a relaxation/mindfulness activity as a way to "facilitate a sense of comfort, relaxation, and at-homeness" for co-researchers (Moustakas, 1990, p. 46), and asked the co-researcher if they would like to engage in a breathing exercise at the end of their interview. As a licensed therapist, I have worked to familiarize myself with research that supports the benefits of mindfulness activities. Studies have shown that engaging in focused breathing and mindfulness can help individuals tolerate uncomfortable emotions and sensations (Eifert & Heffner, 2003; Levitt et al., 2004) and increase emotional acceptance (Hayes et al., 1999; Linehan, 1993; Segal et al., 2002) as cited in the work of Arch and Craske (2006).

Whether they did the breathing exercise or not, co-researchers were asked what feelings they were experiencing and whether they felt emotionally ready and comfortable to end the interview. Working with the co-researchers to make sense of the complex trauma that has impacted our bodies and minds, as we explored our perceptions, memories, and behaviors related to food trauma was a journey that can only be described as insightful and affirming—at least it was that way for me.

Data Analysis

In heuristic inquiry, data analysis is generated as a result of individual depictions of an experience, coalesced into a collective representation, capturing the themes, patterns, and essence of the phenomenon. The five individuals who participated in this inquiry offered vivid, meaningful, illustrative accounts of their experiences with childhood hunger. In an effort to create an accurate composite description, I employed a data analysis process similar to Carter (2002). First, I immersed myself into each individual dialogue over and over—reading and re-reading, listening to each respective interview repeatedly. I also reviewed my own personal notes taken during the interviews and as part of my internal self-dialogue process, as well as material gathered as part of the literature review. Once I had an understanding of each narrative's essence, I stripped my words from the conversation, thereby creating a transcript containing only the narrative of my co-researcher.

A qualitative analysis software was used to query the 200 most used words across all five interviews and made note of them. From there I re-read each co-researcher's account of their experience and began highlighting words, passages, and descriptions most relevant to the research question. The word query function served as a way to verify how often and in what context certain words and themes were being used. While other phenomenological studies might encourage researchers to rely upon data analysis tools to validate context and coding interpretations, heuristic inquiry encourages the researcher to use their tacit knowledge in order to build a sense of the wholeness of the phenomenon. In doing so, the process fosters the researcher's intuition so that it may be developed as the primary analytic instrument for interpretation—just as precise as an external machine—making it something to be cherished and utilized to understand and find deeper meaning and the true essence of a theme. From there, I

was able to create a principal document that contained the merged parts of each respective interview into one comprehensive document. In doing so, I created a dynamic story flow of the accounts, denoting the differences and similarities, and patterns throughout the accounts. Thereby, creating a singular creative synthesis that highlights the meanings, qualities, and themes inherent to each individual's experience. Divesting from the individual perspective and moving toward the collective, was a crucial shift as I began to focus on building a collective frame of reference. As Moustakas (1990) observes, that for every question that resonates personally, there is a social and perhaps universal significance ascribed as well.

Chapter 4 - Results

Over the course of the five interviews, the co-researchers provided meaningful, illustrative accounts of their experience with childhood hunger and their understanding of ways in which this adversity has impacted their lives. Three core themes surfaced alongside two observations of “the experience of childhood hunger.” These themes consisted of: Scarcity, (Un)Fairness, and Gratitude. Specific quotations from individual experiences are used to illustrate the nature and essence of the collective narrative of the phenomenon. Additionally, extended passages from the co-researcher’s interviews that surfaced as commonalities were constructed into a narrative portrait (see Appendix B). This was done by selectively arranging direct quotations into a comprehensive depiction of the collective narrative; nothing outside of the precise spoken word was captured in this depiction; therefore, transitional words were not included and verb tense modification did not occur. According to Moustakas (1990)

the composite depiction (a group depiction reflecting the experience of individual participants) includes exemplary narratives, descriptive accounts, conversations, illustrations, and verbatim excerpts that accentuate the flow, spirit, and life inherent in the experience. It should be vivid, accurate, alive, and clear, and encompass the core qualities and themes inherent to the experience” (p. 52).

Themes

In order to fully conceptualize each theme, I first worked to concretize the thematic construct. By combining various interpretations, including formal definitions and informal objective qualities of the term, I was able to assemble a broad thematic construct. Thereby creating a personal depiction of my understanding of the concept as a way to ground myself in a definitive meaning that could be used in juxtaposition with the collective expression of the

theme. My individual characterization of the theme precedes each respective interpretation of the theme surfaced from the data.

Scarcity

Scarcity is the condition of being lacking or insufficient in quantity or provisions compared with the demand or need. A recognized and/or determined state of supply must exists for there to be a perceived shortage in supply or resources.

Scarcity as a concept emerged clearer than any other theme from the individual depictions. In analyzing the data, I conceptualized this theme in two ways: 1) scarcity as a reality, and 2) the threat of scarcity. The first kind of scarcity being related to the existence of food, as every participant conceded that there were periods of diminished or unreliable household availability of adequate, nutritious food. Thereby, acknowledging at least one instance of very low food security wherein eating patterns were disrupted or food intake was reduced for some or all members of the household because of a lack of money and other resources. This type of scarcity is in line with the defined levels of household food insecurity.

When interpreting the context in which the co-researchers described the “scarcity” theme I heard them speak to a level of anxiety and/or fear. As they shared their unique experiences, there was a sense that this underlying instability or uncertainty about the availability of food had become internalized, and seemed to surface emotionally. In the same way a rumble in the stomach can denote a hunger pain, the colloquial butterflies associated with nervousness and anxiety were making their presence known in the (empty) stomach as well.

- *“It's sort of the under level, where it feels insecure, like the ground is always shaking and you're not really sure where to grab a hold of. That's what it feels like, to me. You're really nervous. Even if you're full, you're nervous. You're nervous all the time.”*

- *“It can be paralyzing, that sense of fear or that sense of anxiety about being uncertain about how things will work out, because you've seen not work out for people.”*
- *“I think again it's famine thinking. You always kind of feel like you're just insecure, will this last. You just always feel like you should take things while they're in front of you, versus having reassurance.”*

The sense of uncertainty due to scarcity described by the co-researchers resonated with me and compelled me to reconcile the countless childhood memories I can recall from when it was unclear whether or not my basic needs would be met. In addition to the food insecurity, living in the uncertainty of how rent would be paid, whether the water would be on for bath time, and if my clothing would last through the next season induced a near-constant state of anxiety during childhood, that then manifested as a need for control, autonomy, and independence into adulthood. This uncertainty and awareness of impending scarcity seemed to be reinforced through the pervasive “threat” of scarceness that was also surfaced.

The second type of scarcity related to the individual was an emotional experience of scarcity—the fear related to the threat of scarcity. This type of awareness of scarcity differs from the characterization of the “scarcity mindset,” as it did not consistently manifest as a preoccupation with food, but rather a nervousness or anxiety related to the perception of “enough.”

- *“It goes back to the shame. It goes back to the embarrassment, but it also just goes back to that feeling of just scarcity, and so I'll put off an electric bill and make sure that I have enough to eat. The only thing that I don't do is... rent and food are the*

two things I don't chance... I don't chance. So, I've really seen that show up in adulthood. It's the scarceness of things that sort of sits with me."

Interestingly, heightened anxiety corresponding to the “scarcity” theme during childhood, opposed to adulthood, was not consistent across all of the accounts, as a few co-researchers noted their parent’s ability, or at the very least desire, to “protect” or “shield” them from an awareness of their household’s diminished or unreliable ability to attain adequate food. Just as the co-researchers were navigating the awareness of scarcity, the members within their families were charged with doing the same.

- *“I think about how our scarcity was hid to the public, and because of our mother's mentality, we never connected the dots.”*
- *“My mother tried to really protect us from this, but with her, like so many families, scarcity is the word that I would use. It's the threat of scarcity.”*

Nonetheless, while family rules influenced the awareness and meaning made from scarcity within the family system, each co-researcher was still experiencing the scarcity within their ecological environment and social spheres; these children didn’t exist in a vacuum solely within the confines of their home, but in their extended familial relationships, with their peers, and in their social environments at school, church, and on sports teams.

This notion of enough seemed to evolve from eating *enough*, to having *enough*, to being *enough*. It was as if the feeling of not eating enough/having enough food, influenced the individual’s own perception of being “enough” in the ways in which they showed up in the world. Which is why the second aspect of the theme related to the emotional experience of scarcity and nervousness or anxiety related to the perception of “enough” made so much sense to me. As if there was also an internalization of the feeling of being “enough” in relation to being

perceived as an “outsider,” “other,” or “different” because of experiences like: standing in line waiting for their free lunch, or similarly being denied food because of inadequate funds to pay for school lunch, using food stamps in public, or the experience of receiving charity.

- *“It's an experience of like, what's all involved with food insecurity and just the insecurity of not having enough. That sometimes can also connect with who belongs where. It's an organizing principle in society about who belongs. And I call it invisible tracks. It puts people on like invisible tracks.”*
- *“And that doesn't escape the realities that you're careful about when you share that so that it doesn't get weaponized. Because there still is a level of... I still deal with as an adult, a sense of imposter syndrome.”*
- *“That whole idea that getting looked down upon, I felt it. Because I know it, I know the embarrassment, what it is. That's what I remember. That's the thing I remember more than being hungry.”*

There were 12 references to scarcity as it related to “enough.” And it was only after I sat with this idea of “enough” for a few weeks, did I make the connection between body signals, self-talk, and behaviors. If your body is constantly telling you, “You don’t have enough food,” a type of shorthand could develop, indicating “you don’t have enough.” This type of self-talk over years and years could develop not only into hoarding behaviors around food, but also low self-esteem and self-confidence, as it becomes indistinguishable from the amount of food in your stomach compared to your individual capabilities and strengths. Knowing that I and so many others in my life have dealt with “imposter syndrome,” or the feeling of not belonging in a certain group or context, the nagging question menaced in my head for weeks — if you don’t feel like you ever *have* enough, can you really ever get to a place where you feel as though *you* have enough?

(Un)Fairness

Fairness endures in a reality free of partiality and injustice, while unfairness benefits or promotes an individual or group over another, resulting in inequality, injustice, or advancement of those with an equal claim.

Fairness or the lack thereof, surfaced as an underlying theme. I interpreted this theme not as an idealist's declaration for boundless justice and equity, but rather as a concession that hunger should not be a lived experience for a child in this day and age. More so, as an understanding that while life isn't fair, the experience of childhood hunger just "isn't right," no matter who you are or where you come from.

- *"Yeah, probably just the idea of life isn't fair. And to have a society act as though ... a larger dominant society act as though life is fair or that everything you get in life is deserved whether it be good or bad, which is a lie, and the lack of compassion."*

Correspondingly, a tinge of sadness seemed to accompany this theme, as I listened to the tone and inflection change for my co-researchers as their registers lowered and their speed slowed. As they respectively shared experiences of going to friend's homes only to be dumfounded by the idea of a snack with the sole purpose of abating hunger until dinner, or realizing that their peers were not responsible for securing their own dinners on weekends, or the embarrassment or shame around having friends or family over without the appropriate amount of food necessary to sustain the group. In sitting with this theme, I was reminded of the naiveté associated with childhood, and the loss of innocence so many who experience hunger endure. Prematurely taking on the responsibility of worrying about or providing food for themselves or others, a task no child should be responsible for before their time. I perceived a sense of anger or

irritation from the co-researchers when speaking to the context related to the theme of “(un)fairness.” Some communicated it as a general anger, more so at the situation and the fact that it happened as a general reality of the phenomenon.

- *“Yeah, I knew it and it pissed me off that they knew that I was this poor. That aggravated me and that's fueled me. I mean like in my entire life, like seriously. So that's what fuels me, is that sort of stuff”*

However, others revealed an assigned level of anger, directed at their parent(s) in particular, as they were the one's responsible for the care and well-being of the co-researcher and had failed to meet the perceived necessary standard as it related to the provision of food.

- *“And that to me is like the big injustice of it. It's like, ‘How could you do that? How could you make the choice?’”*
- *“So, it's mostly just shame and then a probably a decent amount of anger too. In terms of being like why am I the one that has to deal with this. This is not my job. This isn't my responsibility.”*

This type of targeted anger is an emotion that I have struggled with for many years throughout my own healing journey. I did feel anger towards my mother for some of the choices she made financially, but ultimately my anger was more grounded in sadness and hurt than fury or rage. I was sad that the trajectory of poverty my family endured was a result of the various traumatic experiences my mother suffered throughout her own life; leaving her simultaneously susceptible to, and sometimes the perpetrator of the violence and abuse that contributed to the dysfunction within our household. Likewise, my hurt stemmed from my mother's inability to validate how the experience of hunger continued to negatively impact my siblings and me well into adulthood.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a disposition with regard to a positive feeling of appreciation of thankfulness, generally felt toward a person, experience, or act of kindness. Unlike future-oriented feelings based in expectation, such as hope, gratitude is a current emotion often grounded in the past.

Gratitude emerged as an unexpected theme in the analysis of data. Though something I myself would also attach to my experience of childhood hunger, it was surprising to see it surface in almost every account.

- *“There's a part of gratefulness that you've got to have and I think I was stuck in that grateful mode. That's it, that's how I got through it because I had to be stuck in that grateful part, being grateful for what you're eating. I would be grateful because what I had known, not asking about the half-eaten food or where this came from or all that type of stuff because you're lucky you just got it.”*
- *“Mostly gratitude. That I don't have to deal with this anymore. That I have autonomy to myself and my body and people can't tell me what I can and cannot eat. But again, gratitude for people who are out there doing that work and they see the value in it.”*

Co-researchers often attributed their present self, or resilience, in part or due to their experiences growing up. Acknowledging that the adversity of childhood hunger had influenced them in such a way that they would not behave in the same way, think the same thoughts, or see the world with the same perspective without this experience.

Additionally, the individuals that reported having children also made note that they would never want their children to experience childhood hunger, but endeavor to instill a level of

resilience in their children that was developed in them as a result of this adverse childhood experience.

- *“Gratitude actually is one of them. I think about my kids a lot when I do this and I think it shaped me and I worry about how I’m shaping them. I mean, they live a very privileged life that how do you... I am why I am because of my experiences. But my kids have never wanted for anything in their entire life and they never will. So I think about that...”*
- *“I don’t want my son... Don’t get me wrong, he’ll never go without. But it’s that question I ask myself all the time, ‘How can I make sure he’s grateful?’ So, if he’s sitting around kids that are grateful, then he’s sitting around and he’s eating the peas, breaking bread with the brethren, they know... Because I guarantee you with his mom, he’s never going to have to think twice about wanting or asking for nothing. I want them to eat with those kids, so they’d be well-rounded. Those kids have got a little oomph to them because I truly feel that that’s made me a better person overall, on the back-end of it.”*

This sense of gratitude was more often than not expressed toward the end of the interview when participants had the opportunity to reflect on their emotions and what they would like people (those that have not experienced childhood hunger) to know about the experience.

- *“I’m not embarrassed by it. I think it’s shaped, it played a big role in the way that I think about life and act. And I think I’m much more generous now because of it. I think that generosity is just about, obviously I’ve dedicated my career to that, to helping people help others. And I think that makes sense to me that, that’s it.”*

Observations

Learning and Memories

An associative learning process was described in varying degrees by each of the co-researchers. According to Thorwart and Livesey (2016), associative learning offers “one account of the way animals and humans assess the relationship between events and adapt their behavior

according to resulting expectations” (para. 1). Whether demonstrated through an unspoken directive, an implicit understanding, or explicit reprimand, each individual recalled an instance when their understanding of the situation was informed by the rules by which their family operated.

- *“You learn that. If your mom is sitting there, telling you about all the things that my dad doesn't do, and all the things that she does, and all the money that they don't have, and all the things that she's stressed about, the electric bill, all the stuff, you just learn not to ask for things. No one told me, ‘You can't have stuff.’ You know, stuff like that.”*
- *“So things like going to the grocery store turned into a really big deal. You planned your meals on Saturday. I still know the routines to this day. You plan your grocery lists accordingly. If there's sales, you learn how to morph one thing into another thing into another thing. You start learning how to stretch.”*
- *“It's like all of a sudden you pick up on something. Even though no one's explicitly taught you something, you've learned something anyway. It's just the same thing, where it's like I didn't know that I shouldn't appear that hungry, as hungry as I was, to other people.”*

Additionally, the co-researchers were asked to recall memories relevant to their experience as they engaged in the dialogue about childhood hunger. When asked about the distinctness of the memories (clear, vivid, obscure, etc.) every participant reported having at least one clear and/or vivid memory related to food insecurity or diminished/unreliable availability of adequate food. Three co-researchers suggested a feeling as though the experience had occurred recently, as it was so clear in their memory— one even indicating that they could smell and taste the context related to the memory. Myself and two of the co-researchers remarked on the inability to recall large portions of childhood, as if the memories had been erased or blurred from our memory.

- *“I sometimes think my memory was a way to protect myself, that I just don't remember lots of things.”*
- *“So, I mean, that's the thing about trauma, when you have those experiences of trauma, they stay ... those memories can be very vivid and they stay with you. And so it's not something that's a conscientious ... they play in ... I call trauma the back roads. They play in the back roads of the mind.”*
- *“I don't think vivid and clear even gives it its justice. I see it right in front of me right now today.”*

What People Should Know

The last question in each interview was dedicated to providing space for the co-researchers to share their thoughts on what “people” as in the general public, should know about food insecurity and the experience of hunger. While the answers varied, a consistent subtheme related to understanding and empathy arose. The co-researchers endeavored to convey that childhood hunger is pervasive and has lasting effects. Additionally, there was a universal sentiment that you can never really know what another person’s experience in this world is like, therefore, you must seek understanding and care for others so no child has to endure this pervasive, yet preventable reality.

- *“I just think what I want people to know is fucking advocate for better and build better. Our world does not have to be this way. No little kid should be hungry or be stressed their whole freaking life about eating.”*
- *“I guess the last thing I would say about those people is just the idea of until you have been caught in the system where you are dependent on the system, always ask questions, never make statements. Because until you've been dependent on something, and not by your own choice but because of your circumstances, never say never, never say it can't happen to you. Always ask questions.”*

- *“I guess what I would want to know or let people know is it's probably more common than they think. It has long term consequences. It has long term effects; I don't think consequences is the right word. It has long term effects on people.”*
- *“And it is each of our responsibilities in our communities to be a part of the solution. I think the other part is, too, for them to know like it's going to upset you, what you see. Part of the reason why this continues is because people don't want to see people suffering, and it's painful to see people suffering. It's painful to hear the stories that are behind people that are homeless. You would be surprised of the people who are not homeless that are struggling, and they're in white-collar jobs, and they have houses and mortgages, and they look like they got their stuff... They don't have their stuff together at all.”*
- *“And it is a lot more preventable than people would like to think it is, which I know you know that already. But not a lot of people do.”*
- *“I really believe there is no such thing as you not being a part of it. You are either a part of perpetuating it, or you're a part of correcting it. “*

Nonetheless, even though I am pleased that I, along with my co-researchers found a way to move through our traumas and find gratitude, I recognize that this is not the case for all those with similar experiences. There is an unreasonable and sometimes harmful attribution often made when characterizing the impact of trauma; wherein trauma can somehow make you stronger. While that may be the case for some, and could very well be the reason a person becomes who they are — I want to be clear — children do not need to be made ‘stronger’ by way of diminished or unreliable availability of adequate, nutritious food. Instead, they need to feel safe, cared for, and supported in nurturing relationships so that they might be permitted to grow and learn in order to realize their full potential.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Building Blocks to Self-Actualization

When I took a step back to reevaluate the themes surfaced from the data, my intuition summoned a pyramidal building block illustration comparable to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In the same way the higher-level needs are nestled within the lower-level needs, the experience of scarcity and unfairness engendered ultimate feelings of gratitude and awareness for co-researchers. In positioning the framework parallel to the themes of the lived experience (Figure 4.1) the narrative depictions suggests that the development of gratitude arose correspondingly to Maslow's hierarchy of personal evolution, culminating in self-actualization. Maslow depicted reaching one's potential through self-actualization as being devoted to a cause beyond oneself in an effort to pivot from self-centeredness to a level of kinship with the human race that is grounded in well-being and gratitude for life. As such, even as the co-researchers endured scarcity and sustained anxiety, fear, and anger, they were able to move through these sentiments of injustice and find gratitude in their experience.

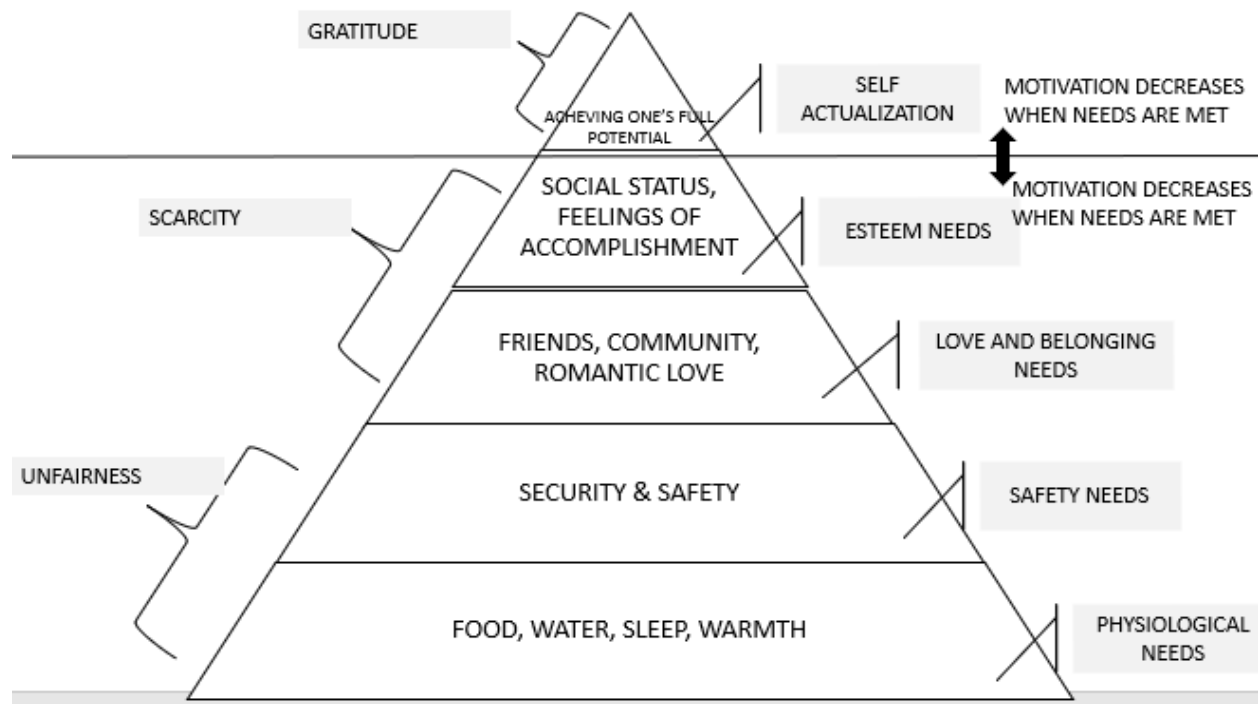


Figure 4.1 Hierarchy of needs in relation to developmental process of childhood hunger, Adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (© Sarah F. Barrett 2021)

In contemplating this visualization, I was compelled to once again occupy a space of illumination. My new awareness of the experience of childhood hunger, fostered by the creation of the collective narrative, compelled me to descend deeper into understanding, not only of the essence of childhood hunger, but into the individuals who experience this phenomenon.

For most of my life I hid my experience of hunger. Only after I committed to doing the work to heal my trauma, was I able to acknowledge and move through the contempt I held for both the societal structures that propagate childhood hunger and my mother's inability to protect me from it and embrace my experience. I internalized a metaphoric "badge of resilience" as an indicator that I not only survived my trauma, but had broken the generational cycle of poverty and scarcity, and learned to thrive. I was resilient. I was strong. I had grit. Unfortunately, as I

worked through the heuristic inquiry process, it became more and more clear to me that none of these characterizations of strength seemed to accurately describe the developmental process I saw unfold before me; wherein individuals who experienced childhood hunger were able to move from instability to appreciation—essentially from trauma to gratitude. Instead, I found the characterization of ‘psychological hardiness’ (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984, Maddi, 2002) to be more aligned with the courageous growth and self-reflection I saw demonstrated by my co-researchers and me.

Conceptualized as three interrelated personality traits (3Cs), psychological hardiness provides space for an individual to respond to adversity in relation to their own levels of “*commitment*, tendency to regard life as interesting and meaningful; *control*, belief that one can influence outcomes by taking action; and *challenge*, an adventurous, exploring approach to living” (Bartone et al., 2016, p. 745). Maddi (2006) discusses the foundation of hardiness in existential psychology, describing how:

the person is continuously making decisions (whether or not they are recognized as such) as to dealing with stresses by moving toward the future (facing the circumstance and learning from the experience) or shrinking toward the past (denying and avoiding so as to preserve the status quo). In order to grow and develop, one must choose the future, even though this is anxiety provoking, as the outcome is uncertain. Facing this anxiety, and growing in that process, requires courage (p. 162).

Though I am mindful that this sense of ‘psychological hardiness’ does not apply across the phenomenological spectrum of hunger, through this heuristic inquiry I was able to surface a new understanding of the essence of childhood hunger for adults. Our ability not only to face our circumstances, but to commit to learning, sharing, and understanding, as we all look towards

tomorrow— a better day for ourselves and the children to come — reaffirms that we are choosing our futures. We choose a future that is informed by the growth and learning from our experience. A future that requires courage, and hope, and has manifested in a deep gratitude, not for the experience itself, but appreciation of the growth through this phenomenon, not because of it, but in spite of it.

The Validation of Heuristic Research

As I reflect on this process to answer the question of “How do adults perceive and describe the experience of childhood hunger?” I find myself filled with sadness, gratitude, a little bit of hope, and a lot of humility. In working through the *Illumination* and *Explication* phases, I could clearly recognize how each co-researcher’s personal experience was exceptional, but more so I was able to appreciate how very similar each recollection was to another. It was heartbreakingly clear that while I was not alone in this experience of childhood hunger, I was unique in my willingness to share so openly — in the form of a published work no less. Which is why I find myself eternally grateful that my co-researchers would trust me enough with their stories so I might generate a collective narrative on our behalf, but also humbled by the power of this process. As Moustakas (1990) avows, “the power of heuristics is in its recognition of the significance of self-searching and the value of personal knowledge as essential requirements for the understanding of common human experiences” (p. 90). The human experience of hunger in and of itself, is a necessary and natural bodily response. Unfortunately, when the experience becomes severe, chronic, or prolonged, a form of complex trauma develops within the mind and body, one that deserves its place in the literature and knowledge base within the field of research.

The events associated with transitions from birth, through childhood and adolescence, on into adulthood and ultimately death, almost certainly guarantee opportunities for stressful

circumstances to arise. And while some stressors may be classified as adversity, adversity in and of itself does not have to be a negative experience nor does it have to engender poor outcomes. In fact, most individuals are able to recover from challenges posed from normative transitions over the life cycle, thereby building resiliency. Likewise, individuals can even recover from potentially traumatic instances of abuse, violence, and extreme poverty when they have access to protective factors. Stable, nurturing relationships, positive peer friendships, and living in a community where residents feel connected to each other and have access to economic and financial help, can all increase the likelihood an individual will have an adaptive response to an adverse experience, thereby creating a buffer against potential long-term effects of the stressor (Child Trends, 2019; CDC, 2021). However, not all adversities wield the same impact nor do they require the same response. Extensive ACE research indicates that adversity experienced during childhood is associated with various physical and mental health problems in adulthood, including depression (Chapman et al., 2004; Edwards et al., 2003), suicide (Dube et al., 2001), obesity (Williamson et al., 2002), as well as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and overall poor health (Felitti et al., 1998). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the difference between adverse circumstances and the intense, repetitive and/or severe exposures to adversity that result in trauma.

With the exception of a subset of the population that favors a life of very limited financial demands and resources, poverty is generally a negative and adverse experience. However, it is important to recognize that poverty, while a negative experience, does not equate to trauma. Even though, emerging research demonstrates significant disparities in adversity level by income, establishing that “youth living in poverty are nearly six times more likely than their higher-income peers to experience multiple [severe] adversities” (Porche et al., 2017, p. 12), it is

important to distinguish this detail in summarizing the focus of this study. So, while the experience of poverty is rife with adversity, the experience of poverty does not have to result in trauma. Instead, I posit that it is the subsequent hunger, often the result of food insecurity due to poverty, that should be recognized as a complex trauma. An internally-focused trauma, occurring within one's own body, as the result of an external circumstance. It is this pervasive and persistent trauma, known as childhood hunger, that must be considered as a distinct adverse childhood experience, and not just consolidated into a group of adversities within the CDC ACEs-10 questionnaire. The cumulative sum, commonly referred to as an ACE score, does not accurately capture the complex and stressful circumstances that are imposed on children experiencing prolonged, involuntary lack of food that goes beyond the uncomfortable, though normative, sensation of hunger.

The methodological approach employed by this study furthers the understanding of complexities of food insecurity and hunger, and the complex trauma related to it when experienced during childhood. The search to understand who I am and the world in which I live simultaneously fostered insight not only into myself, but highlighted why I felt so challenged by the method of combining multiple complex adversities into the overly broad ACE category of “physical neglect.” Adversity, specifically in the form of complex trauma poses a significant risk of negative health and well-being outcomes over the life course.

Various studies underscore the necessity and impact of early, trauma-informed, intervention, when seeking to reduce the prevalence of ACEs. In fact, the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has an entire area devoted to ACE awareness, risk and protective factors, and even prevention strategies in an effort to mitigate the long-term negative outcomes associated with adverse childhood experiences. Noteworthy research has been used as a tool in

both advocacy and policy work to address the outcomes resulting from “wicked problems” such as poverty and childhood adversity, so the process of conducting and evaluating a theoretical informed study can only bolster the instrumental work already being done.

Future Research

Moving forward, qualitative research must continue to integrate the intimate and unique experiences of individuals. In order to accurately measure the experience of food insecurity within the household, we must focus in on the isolating, misunderstood, and all too personal physical sensation of discomfort associated with hunger at the individual level. Conversely, in order to address the complex social problems associated with ACEs — such as violence victimization and perpetration, wide-spread chronic health problems, mental illness, substance use/abuse, as well as limited education, job opportunities, and earning potential — we must move from focusing on the individual ACE score, and attribute these scores to being a symptom of a an economic, institutional, political, and socio-cultural system that allows its families to exists in perpetual crisis. Understanding a family’s perceived stressors, coping mechanisms, and resources can be “especially useful for researchers and educators who want to translate theory into practice in order to work with and improve the lives [of families]” (Allen & Henderson, 2017, p. 197).

Economic stressors within the family system such as under- or unemployment, divorce or separation, and chronic illness or long-term disability, not only contribute to food insecurity and subsequent hunger, but the development of ACEs. These circumstances occurring within the microsystem also influence the individuals within the family as they move throughout the meso- and exo-systems. As such, practitioners must develop an inclusive understanding of the intersection between social circumstances and adverse experiences within the family system in

order to better construct interventions that allow families to adapt to stressors, rather than moving further into crisis. Additionally, vulnerable and revealing narratives like the one generated from this study may help to established more individual- and family -based prevention strategies for policy makers as they work to reduce ACE prevalence and childhood hunger, and their root causes. Identifying and mitigating circumstances that contribute both simultaneously and irrespective to the family's ability to adapt to crisis is invaluable, as family science researchers continue to understand the individual phenomenon of hunger that occurs within the family context.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

A primary strength of the study is its contribution to the body of knowledge related to the humanity of the experience of hunger during childhood. The themes and knowledge surfaced in the collective narrative cannot be depicted in datasets or graphs and tables. Instead, these insights into the human experience can only be surfaced through in-depth, qualitative inquiries that reflect those who have lived the experience and can speak to it from their frame of reference of the phenomenon. They are the ones who can accurately represent the essence and humanity of the subject at hand.

A notable limitation is that demographic data was not formally collected from the co-researchers. General attributions can be made regarding race, gender, disability, and age range, and household composition (i.e., two-parent household, one-parent household, family of four, etc.). However, these assertions did surface through conversation for every co-researcher. In fact, every co-researcher freely volunteered their household structure, not as a way to classify themselves but as a way to more accurately portray the reasons for or contributing factors related to their family's economic state. As such, the following demographics can be assigned generally

of the co-researcher pool: 60% of the group was comprised of Non-White, Females, age 30-45, from a home with divorced or separated parents. It should be noted as well, that the relationship between race and food insecurity and subsequent hunger is multifaceted and is more directly related to determinants of economics (e.g., poverty, employment, education, incarceration) than the experience of hunger alone.

Concluding Summary

Children thrive when their family system has access to conditions and environments that support a high quality of life, including safe housing, education and employment opportunities, and access to clean water, nutritious food, and affordable child- and healthcare. Unfortunately, most of these social determinants of health are directly linked with economic stability, as low-income families often struggle to balance the need for food with other basic necessities. As such, special attention should be paid to children growing up in homes experiencing both poverty and household dysfunction. Data from the World Bank (2019), “shows that safety nets—which include cash, in-kind transfers, social pensions, public works, and school feeding programs targeted to poor and vulnerable households... reduce the poverty gap by about 45 percent” (paras. 4) and may help to mitigate the impacts of poverty. Because the original ACE study did not account for relationships between adverse childhood experiences and childhood poverty, it is unclear if variance related to risk factors for many of the leading causes of death in adults in the U.S. is explained more so from poverty or adverse childhood experiences. The challenge for the field lies in extricating how food insecurity interacts with economic status to influence health outcomes and overall quality of life. If it is concluded that individuals who experience both poverty and household dysfunction endure stronger negative effects on health and well-being over the life course, increased risk assessment for household dysfunction for at-risk families in

poverty may be promoted. Likewise, in addition to anti-poverty reduction programing, effective interventions to mitigate the occurrence of adverse childhood experiences at the point of entry for social safety net programs could ultimately change the health trajectory for countless individuals.

Therefore, we must create more comprehensive responses to diminished or unreliable household availability of adequate, nutritious food and look to interventions that extend beyond nutrition assistance. Programs that promote gainful employment, and policies that support educational attainment and access to high-quality child- and healthcare will undoubtedly reduce poverty and improve the health and well-being for all members within a family system. Likewise, researchers, family science practitioners, and policy makers, must work harder to create space for the stories of those who have experienced childhood trauma, especially the complex trauma of childhood hunger. The unobserved experiences of individuals within “hard-to-reach” populations are underexplored and inconsistently represented in the literature. In order for childhood hunger to be fully addressed and eventually eradicated, both research and interventions must include participation from those who have a personal frame of reference with the phenomenon. Chilton and Rabinowich (2013) elaborate not only on the reasons to include this “hard to reach” population, but also the benefits of doing so:

The full participation of those who know hunger, or are currently experiencing it, is difficult on multiple levels, and it is easy to see why it is typically avoided. It is difficult for those who have experienced the traumatic experience of very low food security to share those experiences with an audience that might be less than empathetic. For an individual whose interactions with government policy has been limited to the role of a passive recipient of services, it can be difficult to believe that speaking out might do

anything more than result in being cut off of benefits. Full participation is also difficult because it forces all involved in the process to confront the messy, traumatizing nature of very low food security. But by integrating such knowledge, we are sure to develop smarter and more comprehensive programs and legislative policies that truly protect the most vulnerable children (p. 23).

Then and only then will we be able to foster shared insight and meaning into the essence of this phenomenon, so we might ensure that no child has to endure the complex trauma associated with the experience of childhood hunger.

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Appendix A - Study Questions

Study Questions

- How does your body tell you that you are hungry?
 - What cues does your body send?
- What does hunger mean to you?
- What does being hungry mean to you?
 - Are there ways those two states are the same or ways they are different?
- How did hunger show up during childhood?
 - In what areas did hunger show up in your life — relationships, at school, etc.
 - What events, situations, people, and places do you feel are connected to your experience of childhood hunger?
- What memories stand out for you as you reflect on your experience with hunger during childhood?
 - Can you recall your most salient (explicit, etc.) memory related to hunger?
 - Are they vivid, clear, dull, obscure? What emotions come up for you?
- What cues, behaviors, feelings, or understanding, if any, did you learn from family or social relationships in regard to ongoing/chronic hunger as a child?
- Were there times when you had to hide or downplay this learning in childhood and/or as an adult?
- What feelings and thoughts are generated when you remember these experiences?
- What messages are you getting from your body right now (during our conversation) as you reflect on your experience?

- In what ways did you make sense of your personal hunger as a child?
 - How do you make sense of that experience as an adult?
 - In what ways do they differ and what ways are they the same?
- Do any of these characterizations align with your experience as an adult, and if so, why: 1) spend significant amounts of time thinking about food, 2) severely restrict or binge food, 3) hide or keep “secret” food 4) stash food in preparation
- Do any of these characterizations align with your relationship with food: neutral, positive, negative, complicated, overwhelming? Please elaborate on this.
- In what ways, if any, has your experience of chronic hunger impacted you as an adult? Please elaborate on this.
- What would you want people to know about what it’s like to be hungry?

Appendix B - Collective Depiction

The following is comprised of direct quotations; nothing outside of the precise spoken word is captured in this depiction; therefore, transitional words were not included and verb tense modification did not occur. Each distinctive color represents a single co-researcher.

I think my story is interesting. Everybody's is, right? So, I think you need context.

I remember being hungry all the time. I will caveat all that by saying I can't think in my head of my parents saying there was absolutely nothing, but there definitely wasn't enough. You know?

My belly never went empty, but it was the total awareness that everything that you had had to count for something, and it really shows up into my adulthood a lot.

That was consistently not enough, or you're eating really ... You had some flour, so you made a flour water gravy thing.

And I do know or remember at times too when again when no one was home if I was looking through the cabinets sometimes it's just canned goods and stuff and you're not at eight year old, going to open a can of corn and just go to town.

We never had milk. Never anything other than water. People will always talk about "oh, this favorite dish from my mom when I go home," and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" Chipped beef on toast, we had that all the time. Yeah, hot dogs. Ramen noodles, which I still love. I still love Ramen.

I think it was more of one of those things where you just live with it but you don't feel ... So again it's not like I went multiple days in a row without eating or anything. So, it wasn't to a severe degree where you feel like it's abnormal.

You learn that. If your mom is sitting there, telling you about all the things that my dad doesn't do, and all the things that she does, and all the money that they don't have, and all the things that she's stressed about, the electric bill, all the stuff, you just learn not to ask for things. No one told me, "You can't have stuff." You know, stuff like that.

So things like going to the grocery store turned into a really big deal. You planned your meals on Saturday. I still know the routines to this day. You plan your grocery lists accordingly. If there's sales, you learn how to morph one thing into another thing into another thing. You start learning how to stretch.

It's like all of a sudden you pick up on something. Even though no one's explicitly taught you something, you've learned something anyway. It's just the same thing, where it's like I didn't know that I shouldn't appear that hungry, as hungry as I was, to other people. When people started saying something about it, that then I'd pretend that a smaller portion was fine, like all the other little girls. "Look at me. I'm a cute, dainty little girl, just like these other people, not this monster that wants four plates of food." Which is how I felt, and was always hungry.

Hunger for me generally manifests in two ways. The first way would definitely be stomach discomfort, kind of related to what you feel with anxiety in terms of tightness towards the bottom through your upper part of the stomach.

But I do remember that's really what I feel is a lot of I guess tension would be a good way to describe it, in my stomach.

Kind of like if you're doing planks, you know?

I do remember at times just feeling nervous or anxious when it came to me wanting food. You get kind of an overwhelmed sensation of wanting something but you don't really know how to get it, you don't know how to ask for it because you know what the answer is going to be already anyways.

As far as me getting hungry, we ate what was there

I opened up the pantry, there was no food. There was nothing. When mom came home, she would clean up and then she would finish and we would eat, and I opened the pantry, there was nothing in there. I remember calling mom saying, "Mommy, I don't know what to do. There's nothing." "Well, is there cereal?" "Mama, there's nothing," .

There wasn't no going out and fast-food. Guaranteed, because we weren't spending money to go out and eat, we ate what was in the house, we ate whatever was there. And some people would

think it was old or frostbit and all that type of stuff. We were eating it some type of way. It was cooked on top of the stove and we were eating it.

And I don't think it registered me as an adolescent, as a teenager that I didn't have enough food to eat, but as an adult, I'm like, "No, I would never allow my kid to live that way." So I mean, I hate to think what would happen if I didn't have a social network. I had tons of friends. So I knew how to get food. I just went over to my friend's house. I just went to someone, and people were good to me. They fed me.

Everybody was willing to feed me. I'd go everywhere. I'd go to my friend's house and they would just totally expect it and their parents were happy to do it. And I think I did a good job of convincing people that it was just because we're social, we're friends and not that if I don't eat here, I'm not eating.

I'm trying to think when I visited friends and stuff if I had ... I think I definitely, again, if I was over at a friend's and we were hungry, I would never ask for food. So, whenever we'd come over they would just walk into their kitchen and grab food and I would be like, "Hell yeah, would you grab me some too?" We never really feel uncomfortable crossing that line. But being very grateful when either parents would just ... That was one thing too, when parents would just bring stuff too to their room. They're like, "I made you some snacks." And I was like, "This is pretty cool." I was like, "We're still eating dinner, right?". But I do remember being jealous of friends who had cupboards full of Gushers and just again snacks.

When it was 10 o'clock at night and I couldn't just walk over to a friend's house and figure out how to make something happen or go without it. Just going to bed hungry.

I think as a kid, for a long time, what I tried to do was pretend I was the same as my peers. I was in a school that people were really wealthy. Really, maybe they really were middle class, but to me they were super, super wealthy. That's why I remember that instance of, "Oh, people eat more times of the day, other than just when you got to school, for lunch." Or trying to pawn us off on other people, I think now probably "oh, you're eat with them," kind of thing. No money was ever given to me, to support any of these people that were feeding me.

I think the parents knew I was poor. I don't think I was fooling anybody, as much as I thought I was. I think, and my teachers knew.

I would say definitely, as a child, having multiple memories of someone saying something to me about the amount of food that I was eating. It's because I was hungry and wanted more.

But I remember sort of laughing at it, as a kid, as a high school kid when I'd go to school every day and I'd punch in my lunch number and they're like, "You're out of money. You've been out of money. You're out of money. You're out of money. You're out of money." And that was always, I sort of laugh at it and joke. And then they stopped telling me I was out of money because now all of a sudden I was free and reduced lunch.

And there was only a couple of times because they did this really shitty thing where they would just give you milk and crackers. And I remember yeah, that didn't happen to me very often but I remember other people that it happened to pretty frequently and remembering the embarrassment with that and also there's a lot of feelings and emotions that go around that.

They were just basically saying, "Hey, you have one or two more days that we can let this go by, but you need to let mom know that you're delinquent and we need payment." And then as a kid you're just like, "Okay."

You just take it and you're like, "All right then." There is a certain sense of I guess guilt once you go up to lunch time and didn't get that because you know you didn't pay for it at that point and it kind of makes you feel a little different about the meal.

I had reached the level of poverty that, we reached a level of income where you didn't even want it.

And then I was pretty aware by sixth grade of our financial status and stuff. And so I don't think it was really a shock to me that we were past due and stuff like that.

I think part of that was, the second it was pointed out to me and I felt shame, I never wanted to feel that way again. My whole childhood and through high school, I remember just being like, "Do everything to make everyone think that you're exactly like them, and that nothing's different about your life, or that you also know these things, whatever things they know." Which now is like social capital. Yeah, I just remember really pretending, wanting to not reveal anything about myself. I never, ever invited people over, or anything like that.

I do not remember one time having a friend over to eat.

Which is why I'm really bad at the social graces of other things, because they were never really modeled for me. People just know things when you have access to a lot of stuff, or your parents talk about different things.

And then you get older and you hear, you understand the story in much more detail

And that to me is like the big injustice of it.

So, it's mostly just shame and then a probably a decent amount of anger too.

In terms of being like why am I the one that has to deal with this. This is not my job.

This isn't my responsibility.

I think probably for childhood, I probably felt it in a way that I didn't even recognize it as being hungry.

For me, it was filled with a lot of shame and a lot of anxiety. I would have been totally fine living my life, older people being embarrassed for me without actually having to have the realization myself. I think that was the worst part of it, was other people saying something that made me feel less than and empty and small and ashamed.

I mean, because like, I know you talk about it now and they sort of they talk about me as sort of a survivor story. But at the time I would've never considered myself to be in that category.

I remember feeling really small. Yeah. I'm going to cry. God. Sorry. Yeah, I just remember feeling really small.

That's probably why it's also harder to recall, bodily, specifically.

I sometimes think my memory was a way to protect myself, that I just don't remember lots of things.

So, I mean, that's the thing about trauma, when you have those experiences of trauma, they stay ... those memories can be very vivid and they stay with you. And so it's not something that's a conscientious ... they play in ... I call trauma the back roads. They play in the back roads of the mind.

I'm not embarrassed by it. I think it's shaped, it played a big role in the way that I think about life and act.

I think again it's famine thinking. You always kind of feel like you're just insecure, will this last. You just always feel like you should take things while they're in front of you. Versus having reassurance.

I don't hide. I don't stash. Don't conserve in any way, no. I mean, I overindulged, if anything, and then overdo it all the time.

Now, I do whatever the fuck I want, related to food. I am a person that lives on every whim and craving that I have. I will never tell myself no. If I was working, and I'd be going somewhere and being able to get myself something if I was hungry was a very different experience than being trapped by your parents are the ones that cook for you, and there's not enough or whatever.

I mean, even talking I'm like, I get so tired of penny pitching that I will get something frivolous, just because it just, for a moment, it just feels like freedom. It's a superficial level of freedom.

So it's just challenging as an adult to see some of this half ... some of the learning is helpful and you just get tired because you feel like in your 40s, you should be beyond it.

I have a hard time defining what hunger means to me or what it is, but you know what? I know I'm not fucking hungry, when I can go into a restaurant, and I'll order three meals for myself because I want something off of each of them. I will do that because I can. It's like, I never will let myself want something that then I tell myself I can't have. I think how I feel about hunger is the opposite of that. What hunger means to me is it means it's sad, and it means a hard time in your life, and that I'm different now somehow, or that I'm not like that now.

It's weird because, like I said, I'm just learning some of these things or being able to make sense of them. I know I was joking about feeling like "I'll buy whatever the fuck I want at the grocery store or whatever" but it's like, compulsive. It's not like I'm having this articulate thought of, "Oh, because you used to be hungry, you're doing X." It's like animalistic in some ways, that I'm driven to want to prove that I can have whatever I want. I think until now, I've not totally realized that. It's like some weird, conscious decision. It is like, "No, I will prove this. Do it."

Unless you've been through it, and sometimes I guess maybe I'm like you don't have to be through it to know and understand it, because I also know that that can be the case too, but there's just a really cellular level, a cellular level that informs how you move.

And then I don't think I spend a lot of time thinking about it, but I definitely I do binge when I buy groceries and I have plentiful food because that just feels good and I have a lot of food and I want to eat a lot of food.

It's the opposite of insecurity, right? It's bountiful.

And at least for that point in time and maybe the next few days, you don't have that. When your cupboards are full and you see everything, you open your fridge and it's full and if I have prepped, I have two meals that are ready to eat too and everything, it's very secure and comforting. It's a good feeling for me. It's something I hope to maintain for the rest of my life.

And so yeah, it has a more of a lasting effect on anything, you really realize sometimes.

Now, seeing some of those things helps me to understand my experience and be like, "Where did this come from? Oh."

So there is an empowerment of when you can own your own truth, and when you feel like others can't hurt you with it.

So it's this idea of like, you really did learn about resiliency. So the feelings that I have is like ... I have a friend who was saying to me like, "Oh, you're so resilient." And this is somebody who loves me, who's really close to me, And I said, I know that that's a loving comment, but you're mistaking thriving with surviving." When you are surviving, that's not resiliency. That's reactionary. That's fighting for your mind sometimes. That is fighting for your body sometimes.

I don't have a chip, I have a crack in my shoulder and I don't know when I'm going to find, and I use it to fuel me. I use it to motivate me and I think distance myself from the herd. That whole idea that getting looked down upon, I felt it. I felt like that was how I was perceived. My family was perceived and I remember hating that feeling and saying, "Just watch."

That I don't have to deal with this anymore. That I have autonomy to myself and my body and people can't tell me what I can and cannot eat. But again, gratitude for people who are out there doing that work and they see the value in it.

Gratitude actually is one of them. I think about my kids a lot when I do this and I think it shaped me and I worry about how I'm shaping them. I mean, they live a very privileged life that how do you... I am why I am because of my experiences. But my kids have never wanted for anything in their entire life and they never will. So I think about that

I want them to know to be grateful for what you have. I want them to know that more doesn't always equal more. And less can be less or more. I'd like them to know that people like to think food is as much as you make. I don't live to eat, I eat to live. But rather, I'm in a situation with my life's purpose will be shown in what I eat.

So again, it's just circumstance. So, I think my feelings around it, it's motivational to me to try and make sure that as I continue developing my life and if I have kids, working hard to avoid the situations.

Introspective, but again, pretty grateful. Pretty grateful. Yeah, yeah. Not quite sure I deserve it. Not quite sure I deserve all these things, and humbled and again, the story could've ended a lot of different, could have, well not over.

There's a part of gratefulness that you've got to have and I think I was stuck in that grateful mode. That's it, that's how I got through it because I had to be stuck in that grateful part, being grateful for what you're eating. I would be grateful because what I had known, not asking about the half eaten food or where this came from or all that type of stuff because you're lucky you just got it.

I just think what I want people to know is fucking advocate for better and build better. Our world does not have to be this way. No little kid should be hungry or be stressed their whole freaking life about eating. I guess the last thing I would say about those people is just the idea of until you have been caught in the system where you are dependent on the system, always ask questions, never make statements. Because until you've been dependent on something, and not by your own choice but because of your circumstances, never say never, never say it can't happen to you. Always ask questions.

Yeah, so for me just I think that's kind of where... I think probably just feeling a little bit more enlightened about how the connections, the connections with things.

So that we can be visible with one another, so that truth becomes multiple truths, become part of the foundation of our relationships.

I guess what I would want to know or let people know is it's probably more common than they think. It has long term consequences. It has long term effects; I don't think consequences is the right word. It has long term effects on people.

And it is each of our responsibilities in our communities to be a part of the solution. I think the other part is, too, for them to know like it's going to upset you, what you see. Part of the reason why this continues is because people don't want to see people suffering, and it's painful to see people suffering. It's painful to hear the stories that are behind people that are homeless. You would be surprised of the people who are not homeless that are struggling, and they're in white-collar jobs, and they have houses and mortgages, and they look like they got their stuff... They don't have their stuff together at all.

Why do we even have to have a study on this? Why is this so invisible? Why isn't this so average everyday conversation that you even have to do this kind of a study? I think part of the anger is just living in a culture that minimizes, deflects, and we lie about who we are.

And it is a lot more preventable than people would like to think it is, which I know you know that already. But not a lot of people do.

I really believe there is no such thing as you not being a part of it. You are either a part of perpetuating it, or you're a part of correcting it.