A Grounded Theory of How Trauma Affects College Student Identity Development

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Tricia Rosalind Shalka, M.A.

Graduate Program in Educational Studies

The Ohio State University

2016

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna, Advisor

Dr. Susan Jones

Dr. Maurice Stevens
Abstract

Research suggests many college students have experienced trauma in their lives (Read, Ouimette, White, Colder & Farrow, 2011). Despite trauma as a present condition on university campuses (Banyard & Cantor, 2004), there remain notable gaps in the literature about how trauma affects college students. For example, more research is needed to investigate how trauma in early adulthood impacts developmental outcomes (Maercker, Solomon, & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). This gap is particularly notable in terms of the impacts of trauma on college student identity development.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study, informed by situational analysis, was to understand how college student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma in college. Two research questions guided this study: (a) How do experience of trauma in college affect identity and identity development?; and (b) How is traumatic experience in college incorporated into self-definition of identity?

Qualitative data collection techniques were implemented with a sample of 12 participants. Each participant took part in three semi-structured interviews and completed two visual mapping/written response activities. Data were analyzed using methods consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005).
The outcome of these analytic procedures is a grounded theory of how trauma affects college student identity development. This emerging theory has three major components that address the abovementioned research questions of this study. First, orienting systems that exist prior to trauma shape how an individual will make meaning of traumatic experiences. These orienting systems include social identities and social discourses. Next, after trauma, various trauma-related tasks and negotiations emerge that offers sites where identity-related work will occur. Specifically, survivors work to make meaning of the question “who am I?” across the psycho-physical self, the relational self, and the negotiated self. Finally, the outcome of these orienting systems and identity site processes is twofold: (a) trauma becomes a part of the self, but not the full self; and (b) a trauma-informed lens on identity and self in the world emerges.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to the two people who instilled in me a passion for learning, nurtured my resourcefulness to push through roadblocks, and always encouraged my incessant asking of “why?”

My parents

Lennard Eugene Shalka (1949 – 2011)
&

Janine Rosalyn Shalka, PhD
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to so many who have been a part of this dissertation journey with me. First of all, I have to thank my incredible participants. You shared your pain and your resilience with me. I am humbled to have had the opportunity to bear witness to your experiences.

To my advisor, Tatiana Suspitsyna – thank you for nurturing my mind and spirit through this educational experience. Your incredible intellect has stretched me so many times to want to know more and think differently. Beyond taking good care of my brain over these past several years, you also were a caretaker of my soul, always reminding me that my life was more than a PhD. You have somehow always known exactly what I needed along the way from a philosophical discussion to your quintessential dark humor to a pep talk to a delicious piece of only the best chocolate. I am so grateful to have had you as my advisor.

To my committee members, Susan Jones and Maurice Stevens – what a dream team! Susan, our journey began a decade ago when you called to tell me I had been admitted to the masters program at Maryland. And, truly, there are not enough words to do justice to all that you have been in my life since that life-changing moment. I have learned so much from you as a teacher, a scholar, and a friend. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support and guidance in so many, many ways. Maurice, I
cannot imagine my experience at OSU without you. We had instant synergy from our very first coffee meet-up to talk about our shared trauma interests. Since then, you have made my head spin with your brilliant and complex ideas for making meaning of the world. You have also been an incredible model of an invested and passionate teacher – I hope I can carry that torch forward. Most importantly, I am grateful for your unwavering affirmations and friendship.

I also want to thank three people who have been phenomenal mentors to me during my doctoral experience. Jen Gilbride-Brown, you are the most student-centered person I know, always going to unbelievable lengths to make sure the people around you are supported and cared for. Thank you for your incredible example! Dr. J, it has been an unbelievable experience to work with you in my time here and I walk away knowing the kind of teacher and person I want to be through your example. Your deep investment in others has been an inspiration to me in the way that I want to continue working with students across my career and to know that the heart can guide academic spaces. Marc Johnston-Guerrero, what on earth can I say here to do justice to the deep, deep mentorship you have provided to me? It is safe to say my doctoral experience would not have been nearly as rich without you. You are an unbelievable gem and I am so very grateful to have had the privilege to cross paths with you.

Finally, my deepest thanks goes to the love of my life – my partner, my best friend, my husband – Steve. You are my inspiration every single day. Your unwavering support is an unbelievable gift that I treasure. Thank you for walking this beautiful life path with me!
Vita

June 2001 ........................................... Bonnyville Centralized High School

June 2005 .......................................... A.B. English modified with French,

Dartmouth College

August 2008 ........................................... M.A. Counseling & Personnel Services,

University of Maryland – College Park

August 2012 – May 2015 ......................... Graduate Administrative Associate,

Columbus College of Art & Design

May 2015 – May 2016 .............................. Graduate Administrative Associate, Student

Personnel Assistantship Program, The Ohio

State University

Publications

Shalka, T. R. (2016). The impact of mentorship on leadership development outcomes of

international students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online

publication. doi: 10.1037/dhe0000016


Field of Study

Major Field: Educational Studies

Specialization: Higher Education & Student Affairs
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Have you ever seen a tree that was hit by a hurricane when it was a sapling? The tree bends, and it rights itself and grows back straight, but there's a little nick and bump in the tree. You look at it, and you're like, "Oh, it underwent something really nasty, but it kept going." I feel like that's how I see myself...I'm still the same person, I just have a little bump.

I begin this work with the powerful metaphor offered by one of the participants in this study, Beth. The image of the sapling surviving the hurricane so poignantly captured the relationship between college trauma and identity that was so evident in the words, images, and silences across the collective stories of the participants in this research project and that will be revealed in what follows as an emerging theory of how trauma affects college student identity development.

Beth’s metaphor is one of resiliency and that strength is certainly evident across the experiences of the participants in this study. However, the relationship between trauma and identity cannot be understood simply as one of triumph. Indeed, each participant navigated through pain, disruption and difficulty en route to the resiliency present in the tree that keeps on growing. As Beth articulated, the same person fundamentally arrived on the other side of trauma, but with markers of the storm as a
testament of what had been endured and affected. The work that follows chronicles that process.

**Statement of the Problem**

Herman (1992/1997) noted that the “ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (p. 1). Experiences of trauma frequently fall into this unspeakable category – challenging stories silenced because they are difficult to both utter and hear. Although trauma may be a challenging subject to discuss, its prevalence in modern life necessitates its investigation. Epidemiological studies suggest as much as 80% of the American general population has had exposure to trauma (Breslau, 2009).

Trauma is a topic that has gained increased attention in public discourse for a variety of reasons that extend even beyond its prevalence in modern life. As some scholars have suggested, “…trauma has come to serve as a cultural trope that expresses many of the concerns and fears of our time” (Bracken, 2002, p. 3). The world in which we live, particularly from a western perspective, is increasingly interested in trauma connected to the human condition (Caruth, 1995b). While this interest may once have been confined to parameters of psychological inquiry, trauma has gained much broader attention as it emerges into discourse. Indeed, as Fassin and Rechtman (2009) observed, “Trauma is not confined to the psychiatric vocabulary; it is embedded in everyday usage” (p. 6). Trauma increasingly defines our times.
Regardless, psychological dimensions of traumatic experience have certainly provided the undercurrent of increased attention on trauma generally. Since 1980 and the introduction of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the *DSM-III* (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) of the American Psychiatric Association, trauma has emerged as a dominant theme across a myriad of mental health communities (Bracken, 2002). With the introduction of PTSD criteria, a broad and common language to understand and conceptualize the psychological impact of trauma finally emerged (Brown, 2008). As criteria for PTSD were firmly established, a surge of research and practical attention on the psychological dimensions of trauma soon followed (Bracken, 2002; Caruth, 1995b; van der Kolk, 2014).

In recent years, a growing awareness of the presence of trauma on college campuses has surfaced. This is particularly true against the backdrop of recent federal reports highlighting the continued prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses and the imperative need for higher education institutions to engage officials in trauma-informed training (e.g. White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). However, sexual violence is but one form of trauma that college students experience. In fact, research suggests students have experienced or will experience a variety of forms of trauma during college, which for traditionally aged college students is a critical time of psychosocial development, particularly identity development. For example, one study of over 3,000 matriculating students at two American universities found that 66% of these entering students had already been exposed to a traumatic event
in their lives, with 9% exhibiting symptoms for post-traumatic stress disorder (Read, Ouimette, White, Colder & Farrow, 2011).

Despite recent increased attention to experiences of trauma both nationally and within higher education environments, there remain many gaps in the literature regarding the impacts and outcomes of traumatic encounters for traditionally aged college students in the midst of the developmental milestones of early adulthood. Notably, the role of lifespan development has been largely unexplored in the research canon concerning traumatic experience (Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). In fact, Wilson (2006) projected that a key area for future trauma research is that of trauma’s relationship with human development:

Future work is critically needed to understand precisely how trauma affects the inner world of experience in terms of ego identity, the self structure, and personality processes….Understanding trauma’s impact on the processes and vicissitudes of life-span development is in its infancy. How does trauma affect the epigenesis of identity across the life cycle?” (Wilson, 2006, p. 255)

The current research project endeavors to answer a piece of this question by investigating the impact of trauma on identity development of college students. As Wilson (2006) articulated, the impact of trauma on identity across the life cycle is an underexplored and yet critically needed area of research.

**Review of Literature**

Given the sparse research intersecting identity development and traumatic experiences of college students, the current study implemented a synthesis of diverse
research and theory to frame this relationship. Specifically, the current study is informed by three broad categories of literature that collectively offer a framework through which to consider how college trauma impacts identity development. These include: identity and identity development, trauma studies, and the intersection of trauma and identity.

**Identity**

Research concerning identity and identity development is a growing body of literature across the social sciences (Côté & Levine, 2002; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011), with higher education as no exception (Jones & Abes, 2013). Depending on the particular discipline and lens, however, conceptualizations of identity can vary. Regardless, a consistent theme across many definitions of identity is that it accounts for an individual’s response to the primary question of “Who am I?” (Jones & Abes, 2013; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011).

In the current study, identity is conceptualized as a multidimensional process that is made meaning of at the level of the individual, but includes an individual’s interactions as well as psychic appraisals. This perspective is informed by a variety of theoretical perspectives, but primarily located in the work of Erik Erikson. Specifically, identity in the current study is understood to be a process that draws on biological, psychological, and social influences simultaneously (Erikson, 1982/1997; Kroger, 2007). Certainly, while identity is located at the level of the individual, it is very much understood, enacted, and developed through interactions with the environment and others (Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1968/1994). Finally, identity is understood here to include

Many theorists have proposed frameworks that contribute to a richer understanding of the key elements and processes involved in identity formation and development. In the current study, two of these approaches are reviewed as foundational to frame understandings of identity and identity development in college student populations. These include Erikson’s (1968/1994, 1982/1997) stages of psychosocial development and Marcia’s (1966) identity statuses.

Erik Erikson’s intellectual evolution in conceptualizing identity originated from his work with veterans of World War II. While working in a rehabilitation clinic, Erikson began to contemplate an “identity crisis” to help explain the loss of a consistent ego identity that he observed in his patients (Erikson, 1968/1994; Kroger, 2007). What Erikson noted was that identity was made much more visible when it had been disrupted in some way, as was the case with the traumatized soldiers with whom he worked (Kroger, 2007).

Notably, Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development offered one of the first theories in which identity development was considered across the lifespan (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) and marked the beginning of much research and popular attention toward the topic of identity (Kroger, 2007; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). In Erikson’s eight-stage model, the fifth stage marks a period that roughly aligns with adolescence (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). It is this phase that Erikson believed to be rich with potential for psychosocial
tasks (or crises) that propel a person to navigate the space between childhood and adulthood (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997; Evans et al., 2010; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). In the process, movement towards established identity is achieved as an individual makes meaning of childhood identities while adopting and navigating those demanded by adult life (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). These identity-related tasks align well with traditionally aged college student populations.

Although Erikson’s work was foundational in the study of identity development, it lacked easy application to empirical study. Thus, James Marcia extended Erikson’s work into a form that could lend itself more readily to scientific investigation (Jones & Abes, 2013; Kroger, 2007). Marcia arrived at four identity statuses that indicated the degree to which an individual was (a) exploring identity and (b) committing to an identity (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). In the achievement status, commitment occurs after a process of exploration. With moratorium, there is a process of active exploration occurring but without a corresponding commitment. In foreclosure, commitment is established, but without prior experiences exploring. Finally, diffusion represents an absence of both dimensions with neither commitments made nor active exploration occurring.

In addition to Erikson and Marcia’s foundational theories referenced above, several theories specific to the field of higher education also informed conceptualizations of identity in the current study. These theories are included as theoretical frameworks in this study to structure particular understandings of identity development within college student populations. Specifically, this study drew heavily on Chickering’s theory of

Chickering’s theory of identity development emerged as a response to Erikson’s work with particular emphasis on the process of identity development during the college years (Evans et al., 2010; Jones & Abes, 2013). This theory suggested that college student identity development occurred as a process across seven interacting vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Briefly, these seven vectors include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

Self-authorship is broadly a theory of meaning making. It represents an individual’s capacity “to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (Baxter Magolda, 1998, p. 143). This theory provides a framework for considering development holistically, in which the journey towards self-authorship occurs along a continuum (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2009b; Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010). On one end of the developmental continuum, meaning-making capacity is based on external formulas, while at the other end internal structures of meaning making are employed (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). In this process, self-authorship draws on three separate but integrated dimensions of development, including the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.
The model of multiple dimension of identity (MMDI) developed by Susan R. Jones and Marylu McEwen, and the revised model (RMMDI) developed with Elisa Abes (Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000) offers a specific theoretical framework for this study in conceptualizing multiple aspects of identity. The model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) imagined identity as a product of multiple factors including personal self-definition, social identities, and contextual factors. This model recognized identity as a more fluid process than previous stage models and highlighted the role of identity salience that may be different at different points in time across different contexts. The revised model (RMMDI) incorporated the role of meaning making in this process. Contextual influences on identity include processes that are closely connected to an individual’s overall developmental capacity for meaning making as either an external or internal process.

**Trauma**

Trauma can be understood as “a blow to the tissues of the body – or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind – that results in injury or some other disturbance” (Erikson, 1995, p. 183). Though the topic of trauma is researched and discussed across a variety of disciplines and fields (Erikson, 1995; Green, 1990; Levers, 2012), the notion of trauma as a “blow” begins to capture some of the commonality that can exist across a multidimensional experience. Ultimately, trauma manifests not only within individual experience, but is also embedded within social context (Brown, 2008). Indeed, trauma manifests across multiple layers of experience, including the physical,
psychological, relational, spiritual, and cultural (Brown, 2008; Erikson, 1995; Levers, 2012).

What emerges as a theme across a variety of attempts to define and explain traumatic encounters is the sense of heightened experience. For Briere and Scott (2015) an event is traumatic “if it is extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms the individual’s internal resources, and produces lasting psychological symptoms” (p. 10). Carlson and Dalenberg (2000) spoke of trauma as “a lack of control over what is happening, the perception that the event is a highly negative experience, and the suddenness of the experience” (p. 6). Meanwhile, Landsman (2002) noted that, “By definition, trauma overwhelms our usual abilities to cope and adjust, calling into question the most basic assumptions that organize our experience of ourselves, relationships, the world, and the human condition itself” (p. 13).

Regardless of attempts to define it, trauma inherently defies the easily quantifiable (Herman, 1992/1997). Although the desire to understand trauma in ways that are easily measurable for the purposes of research certainly exists, the very nature of traumatic experience challenges that possibility. As Herman (1992/1997) cautioned, “simplistic efforts to quantify trauma ultimately lead to meaningless comparisons of horror” (pp. 33-34). Additionally, though commonality certainly exists across many stories of trauma, there are equally numerous and varied reactions and experiences of trauma (Brown, 2008; Levers, 2012; McNally, 2005). One individual may experience something as traumatic, while another person has a completely different reaction to the same event (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000).
In the current study, trauma is defined and interpreted very broadly, in part to account for the subjectivity and multidimensionality of traumatic experience. Primarily, trauma in this study is understood to occur as a result of an individual’s subjective response to something as traumatic (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; Green, 1990). This allows for a broad understanding of trauma and recognition that reactions to trauma vary greatly (Brown, 2008; Levers, 2012; McNally, 2005). Additionally, critical trauma studies (Casper, 2014; Stevens 2009, 2011, 2014) are introduced as a theoretical perspective in this study as a mechanism to challenge and stretch conventional notions of trauma.

**Intersecting Trauma and Identity**

Research that brings traumatic experience together with adult development is in its infancy (Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). However, there is much literature to support the ways that trauma impacts aspects of identity, even if not through a developmental lens. Increasingly, studies are drawing connections between traumatic experience and changes in self-concept (Webb & Jobson, 2011). Indeed, a reoccurring theme across much literature related to traumatic experience is that of trauma’s potential to create a discontinuity in experiences of the self (e.g. Brown, 2008; Brison, 2002; Caruth, 1995a; Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Stewart, 2014).

An emerging area of research that seems connected to the impact of trauma on identity is that of the centrality of the traumatic event for the survivor. Berntsen and Rubin (2006) noted the ways in which an individual constructs a narrative of his or her
life is often closely connected to the person’s self-concept and sense of personal identity. Within the life narrative, certain memories will inevitably be more salient than others. These salient memories, then, emerge as important markers within the life story and play a critical function in how an individual interprets experiences and decisions in his or her life moving forward. In the case of trauma, the centrality of the event and vividness of traumatic memories ultimately determines how the traumatic experience will be interpreted within the broader life narrative for that individual (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007). This can be closely connected to identity, particularly when the individual marks the traumatic experience as a central component of the life narrative (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study, informed by situational analysis, was to understand how college student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma in college. The following research questions guided this study:

1) How do experiences of trauma in college affect identity and identity development?

2) How is traumatic experience in college incorporated into self-definition of identity?

**Significance of the Study**

Trauma is a prevalent experience in the United States population, with as many as eight out of every ten Americans having been exposed to trauma (Breslau, 2009). Although it is tempting to want to imagine that college campuses are somehow sheltered
from this reality, they, too, grapple with traumatic experiences. Indeed, trauma’s prevalence extends to higher educational environments (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Read et al., 2011).

Although trauma is a present condition on university campuses (Banyard & Cantor, 2004), there have been few studies that specifically examine the effects and impacts of trauma unique to college student populations (Read et al., 2011). Despite recent increased attention to experiences of trauma (Bracken, 2002; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; van der Kolk, 2014), there remain many notable gaps in the literature concerning impacts and outcomes of traumatic encounters, particularly in terms of the developmental processes that occur for traditionally aged college students. For example, how childhood trauma impacts and is impacted by developmental processes is an ever-expanding body of literature (e.g. Kindsvatter & Geroski, 2014; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Meanwhile, research that uniquely investigates trauma in early adulthood and its impact on lifespan development has been underexplored (Maercker, Solomon, & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). An area where this is particularly true is that of the impact of trauma on college student development and, more specifically, identity development.

The current research project addressed this topic for the college student population, a group particularly vulnerable in the developmental task of identity formation, as this period of late adolescence is a critical time during which identity development occurs (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Kroger, 2007). Enhancing the development of college students has long been a part of higher education’s
mission to educate the whole student (King, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Identity development is a key developmental priority for educators working with college students, as the process of identity formation contributes to how students will discover their abilities, goals, and effectiveness as they enter adult life and the workforce (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Additionally, the awareness that comes through identity development allows students to understand how they make decisions, explore alternative viewpoints, and consider criteria for evaluation, all of which are important outcomes of higher education learning (King, 2009). Regardless, there is sparse research about how trauma interplays in this process. The current study sought to contribute to new understandings within this gap.

**Research Design**

This study implemented a constructivist grounded theory design as conceptualized by Charmaz (2014) in addition to situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). The current study was aimed at understanding how college student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma, and a grounded theory methodology was well suited to this topic for a variety of reasons. Notably, grounded theory is directed towards theory generation (Charmaz, 2014; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Payne, 2007). Given the fact that sparse research exists that explicitly connects student development theory and trauma, a primary goal of this study was to contribute to theory generation with the potential to inform future research, practice, and policy.

Additionally, as Charmaz (2014) explained, constructivist grounded theory “offers an *interpretative* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (p. 17).
Though rooted in many of the original principles of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) seminal conceptualization of grounded theory, the constructivist approach also provided for more flexibility in method and analysis that acknowledges research as a subjective process of co-construction between participants and researcher. Given that trauma is a complex subject that inherently defies a linear and definable structure (Brown, 2008; Herman, 1992/1997; Levers, 2012; McNally, 2005), the constructivist design was an appropriate methodological choice particularly regarding its assumption that “social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). Ultimately, this methodology emphasized how the current study was one of construction rather than discovery and finding.

Meanwhile, situational analysis offered a complementary extension of constructivist grounded theory with nuanced approaches for both data collection and analysis (Clarke, 2005). Situational analysis was developed as a means to accommodate postmodernist notions of knowledge and knowledge production within the methodological framework of grounded theory. As Clarke (2005) explained it, the purpose of situational analysis is a postmodernist one that “has shifted emphases to partialities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation – complexities” (p. xxiv).

This emphasis on complications and instabilities was a particularly relevant fit for the current study focused on trauma. Trauma has often been framed as a complex and multi-dimensional experience (e.g. Brown, 2008; Erikson, 1995; Herman, 1992/1997; Lever, 2012). Additionally, calls for new methodologies in studying trauma (e.g. Cho,
have originated from this complexity. The need for new ways to explore trauma have increasingly been exposed through an emerging area of scholarship, critical trauma studies, that calls into question conventional definitions of trauma and promotes a deeper layer of cultural analysis to extend trauma beyond a definition to rather a process that produces something (Stevens, 2009, 2011). In other words, critical trauma studies begin to unearth the “limitations, constraints, and possibilities created by the present state and trends of our knowledge” (Stevens, 2014, para. 11). The goal of situational analysis to extend grounded theory “around the postmodern turn” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxi) offered a more complex methodological approach and set of analytic methods that were able to get into and through the constraints and possibilities that exist within traumatic experience and how it has conventionally been framed.

Summary

Despite wide attention to the study of trauma, very little research has explored the impact of traumatic experience on the college population (Read et al., 2011), particularly in terms of its relationship with college student development. The purpose of this study was to address this gap by investigating how student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma in college. This study is informed by literature that spans identity development, trauma, and the intersection of these two domains. A constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) informed by situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) was employed to explore this topic.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The intersection of adult development and trauma is a sparsely theorized area (Maercker, Solomon, & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). Given the scant research in this area, this chapter draws on multiple bodies of literature to contribute to a conceptual framing of the current study about how college trauma impacts identity development. This chapter begins by framing the collegiate context of trauma. Next, three dominant bodies of literature that informed an investigation of the intersection of trauma and college student identity are outlined. First, several theoretical and empirical perspectives are offered to conceptualize identity and identity development in the college student population. Then, an overview is offered of trauma as a psychological construct. Finally, relevant literatures are intersected to explore how identity development and trauma interact.

Framing the Collegiate Context of Trauma

Past research supports the notion that trauma is strongly prevalent in the lives of college students. For example, a study conducted by Read, et al. (2011) discovered that two-thirds of the entering classes at two universities had already experienced trauma in their lives. Meanwhile, in a study of 1,528 undergraduate students at four universities, 85% of respondents had experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives (Frazier, Anders, Perera, Tomich, Tennen, Park, & Tashiro, 2009). Twenty-one percent of these
students experienced a traumatic event in college during the 2-month period during which the study was being conducted, alone. Finally, a study by Avant, Davis, and Cranston (2011) found that in a sample of 222 female college students at two universities, 76% had experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives. Additionally, several participants had experienced multiple traumas with the mean number of traumas experienced by students in this study at 1.78.

Recent federal actions have heightened the awareness of many campus officials for the need to consider trauma in the lives of college students. For example, a report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) underscored the continued prevalence of sexual violence (one type of traumatic experience) on college campuses. In this report, an urgent call to action was made for the need for higher education institutions to equip college officials with trauma-informed training. Indeed, there is growing attention on trauma-informed services within higher educational environments as a result of these reports as well as other federal clarifications concerning sexual violence and Title IX policy (Shalka, 2015).

However, there remain significant gaps in the literature about trauma in the lives of college students. A key outcome of many higher educational institutions is that of the holistic development and growth of its students (King, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). In the case of trauma, however, there is a dearth of literature to explain how college trauma may impact these developmental processes. Indeed, there is a significant gap in research about how trauma impacts the developmental milestones of early adulthood (Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013;
Wilson, 2006), a developmental period that aligns with the traditionally aged college student population. Thus, there is additional research needed to explore the intersection between college student development and trauma. The current study contributes to this need.

**Identity Development**

In recent years, studies about identity and identity development have proliferated across social science research (Côté & Levine, 2002; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Indeed, identity has emerged as one of the most studied topics across much research in this disciplinary area (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Unsurprisingly, the field of higher education research has been no exception, with the study of identity playing a central role. As Jones and Abes (2013) observed, “The study of identity has long been a hallmark of higher education and student affairs research and practice” (p. 2).

In the current study, identity is a primary site of investigation in exploring how college trauma affects self-identification and understanding. Below, I frame how identity is conceptualized in this research project. First, I provide parameters around how identity is defined in this study, and then I offer theoretical and developmental research perspectives that specifically informed the current research project.

**Conceptualizing Identity**

Identity, as a concept, can be understood in a multitude of ways. A direct result of the vast and diverse bodies of literature exploring this topic, identity is examined and interpreted in different ways across disciplinary sites and even sub-disciplines of the
same sites (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Given this variation, it is that much more critical to situate how identity is conceptualized in the current research study.

Brown (2008) defined identity as “an enduring phenomenon that eventually comes to transcend social locations, to represent how the person knows her- or himself to be, and to reflect core values held by the individual” (p. 49). Meanwhile, many others conceptualize identity as the response to the fundamental question of “Who am I?” (Jones & Abes, 2013; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). While it can be understood as an individual process, Côté and Levine (2002) reminded that identity can also include environmental influences noting that “identity is a function of both external (social) and internal (agentic) factors, and that both the sociological and psychological perspectives are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of human self-definition” (p. 9). This concept of identity as multidimensional and interactive is something that was established in Erikson’s foundational work in noting both the psychological and social dimensions of identity (Erikson, 1968/1994). Indeed, for Erikson, identity is “a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which established, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (Erikson, 1968/1994, p. 22)

The current study draws on these perspectives in conceptualizing identity as a multidimensional process that is made meaning of at the level of the individual, but includes an individual’s interactions as well as psychic appraisals. In the tradition of the pioneer identity scholar, Erik Erikson, identity is framed here as a psychosocial developmental process that draws on biological, psychological, and social influences
Erikson, 1982/1997; Kroger, 2007). Additionally, this study is also framed by Erikson’s notion that identity is composed of both stable elements that persist over time as well as other elements that evolve and change across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997; Kroger, 2007).

**Framing a Multidimensional Developmental Perspective of Identity**

Numerous theoretical perspectives have contributed to a richer understanding of how identity evolves and what matters in this process. Below, foundational identity development theories are discussed that contributed to framing how identity is conceptualized in the current study, operationalized in research design, and made meaning of in analysis of data. Two foundational theories that are incorporated include Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968/1994; Erikson, 1982/1997), and its elaboration in Marcia’s (1966) ego identity statuses. Specific to how identity has been understood in higher educational research and practice, I also draw on Chickering’s theory of identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), Baxter Magolda’s (1998, 2009a, 2009b) theory of self-authorship, and Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity.

**Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development.** Erikson’s theory is noteworthy, particularly because it marked the first occasion during which identity development was considered across the lifespan as opposed to just childhood (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Indeed, Erikson has frequently been heralded as the first to bring both research and popular interest to the topic of identity (Kroger, 2007; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). As Jones and Abes (2013) underscored, “Erikson’s
conceptualization of identity laid the groundwork for many theorists who followed in his footsteps” (p. 1). Although Erikson was trained in Freud’s psychoanalytic tradition (Jones & Abes, 2013), Erikson’s understanding of ego development varied from Freud’s. Notably, Erikson’s conceptualization of ego development extended beyond the internal influences of ego that where the emphasis of Freud’s work. This is a critical aspect of Erikson’s work, as he highlighted both the internal and environmental and social dimensions of identity, something with which he claimed the psychoanalytic tradition was not capable of grasping at the time (Erikson, 1968/1994). Additionally, Erikson’s work very much embraced identity as a process that is never fully completed or static in its presentation (Erikson, 1968/1994). Instead, identity development is simultaneously characterized by both stability and change. Certain elements of identity maintain a consistency over time, while others evolve as various challenges across the lifespan are resolved (Erikson, 1982/1997; Evans et al., 2010; Kroger, 2007).

Though identity formation occurs across the lifespan, Erikson emphasized adolescence as a particularly critical and fertile time in this process (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). A variety of experiences emerge in adolescence from considering career opportunities, social relationships, and values and beliefs that collectively provide rich opportunity for the development of an identity. As Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca and Ritchie (2012) captured it, “The adolescent years, according to Erikson, were set aside for identity work” (p. 2). Adolescence provides the necessary conditions within which identity exploration and
formation can be fully experienced. This stage and time period of development align well with the milestones of traditionally aged college students (Evans et al., 2010).

Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development across the lifespan includes eight separate but related stages (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997; Evans et al., 2010; Kroger, 2007; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Every stage is characterized by a distinct psychosocial task or crisis and resolution of these crises is how a person develops. Of particular note to the topic of identity is Erikson’s fifth stage, in which the dominant psychosocial task is characterized as identity versus identity confusion (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997; Evans et al., 2010). This stage is fundamental to an individual’s evolving process of identity formation and is the stage during which identity formulation will present as a key developmental task (Jones & Abes, 2013). This developmental stage simultaneously builds upon tasks previously resolved in psychosocial development and serves as a building block towards others that will occur later (Kroger, 2007). Thus, although this is a distinctive stage, it is also highly connected to other aspects of psychosocial development across the lifespan.

During adolescence, individuals are confronted with a psychosocial crisis that straddles the space between childhood and adulthood (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Erikson conceptualized this as the crisis of identity versus identity confusion, in which an individual is faced with the tasks and responsibility of accepting and growing into adulthood while needing to let go of or release the childhood experience of being taken care of (Erikson, 1968/1994, 1982/1997). Achieving this developmental task requires “changing one’s worldview as well as projecting oneself imaginatively into the future”
(Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 32-33). Thus, identity development in this stage is represented through a process in which an individual makes meaning of and synthesizes childhood identities while establishing a sense of self and relationships in the context of the adult world. It is important to note that this process can be challenging. The process of relinquishing previous identifications that were present in childhood can produce both feelings of loss and confusion (Kroger & Marcia, 2011).

**Marcia’s ego identity statuses.** Developmental psychologist James Marcia was credited with first studying Erikson’s theory empirically (Jones & Abes, 2013). One of the challenges of Erikson’s work was that it was difficult to operationalize for the purpose of research (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). Though others attempted to develop a model with which to empirically study Erikson’s work, Marcia’s (1966) identity status model became the dominant framework to inspire much future literature and research. Certainly, Marcia’s ego identity statuses have accomplished much in building upon Erikson’s theories of identity development and expanding these concepts in significant ways (Kroger, 2007).

For Erikson, resolution of the developmental task associated with his fifth stage occurred along a continuum (Kroger, 2007). At the desired end of achieved identity, a person would have a solidified and high sense of identity. Meanwhile, at the lower end of identity development, identity confusion would exist. Erikson introduced the idea of an identity crisis as a key component of development during this period of late adolescence, and Marcia’s work with identity statuses marked the exploration of how individuals may navigate and resolve these crises (Evans et al., 2010).
Marcia’s statuses built off of Erikson’s concepts of identity formation and extracted ideas of exploration and commitment, expanding these dimensions to investigate the presence or absence of each of these dimensions to arrive at four statuses, which included: moratorium, identity achievement, foreclosure, and diffusion (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). For Marcia (1966), exploration (or crisis) and commitment emerged as two key variables in the formation of identity, with exploration accounting for “some period of re-thinking, sorting through, and trying out various roles and life plans” (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 33). Meanwhile, commitment referenced the “degree of personal investment the individual expressed in a course of action or belief” (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, pp. 33-34).

Marcia later added additional layers to the statuses by suggesting that identity should be evaluated through three lenses, including: structural, phenomenological, and behavioral (Evans et al., 2010). At the structural level, attention is made to understanding how identity serves as a reference point for decisions and general ways of being within a complex world. At the phenomenological level, emphasis is placed on noting how identity is shaped by others and how it is shaped by the self. Additionally, the experiences that contribute to identity construction are considered at this level. Finally, the behavioral lens places emphasis on how an individual’s identity is represented in their behavior and how this might be interpreted by others.

Several concepts from Marcia’s (1966) theory were helpful in interpreting results in the current study. The concepts of exploration and commitment proved particularly useful in considering how experiences of trauma produced opportunities or not for
participants to re-examine their identity. Additionally, Marcia’s three lenses mentioned above contributed to an increased complexity in considering the multiple dimensions involved in how participants understood experiences of trauma and connected these to their identities or not.

**Chickering’s theory of identity development.** Chickering’s work emerged as an elaboration of Erikson’s fifth stage of psychosocial development and explicitly considered this stage in terms of college students (Jones and Abes, 2013). Similar to Erikson, Chickering held identity development to be one of the most critical developmental processes of adolescence (Evans et al., 2010). Thus, Chickering’s theory emerged from a desire to better understand this process within the unique context of the college environment.

One of Chickering’s primary goals in researching college student development was that of improving higher education practice and offering educators ideas about how to positively affect development of the students with whom they worked (Evans et al., 2010; Jones & Abes, 2013). Driven by this purpose, Chickering conducted research with students at Goddard College between 1959 and 1965 (Evans et al., 2010), and would continue to refine the theory in subsequent years by incorporating newly available research from other scholars (Jones & Abes, 2013). At its core, however, Chickering’s theory expounded on various “recurring themes” that he noted as emerging across college student experiences including “gaining competence and self-awareness, learning control and flexibility, balancing intimacy with freedom, finding one’s voice or vocation, refining beliefs, and making commitments” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 35).
Chickering’s theory purported college student development to occur along seven vectors that work together in contributing to the development and formation of identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010; Jones & Abes, 2013). Important to the theory, vectors were used to connote “both magnitude and direction” (Jones & Abes, p. 33). Development in any particular vector could occur at varying rates and while forward movement is possible, so is regression and re-evaluation of previous vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010). Indeed, Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted the complexity of development and that their “model does not portray development as one predominant challenge or crisis resolution after another” (p. 34). Thus, the seven vectors represented in their theory are meant to exist as road maps or general directions to indicate where students’ developmental journeys may be headed, but not to be prescriptive of what will happen at a specific time or age.

The seven vectors offer a rather broad and comprehensive perspective of the landscape of psychosocial development in college (Evans et al., 2010, p. 67). Collectively, these vectors interact across the college years as a student defines a sense of identity. The seven vectors include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

In the current study, Chickering’s theory was useful in situating the unique context of identity development in college. Several of the vector themes emerged across participants’ stories of meaning making after trauma. Additionally, Chickering’s theory
is one of the few college student development theories that explicitly addresses emotions, a theme that emerged across participants’ experiences of trauma.

**Self-authorship.** The construct of self-authorship emerged from the work of Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) and his theory of self-evolution. This theory offered a holistic developmental framework that placed meaning making at the core of development. Kegan (1994) argued that development into adulthood demands capacities for greater complexity of meaning-making structures or orders of consciousness. Generally, Kegan’s theory is discussed in terms of five orders of consciousness. Within these progressive orders, the subject-order relationship is a key aspect of how an individual makes meaning and constructs experiences. As development occurs, corresponding changes in the subject-order relationship dictate how an individual is able to organize and make meaning of his or her experiences.

Within Kegan’s (2004) fourth order of consciousness, self-authorship emerges as a meaning-making system in which individuals are able to manage their lives from an internal locus of control, rather than being dictated by external forces. It is this fourth order of consciousness and Kegan’s reference to self-authorship that Baxter Magolda further explored in arriving at a theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Baxter Magolda’s (2004, 2009a) longitudinal study regarding individuals’ meaning making during and after college, has since contributed to an elaborated understanding of the journey toward self-authorship.

Captured concisely, self-authorship is “the ability to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (Baxter
Congruent with Kegan’s (1982, 1994) work, self-authorship presents a holistic perspective of development in which meaning making is at the core (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2009b; Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010). Individuals develop toward self-authorship as experiences of disequilibrium prompt qualitative changes in how an individual makes meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Thus, the journey of self-authorship occurs along a continuum. On one end, an individual’s meaning-making capacity relies on external formulas, while at the other end of the spectrum the individual solidifies internal structures of meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2009a).

Growth towards self-authorship simultaneously draws on three developmental dimensions, including the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2009a). Though distinct development occurs in each of these domains, the developmental process occurs as an integration of all three dimensions simultaneously (Baxter Magolda, 1998). As Torres and Hernandez (2007) discovered, developmental level in one dimension is never more than one phase ahead of any others. Thus, these dimensions of development operate in an integrated manner.

In the cognitive dimension, development is primarily rooted in the mental processes involved in how an individual assesses and analyzes information to arrive at conclusions. This dimension is a response to the personal question of “how do I know?” (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Meanwhile, development also occurs at a relational level, as individuals interact with and are influenced by the opinions of others (Baxter Magolda, 1998). The question related to the interpersonal dimension of self-authorship
development concerns “what relationships do I want with others?” (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Finally, development also occurs at a psychic level for the individual. The intrapersonal dimension accounts for developmental processes connected to an individual’s internal world and belief systems (Baxter Magolda, 1998). In the intrapersonal dimension, an individual is confronting the question of “who am I?” (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Although, there are several different components to the journey towards self-authorship, it can generally be considered in terms of three dominant phases, which include: external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). In external formulas, voices outside of the individual play a dominant role in meaning making. In this phase, external voices play an instrumental role in how individuals define what they believe, understand who they are, and relate to others (Baxter Magolda, 2009a; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

A crossroads stage emerges between the reliance on external formulas and movement towards adopting internal ones (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). As Pizzolato (2005) articulated “…through students’ experiences at The Crossroads…they begin the search for internally defined beliefs, goals, values, and self-conceptions, and for how they might integrate internal and external perspectives and expectations” (p. 625). Thus, the crossroads represents a bridge between external and internal structures of meaning making. Within the crossroads phase, then, emerges two elements (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). First, individuals learn to identity and listen to their internal voice. Secondly, individuals
begin to cultivate that internal voice and use it to tackle elements of development in cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions.

Through the crossroads, self-authorship ultimately occurs when “the challenge to become self-authoring is present and is accompanied by sufficient support to help an individual make the shift to internal meaning making” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 271). Baxter Magolda (2008, 2009a) outlined three elements of self-authorship including trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. Trust of the internal voice emerges as individuals realize that while they may not be able to control everything, they are in control of their reactions. As individuals become more adept at trusting their internal voice, they are increasingly able to build an internal foundation in which they can make commitments that are connected to personal philosophies and beliefs. Finally, self-authorship allows an individual to find congruence in realizing those commitments and the internal voice as a guide in his or her everyday life.

A critical question that has emerged in research about self-authorship is what circumstances lead to development of this type of internal meaning making. Pizzolato (2003) identified what she termed a provocative experience. In her research of high-risk college students, movement towards self-authorship was connected to a provocative experience, which “challenged students’ current ways of knowing and conceptions of self” (Pizzolato, 2003, p. 803). In this study, the period of crossroads in self-authorship was frequently a collection of experiences that ultimately culminated in the provocative moment. In each provocative experience, Pizzolato found that students experienced a
state of disequilibrium. Notably, Pizzolato mentioned that some of the experiences coded as semiprovocative in this study were traumatic in nature. Although these semiprovocative experiences may have resulted in a participant being in the crossroads, they did not guarantee that the participant would commit to new behaviors and goals towards self-authored ways of knowing.

Barber and King (2007) also investigated the circumstances that may promote the development of self-authorship. Based on qualitative data, Barber and King sought to answer the question of what demands and characteristics are evident in experiences that contribute to this type of growth. Results indicated that these experiences generally fell into two categories including those that demanded or challenged students and those that offered students support. Three themes were identified. Experiences that promoted the development of self-authorship included those that (a) presented an exposure to new ideas, perspective, and diverse others; (b) created discomfort that led to action; or (c) allowed students to rely on organizational structures or routines. The first two themes fell under the umbrella of challenge, while the last theme fell under the category of support.

More recently, Barber, King and Baxter Magolda (2013) further explored circumstances surrounding dramatic growth towards self-authorship over the first three years of college. In a qualitative sub-study of 30 college students, six themes of developmentally effective experiences emerged as connected to substantial changes in self-authorship. These included: (a) experiences that fostered identity development; (b) being challenged to evaluate knowledge claims and take ownership of beliefs; (c)
belonging as a major source of support; (d) encounters with diverse others and new cultures that promoted reevaluating perspectives; (e) exposure to tragedy or intense personal challenge that requires shifting perspectives; and (f) working through complex relationships. The category related to tragedy and challenge was particularly noteworthy as connected to the current study of trauma.

A primary strength that is offered with a self-authorship framework is its ability to conceptualize multi-dimensional and holistic aspects of experience and development. In the current study, this was utilized as a useful framework in considering identity as occurring within the context of an individual’s holistic development. Additionally, this theory proved useful in data analysis to consider how aspects of cognition, intrapersonal processes, and interpersonal connections manifested within participants’ experiences of trauma as connected to their overall meaning making of their identities.

**Model of multiple dimensions of identity.** The model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) emerged to illuminate the multiple factors that impact identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). It is a theory that incorporates elements of personal self-definition, social identities, and contextual factors in understanding identity as a more fluid process than stage-theory conceptualizations may suggest. Additionally, the MMDI envisions identity at a particular point in time, rather than necessarily looking at its development over time.

The MMDI is comprised of four critical features that interplay in identity. These include the core, multiple social identities, relationship of social identities to the core and identity salience, and contextual influences (Jones & Abes, 2013). The core is characterized by personal attributes and qualities that are thought to be generally stable
over time, although is more dynamic in newer models. This portion of the model accounts for aspects of identity that are considered to be the “core sense of self” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 82). Participants in the original study that led to the creation of the MMDI cited an aspect of their identity that was an inner self that could be somewhat different or more nuanced than what others may automatically see on the outside (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Multiple social identities are recognized in the model and acknowledged as distinct from core identity attributes (Jones & Abes, 2013). These include social identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, and social class, to name a few (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The inclusion of multiple and intersecting social identities in the model also “exposes systems of power and privilege that pattern development in both particular and systematic ways” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 84).

Additionally, the model accounts for the interaction of identity salience between social identities and the core (Jones & Abes, 2013). Those identities that are considered more salient to an individual at a given point in time are considered to be experienced closer to the core, while identities of less salience are not experienced with the same awareness or intensity to self. Although various dimensions of social identities are always present for an individual, the relative salience of these identities is what can change (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Frequently, those identities that are experienced as minority identities are those that may also be more salient in contexts that reinforce a majority identity.
Finally, context matters in the interactions of the model (Jones & Abes, 2013). The MMDI acknowledged that the core identity and multiple social identities “are situated within a larger context,” which suggests, “that self-perceived personal and social identities may not be fully understood without particular contextual influences” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 88). As Jones and McEwen (2000) underscored, “Influences of sociocultural conditions, family background, and current experiences cannot be underestimated in understanding how participants constructed and experienced their identities” (p. 410).

Although the MMDI was critical in emphasizing the interplay of multiple identities within student development theory, it also had some limitations, including its almost exclusive focus on intrapersonal dimensions of development (Jones & Abes, 2013). The model was later revised to consider interpersonal and cognitive dimensions of identity and development. This newer model, the reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI), explicitly explored how meaning making interacts with identity. As Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) captured, the purpose of the RMMDI was to “more aptly [capture] the complexity of intersecting domains of development” (p. 5).

To add complexity, the RMMDI drew on other contemporary theoretical frameworks including the theory of self-authorship, which informed a more holistic view of development and the addition of a meaning-making filter in the new model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013). In the RMMDI, the core, multiple social identities, and salience of these identities are represented and understood in similar ways as in the MMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013). However, context is interpreted with a more
nuanced approach as contextual influences such as peers, family, cultural norms, and sociopolitical conditions move towards identity, but are separated from multiple dimensions of identity by a meaning-making filter.

The meaning-making filter in the RMMDI is imagined as a screen or filter between context and identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). In this way, the RMMDI brings attention to the fact that context influences identity in different ways as a process closely tied to an individual’s overall developmental complexity. When meaning-making capacity is heavily reliant on external influences, contextual influences will play a much greater role in an individual’s understanding and perceptions of their identity. Meanwhile, when a person is operating from a strong internally defined meaning-making capacity the contextual influences are filtered through a more complex and nuanced system. In this way, an individual’s understanding of his or her multiple identities will take those contextual influences into account in ways that are internally defined.

In the current study, the MMDI was used to frame the research design. Particularly, this model was heavily relied upon in considering aspects of identity to explore in the study. Additionally, the meaning-making filter of the RMMDI proved useful in analysis of data to better understand trauma as a potential context for identity meaning making moving forward.

**Trauma**

Attention and research regarding the topic of trauma has grown substantially in recent decades (Bracken, 2002; Caruth, 2014; van der Kolk, 2014). Although a variety of factors are associated with this phenomenon, the proliferation of trauma research can be
interpreted as a positive development given the high lifetime prevalence of traumatic experience (Breslau, 2009; Brown, 2008; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). In what follows, I present an overview of the evolution of the study of psychological trauma. Additionally, definitions of trauma are offered. Finally, I explore possible characteristics of traumatic responses and dominant post-trauma models.

An Overview of the Study of Psychological Trauma

The systematic and wide study of psychological trauma remains a relatively new area of research and practice (Briere & Scott, 2015). However, early studies of psychological trauma date back to the 1860s with emergent investigations of the origins of “railroad spine,” a condition initially believe to have physical origins that were later attributed to the equivalent of traumatic neurosis and nervous shock (Brown, 2008; Keller & Chappell, 1996; van der Kolk, Weisaeth & van der Hart, 1996). The work of several in the European neurological and psychiatric communities during the late 1890s would continue to explore the psychic elements of trauma. Particularly noteworthy were the investigations of Pierre Janet in Paris and Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer in Vienna that connected hysteria with traumatic experience (Brown, 2008; Herman, 1992/1997).

As the 20th century began, two world wars and tragedy on a massive scale brought the concepts of “shell shock” and “traumatic neurosis” into the vernacular, as veterans struggled with their wartime exposure (Brown, 2008; Herman, 1992/1997; van der Kolk, 2014). However, this interest in psychological trauma dwindled with the end of World War II and would not receive widespread research and public attention in the United States again until the advent of the Vietnam War (Brown, 2008; Herman, 1992/1997).
Ultimately, it was late in the 20th century when trauma as a psychological experience would finally gain broad exposure and understanding. In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association formally acknowledged trauma as a more widespread experience across populations under the title of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Caruth, 1995c; Herman, 1992/1997; McNally, 2005).

Indeed, the emergence of PTSD criteria marked a significant turning point in the study of trauma. Particularly noteworthy, PTSD criteria provided a common language around traumatic experience and leverage for acknowledgement of the prevalence of trauma. As some psychologists have recounted, while they were certainly working with clients who suffered from trauma-related distress prior to 1980, they often did not have the language or frameworks available to them to fully understand what they were seeing (Brown, 2008). With the establishment of PTSD criteria, a surge of research and interest in the study of psychological trauma followed (Bracken, 2002; Weathers & Keane, 2007; van der Kolk, 2014).

However, PTSD criteria have also faced criticism, particularly in terms of pathologizing what many consider normal distress to overwhelming experiences (Brewin, Lanius, Novac, Schnyder, & Galea, 2009). Recently, discussions have emerged within the United States military suggesting that PTSD should be changed to PTSI to reflect an “injury” rather than a “disorder” (Levine, 2010). PTSD, in many instances, has become synonymous in common consciousness with trauma (Bracken, 2002); thus, making the criteria an influential (and contested) modern framework for how psychological trauma is conceptualized.
Defining Trauma

Discussions of trauma occur across a variety of fields and disciplines (Erikson, 1995; Green, 1990; Levers, 2012; Stevens, 2011). As a result, arriving at a singular definition of what constitutes trauma can be a complicated task, as it can be conceptualized in different ways depending on the domain in which it is being discussed. Additionally, trauma can occur across multiple layers of individual experience. Trauma can impact someone at the level of the physical, psychological, relational, spiritual, and cultural (Brown, 2008; Erikson, 1995; Levers, 2012). Indeed, trauma exists within the multidimensionality of human experience.

In public discourse, PTSD has often been conflated with trauma (Bracken, 2002). Further detail will be provided in what follows as to the specific criteria that make up PTSD. However, in the interim, the problems that exist with this conflation are connected to limitations that may not account for all variations of trauma. Several have challenged the narrow definition offered by PTSD criteria that generally frame trauma to occur as a result of a threat to life or severe injury (Briere & Scott, 2015). These critics have highlighted examples in which people do suffer traumatic reactions even if threat to life or serious injury is not part of the source of trauma (Briere & Scott, 2015; Shapiro, 2010). Thus, in what follows, a broader view of trauma is presented.

Several definitions of trauma highlight a sense of heightened experience. Briere and Scott (2015) characterized an event as traumatic “if it is extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms the individual’s internal resources, and produces lasting psychological symptoms” (p. 10). Carlson and Dalenberg (2000) captured similar themes
in delineating features of traumatic events as “a lack of control over what is happening, the perception that the event is a highly negative experience, and the suddenness of the experience” (p. 6). They also underscored the fact that each of these dimensions depends on the subjective interpretations made by those experiencing the event. Landsman (2002) noted that, “By definition, trauma overwhelms our usual abilities to cope and adjust, calling into question the most basic assumptions that organize our experience of ourselves, relationships, the world, and the human condition itself” (p. 13). Meanwhile, Herman (1992/1997) explained that, “psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless…Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (p. 33).

There is tremendous subjectivity in trauma. Though commonality across experiences of trauma can exist, there are also multiple ways that traumatic events can be experienced and reacted to (Brown, 2008; Levers, 2012; McNally, 2005). Although one person may experience an event as traumatic, a different person may not (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000). Though some events could be objectively assumed to induce a traumatic response in those experiencing it, most assessment of trauma is inherently less obvious. Carlson and Dalenberg (2000) explained that, “although some events may be so powerful that they would traumatize anyone, most potentially traumatic events are not so powerful” (p. 5). Herman (1992/1997) cautioned that the desire to try to classify and quantify trauma is a somewhat contrived process. Indeed, as Herman explained, “The severity of traumatic events cannot be measured on any single dimension; simplistic
efforts to quantify trauma ultimately lead to meaningless comparisons of horror” (pp. 33-34).

As stated above, subjectivity plays a critical role in whether an experience will be interpreted as traumatic or not by a particular individual. However, there are several events that often do lead to a traumatic response. Schiraldi (2000) clustered many of these events into three different categories, including intentional human traumatic events, unintentional human traumatic events, and acts of nature or natural disasters. The intentional human category accounts for trauma that is “man-made, deliberate, malicious” (Schiraldi, 2000, p. 5), including active combat, all forms of abuse, terrorism, death threats, alcoholism, or suicide. The unintentional human category takes into consideration various accidents and dangers that may still have a human origin, but were not intentional. This may include accidental fires, explosions, vehicle accidents, building collapses, boating accidents, and surgical damage. Finally, the third category includes various natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, animal attacks, and life-threatening illness. These lists are not comprehensive and other examples could be offered.

Characterizing Traumatic Response

Trauma has a pervasive quality to it. Studies of nationally representative data have suggested that approximately 80% of the U.S. population has had exposure to trauma (Breslau, 2009). However, despite the prevalence of exposure, not every individual who witnesses or lives through trauma will be notably impacted. Indeed, a smaller percentage of those exposed will experience a lasting negative psychological
impact, ranging from mild anxiety to generalized impairment of daily functioning (Briere & Scott, 2015).

In other words, reactions to trauma will vary by the individual (Brown, 2008; Levers, 2012; McNally, 2005). In some cases, more challenging symptomology and responses may occur, while others may be generally unaffected, while still others experience growth and positive outcomes (Briere & Scott, 2015; Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Several possible responses to trauma across different layers of experience are explored below.

**Physiology.** In the moment of trauma, experiences are often physiological as the body automatically responds to perceived threats to safety (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000). This reaction is frequently referred to as the fight, flight, or freeze response (van der Kolk, 2014). As threat is detected, the body initiates a process in the sympathetic nervous system to ready the body to fight or flee (Levine, 2010). In a fight or flight state, body systems may be in a state of high arousal, while a freeze response is characterized by parasympathetic activity and numbing (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; van der Kolk 2014).

As a result of these physiological experiences in the moments of trauma, experiences post-trauma can continue to occur in ways that interact with the nervous system. As Herman (1992/1997) explained, “Traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from the present” (p. 35). For those who suffer from post-traumatic stress, an imbalance occurs in which the brain (particularly the amygdala and medial prefrontal cortex areas) is unable to maintain a critical balance in
deciphering threats, which can make it more difficult to manage affect and impulses (van der Kolk 2014). Levine (2010) characterized this disconnection as connected to biological bases of the fight or flight responses to danger that may be impeded in modern life. He explained that the fight or flight system is essential in surviving real threat to life, but also that it must run its course. Van der Kolk (2014) noted a similar issue that when recovery is blocked for a variety of reasons, the body can continue to react as though it is defending itself from threat, with increased states of agitation and arousal.

**Multidimensionality of the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive.**

Trauma is experienced on a variety of levels for a survivor that draws on both personal and interpersonal aspects of experience as well as cognitive tasks of restructuring. Erikson (1995) characterized the multidimensionality of trauma by stating that:

> Traumatized people calculate life’s chances differently. They look out at the world through a different lens. And in that sense they can be said to have experienced not only a *changed sense of self* and a *changed way of relating to others* but a changed *worldview*. (p. 194)

Judith Herman (1992/1997) also expressed the multidimensionality of traumatic experience. She highlighted the ways that trauma is experienced in terms of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive dimensions of experience simultaneously:

> Having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self….now she must develop a new self. Her relationships have been tested and forever changed…now she must
develop new relationships. The old beliefs that gave meaning to her life have been challenged; now she must find anew a sustaining faith. (p. 196)

Trauma often propels a survivor to grapple with a variety of questions around identity and self (Brison, 2002; Brown, 2008; van der Kolk, 2014). Indeed, even for survivors who may have had a firm sense of identity before a traumatic experience, they may emerge on the other side of the experience with questions about self-definition and who they are post-trauma (Brison, 2002; Caruth, 1995a). Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka (2004) referred to psychological trauma as “[becoming] a part of the psyche” (p. 42), while Lifton spoke of trauma as a “theory of self” (Caruth, 1995a, p. 137). Trauma has the capacity to shake an individual’s sense of stability and consistency of self over time (Brown, 2008), catalyzing issues of self-exploration and self-learning as survivors work through recovery and a process of meaning making and integration of their experiences (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Processes of cognitive meaning making also feature prominently in the traumatic recovery experience. Brison (2002) noted that traumatic recovery draws on a process of piecing together a variety of bits of information about the traumatic experience to continuously work towards building a cohesive narrative account of what happened. Research suggests that traumatic experiences may be initially stored as fragments of thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the brain that require reintegration and restructuring in mental schemas (van der Kolk, 2014).

Clinical and empirical evidence offer validity to the vital role of interpersonal relations for survivors in a post-trauma reality (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Carlson &
Dalenberg, 2000; Maercker & Horn, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014). However, interpersonal connections seem to have both attractive and repulsive qualities to them for survivors. Erikson (1995) aptly captured this sometimes paradox by outlining the movement to and away from others that can occur throughout the process of traumatic recovery. As he explained, “…trauma has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. It draws one away from the center of group space while at the same time drawing one back” (Erikson, 1995, p. 186).

For many survivors of trauma, interpersonal support is an integral component as individuals move through recovery (Brison, 2002). During this process, survivors benefit in many ways from empathetic listeners who can bear witness to their experiences (Brison, 2002; Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; Caruth, 1995a; van der Kolk, 2014). Research has also noted the ways that interpersonal connections prove paramount in survivors’ potential long-term experiences of growth through their traumatic ordeals (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

However, trauma can also challenge the capacity for new and existing relationships. Survivors confront a variety of barriers in their interpersonal connections after trauma from being ostracized or blamed (Maercker & Horn, 2013), to experiencing difficulties with intimacy, trust, and self-awareness (Nietlisbach & Maercker, 2009). Herman (1992/1997) explained that, “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community” (p. 51).
**Traumatic triggers.** For many survivors, the journey of traumatic recovery is complicated by moments that trigger a reminder of the traumatic experience. In many instances triggers, in and of themselves, are simply harmless environmental cues, but for survivors these triggers have become associated with the trauma in a way that brings them back to the negative emotional and physiological responses of the original trauma (Briere & Scott, 2015; Buck, 2012; Schiraldi, 2000). Triggers can be very obvious and literal in their connection to the trauma or more subtle or abstract (Schiraldi, 2000), but ultimately initiate an increased negative response in the survivor (Buck, 2012).

Sensory data can be particular salient as triggers (Buck, 2012), but they can take form in other ways, also. For example, Schiraldi (2000) noted categories of sensory triggers that are activated through a particular sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. However, triggers can also occur connected to important dates, particularly stressful events or emotions, as well as particular thoughts or behaviors.

**Influential Models of Post-Trauma Response**

Although reactions to trauma may be as diverse as the individuals who experience it, certain models of what might occur post-trauma have taken on prominent roles in discourse and research. In what follows, two models that have received increased attention in research are discussed as possible reactions to trauma. These include post-traumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth.

**Post-traumatic stress disorder.** Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric trauma-specific diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; *DSM-5*) of the American Psychiatric Association (Briere & Scott,
2015), and is one possible response to trauma. Studies suggest that less that 10% of those exposed to trauma will meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013; Breslau, 2009). When it occurs, PTSD is the result of exposure to an extremely overwhelming event that is characterized by stress and distress and is a “normal response by normal people to an abnormal situation” (Schiraldi, 2000, p. 3).

The first important criterion for diagnosing PTSD is that a person must have had exposure to trauma. This is specifically defined in criterion A of PTSD in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) as:

Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: 1) Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s), 2) Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others, 3) Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental, 4) Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). (p. 271)

Once criterion A is satisfied, four symptom clusters that are characteristic of PTSD are evaluated, including: (a) intrusive symptoms, (b) avoidance of stimuli, (c) negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and (d) alterations in arousal or reactivity (APA, 2013). Intrusive recollection may include symptoms such as intrusive memories, flashback, nightmares, and various triggers. In the avoidance cluster, individuals may be
expending effort to avoid trauma-related cognitions or feelings or anything in the individual’s external world that reminds him or her of the trauma. The negative alterations cluster accounts for a wide variety of symptomology including things such as an inability to recall aspects of the trauma, negative trauma-related emotions, diminished interest in significant life activities, feeling alienated from others, and an inability to experience positive emotions. Finally, the alterations in arousal or reactivity cluster accounts for symptoms of irritability or aggression, self-destructive behavior, hypervigilance, difficulties with concentration, an exaggerated startle response, and sleep disturbances.

There are specific criteria for how many symptoms in each cluster must be expressed for a diagnosis (APA, 2013). The “duration of disturbance” specifies that symptoms must be present for more than one month. Additionally, “the disturbance” has to cause “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (APA, 2013, p. 272). Finally, the disturbances must not be attributable to the effects of other substances such as alcohol or drugs.

Maercker, Solomon and Schützwohl (1999) described post-traumatic stress disorder as being “notoriously chameleon” (p. 2), as it may appear shortly after a traumatic experience, or take years to emerge. The most recent PTSD criteria in DSM-5 have continued to recognize this reality. Thirty days must have passed since exposure to the traumatic stressor before PTSD can be diagnosed, but criteria also allow for a delayed onset that can occur much later (Briere & Scott, 2015).
Although PTSD presents those who suffer from it with significant challenge and struggle, Schiraldi (2000) underscored the paradox of post-traumatic stress disorder. He noted that PTSD could simultaneously present difficulty as well as growth. “In one sense, PTSD is described by great emotional upheaval and the shattering of the soul. From another view, however, PTSD is also the story of courage, determination, resilience, and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit” (Schiraldi, 2000, p. xii).

Posttraumatic growth. Extensive bodies of literature have identified the many negative impacts that may occur for survivors of trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Less attention, however, has historically been placed on the potential for trauma to induce positive growth. Increasingly, researchers are coming to understand the many dimensions of personal experience that may be positively impacted by trauma, including perceptions of self, relationships with others, and philosophy of life.

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as the “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). This phenomenon captures the range of changes in which a survivor experiences development in at least one area of their life that was not present before the traumatic event. Thus, it moves the individual beyond simply surviving or returning to some prior benchmark. Although positive outcomes from trauma, in the form of PTG, can occur it is important to note that these unfold concurrently with very negative and trying circumstances.

As Janoff-Bulman (2004) noted of Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) model of posttraumatic growth, cognitive processes and the reconstructive process of schemas are
central to the concept. The post-traumatic experience, then, becomes the process of rebuilding (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). An individual may be presented with new information that challenges previous paradigms, and the extent to which he or she is able to reconcile and incorporate that into new schemes represents the capacity for posttraumatic growth.

The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) was developed as a quantitative measure of posttraumatic growth and offers clarification of major components of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This inventory presented five PTG domains that have emerged from research. These included (a) a greater appreciation of life and changed sense of priorities; (b) warmer and more intimate relationships with others; (c) a greater sense of personal strength; (d) recognition of new possibilities for one’s life; and (e) spiritual development.

Certain elements seem fundamental to the development of posttraumatic growth. To begin with, cognitive engagement with the traumatic experience is prominent in the process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, the trauma must also be experienced as affective. In this way, meaning making occurs because the intellectual is combined with the transformative power of powerful emotions. Finally, interpersonal support structures play a vital role. In particular, supportive social systems aid the survivor by offering empathetic responses to the survivor’s story as well as providing assistance in establishing new schemas.
Trauma and Identity Development

The impact of trauma on child development has been a growing area of research (e.g. Kindsvatter & Geroski, 2014; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). However, there has been a much slower progression of research investigating how trauma impacts development across the lifespan, particularly into early adulthood and beyond (Maercker, Solomon, & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). Regardless, there is agreement across much research that stressful and/or traumatic life events have the potential to catalyze developmental changes (Filipp, 1999; Park, 2010).

In the current study, the area of interest is that of how trauma and identity development intersect. Although there is a dearth of research investigating this intersection, there is literature to support its synergistic relationship. Below, I draw on literature that connects trauma and aspects of identity to help frame the current study.

Intersecting Trauma and Identity

As noted above, Erik Erikson’s theorizing on ego formation was a watershed moment in the study of identity (Côté & Levine, 2002; Evans et al., 2010). Notably, many of Erikson’s ideas about identity formation are rooted in traumatic experience. For example, Erikson first conceptualized an identity crisis while treating veterans suffering from the traumatic effects of war following World War II (Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1968/1994; Kroger, 2007). As he observed patients who were experiencing identity confusion as a result of their experiences, Erikson began to imagine the concept of an identity crisis as both a catalyst towards identity formation and a potential barrier to it. Following his wartime work, Erikson began to notice broader challenges of identity
formation within the general American population and started equating the underlying causes of these states to those of a war within (Côté & Levine, 2002).

Experiences of trauma can instigate profound questions of identity and a coherent sense of self. Traumatic events often serve to catalyze issues of self-exploration and self-learning as survivors work to make meaning of their experiences and integrate what has happened into their lives (Brison, 2002; Brown, 2008; Janoff-Bulman, 2004). In many instances, survivors’ views of who they are in the world have changed in some respect as a product of encounters with trauma (Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999). Fundamentally, trauma has the capacity to challenge the consistency of the self over time (Brown, 2008). As Brown (2008) has explained it:

Trauma has a role in shaping identity when it is a component of early life experiences and/or embedded in the context of early development. It challenges identity when it occurs later in life. Trauma is also a component of identity when it is an aspect of a person’s familiar and/or cultural heritage of oppression, intergenerational or historical trauma. This is because trauma often lands squarely in vital components of identity and can interfere with basic human expressions of self, particularly those aspects of being human contained in people’s capacities for relationship. (pp. 50-51)

**Pre- and post- self.** For many survivors of trauma, their lives are defined in terms of what came before the trauma and what came after the trauma (Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Stewart, 2014). In part, this can be explained through temporal comparison theory. Instances of tremendous change, such as those initiated by
a traumatic event, tend to make the past more salient to an individual than it may be otherwise (Filipp, 1999).

Robert Lifton has referred to the reality of a pre- and post- trauma self by talking about trauma as a “theory of the self” (Caruth, 1995a, p. 137). In gradients of trauma, there can be dramatic alterations to a person’s sense of self, and Lifton captured this by imagining that a second self or trauma self is realized in the process. Thus, recovery must include a process by which a reintegration can occur between the self before the trauma and the self after the trauma. Although the survivor may enter the traumatic experience with a solid sense of self, those conceptualizations can be altered and challenged post-trauma (Brison, 2002; Caruth, 1995a).

Stewart (2014) also captured aspects of biographical disruption manifested in terms of pre-self and post-self experiences following brain injury. In his early research into the experiences of women living with brain injury, Stewart conceptualized experiences as impacting identity by illness marking a period of transition or disruption between the pre-injury self and the post-injury self. As Stewart explained, “…people recovering from an acquired brain injury also have to content with themselves – their prior, ‘premorbid’ selves – and the narratives of self and the world (and of disability) they had held pre-injury” (p. 7).

Stewart’s (2014) continued research, however, underscored the nuance in understanding the impacts of brain injury beyond a purely dichotomized perspective between pre-injury and post-injury senses of self. While some participants in Stewart’s research had clearly defined discontinuities between their pre and post injury experiences
of identity, others had a much more complex experience. The pre-injury self could sometimes be integrated into post-injury narratives, while at other times it hovered without being completely resolved. As one participant in the study captured, “I would think that one is always kind of living with this burden of the pre-injured self over one’s – or the perception of the pre-injured self over your shoulder” (Stewart, p. 84).

The notion of a self pre-trauma and post-trauma functions in a variety of ways. In one respect, the pre-trauma self may “loom as a desired once and future self” (Stewart, 2014, p. 82). In this situation, the pre-trauma self is aspirational and something the survivor wants to reclaim, which can invoke feelings of loss and mourning. However, the pre-trauma self can also function as a productive benchmark. This experience of the pre-trauma self “also references a lifetime of experiences and relationships, ways of knowing oneself apart from or other than ‘disabled,’ and so can also serve as a resource, as grounds for refusing objectifying and disqualifying treatment and relationships” (Stewart, p. 82). Thus, the pre-self can have very positive aspects that propel an individual forward in recovery, also.

**The changing self.** Notions of trauma fundamentally challenging issues of identity are captured across many narratives of trauma. Brison (2002) noted multiple cultural trauma examples, including those of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, in which survivors articulated their experiences in terms of a death. Across many of these accounts, survivors captured their experiences in terms of a pre- and post- trauma self, often in terms of a death of the former.
As Brown (2008) observed, trauma can jar an individual’s sense of a stable and consistent self over time. She noted that:

Trauma can shatter that coherence and evoke conflict by undermining previously held values, blocking the use of capacities emerging from a person’s prior sense of self, and changing the face of the world as known, thus altering the parameters of the social context in which self is understood. (Brown, 2008, p. 51)

As a result of the ways that trauma can change an individual’s sense of self over time, Brown (2008) suggested that identity models that can simultaneously incorporate aspects of stability as well as evolution and transformation tend to fit best in understanding trauma’s impact on identity. Brown noted that these types of identity models recognize the multiple identities that come together into a sense of coherence by an individual. However, Brown also explained that for survivors of trauma “When that integration is problematic, trauma is frequently although not always a component of the difficulties encountered by that individual” (p. 51).

In traumatic recovery, identity re-evaluation and meaning-making take on important roles. As Stewart (2014) acknowledged, “It is in recovery and rehabilitation that one ‘meets’ the post-injury self and in that meeting one also ‘meets’ the pre-injury self on new terms and from a new position” (p. 83). Recovery, then, provides the space for this critical aspect of post-trauma work, which is that of understanding what the event meant in terms of self-definition. The critical and often difficult work of navigating the reconciliation process between what was prior to the traumatic experience and what
exists and is possible post-traumatic experience activates explorations of self-concept and identity formation or re-formation.

**Centrality of traumatic event and identity.** How a person makes meaning of his or her life and constructs an ongoing personal narrative can be connected to memories that are both vivid and easily accessible to the individual (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). Such memories tend to have greater salience for a person, and thus tend to be more closely tied to how a person comes to understand his or her experiences. Such memories tend to “validate current beliefs and feeling, and to guide thoughts and behaviour” (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, p. 220).

Past research on experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has often assumed PTSD symptoms to be a product of cognitions that are not fully integrated into an individual’s life story and meaning-making (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, 2007). However, research on the centrality of event surrounding traumatic experience is unearthing an opposite problem. Rather, it is the issue of a traumatic event being processed as central that is proving correlated with such symptomology (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, 2007; Webb & Jobson, 2011). Berntsen and Rubin (2007) argued:

…that the traumatic memory – because of its distinctiveness and emotional impact – in most cases stays highly accessible and may form a cognitive reference point for the organization of autobiographical knowledge with a continuous impact on the interpretation of non-traumatic experiences and expectations for the future. (p. 418)
How individuals construct their self-narratives or life stories is closely connected to issues of self-understanding and identity construction (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). In the case of traumatic experience, the centrality of the event and vividness of traumatic memories impacts how the trauma is interpreted and understood in the context of an individual’s life narrative and identity (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007). As Berntsen and Rubin (2006) explained, “if a trauma memory is seen as a central turning point in our life story it would also most likely be regarded as a central component of our personal identity” (p. 221). Increasingly, research is demonstrating how trauma affects changes in self-concept and in turn changes in how the trauma may be experienced (Webb & Jobson, 2011).

In this way, trauma can be embedded in a person’s sense of identity and function as a symbol of interpreting other themes that occur across his or her life (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007). For some survivors of trauma, their sense of identity along with memories become oriented around and focused upon their traumatic experience (Webb & Jobson, 2011). Additionally, while trauma can embed itself into personal identity in this way, it can also become entwined with social roles and social identity expectations, also. As Bernsten and Rubin (2007) explained,

…if a trauma memory becomes a central turning point in our life story, the social role of being a trauma victim, or trauma survivor, is likely to become similarly salient in our conception of ourselves, and thus an important component of personal identity. The result may be that the person who has adopted the social role of a trauma victim finds it harder to relate to people who associate themselves with more traditional social roles. (p. 420)
Summary

This chapter offered a conceptual framework for the current study about how experiences of trauma in college affect college student identity development. Specifically, three broad categories of literature were presented. First, an overview of identity and identity development scholarship was presented. Next, framings of trauma as a psychological experience were offered. Finally, literature was presented to explore the intersection of trauma and human development with a particular focus on trauma and identity development.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand how experiences of trauma in college affect identity development. Currently, this is a sparsely researched area, which lacks a specific theory that illustrates the impact of trauma on college student identity development. Using a constructivist grounded theory methodology informed by situational analysis, the current study seeks to fill that gap, with the specific outcome of generating theory to inform future research and practice. In this chapter, I detail the specific methodology and methods that framed this study.

Epistemological Approach

Questions of epistemology take on a heightened role in a qualitative project. Indeed, several scholars note the critical importance for qualitative researchers to reflect and articulate their specific notions of what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is created, and how it can be justified (Creswell, 2013; Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014). Ultimately, the researcher’s beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge have profound implications for the production of research. Specifically, a researcher’s epistemological stance will influence both how data is gathered as well as how data is understood and analyzed (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014).

The current study was grounded in the social constructivist paradigm articulated by Creswell (2013). This epistemological perspective recognizes complexity of views as
opposed to assuming that research is directed at unearthing a more narrow set of concepts or categories. While this approach recognizes the subjectivity of meaning making as part of experience, it additionally underscores the notion that individual meaning is also situated in and impacted by the social contexts within which a person is embedded. As described by Creswell (2013), social constructivism is the perspective that:

…individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences…often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically…they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others…and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives. (pp. 24-25)

This perspective acknowledges the construction of knowledge and subjectivity of meaning making (Creswell, 2013). Thus, social constructivism offered particular conceptual fit with how experiences of trauma are framed in the current study as subjective experiences influenced by social contexts (e.g. Brown, 2008; Herman, 1992/1997; Stevens, 2009, 2011). The constructivist framework allowed space to understand and interpret this subjectivity and interaction as part of the nature of knowledge. Additionally, as the constructivist epistemology recognizes knowledge emerging from interactions (Creswell, 2013), this perspective also impacted a pervasive belief in the current study that knowledge would be co-constructed between participants and researchers as the study progressed.
**Theoretical Perspective**

In critiquing early definitions of trauma in the *DSM-III-R*, Brown (1995) raised the question of what is served by the definition. “What purposes are served when we formally define a traumatic stressor as an event outside of normal human experience…?” (Brown, 1995, p. 103). Although the diagnostic criteria for PTSD in the *DSM* have evolved beyond that definition, Brown highlighted a key point of consideration regarding any definitions and conceptualizations of trauma – what purposes are served?

A critical trauma theory lens brings attention to this question. This is an emerging area of theory that has evolved in part due to the gaps that exist where conventional trauma theory has proved inadequate, specifically in terms of how trauma is conceptualized (Stevens, 2011, 2014). Although criticism around who has been left out in conventional understandings of trauma is growing, Stevens (2009) noted that these critiques do not go far enough in “interrogating the concept of trauma itself, from submitting it to the analysis we might apply to other cultural objects” (p. 2). Thus, a key paradigmatic shift that occurs in viewing trauma through a critical trauma theory framework moves trauma from passive descriptor to active constructor. Rather than conceptualizing trauma by thinking about what it describes, critical trauma theory shifts the focal point to what trauma makes (Stevens, 2009, 2011). In the current study, this perspective proved useful in creating space to understand experiences of trauma that may not fit into conventional definitions, in addition to those that would likely be contested in certain spaces.
Fassin and Rechtman (2009) noted that particular actors connected to trauma make use of concepts and definitions of trauma in particular ways to achieve particular purposes. Thus, critical trauma theory begins to unearth what is produced and exposes the “limitations, constraints, and possibilities created by the present state and trends of our knowledge” (Stevens, 2014, para. 11). Critical trauma theory exposes the ways in which the parameters of trauma allow some to claim being traumatized while others are not entitled to that label (Stevens, 2009).

Theoretical perspectives are the philosophical underpinnings that guide research decisions (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In the current study, the emerging field of critical trauma studies was used to guide both research design and data interpretation. Specifically, critical trauma studies influenced my desire to allow participants to self-identify as having experienced trauma, rather than me providing a definition of trauma against which potential participants had to measure themselves. This produced welcome complications in sampling and data collection, because I ultimately included three participants in the study whose experiences of trauma did not fit traditional molds of event-based trauma. Instead, these participants’ experiences challenged the “requirement that the traumatic event have specific spatial and temporal coordinates” (Stevens, 2011, p.179). Additionally, critical trauma studies offered a compatible framework to guide my use of situational analysis in interpreting data, as situational analysis provided flexibility to explore the instabilities and complexities of trauma that may not fit into conventional notions of trauma or be visible through other analytic methods.
Methodology

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) were the methodological approaches that framed this study. The origins of grounded theory are attributed to Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* publication (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Payne, 2007). Since Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) work, grounded theory has evolved and progressed in both consistent and divergent directions (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Payne, 2007). However, several aspects of the original methodology have remained in current iterations, particularly around the underlying purpose of grounded theory to move beyond simply describing a phenomenon of interest to instead generating a theory about the topic of study (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

More specifically, the current study implemented a constructivist grounded theory methodology as conceptualized by Charmaz (2014). While constructivist grounded theory is rooted in several of the original principles of Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) seminal conceptualization of grounded theory, it interprets the process in more flexible methods that acknowledge research as a process of construction not simply discovery (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory moves grounded theory beyond notions of research as an objective and neutral process, to recognize the research process as subjective and co-created between participant and researcher. Through a constructivist grounded theory lens, reality is assumed to be “multiple, processual, and constructed” which heightens the need to “take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 63).
Thus, constructivist grounded theory begins with the premise of subjectivity on both the parts of participants and researcher and assumes research to be a process of constructing rather than finding.

The purpose of this study was to understand the ways that student identity development is affected by experiences of trauma in college. Grounded theory as a methodology is well suited to this topic for a variety of reasons. Perhaps most critically, grounded theory is directed towards theory generation (Charmaz, 2014; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Payne, 2007). Given that the intersection of trauma and identity development is underexplored, a specific goal of the current study is to generate theory that can be used to inform future research and practice concerning this topic.

Additionally, the specific lens of constructivist grounded theory explicitly recognizes research as a constructed process where subjectivity of both participants and researchers converge and allow the researcher to produce an interpretation of the studied topic (Charmaz, 2014; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Given the complexity and variation of traumatic experience, this orientation is an appropriate one in underscoring that findings will inform the topic in a particular, contextual way as a co-product of both participants and researcher. In other words, constructivist grounded theory allows for an interpretative understanding of trauma and identity without presupposing a definitive and simple answer to the question of how trauma impacts identity development could be unearthed. Instead, as Charmaz (2014) explained, “the constructivist approach treats research as a construction but acknowledges that it occurs under specific conditions” (p. 13).
Situational analysis was also used as methodology in this study and offers a complementary extension of constructivist grounded theory with nuanced approaches for both the collection and analysis of data (Clarke, 2005). Clarke (2005) noted that grounded theory research has increasingly leaned towards constructivist approaches that, in the tradition of Charmaz (2014), stress “a focus on meaning-making” that in turn “furthers interpretive, constructivist, and…relativist/perspectival understandings” (p. xxiii). Clarke (2005) sees situational analysis as an extension of this work.

Clarke (2005) noted that postmodern understandings of knowledge and knowledge production have permeated many disciplinary sites and ultimately emphasize the need to pay attention to complexity. This stands in contrast to more modernist approaches in research that focus on principles of simplification and generalization. Clarke observed this reality within traditional approaches to grounded theory and offered that, “while many scholars working in the grounded theory tradition have long since embraced constructionism and truth with a small ‘t’, a certain (sometimes) naïve realism or ‘bottom line-ism’ also lurks” (p. 11). One of Clarke’s primary critiques concerns the tendencies of grounded theory designs to focus on oversimplifications that aim to find commonality and coherence as products towards formal theory. Instead, the focus of situational analysis is a postmodernist one that “has shifted emphases to partialities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation – complexities” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxiv).

This focus on complexities offered an essential framework for the current study about college trauma and its intersection with identity development. Notably, the
emphasis of situational analysis to see difference and multiplicities that may not be highlighted in grounded theory alone (Clarke, 2005) allowed for an additional layer of understanding to emerge concerning the intersection of identity and trauma. As Cho (2008) stated, “The project of seeing and speaking trauma requires new methodologies to facilitate forms of perception that register the unassimilable of trauma, as well as writing forms that register the nonnarrativizable” (p. 167). This call for new methodologies speaks to complexities of trauma that are increasingly being exposed through an emerging area of scholarship, critical trauma studies, also (Stevens, 2009, 2011). The goal of situational analysis to extend grounded theory “around the postmodern turn” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxi) offered a complex methodological approach and set of analytic methods that were able to get into and through the constraints and possibilities that exist within traumatic experience and how it has conventionally been framed.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to understand how student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma in college. The following research questions guided this study:

1) How do experiences of trauma in college affect identity and identity development?

2) How is traumatic experience in college incorporated into self-definition of identity?
Methods

Below, I detail specific methods that were implemented in the current study. Specifically, I discuss sampling and data collection strategies. I then outline data analysis methods that were used in interpreting the data.

Sampling Criteria and Strategies

Determining sampling criteria is a critical component of the research process, as it ultimately denotes the scope of what can be studied (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014). The identified criteria for participation should be connected to the purpose of the study and research questions for this reason. In the current study, the following sampling criteria were used: participants must be college students or recent graduates (within 5 years), and must identify as having experienced trauma during their college years.

Jones, Torres and Arminio (2014) underscored sample size in qualitative design as a product of considering the purpose and significance of a study along with the methodological approach. Regardless, selecting an appropriate sample size is a complicated task. A number of competing factors are relevant when considering appropriate sample size and there is much disagreement among researchers as to what constitutes a quality sample size (Charmaz, 2014). As a starting point for the current study, several recently published grounded theory studies in the field of higher education and student affairs that address identity development were consulted as a benchmark for sample size. These studies ranged from 10-13 participants (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Stevens, 2004). With the
benchmark of comparable studies mentioned above, the current study included a sample of 12 participants who completed the full study.

Two priorities were balanced in selecting the sample for this study. First, attention was placed on identifying information-rich participants who could contribute to adequate coverage of the topic (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Second, informed by the theoretical perspective of critical trauma studies that seeks to interrogate narrow and political understandings of trauma, participants were also selected with a desire to explore broad and diverse forms of trauma (Stevens, 2011). In a closely related priority, attention was placed on selecting a sample that would include diverse backgrounds, particularly in terms of social identities. Several sampling strategies contributed to achieving these goals, which included snowball sampling, maximum variation sampling, and theoretical sampling to explore emerging themes.

Charmaz (2014) characterized initial sampling as a starting point in grounded theory. Initial sampling is built by establishing criteria for participants that are relevant to the study. The criteria for this initial sampling was determined by sampling for participants who met the study criteria of having experienced something traumatic in college and currently identifying as either a current college student or recent graduate (up to five years since graduation). To engage in initial sampling in the current study, a process of snowball sampling was implemented (Creswell, 2013; Gobo, 2004). I implemented a process of snowball sampling by soliciting the assistance of colleagues and professionals in relevant fields to share my recruitment email with individuals who may qualify for the study. Specifically, I personally outreached to 39 colleagues with this
request. Additionally, I shared my recruitment email over a professional listserv of student affairs professionals and faculty to request that they share it with interested individuals.

Throughout recruitment, I also implemented a sampling process that was attentive to maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2013). Given a goal of the study to expand definitions of trauma this approach allowed me to sample with the intent of attaining a final sample that would include variations in experiences of trauma as well as diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants. As themes began to emerge in the study, I used maximum variation sampling alongside theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2013; Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) explained theoretical sampling as a unique feature of grounded theory and the process of “seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory” (p. 192). In this study, theoretical sampling was beneficial to explore how emerging themes worked or did not work across individuals representing different types of traumatic experience.

Clarke (2005) noted that “most research has relentlessly sought commonalities of various kinds in social life while evading and avoiding representations of the complications, messiness, and denseness of actual situations and differences” (p. xxviii). Situational analysis encourages actively seeking out the silences and complexities. Thus, while Clarke (2005) sees theoretical sampling as a strength of grounded theory, she also suggests extending sampling in broadened directions that avoid oversimplification and emphases on unity. Thus, in implementing theoretical sampling in this study, I was not looking for cases solely to confirm emerging theory, but rather to also open up possible
silences and complexities. In other words, I was as interested in interrogating emerging themes through theoretical sampling as I was confirming them.

Once participants expressed interest in the study, I asked them to complete a brief demographic questionnaire to help narrow down a list of initial participants for the study, with the goal of achieving an initial sample of participants who represented diverse backgrounds and experiences of trauma. This questionnaire included open-ended responses for participants to describe their self-identification in terms of the following demographic categories: type of trauma experienced in college, race, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, religion, nationality, and socioeconomic status. As a result of all recruitment processes, a total of 23 individuals expressed interest in participating. I invited 16 of these individuals to participate in the research project at various stage of data collection (i.e. some participants were invited early on to participate, while others were invited later as a result of theoretical sampling) by selecting a sample that represented diverse experiences of trauma as well as diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants. Thirteen individuals began the study, with 12 participants completing the full study (one individual decided to withdraw from the study after the first interview).

**Ethical Considerations**

Depending on the nature of the traumatic experience, certain survivors of trauma could potentially be considered a vulnerable population for purposes of research. However, survivors of groups of similar trauma cannot necessarily be considered universally vulnerable. A recent work group convened by the National Center for Ethics
in Health Care of the Veterans Health Administration underscored this point in concluding that veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder “are not categorically vulnerable and, therefore do not require special protections in the form of new regulations, policy or guidance” (Work Group, 2008, p. 2).

Regardless, in the current study, attention was made to ensure participants were fully aware of the study and their role in participation. Additionally, participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time, and one participant chose to do that after the first interview. Although the research design did not suggest more than minimal risk to participants, resources for mental health support were distributed to participants in case they felt a need to seek additional support.

Certainly, trauma can be a sensitive topic. However, research supports the ways that the process of talking about traumatic experience can be healing (Herman, 1992/1997). Studies also suggest that participation in research about traumatic experiences, such as sexual assault in particular, can result in benefits that significantly outweigh costs of research participation (Edwards, Kearns, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2009).

Data Collection

Data collection in grounded theory begins first and foremost by choosing methods that flow from the research questions as opposed to vice versa (Charmaz, 2014). Although some have suggested grounded theory to be a predominantly interviewing based inquiry, it can, in fact, draw on a variety of qualitative techniques, particularly through the flexibility of methods advanced within the constructivist grounded theory approach. Charmaz (2014) advocated that researchers prioritize “rich data” that are
“detailed, focused, and full” (p. 23) and suggested that collecting rich data may result from a combination of sources.

Charmaz (2014) used the idea of “sensitizing concepts” to denote the tentative concepts, topics, and ideas that provide the spark of grounded theory research. Sensitizing concepts offer researchers a starting point upon which to build ideas to pursue and questions to address in their study. Both Charmaz (2014) and Clarke (2005) suggested that sensitizing concepts are best implemented as starting points, but not as foreclosed conclusions.

I brought several guiding interests to the current topic of study that I used as “sensitizing concepts” upon which to build some initial areas of inquiry. These sensitizing concepts included student development theory and theories of psychological trauma, which served as springboards in conceptualizing the structure and content of data collection. In particular, the study design drew on several specific theoretical perspectives including, self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009a), the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), and multiple theoretical perspectives that consider trauma to parse out distinctive pre- and post- trauma states (e.g. Brison, 2002; Brown, 2008; Caruth, 1995a; Herman, 1992/1997; Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Stewart, 2014). The pre- and post- trauma perspective proved an example of what Charmaz (2014) and Clarke (2005) encouraged in terms of sensitizing concepts as malleable starting points rather than places to end inquiry, as the idea of distinctive pre- and post- trauma states proved to ultimately not match the lived experiences of many participants in this study.
This study drew primarily on interviewing as a technique, as well as visual mapping and written response activities. Each participant completed three interviews, and two mapping/writing activities. The use of multiple different methods of data collection supported data triangulation, but also provided an opportunity for participants to think through and articulate their experiences in varied ways. For example, the mapping and written response activities allowed participants a different way to reflect upon and share their experiences than what occurred in a purely interview format exchange. This offered multiple opportunities throughout data collection for clarification of data, exploration of themes, and constant comparative analysis that was co-constructed between participants and researcher. Information about these techniques and how they were implemented is elaborated below.

**Interviews.** Intensive interviewing is a common method of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014). In intensive interviewing the researcher has certain topics they want to address, but the interview process is not constrained by a particular set of questions that must be asked of every participant in the same way. The purpose of intensive interviewing in the context of grounded theory is to “create and open an interactional space in which the participant can relate his or her experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 57).

Intensive interviewing was particularly useful in the current study, because it maintained an ethos of co-construction between researcher and participants throughout the study. Although each participant was provided with a list of “possible questions” to frame each interview prior to the interviews, there was flexibility with an intensive
interviewing philosophical stance to veer away from the questions into what was most important to each participant’s story. As Charmaz (2014) highlighted, “Both grounded theory methods and intensive interviewing are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (p. 85).

Three semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014; Leech, 2002) framed the current study. Initial interviews were brief and ranged from 14 to 35 minutes in length. Interviews two and three ranged from 48 to 100 and 42 to 78 minutes in length, respectively. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Due to the researcher’s desire to give agency and control to participants as much as possible, each participant was given the option of in person (when possible), Skype, or phone for the format in which to conduct the interviews. All three formats were used, sometimes including multiple mediums with the same participant, and were at the discretion of the participants.

An initial interview was conducted with a primary goal of establishing rapport with participants, as well as exploring what was meaningful to participants prior to college and early in their college careers. Given the sensitive nature of traumatic experience, I felt this interview was particularly important in establishing trust and comfort between the participants and researcher prior to getting into the details of traumatic experience. Retrospectively, I believe this proved a critical aspect of the research, as I noted nervousness with some participants in the first interview that had dissipated by the second interview, allowing us to delve into rich material.
The second interview followed an initial visual mapping/written response activity (discussed in further detail below) and began to explore the participants’ stories of experiencing trauma. Interview two was a space to begin identifying what was meaningful to participants before and after their experiences of trauma in terms of activities, people, places, and ideas. Additionally, the second interview provided an opportunity to begin exploring how participants might have identified before and after trauma and how, if at all, that identification had changed. Finally, this interview investigated participants’ definitions of traumatic experience.

A third interview was used to follow-up on emerging themes, more deeply explore participants’ social roles and social identities as connected to their traumatic experiences, and further investigate the meaning participants made of their experiences of trauma. As Charmaz (2014) explained, there are two goals for the grounded theory interview, which are “attending to your research participants and constructing theoretical analyses” (p. 87). The ability to accomplish both of these objectives often requires additional interviews with a particular participant or carefully added questions for upcoming interviews with new participants. The third interview in this study accomplished the task of furthering the collection of data to support theorizing (Clarke, 2005).

An important component of interviews two and three was that both of these interviews began with participants discussing the visual mapping activity they had completed prior to the interview. This allowed participants to begin the interviews by articulating what had emerged as salient to them both in terms of their processes and
content of their visual maps. This proved a very useful springboard into interviews two and three that focused the conversation to the participants and what was meaningful to each of them, rather than beginning these conversations with what was salient to the researcher.

**Visual mapping and written response activities.** Two visual mapping activities, with corresponding written responses, were embedded between the first and second interviews and second and third interviews, respectively. Specifically, this activity drew on Jones and McEwen’s model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), and served as elicited documents, and additional forms of data to complement interviews and strengthen the study design (Charmaz, 2014). While elicited documents do not allow “the intimacy and immediacy of intensive interviewing” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 48), they do allow for participants to provide data and information in a different way where they are better able to control the extent to which they would like to share about a topic.

During the first interview, participants were introduced to the visual mapping/written response activity. Each participant was asked to create a visual model (however they interpreted that) of his or her identity before trauma. Participants were told they could think about identity however they wanted to, but were also provided with prompts in case they needed assistance in considering elements of identity that were important to them. These prompts were informed by the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) (Jones & McEwen, 2000) including the core, social identities, salience, and context, in addition to a prompt about social roles, a concept not explicitly discussed
in the MMDI. After participants completed their visual maps, they were asked to write a brief reflection about the visuals responding to the following prompts: (a) What is noteworthy to you in your visual representation?; and (b) How does your visual representation work?

After the second interview and before the third, participants were then asked to create a second visual map, but this time focusing on their post-trauma self and experiences. The same identity prompts were provided as options to consider as the first visual map, and again participants were told they could use any, all, or none of these elements. Participants were again asked to write brief reflections about their visuals responding to similar questions as the first visual. The following prompts were provided: (a) What is noteworthy to you in your visual representation?; (b) Thinking about this model and your previous model together, what do these models capture for you connected to your traumatic experience?; and (c) What is missing in these models about your traumatic experience?

As mentioned previously, these visuals and corresponding written responses were the starting points for interviews two and three. Participants were able to begin each of these interviews talking about whatever had emerged most meaningful to them through the process of creating the visual and responding to the written response questions. A wide array of visuals were produced from those that mapped words to those that were elaborate artistic drawings capturing salient elements of trauma. The written responses were used for data analysis, but the visuals were not. Instead, these visuals were used simply as places for participants to think in different ways about their experiences and
then to guide conversation in interviews to connect to what was most salient to participants. Thus, what participants discussed in the interviews about their visuals was used as data that was analyzed, but the visuals themselves were not analyzed further.

**Reflections on data co-construction.** The current study was grounded within a social constructivist epistemological paradigm. Consistent with this perspective, it was assumed throughout this study that knowledge occurs as a process of co-construction in which meaning making is both subjective and situated (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, this epistemological perspective acknowledges knowledge emerging from interactions. As a result, there were multiple aspects of this project that allowed for explicit co-construction of knowledge to occur between researcher and participants.

As the above data collection structure suggests, this study was designed to allow for movement back and forth between researcher and participants in ways that encouraged processes of co-construction. For example, the three interview design allowed for clarification and refinement of themes with individual participants across their interviews. However, this design also allowed for participants to take part in co-construction of meaning making of emerging themes and data. As I progressed through the study, various themes would begin to emerge and I was able to talk about these across interviews and ask participants what meaning they made of them. In some cases, participants would find resonance with something that had emerged in another participant’s interview and then offer additional thoughts on how it worked for them. In other cases, elements of others’ stories did not resonate and then participants would help me to make meaning of how these examples might work in certain situations and not
others. A prime example of this occurred in discussions of visible versus invisible trauma. Multiple participants engaged in conversations about this topic with me to make sense of how it might work in their own experiences but also how it might work for experiences that were unlike their own. Thus, there were numerous opportunities for co-construction across interviews.

Additionally, the use of visual maps and corresponding written response reflections proved an invaluable tool in this study to help refocus the usual power dynamic present between researcher and participants, in which the researcher often drives the process. I provided prompts to participants to consider in constructing the visual maps, but I also stressed that they could use all or none of these in identifying what mattered most to them about their identities before and after trauma. Regardless, each interview that followed a visual activity began with that visual. I would ask participants to tell me about their visual and whatever emerged as most meaningful to them. This was such a critical piece of the research, because it allowed us to start with whatever mattered to the participants rather than what mattered to me. As a result, I was able to begin interviews two and three by following the lead of my participants, and asking follow up questions driven by what was salient to them.

**Data Analysis**

As a grounded theory design, analysis occurred as an iterative process throughout this study (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014). Data analysis for this study relied on grounded theory methods, including analytic memos and coding (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Additionally, situational analyses constituted a complementary analysis
approach that illuminated additional interpretations of the data and encouraged the researcher to maintain space for complexity (Clarke, 2005).

**Memo writing.** Memo writing occurred throughout this study and offered a mechanism by which to engage in ongoing analysis and constant comparative methods with the data. Charmaz (2014) noted the process of writing analytic memos as the connective tissue between data collection and drafts of results. Meanwhile, Saldaña (2011) described an analytic memo as a “think piece of reflexive freewriting, a narrative that sets in words your interpretations of the data” (p. 98).

Three particular types of analytic memos were generated in this study, and collectively contributed to interpretation and analysis of data. First, after each interview, I wrote an analytic memo to capture my initial thoughts and reactions to that data collection event. Additionally, these post-interview memos allowed me to make preliminary observations and connections to other data points in the study. Secondly, I engaged in analytic memo writing while in the process of formal analysis processes (e.g. open reading, coding data, creating situational maps). This was particularly important from the situational analysis perspective of Clarke (2005) as a method to capture my reactions to emerging points of interest in the data and my process as a researcher. Finally, I created general analytic memos sporadically throughout the research project as thoughts occurred to me about the data or other topics that I was reading or learning about that connected to my project. These general memos were also a space for me to reflect upon how I (as the researcher) was being affected by and interacting with the study and participants.
**Open reading.** Both grounded theory and situational analysis require a familiarity with the data in order to work toward interpretation of what is present (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005). In order to gain broad familiarity with my data, I engaged in a process of open reading across all analytic memos, interview transcripts, and written response activities from participants. This initial open reading was conducted with the goals of simply familiarizing myself with the vast quantity of data I had acquired, as well as allowing my initial impressions across the data to emerge and be documented.

As mentioned above, I simultaneously conducted analytic memo writing while engaged in open reading of the data. These memos emphasized capturing data points that I wanted to return to, summaries of important components of the data, and my preliminary analytic meaning making of the data. Memos in the open reading phase of data analysis generated a sizeable amount of additional data, with 88 pages of notes acquired.

**Coding.** As a constructivist grounded theory study, I utilized coding methods specified by Charmaz (2014). Indeed, Charmaz emphasized the role of coding as a “pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory” (p. 113). Specifically, coding occurred with data in two broad phases including: (a) initial coding; and (b) focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Collectively, these two methods of coding allowed for even deeper familiarity with the data, as well as the emergence of important themes that contributed to theory generation.
Initial coding remains close to the data with the goal of trying to define action in selected segments (Charmaz, 2014). Using atlas.ti software, I worked through all the interview transcripts and focused my attention on coding meaningful units of data with an emphasis on action. This process proved particularly useful in forcing me to see what was really happening and emerging in the data rather than superimposing theoretical concepts onto the data. Using Charmaz’s (2014) advice to code with gerunds, I was forced to keep returning to action in the data. This process illuminated themes in the data that I had not previously noticed. In total, 1,039 initial codes emerged from this process.

I next engaged in a process of focused coding to begin fleshing out meaningful categories across the data and initial codes. Charmaz (2014) framed focused coding as a process in which you “sift, sort, synthesize, and analyze” (p. 138). I used dominant codes that emerged in initial coding, as well as information from previous reads of the data and analytic memos to cluster categories across the codes. Coding at this level focused on making decisions about initial codes and advancing analysis towards emerging theoretical implications.

**Situational analysis.** I engaged in situational analysis to contribute to additional meaning making of my data in ways beyond the linearity that emerged through grounded theory coding. In other words, I engaged in what Clarke (2005) described as situational maps “…‘opening up’ the data and interrogating it in fresh ways within a grounded theory framework” (p. 83). Although I returned to situational analysis towards the end of my process to further elaborate and trouble my emerging theory, I began situational analysis early in the process, particularly in mapping out participants’ situations and
Collectively, I used two of Clarke’s (2005) mapping techniques, including situational maps and social worlds/arenas maps to understand my data.

In situational maps, the priority is to articulate all aspects of the situation (human and non-human) and then investigate the relationships that exist between them (Clarke, 2005). I created situational maps for each participant to illustrate the major aspects of his or her situation that proved salient across the data. Essentially, I used a large sheet of poster paper for each participant with his or her name and type of trauma at the top of the page. Then, I added any element of that participant’s “situation” that seemed relevant. There were numerous elements present in any participant’s situation. However, I offer a few brief examples of the types of elements I was adding to situational maps to provide some context for the reader. For example, Liv’s situational map included elements such as important identities (e.g. vegan, yogi, sister), significant people, symbols of trauma (e.g. wearing sunglasses to glass so others did not see her crying), emotions, and activities (e.g. running or not running, watching Netflix) just to name a very few. To offer another example, Violet’s situational map included significant people, work experiences, student involvements, trauma metaphors (e.g. museum imagery, theater imagery), and sources of recovery (e.g. writing, literature), as just a sample of elements.

After creating these maps, I asked questions of these situational elements with an emphasis on the following: a) how does this element work for this participant’s story?; b) how does this element interact with other elements in regards to the intersection of trauma and identity?; and c) how are these individual elements of a participant’s story
connected to elements in others’ stories across the data? As I reflected on these questions, I captured my thoughts and impressions in analytic memos. These early and ongoing reflections on the important elements of each participant’s situation proved helpful in identifying where and how trauma and identity might be intersecting across participants’ experiences.

Social worlds/arenas maps serve as “cartographies of collective commitments, relations, and sites of action” (Clarke, 2005, p. 86). These maps capture a meso level of experience, which is that of social action. Similar to situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps begin with an abstract map in which an attempt is made to articulate all the key social worlds of the situation. Clarke (2005) suggested beginning by seeking to answer the question: “What are the patterns of collective commitment and what are the salient social worlds operating here?” (p. 110).

I created social worlds/arenas maps to capture the dominant spaces of social action in which participants’ experiences of trauma were situated. In some cases, these social spaces where those that participants were willingly participating, while at other times they represented spheres that hovered around participants or in which they were implicated, but not necessarily of choice. For the social worlds/arenas map, I began the work of trying to create more synthesis across participants’ experiences. Thus, I created a macro social world/arena map that captured dominant spaces of social action across participants’ experiences rather than doing this individually for each participant. This work began with me identifying all the social worlds present across my data (e.g. the classroom, student groups, family, policies, social discourses, social identities). Next, I
began to map the larger arenas of which these social worlds were a part. For example, an arena of the higher educational environment emerged to capture many of the interactions students were engaging in on campus. Or, a socially constructed arena was also present that helped to cluster how social discourses and social identities were manifesting across participants’ experiences of trauma. In some cases, social worlds could be part of multiple arenas.

I also created a modified worlds/arenas map inspired by situational analysis, but somewhat more unique to the current study. Specifically, I created a worlds/arenas map that was not focused solely on social actions, but instead on what I perceived to be “identity arenas” emerging in my data. In other words, based on my analysis to date, I began to trace the major dimensions of identity-related work that were emerging for my participants. In this map, I identified seven dominant identity arenas of trauma emerging in my data (Figure 1). These included: ability, embodiment, interpersonal interactions, partial self, vulnerability, kindred connections, and contexts.

![Identity arenas of trauma](image)

*Figure 1.* Identity arenas of trauma.
Collectively, these social worlds/arenas maps allowed me to see the forces beyond the individual that were actively impacting elements of identity connected to traumatic experience, including impacts that occurred pre, during, and post trauma. As I mapped these social worlds/arenas, I asked similar questions of the elements that I did in the situational maps – (a) how does this social world/arena work for this participant’s story/across others participants’ stories?; and (b) how does this social world/arena interact with the intersection of trauma and identity? I continued to document my observations about these questions in analytic memos as I progressed through the social worlds/arenas maps.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research represents the “means by which to assure a study is of high quality” (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014, p. 35). Unsurprisingly, this is a critical component of the qualitative research process, allowing both researcher and readers to have assurance that the study was well designed and executed in ways that support reliable and well-founded conclusions. There are a variety of ways that a researcher can add to the trustworthiness of their study (Creswell, 2013; Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014). In the current study, peer debriefings, multiple data collection points with individual participants, multiple analytic methods, and member checks were implemented as methods towards trustworthiness.

**Peer debriefings.** Peers debriefers offer an external verification of research and aid in interrogating research design and analysis (Creswell, 2013). I included three formal peer debriefers in analysis of this study. Two of these peer debriefers work in the
field of higher education and student affairs, while the third works in a different field. Having perspectives both from within my primary field of study as well as from outside of this field ensured I was seeing a broader view of my data and analysis.

I worked with two of these debriefers (one from within the higher education field and one from outside of) throughout the study to discuss early study design ideas. For data analysis, I worked with all three debriefers by presenting my preliminary ideas as well as emerging theory. The debriefers worked to ask questions of my data and my interpretations that allowed me to both articulate what I knew of the data and reinterpret and refine my analysis. Over the course of these conversations with peer debriefers across data analysis, I went through three iterations of my emerging theory.

**Multiple data collection points.** Triangulation of data is an important aspect of validation in qualitative research by adding “corroborating evidence from different sources” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251) to illustrate findings. The current study relied on many different data points both from multiple participants, as well as varied data sources from the same participant. Collectively, these contributed to assurance of emerging themes.

To being with, rich data was collected from each participant by implementing a three-interview model for the study. This meant rich data from each participant in addition to several opportunities for clarification and elaboration. Additionally, the inclusion of visual mapping and written response activities in the study allowed for additional triangulation of data in different formats than the interview.

**Multiple analytic methods.** In the current study, data were analyzed through multiple analytic methods. This was an intentional choice in order to understand and see
the data in varied ways, as a mechanism towards both increased familiarity with the data as well as rigor in interpretation of concepts. The use of analytic methods from both constructivist grounded theory and situational analysis allowed for multiple ways to see the data, disrupt and inform emerging impressions, and refine theory.

The balance of grounded theory and situational analysis approaches allowed for both careful and structured treatment of the data as well as more organic approaches to work with the data. Grounded theory coding contributed to methodical treatment of the data. Meanwhile, situational analysis allowed for visual and tactile movement of the data to explore relationships and contexts. As Clarke (2005) explained, “Because maps are visual representations, they helpfully rupture (some/most of) our normal ways of working and may provoke us to see things afresh (p. 30). These varied analysis methods contributed to seeing different aspects of the data that would not have emerged within a singular analytic approach.

**Member checks.** Member checking of results was both an iterative and formal process in this study. As interviews were underway, I was able to follow-up with participants across their individual interviews to ensure I was interpreting and understanding aspects of their experiences accurately. Additionally, as interviews proceeded, I began to see emerging themes across the data that I would test with participants to see if they resonated with their experiences or not as a mechanism of constant comparative analysis. This was a productive ongoing process that allowed me to see the emergence of some themes more strongly while letting go of others that did not
have utility across multiple participants’ experiences. In other words, this added another layer of co-construction between participants and researcher.

Finally, once a theory began to emerge, I created a summary sheet of emerging findings. I shared this with all participants and gave each person the option of responding with reactions and thoughts about the concepts. Specifically, I asked for any feedback about how the findings fit with individuals’ experiences or did not. Three participants offered feedback and indicated their experiences were represented in and resonated with the emerging findings. I used their thoughts to refine final explanations of how the theory worked.

**Researcher Reflexivity and Subjectivity**

In constructivist grounded theory, researchers are explicit about their position as co-constructors of data produced and their central role in the generation of the analytic and theoretical product that follows (Charmaz, 2014; Payne, 2007). Several features of the grounded theory process, such as analytic memos and constant comparison analysis, encourage researchers to bring enhanced awareness to how their own backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge bases interact within the research process (Payne, 2007). Unlike methodologies, such as certain traditions of phenomenology, that encourage researchers to “bracket” out their assumptions and biases, grounded theory assumes the impossibility of this pursuit (Payne, 2007). Rather, the constructivist grounded theory approach, in particular, suggests that “researchers must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis” and how “their values shape
the very facts that they can identify” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). To this end, I explore aspects of my background below that directly intersected with this research study.

I bring both personal and professional experience to the topic of trauma. From a professional standpoint, trauma has been an area of research interest for me since my undergraduate thesis. As an English major, I kept trying to blur the lines with my interests in psychology by writing a thesis that sought to understand how the individual survivor crafts his or her trauma narrative against the backdrop of a cultural trauma. My thesis was an analysis of two survivor narratives that grappled with this issue, including Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Since that time, I have continued to find ways to integrate my interests in traumatic experience into my academic work.

Personally, I am a survivor of trauma, which is certainly where my academic interest in the subject was born. My story of survival began during a study abroad trip to France during my sophomore spring of college. One weekend, while traveling in the south of France, I lived out the proverbial being in the wrong place at the wrong time. What I was unaware of at the time was the fact that I was sharing a hotel with an arsonist who decided to light the hotel on fire in the middle of the night once many people were already asleep. A number of additional things went wrong that night to compound the effect, perhaps the most detrimental of which was the fact that the fire alarms had been disabled. What resulted was a very surreal experience where I was trapped on an upper floor on the ledge outside of my window that ran the length of the building, because there was already fire in the hallway and no other way out. I would
ultimately be rescued but not before I had already been badly injured. By the time I was put into an ambulance, the paramedics clearly knew how bad it was, because they instantly gave me an IV to put me to sleep. I would remain in an induced coma for two more weeks as my body fought to stay alive and begin the process of undergoing surgeries and recovery to heal the 2nd and 3rd degree burns that covered much of my body.

As a researcher with personal experience with trauma, it was important to me to self-disclose my status as a survivor of trauma to my participants when I sent them the consent to participate in research from. I felt this was important for a couple of reasons. First, because control is frequently a theme embedded in experience of trauma, I wanted to ensure participants were fully aware of the parameters of the study in advance so they could make decisions about their comfort and willingness in participating. I believe knowledge of the researcher as a survivor of trauma needed to be a part of information necessary in that decision-making process. Second, in presentations I have done in the past about trauma, I have noticed that occasions when I do or do not self-disclose my status as a survivor impacts the audience. What I have found is that when I do self-disclose, the audience is put somewhat at ease and I have specifically received that feedback from audience participants before. Of course, that is likely true for some and not others. I imagined that some participants would be put at ease to know they were speaking with someone who had also experienced trauma. Alternately, I also imagined that other potential participants might feel discomfort talking to another survivor. Thus, I
wanted any potential participant to have that information in advance so that each person could make his or her own decision about what it meant for his or her experience.

My personal experiences of trauma certainly added additional layers and dimensions to the research study. First, there was an additional element of vulnerability implicit in sharing an aspect of my own history with participants, though in return they were being vulnerable with me. Second, in some ways, my personal experiences heightened my ability to understand certain aspects of trauma that I was hearing about from participants and perhaps even connect more deeply with their stories than I might otherwise. This was beneficial in what I was able to see across the course of the study. Naturally, the other side of that is true also. It was equally possible that my own experience would foreclose my understanding of alternate ways to understand trauma. Thus, I was attentive throughout the process while conducting interviews and analyzing data to question how and why I was understanding certain elements of trauma. I wrote memos about my impressions throughout the research process as a method to bring awareness to how my own experience was intersecting with the research. I was frequently reminded of the complexity of this situation through the words of Clarke (2005):

How can we be present and hold ourselves accountable in our research? Without discrediting our research through “personal bias”? And without displacing it with what Daly calls an “intellectual narcissism” that goes over the reflexive edge to produce a study that becomes too much of “us” and too little of “them”? (p. 13)
These are profound questions that suggest a delicate, yet subjective balance in the research process. Especially in the early stages of this research study, I witnessed my own fears emerge as I worried of engaging in a process of intellectual narcissism. However, that concern was not at the level of the work I believed I would produce, so much as a concern of how the work I would produce might be perceived and whether it would be relegated to “me-search” in ways that would detract from its quality or importance. My temptation, then, would be to pull back from my subjectivities and attempt to over-correct for my experiences and not read into what I see and hear. Across the duration of the study, though, I was able to return to a place of balance between these extremes in which I was more fully able to question my assumptions as well as embrace them.

Trauma scholar Beverley Raphael aptly noted that “one cannot fully separate one’s professional development from elements of personal life experience” (Raphael, 2006, p. 153). Similarly, my professional work in the field of trauma studies is deeply entwined with my own experiences as a survivor of trauma. In some aspects, this is helpful in my work. My research is not purely an intellectual pursuit, but also an opportunity for me to offer space to the voices of survivors whose experiences of the profound difficulties and profound insights that come with trauma with which I can empathize. However, I am also aware of the diverse experiences of trauma that are impacted by a myriad of elements surrounding an individual survivor. Thus, as much as my own experience can provide insight and empathy at times, I am also aware of its limitations and my own need to constantly stretch beyond my own experience to ensure
that, rather than hearing my own voice, I am hearing the stories of other survivors in their own situatedness.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the methodology that framed the current study. This study is informed by a constructivist epistemology that foregrounded a belief in knowledge as a process of co-construction. In the case of the current study, that co-construction occurred as a process between participants and researcher. Both constructivist grounded theory and situational analysis were employed as methodological frameworks and informed all aspects of research design. Data analysis relied on methods from both constructivist grounded theory and situational analysis to make meaning of the data in multiple ways and account for both similarities and complications.
Chapter 4: Findings

*We don't seek the painful experiences that hew our identities, but we seek our identities in the wake of painful experiences* (Solomon, 2014).

In a TED Talk delivered in March 2014, writer Andrew Solomon powerfully drew on his own adversities as well as those of others to share a message of choice and resilience. As the above quote notes, we do not generally choose the kinds of hardships that shake our deepest sense of self. Yet, those very hardships bring with them the potential to explore and locate our deepest sense of self in the process. The findings that follow support this very phenomenon that Andrew Solomon describes. The participants in this study certainly did not seek out the painful traumas that they endured; yet, these experiences of trauma simultaneously brought with them the potential for a clarified sense of identity moving forward.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study, informed by situational analysis, was to understand how college student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma in college. Two research questions framed this study, (a) How do experiences of trauma in college affect identity and identity development? and (b) How is traumatic experience in college incorporated into self-definition of identity. Below, I present an emerging theory of how trauma affects college student identity development.
that, based on data analysis using grounded theory and situational analysis methods, synthesizes the experiences of participants in this study into a response to these questions.

**Overview of Emerging Theory of How Trauma Affects College Student Identity Development**

The emerging theory that follows offers a conceptualization of how experiences of trauma in college affect college student identity development (Figure 2). There are three major components to this theory that include (a) pre-trauma orienting systems that shape how meaning will be made of trauma; (b) identity sites where meaning of trauma connected to identity is made through post-trauma tasks; and (c) the outcome of these processes that results in a trauma-informed lens on identity and self in the world.

*Figure 2. Schematic of emerging theory of how trauma affects college student identity development.*
Each of these three major components includes nuanced elements. In the first component, it was evident in participants’ stories that their experiences of trauma are shaped at the outset by socially constructed orienting systems, including their social identities and social discourses around trauma. Thus, these orienting systems very much frame how participants make meaning of their traumatic experiences from the beginning. In the second component of the theory, trauma brings up several dimensions of identity-related experiences with unique trauma tasks that survivors have to navigate. Specially, survivors have to make meaning of their experiences of trauma in terms of their psycho-physical self, their relational self, and their negotiated self. Experiences in each of these domains form what I call “identity sites” – the places where meaning is made post-trauma that directly connects to identity. Finally in the third component of the theory, the outcome of the framing of trauma and the ways that survivors navigate the identity sites results in a lens that they use to interpret and understand who they are in the world after trauma – a lens on identity post-trauma. Each of these components is summarized below and then discussed in further detail in the remainder of this chapter.

**Orienting Systems That Shape Trauma Meaning Making**

Participants in this study did not exist separate from the society and groups of which they were a part. This is an important reminder in considering how these social systems interact with traumatic meaning making. In work to define a model of meaning making of stressful events, Park (2010) observed that literature about adaptation to life stressors supports the reality that “people possess orienting systems…that provide them
with cognitive frameworks with which to interpret their experiences…” (p. 257). I draw
on this notion of orienting systems here to frame the socially constructed elements that
worked to shape traumatic meaning making for participants in the current study. Broad
orienting systems, such as social identities and social discourses, shaped the ways that
participants would begin to make sense of their experiences of trauma. Thus, before any
work at the level of identity meaning making of trauma even began, participants were
approaching their trauma informed by social orienting systems that shaped their
experiences.

**Social identities.** The social identities that participants embody impacted how
they began to make meaning of their experiences of trauma. For example, gender
stereotypes of women as weak and men needing to be strong altered the ways in which
participants would confront the possibility of weakness in their processes. In another
example, socioeconomic status changed the perception of or actual access to resources
for several participants that impacted how they worked to understand their trauma. The
social identities, then, are very connected to broader social discourses. In essence, social
identities also framed some of the discourses to which participants were exposed.

**Social discourses.** Participants were also impacted in their traumatic meaning
making by messages that were internalized from their surroundings. Several examples
emerged of external messages and broader social discourses that shaped the ways in
which participants would be able to start understanding their experiences of trauma.
These external messages often produced a silencing effect for participants in terms of
challenges in fully expressing their experiences.
Post-Traumatic Identity Sites

Three dominant identity sites emerged as places where particularly salient work occurred for survivors after trauma that became the material they used in conceptualizations of their identity after trauma. These identity sites are areas of experience where survivors made meaning of their experiences of trauma in terms of three domains. These included the psycho-physical self (self tasks at the level of the individual), the relational self (self tasks in relation to others), and the negotiated self (self tasks that arise out of negotiations across different contexts). Each of these identity sites, then, contains elements that arise as a unique result of trauma through which survivors navigate. Additionally, it is important to note that participants experienced different intensities of the tasks in each identity site. Certain tasks may take on dominant roles during some parts of recovery and play a lesser role in other contexts or at different times. Thus, there was fluidity in each of these dimensions from participant to participant.

The psycho-physical self. The psycho-physical self is the site of post-traumatic work at the level of the individual. Fundamentally, survivors are trying to address the following question in this post-trauma identity site: How do I understand the psycho-physical elements of my trauma? This work plays out in three areas: (a) re-negotiating ability; (b) managing emotions; and (c) experiencing embodiment.

The relational self. The relational self is the site of post-traumatic work at the level of the individual in relation to others. Fundamentally, survivors are trying to address the following question in this post-trauma identity site: How do I understand my
relationships with others after trauma? This work plays out in three areas: (a) needing others and needing to push them away; (b) living “outside the realm of collective experience”; and (c) experiencing kinship.

The negotiated self. The negotiated self is the site of post-traumatic work at the level of the individual in context. Fundamentally, survivors are trying to address the following question in this post-trauma identity site: How do I understand negotiations with my surroundings across contexts connected to my trauma? This work plays out in three areas: (a) navigating disclosure; (b) navigating vulnerability; and (c) navigating performance.

Developing a Post-Trauma Lens on Identity

As a result of the experiences survivors have in the identity sites, they develop a post-trauma lens through which they understand who they are after trauma. Two important components of this lens emerged from the data in this study. First, participants indicated that trauma was a part of who they were, but did not define their full selves. Second, though trauma does not account for the totality of their identities, participants expressed that trauma did shape the ways in which they both understood and expressed their identities moving forward.

Participant Profiles

Twelve participants comprised the sample for the current study and were principally selected based on their self-identification as having experienced something traumatic while in college in addition to other criteria detailed in the previous chapter. Below, I provide a brief introduction to the twelve participants whose stories will be
shared across this study. Confidentiality of data is important in any research study, but due to the sensitive nature of trauma, it was particularly important to preserve in the current study. Thus, participants were sent early versions of these profiles and were able to make any changes they wished to better represent their experiences and/or protect their anonymity. I include a summary table of key demographic information of participants (Table 1) at the end of the profiles. Noteworthy, demographic information was collected in a written response format rather than multiple-choice. In other words, each participant was able to self-identify with language that was individually representative rather than needing to select from a pre-set list of demographic options.

Aria

Aria is a recent alumna (Class of 2014) who identifies as Asian American, trans, and gender fluid. Aria’s preferred pronouns are they/them/their and will be used from this point forward. Aria was a high-achieving student in college with multiple leadership involvements and strong academic performance. While in college, Aria was confronted by several traumatic experiences that were interrelated. These traumatic experiences include being sexually assaulted and struggling with mental health as well as physical manifestations of the trauma.

Beth

Beth is a recent graduate (Class of 2012). She identifies as a White, heterosexual female. When Beth was looking for colleges, she knew she wanted an experience away from where she grew up. She talked about finding that perfect fit in her institution and quickly fell in love with her college experience. Beth was an athlete in college and found
a close-knit sense of community and support from her teammates. Beth was confronted with an experience of trauma towards the end of her time in college when she learned that her dad had committed suicide.

Jessica

Jessica is a young alumna (Class of 2014). She identifies as a White, bisexual/pansexual/queer, cisgender woman. Early in her college career, Jessica was able to find ways to get connected and build relationships through student organizations, a job, a roommate who became a friend, and a great resident assistant. While in college, Jessica navigated several traumas connected to her family including a serious car accident in which a close uncle died, her father’s hospitalization and declining health, and learning of her mother’s hospitalization for suicidal ideation. What was particularly important to Jessica connected to these experiences was that they were all clustered in a short amount of time and occurred within the same year.

Juan Carlos

Juan Carlos had just graduated from college when he participated in the study. He identifies as a Hispanic, gay man. Juan Carlos was a commuter student throughout college and highly involved in both extracurriculars and the social life of the campus. He described himself as more introverted in high school, but that his college experience allowed him to express his more extroverted side. Juan Carlos’ experience of trauma in college occurred as a process of several events that culminated in suicidal ideation. His sophomore year of college included a process of coming out that led to needing to
confront his own internalized homophobia, and a very stressful semester that produced mental health challenges.

Lauren

Lauren identifies as a queer, White, Christian woman. She had very recently graduated at the time of the study (Class of 2015). When Lauren started college, she was excited by the prospect of an experience and environment that would be different from the small town where she grew up. Finding community was an important aspect of Lauren’s transition to college and a significant place that she found this was through involvement in a Christian campus ministry at her institution. Lauren’s experience of trauma was centrally identity-based and came to a peak during confrontations from her Christian organization about her sexual orientation.

Liv

Liv is a Class of 2014 graduate and identifies as a White, heterosexual woman. She moved away from home for college and soaked up her new life in an urban center. This included introducing new things into her life including yoga and a vegan diet. Liv described herself as being very involved in extra-curriculars in high school, but in college she initially threw herself into classes, socializing, and exploring her new city rather than co-curricular activities. Liv’s experience of trauma occurred into her second year of college when she learned of the suicide of one of her close friends from home.

Natasha

Natasha graduated from college in 2010. She identifies as an African American, straight female. In college, Natasha was involved in her residential community as well as
being an active member of a sorority. Natasha faced ongoing trauma that was less confined to the parameters of particular events so much as to experiences of extreme stress and shaming in her college environment. Additionally, this was compounded for Natasha by a physical disorder that was amplified in the college environment and yet defied a diagnosis for many years.

**Robin**

Robin was a current undergraduate when she participated in the study. She identifies as a Caucasian, straight female. Robin is a dedicated student with a strong sense of future career goals. Being a resident assistant was an important activity for Robin that she spoke of as having shaped her college experience in many significant ways. While a student, Robin lost her father to terminal cancer.

**SJ**

SJ was a current student at the time of her participation in the study. She identifies as a Black/White, lesbian female. SJ attended college in an environment that was very different than the one in which she grew up, and this was something she was actively seeking. In college SJ has been involved in a variety of activities from working as a resident assistant to research assistant to volunteering to spearheading multicultural initiatives on her campus. Early in her college career, SJ was sexually assaulted.

**Tyler**

Tyler is a recent graduate (Class of 2012). He identifies as a Caucasian, heterosexual male. Tyler was involved in the outdoor club at his institution as well as being an active member and leader of his fraternity in addition to several other campus
leadership positions. Tyler was in a serious car accident during college that left him hospitalized and badly injured including severe burns.

**Violet**

Violet had just graduated from college when she began the study. She identifies as a White, straight, female. Violet was heavily involved as a college student, participating in multiple organizations and taking on several leadership positions. Violet confronted two distinct experiences of trauma in college. She was sexually assaulted and later faced sexual harassment in the workplace.

**Zoe**

Zoe is a recent graduate (Class of 2013). She identifies as a White, heterosexual female. Zoe was motivated to move away from home for college. However, this decision proved challenging for Zoe as she began navigating being physically away from her family and their ongoing process of navigating the continued health decline of her father who had Parkinson’s disease. Zoe’s trauma included the ongoing challenges of being a college student with a parent with serious chronic illness, but was punctuated during her senior year when the conversations began to move her father to a nursing home.
Table 1

Participant Demographic Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Gender fluid</td>
<td>Trans</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Upperclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Upper middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cisgender Woman</td>
<td>Bisexual/pansexual/queer</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Lower middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Carlos</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Upper middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liv</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Lower middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Lower middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJ</td>
<td>Black/White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Lower middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Lower middleclass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>Low SES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Orienting Systems That Shape Trauma Meaning Making

Participants entered their experiences of trauma already impacted by certain orienting systems of which they were a part. These orienting systems, in turn, shaped how participants would both experience trauma and begin the work of making meaning of their experiences. Two dominant orienting systems proved particularly important in framing how participants would begin to make meaning of their trauma including social identities and social discourses (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Orienting systems that shape trauma meaning making.

Social Identities

Participants in this study embodied a diverse array of social identities. Across the data, there were many examples of how the social identities of participants shaped how they would make meaning of their experiences of trauma and operated as orienting systems. Generally, there were more examples from participants about how their
marginalized identities shaped their understandings of their trauma, but there were also a few examples of majority identities that played a role, particularly in terms of gender and religion. In the social identity examples that follow, it is clear that these identities worked to frame aspects of initial meaning making of trauma for many participants.

**Gender.** SJ’s gender presented a barrier in initially acknowledging the severity of her traumatic experience. Her identification as a woman created difficulty for SJ in terms of not wanting her experience to fall into broader gender stereotypes about women as weak. As SJ explained it, “This is also part of why I went into denial for a while, because I was resentful of falling into that stereotype that is out there about women being raped by men, and it made me feel like a weak gender.”

Meanwhile, Liv struggled with similar challenges connected to her experiences of trauma related to gender and stereotypes of weakness. For Liv, her struggle in pushing against the female stereotype of being weak and overly sensitive resulted in her not being able to authentically process what she was going through with others.

I think probably my gender played a larger role in processing it. Like if I'm looking back, having always been combative against the female stereotypes of being overly sensitive. All the things that all humans are but are only assigned to women and that weakness that comes along with it. I think that's another element of letting myself be vulnerable and feeling worse about feeling vulnerable because I'm a woman and because we're told constantly that that's weakness and things like that, and so I did have some safe pockets where I can do that but I think that probably impacted my how I process and work through the trauma.
Tyler also confronted the challenges of gender stereotypes connected to weakness that impacted how he made meaning of his trauma. Although Tyler did not have to deal with his gender identification as a man as being inherently perceived as weak, he had to wrestle with the ways that trauma and his diminished physical ability may be perceived as contrary to male stereotypes of strength. He explained that he started to resist help from others because “I wanted to prove myself again, which lead to a complex battle of what is it to be a man versus now as society sees me, ‘a crippled guy’.” These challenges of his gender identity as a man connected to trauma were also amplified within his role as a leader in his fraternity. Tyler explained this as:

When you're in a fraternity there's automatically a hyper sense of what is masculinity. Automatically there. Plus being the president I think added a whole other layer because, if you're the president, inside of you, you have this complex of I have to be seen as the alpha male in certain contexts. But here I am, I can't walk the stairs, so people have to carry me to the president chair. People have to carry me out of the room up stairs. Am I even looked at as the leader, or am I just weak?

**Race/Ethnicity.** Aria connected their racial identity as greatly impacting the way they would navigate making meaning of their experiences of trauma. In Aria’s case, identification as Asian-Pacific Islander brought with it significant frameworks in terms of how Aria felt their racial community conceptualized mental illness and disability, two significant components of Aria’s experiences of trauma. As Aria explained it:
I identify as Asian-Pacific Islander, API community. That within itself brings certain fundamental assumptions with it so a lot of the discourse around mental health, disability was actually made more traumatic because there wasn't space for that identity within the Asian-American identity that my parents had created for me.

In Aria’s case, being sexual assaulted, in particular, was complicated by previous notions that they had of not having ownership of their body. Aria connected this sense of not having ownership of their own body to cultural messages they had internalized growing up as an Asian American woman. As a result, Aria had to confront many of these internalized messages in the early stages of making meaning of trauma. Aria noted that experiences of multiple traumas ultimately resulted in Aria needing to interrogate these messages:

Well, just because I'm Asian does not mean that I'm not privy to this. Just because I'm Asian doesn't mean that I'm weaker and that's why I had a mental health issue. Just because I'm Asian doesn't mean that I can't advocate for myself and that if I say I have a mental health issue, it means that my family has failed.

SJ confronted similar challenges around messages about her trauma because of her racial identity. For SJ, her racial identification impacted how she would ultimately begin making sense of being sexually assaulted in terms of cultural messages about her trauma. SJ explained that, “as a Latina, this topic is taboo. It's not really talked about in our culture.” She went on to confirm that this reinforced a silencing effect for her around her traumatic experience.
**Socioeconomic Status.** For some participants, socioeconomic status became a salient social identity in processing their traumatic experiences in terms of access to resources. For example, Zoe mentioned that “I think if we had more money, then things probably would’ve been different.” She discussed some of the added challenges for her family in navigating her father’s illness and nursing home needs that would have been very different if they had the financial resources to hire help or could have relied on “the right type of insurance” that would have eased the burden.

Meanwhile, for SJ, socioeconomic status meant perceived barriers in terms of what she could do about her traumatic experience. SJ expressed her sense of limited options and predetermined outcomes of trying to pursue any legal recourse against the man who assaulted her that was directly connected to her socioeconomic status:

Yeah, also being the lower middle class that I am, I think that I didn't want to put my parents through, 1, affording a lawyer, and, 2, …just going through the situation of a trial and having - I don't know. I feel like people who have more money get away - I feel like people who have more money get better - What's it called? Are more likely to win a case just because of the lawyer they can afford.

Jessica struggled with resources too and indicated that “socioeconomic status, slash, access to financial resources definitely played a role” in how she moved through processing her dad’s unstable health situation. She discussed being worried about the financial aspects of the situation, and particularly the impacts on her sister who was the one living with her dad at the time:
That, I think, definitely was a big part of it was being afraid also for my sister and how was she going to get the bills paid and take care of the house and take care of herself when she didn't have a whole lot of money and when she didn't have any transportation. She didn't have any friends or family in the area anywhere. She was really by herself…That was something that would preoccupy me as well. Not only can I not be there to do whatever small thing that I could do, but then also knowing that there was nobody else too was really hard.

In a related way, Tyler also started to process his trauma through the lens of finances. In particular, he became concerned about the financial ramifications of his recovery on his family. He discussed the salience of doctor’s bills in his visual representation of his post-trauma understanding of self:

I also placed the Doctor’s bills up there because now a new layer was added as my mom was paying so many bills for my hospitalization. I would question what to advocate for because another surgery was money, PT was money (so I did it myself), medicine was expensive, and the list went on.

**Religion.** Religion appeared as a mechanism through which several participants began to understand their experiences of trauma. Liv attended Catholic school growing up, though she explained that she identifies as an atheist at this point in her life. Regardless, Liv recounted going on a long walk after her friend committed suicide and ultimately ending up in a church and decided to wait and stay for the mass. As she explained, “I think at the time I wanted something, because nothing else had taken meaning. I probably just wanted something that had meaning so badly that I almost took
it as a sign.” Although Liv expressed that she could not ultimately fill the void she felt with religion, it was where she started to try to do that work. Additionally, Liv’s process of understanding her friend’s suicide was complicated by the many Christians in her life, as it caused Liv to feel she could not talk openly about what happened:

There are a lot of Christian ideologies attached to suicide that it made me feel like I couldn’t talk to anybody about it, who was in my direct living community because well suicide is sin - All of these things that my beliefs didn’t necessarily align with….It was really alienating too because, especially when thinking about [my friend] who grew up very Catholic and went to church every Sunday with his family, it's just like why don't you understand that that's not a correlation. Anything related to my mental health; which, at the time, was not great or healthy, fearing or being ashamed of that response of, “well, you should probably just pray about it” or, even worse, “I'll pray for you.”

Beth identifies as agnostic. Despite not practicing in a religious faith, she had points of contact with religion that allowed her to explore her trauma, in particular her ongoing process of learning to forgive herself. Beth explained attending a religious service after her father’s suicide in this way:

I remember going to Easter services a few years ago, and they gave the sermon about rebirth and forgiving one's sins and forgiving one's self, and I just broke down and cried. It just resonated with me. Then you realize, a lot of people are going through things that are very difficult…I think it also just gave me an
appreciation and respect for religion that I didn't have in the past, even though I'm not participating in it, I can see the beauty in the comfort that that gives to people.

SJ was challenged by feeling her lack of religious faith identification made it difficult for her to not internalize guilt over being sexually assaulted. As she articulated, “I still don't identify with any religion and parts of me at the time felt guilty from the situation. I felt like there was no way of me asking for forgiveness.”

Tyler turned to religious grounding as a Christian to provide the opportunity for meaning to be revealed about his situation and he reported that his religious identity was “boosted a lot, because I needed it.” This faith provided a site for Tyler to begin to seek understanding of his trauma. He explained that, “I found myself leaning on God, just asking questions a lot. There were days where I would just cry and I would ask questions like, ‘I know there's a reason, but I need help finding the reason or I need help believing in the reason.’”

Social Discourses

Survivors of trauma are embedded in broader social systems and discourses that also operate as orienting systems to trauma. This was evident for participants in this study, particularly in terms of how the external messages around them worked to inform how they would make sense of their traumatic experiences. A theme that emerged across many participants’ stories was that of external messages that prompted them towards being silenced in their expression of trauma. For a variety of reasons, many participants in the study faced trauma that they felt they could not talk about in the ways they would want to, because of the broader discourses of appropriateness.
Beth confronted this reality because her traumatic experiences included suicide. What was evident in Beth’s story was that she was pushing against a broader social narrative of the taboo of suicide. Beth was reluctant in sharing her trauma because as she put it, “We don’t talk about suicide in our culture.”

Meanwhile, Robin felt a need to silence her experience because of a fear of perceptions of others that she was seeking attention. She explained that:

I'm always very nervous of how I affect others, which is why I'm anxious when talking about it because I don't want to be seen as someone who is crying for attention. That's just not me and has such a negative connotation with that label that I've done my best to avoid it. In avoiding it I've had to not tell anybody certain things.

A particularly poignant story illustrating external messages that provoke a silencing effect of survivors occurred for SJ. SJ and others in this study talked about a reluctance to share their trauma because they didn’t want to upset others or “ruin their day.” When I probed more around this topic with SJ, it became clear that she had kept the people who knew about her trauma to a relatively small circle because of the fear she had about how people would react. Then, she shared a story with me that she witnessed in a class during her first-year of college, long before her own experience of sexual assault:

I think that comes from my, part of my woman's gender sexuality classes. There was this girl who said that she was raped, like casually, like in class, we were just going through a discussion. She just put it out there. One of the group members
that I had, when we had to go back to working on whatever….She was like “gosh that girl just wanted attention, like why would she just put it out there, that's not something that you talk about, like just out in the open like that.” I was just like wow… now I would have said something but during that time, when I had that class I did not …I wish I had said, "that girl it probably took her a lot of courage to say that, and…who are you to say when that should be said or not." I don't know. That's not your right. Yeah the fact that some people would think of it like that, that's just annoying.

Meanwhile, another social discourse that emerged as shaping participants’ experiences of trauma was that of what counts as trauma. Across several participants’ stories, it was evident that they were rubbing up against notions of what counts as trauma in making meaning of their own experiences. And for some participants, this tension was something with which they were actively wrestling.

For example, Jessica really struggled with where to find a place for her experiences of trauma and whether or not they counted against how others might measure them. She was clearly wrestling with issues of whether her experience was dramatic or terrible enough to count. This tension was palpable in the following quote from interview two where Jessica was grappling with this issue despite naming her experience as a “suspension of horror”:

I guess because in some ways the things that happened were very commonplace. There wasn't any fireworks around them. It was all just like, "That's a bad thing." People have car accidents. People have relatives or friends who die in car
accidents. That happens. People have parents get sick, or their uncle get sick, or their grandpa get sick. That happens. That's pretty - I don't know. I guess because it was all things that sort of - Maybe by them- Oh, I don't know. I was going to say, "Maybe by themselves they're not ..." Although, no. Even by themselves, they probably are still traumatic.

I don't know. I guess because it was such a - Some of it was a slow burn thing, where it wasn't like you could say that it had a clear beginning and end point for some of it. People, if they find out, they're just, "Oh, what happened?" And it's like, "Oh, well my dad got sick and he's at the hospital." Then, the next few days, "What's the update?" It's like, "Well, he's still in the hospital. He's still unconscious." What are you supposed to say? There's - It's just sort of like a suspension of horror that is just spread over a long time, and there's no update. There's no - Two days later it's like, "Oh, is he better yet?" No. There's just - Like, "Oh, your mom wanted to commit suicide? Is she all better now?" No, she is not. This is a life long thing.

Zoe noted similar themes. In her explanation, she was clearly aware of a somewhat invisible benchmark against which college trauma could be measured as counting or not. And she was aware that the mold was one that fit much better for trauma that was event-based, which hers was not. She explained it in this way:

I think that that kind of trauma isn't necessarily something that people are concerned about or think about within being in college. Trauma is usually one event that happens and there are certain traumas that are currently getting a lot of
attention. Not that they shouldn't, but there are just certain traumas that are anticipated or normal in those kinds of environments. Then traumas that you don't expect anyone to be going through and that are more than just one event.

Liv experienced her friend’s suicide as traumatic in many ways and articulated it as such. However, she also seemed to struggle with degrees of trauma against some external measure. And in her exploration of this, she even articulated that she would not personally want to rank trauma, but she still seemed impacted by trying to place her experience somewhere in a hierarchy of trauma that was somehow defined at a level of discourse beyond her own.

To me, that feels like a big trauma, and my trauma feels like a little trauma in comparison, which is like weird that I'm thinking about that now…. I don't think I've ever like for other people, I can understand like this to you - This may seem trivial to me but, to you, it's like the big deal. It's a big thing for you and your life right now, and so it's kind of counter-intuitive for me to take the values and policies that I have that I would like rank traumas by how bad they are because I think it's based on that person's experience. For me to minimize my experience, in comparison to something else, is not something I would ever do to or with another human being. Like I wouldn't tell anybody else like, "Well, yeah, but that seems like a little trauma. Let me tell you what I've been through. It just felt weird to do that to myself."
Post-Traumatic Identity Sites

Analysis of data revealed several identity-related experiences that became salient in the post-traumatic reality. These dominant themes will be conceptualized in what follows as identity sites. These identity sites are areas of experience for survivors that activate questions in the post-traumatic reality that are connected to broader questions of “who am I?” Essentially, these identity sites are where survivors make meaning of their post-traumatic reality in ways that are connected to questions of identity.

Three identity sites are noted in the emerging theory including the psycho-physical self, the relational self, and the negotiated self (Figure 4). The elements present in each of these identity sites arise as a unique result of trauma. Additionally, it is important to note that different intensities of individual elements in each identity site will vary by individual.

*Figure 4.* Identity sites for meaning making of trauma tasks related to identity.
**The Psycho-Physical Self**

This psycho-physical self identity site accounts for aspects of experience that are very personal to the survivor and operate at the level of the intrapersonal. Specifically, this identity site accounts for an individual’s psychological as well as physical experiences of self. Although it can be argued that survivors of trauma are not the only ones dealing with intrapersonal questions in identity development, the elements that emerge for survivors in this area prove particularly salient as a result of trauma. Three dominant themes unique to the experiences of survivors of trauma emerged in this category including re-negotiating ability, managing emotions, and experiencing embodiment.

**Re-negotiating ability.** A theme that emerged across participants’ stories was that of having to confront questions about their abled identity. Regardless of whether the trauma experienced by a participant was physical or not, many participants began to grapple with questions of ability status after trauma. In some cases, these were physical questions of physical limitations. In many other cases, the questions that emerged were connected to mental health and questions of whether or not one had a disability as a result of new mental health concerns. Finally, participants were also grappling with general questions of their capacity to cope post-trauma that challenged their general notions of ability in the world.

Tyler’s experience was an example of a traumatic experience that had a very clear physical element to it given his injuries in a car accident. Wrestling with what that meant in terms of his ability identity was something with which Tyler grappled often after
trauma. For Tyler, there were very tangible symbols of disability present in his post-trauma experience, but he resisted this identification:

Then when I got out of the hospital…I think that's when I realized I wasn't going to be able to walk for a long time. Going around campus, or just being out in public in general, I didn't feel like I was going to be handicapped for a long while, or at least I didn't want to identify as being handicapped. But of course I got the handicapped placard, of course I couldn't walk, I was in a wheelchair. I started having a walker, but I refused to identify that way. I don't know why.

Tyler went on to explain that part of his struggle was connected to a loss of independence that threatened his sense of self.

I had lost so much of my independence…I was losing the mere sense of who I was. I refused to accept it for a long time and I took a lot of offense when people would look at me differently or when people would always want to offer help, because I wanted to ask for help before I was offered help.

What was evident in this example and many others across Tyler’s experience was that something had changed and something had been lost. Admitting changes to his pre-trauma ability self was a source of challenge. This type of struggle in comparing the current ability self to a pre-trauma ability self showed up across many other participants’ stories, also.

Beth was instantly confronted with challenges to her pre-trauma abilities after her dad committed suicide. Although her trauma was very psychological as opposed to physical in how she initially experienced it, her trauma started to manifest in physical and
tangible ways such as having panic attacks, and being unable to eat or sleep. Beth’s challenge came through needing to confront something very new in her life – not being able to do things she always could prior to trauma:

It was the first time in my entire life that I just couldn't. I just was decimated. I would have extreme panic attacks where I just couldn't. I couldn't function. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. Just totally broken in that sense, and also not used to be broken, like broken in the sense that, both literally and figuratively, that I couldn't turn myself on. I couldn't function in the world. I couldn't rely on my faculties that I had trusted and known, and it's also weird because you're in college too, right? You're still forming your own agency and your own identity, and there are things that I had trusted in myself for 20+ years that I was like, "Where did they go? Why can't I just think straight? Why can't I read a book and not be able to remember what I just read?"

Jessica described herself as “able, no disabilities” when she began the study. She mentioned that although many people in her family had struggled with mental illness, it had not been a concern for her. However, her experiences of trauma brought forth challenges to her mental health that caused Jessica to start grappling with how to define her ability status, especially in terms of her mental health. As she started to confront the reality that she was dealing with what might be depression and anxiety after experiencing trauma, she was no longer sure what that meant for her ability identity:

I think that that got me thinking about whether or not I could claim to be ... I don't know...I think that got me questioning, "Is this going to be something that ... This
anxiety or this period of depression, is this something that's going to last? Is this something that's going to come back? If so, what does that mean for me thinking about myself as someone who doesn't have mental health problems?"

Violet, meanwhile expressed something that came up for other participants, which was that of just trying to cope after trauma. Prior to her experience of trauma in college, Violet expressed that she was highly driven and motivated by achievement. But, trauma started to challenge that and brought forth questions for Violet of how she would be able to cope. In other words, Violet started to question her basic ability to just get through the day:

I think the biggest thing was, and I think achiever is still in my top in terms of strengths but achievement took a backseat to just existing and to getting through the day. I don't think I necessarily noticed it because I was so busy trying to exist within those first few weeks…but I also realized I couldn't even achieve anything because I couldn't stay afloat at that time. That was pretty big.

**Managing emotions.** Plutchik (2001) has mapped an evolutionary basis for emotions stating that, “emotions are activated in an individual when issues of survival are raised in fact or by implication…The effect of the emotional state is to create an interaction between the individual and the event or stimulus” in “an attempt to reduce the disequilibrium and reestablish a state of comparative rest” (p. 346). Given this perspective on emotions, it is perhaps not surprising that experiences of trauma brought forth a barrage of emotions for participants in this study.
The strongest themes of emotions that emerged from the data were negative emotions. Themes of loneliness, anxiety, shame, guilt, anger, fear, judgment, feeling misunderstood or invalidated, sadness, weakness and inadequacy dominated coding of the data. However, resilience was also present. Past research supports the fact that emotions, particularly those that are negative, induce increases in self-focused attention and self-awareness (Silvia & Eddington, 2012). Similarly, in the current study, experiences of emotions, particularly those with negative charges, induced identity-related exploration for participants.

For participants in this study, emotions were strongly present across their experiences of trauma. In terms of identity related post-traumatic work, participants were very actively managing and making meaning of emotions that emerged after trauma. This is echoed in the work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) who underscored the important role of affective experience in meaning making after trauma. Specifically, they noted that cognitive engagement with traumatic experience is critical in growth after trauma, but so, too, is the processing of trauma at an affective level. In other words, meaning making of trauma occurs because the intellectual is combined with the transformative power of powerful emotions. As participants in the current study began to experience strong emotions connected to trauma, they worked to make sense of these as a process of clarifying the self within and after the traumatic experience. Similar to what Plutchik (2001) described as emotions serving the purpose of catalyzing a return to equilibrium, emotions for participants after trauma propelled explorations of identity towards stability.
Questions of what the trauma meant for the self were prompted very immediately for Lauren after her traumatic encounter. She recounted going to her car, and after having held it together through the immediate traumatic moment, completely breaking down into tears once she was alone. This emotional expression catalyzed a reflection process for Lauren as she began to process through her emotional response and its meaning for aspects of her identity. Lauren’s experience of trauma ultimately led her towards a more strongly defined sense of self that she was more comfortable being able to stand up for with others. Her emotional response right after trauma represented some early work towards this identity outcome. As Lauren recalled of that moment:

I don't know exactly what the tears were about, but I think that it was definitely being hurt and being ... I feel like betrayed was also kind of a narrative that was kind of going through my mind, but also exhaustion of actually standing up for myself and just feeling completely alone.

Tyler’s experiences of emotions prompted questions of what was authentic for him. In the past, he had been perceived by others as upbeat and positive, and felt some pressure to uphold this image through this recovery. However, Tyler started to experience strong emotions that prompted him towards questions of authenticity in interactions. The authenticity theme became a strong one that Tyler returned to several times in the course of his recovery. Specifically, his experience of emotions of deep sadness and loneliness prompted explorations of what was true to who he was and what he was allowing others to see. Tyler recounted some of this work emerging while he was still in the hospital:
I don't think I did the best job coping, to be honest. I think that that piece really formulated in a negative way, honestly, because what ended up happening is, I wouldn't break down until I was by myself, which being by yourself is the worst time to break down. You're talking about being on all these medications, having all of these feelings, battling what it is to maybe be semi-depressed, maybe. I never would have called myself that, because I was just so resilient. It was so awful, because there were times where I just felt so alone. I wasn't alone, but it was just because me being happy all the time made me close off so many people in the way of talking about the accident, or talking about the feelings I was having. As far as they were concerned, I was resilient. I was happy. I was recovering. I was healing. I was determined, motivated. Whatever word you wanted to put in there, that was me. Behind closed doors, I was sometimes a totally different person, because I was the one looking at my leg. I was the one dealing with it, and I didn't want anyone else having those feelings or seeing me in that state, I guess.

Liv was confronted by strong feelings of guilt after her friend’s suicide. She talked about feeling guilty that her brothers were alive, while someone else’s was not. She also talked about guilt around many of the activities and identities that had been important to her prior to her friend’s suicide, including those that had represented a commitment to a healthy lifestyle including yoga, running, and a vegan diet. The guilt feelings submerged Liv in closely related feelings of meaninglessness to these identity
components. Thus, for Liv, the strong emotion of guilt caused her to question so much of her previous life and identities. Liv talked about these questions in the following way:

I think all of the way that I had seen myself in the world as an awesome big sister, a dedicated friend and a helpful and fit person, I didn't see myself as any of those anymore…

I think they are just so tightly tied to that that it's just hard to be proud of any of those things when now they are just associated with bad…

Feelings of why should I care about what I am doing with my body when [my friend] doesn't have one anymore or what is the purpose? Why is it not or why would I care to be healthy? I am just going to die anyway. That was very pervasive, especially right after that happened. Eventually, those types of feelings of guilt subsided but the behavior that I had implemented and the active stopping of those things has still persisted.

**Experiencing embodiment.** Peter Levine (2010) noted that “most people think of trauma as a ‘mental’ problem…However, trauma is something that also happens in the body” (p. 31). This reality was apparent across many participants’ stories regardless of whether or not the original trauma had physical origins. Participants described aches and pains, troubles sleeping, focus and memory challenges, a lack of energy, and changes in appetite and weight after trauma. What was significant about these physical effects of trauma was that they became sites for participants to understand themselves in different ways. The salience of the body after trauma opened up new insights for many participants about who they were.
Aria’s traumatic experience of sexual assault and an amplification of a physical disability resulted in a very profound re-evaluation of their relationship with their body. Aria discussed how they lacked a sense of ownership of their body prior to these traumatic experiences. In part, Aria attributed this to their cultural background in which Aria was not really taught to think of this kind of ownership for their body. However, Aria explained that the shame around sexual assault and disability forced them to think much more critically about how their body was connected to their self-concept:

All I knew is that it took these two hugely traumatic events for me to even be willing to be like, I need to completely re-conceptualize this whole thing that I have with my body, and what does it mean to be beautiful, what does it mean to be able, and what does it mean to be empowered through one's body and what one can do.

Beth’s experience of trauma induced many changes to her body in the months following her dad’s suicide. As she remarked, “I think your body holds onto grief in spaces within your body.” Beth felt tired and lethargic and gained weight. She talked about how she was notably sick multiple times in the year after her dad died and that she interpreted that as a manifestation of the trauma. What compounded this effect for Beth was that she had been an athlete in college. So her experiences of her body in a diminished state that she could not just push through was a new challenge for her. Beth’s ability to learn about herself through these body changes coincided with finding yoga. It was there that she started to find physical releases to her trauma and messages that it was
ok to not push through, something that was different than what she had previously known as an athlete. Yoga helped her reframe how she understood herself through her body:

There was something so wonderful about being in yoga and having an athletic activity that I could excel in or the message was it’s okay if you can’t get into this pose tomorrow…What matters is you showed up and you’re here and this is your time and don’t look at the people around you. Be very present and focused. I think it was my first practice in forgiveness. It was learning to, as an athlete, forgive your body for not being able to do the same thing all the time.

Liv felt the impact of trauma on her body almost immediately after her friend’s suicide. In college, Liv had taken up yoga and a vegan diet. Prior to her experience of trauma, yogi and vegan were important identity markers to her as she prioritized the health of her body. However, after her friend’s death, there was a sudden inability for her body to do what it had been doing that caused Liv to lose her identification with these identities that were so connected to her physical self:

I remember trying to go on a run…I would always walk down to my starting spot and then run a couple of miles down and back each way. I remember I started going and then I just couldn't go anymore. I sat down on this rock, overlooking the river and just cried.

That was the last time I went to go run there. It was a lot of feelings of why does this matter anymore? It seemed really insignificant…this self-care piece and wanting to be healthy. It just seemed pointless.
The Relational Self

Brown (2008) noted the connection between identity and interpersonal relationships for survivors of trauma by explaining that “trauma often lands squarely in vital components of identity and can interfere with basic human expressions of self, particularly those aspects of being human contained in people’s capacities for relationship” (pp. 50-51). In the current study, actual and anticipated interactions with others emerged as a site of significant exploration for survivors in their understandings of self after trauma. The relational self captures the dynamism that was present in this dimension, as relationships with others had both attractive and repulsive characteristics. Three themes emerged including: (a) needing others and needing to push them away; (b) living “outside the realm of collective experience”; and (c) experiencing kinship.

Needing others and needing to push them away. It was evident across participants’ stories that relationships had oppositional forces. Sometimes participants needed supportive others through their trauma, while at other times they need to push others away. Violet captured her awareness of a heightened need for both of these relational forces. In her case, the intensity of the juxtaposition of needing others and pushing them away was a marker that indicated she was struggling post-trauma.

There was definitely a dissonance there. I think I also became emotionally distant, but more intense where I would push people away but then I would desperately need them and not know how to articulate it. Sometimes I got upset and then I would get really emotional and really intense.
Juan Carlos was also retrospectively aware of both of these relational elements of his own experiences of trauma. Although he at many times was detached from others and felt alone, he also needed the outreach of others. Specifically, while Juan Carlos’ experience of trauma was stretched out as a process across his sophomore year, it was in fact his distancing from others paired with their outreach to him that helped him make meaning of what was going on. However, even as Juan Carlos was acknowledging the severity of his situation and his suicidal ideation, he was feeling a tug and pull with his relationships:

Any sort of support that I had in helping me go through this, aside from me telling people that I was suicidal, was like, "Stop helping me. I don't want to be helped right now. I just want to die because I don't want to feel this pain anymore and you helping me would ..." I don't know. It's still something that I don't understand about myself….The fact that I wanted to take away my life and the fact that I was having that mental state in a weird way was still me controlling how I felt.

Many participants used words like “hiding” or “closed off” to articulate what they were doing in their connection to others after trauma. Liv discussed her immediate challenges as a resident assistant and not yet having skills to deal with the intensities of her trauma as manifesting in her need to distance herself from others. This was something beyond psychological compartmentalizing, but rather a very physical act of distancing herself from others. As Liv explained it, “Not so much compartmentalization as closing my door and crying. Hiding, more than compartmentalizing.”
SJ described her process of starting to date a lot of people after her sexual assault. Although that may seem like needing people closer, this action seemed to be much more connected to her need to push people away. Indeed, SJ described that process as one of “stroking her ego” but simultaneously having a superficiality and performance value to it. At a deeper level, she was actively distanced in relationships. SJ reflected that, “I was closed off, with just not sharing my true feelings, or wanting to actually ... I did feel very alone that semester. I don't know, I was closed off, I made myself closed off.”

Beth thinks of herself as an extroverted person and noted that she had very supportive family and friends through the trauma. Following trauma, she was taken care of by many wonderful friends, as well as her mother, and she welcomed this. However, she also talked about her need to detach from others and talked about a gratitude for it being “socially acceptable to just watch Netflix, and like chill” because there were days when she needed to stay in and do that alone. The trauma caused her to keep others at an increased distance for her own protection.

I actually think even though I'm a pretty outgoing, extroverted...when it comes to these big things, I don't want to talk about it. I'm pretty closed off, and if anything, I actually think this experience has made me more emotionally closed off. I'm not sure if that'll ever change. I feel like I was willing to share more about myself, and my fears and hopes and dreams, before my trauma. Now that my fears are so extreme, I don't want to share them with just anybody anymore; or with even a close group of friends.
Lauren’s experience of trauma produced a great deal of confusion for her connected to her relationships with others. Immediately after, she said she felt like she “shut down” her queer and Christian identities while she tried to find a way to stay within the Christian group that had been her source of community. When she finally found a new Christian group that did embrace her for who she was, there was a tension for her. She wanted to be embraced and believe their messages of acceptance, but she was also very guarded. This guardedness merged across other areas of Lauren’s life as a student and after graduation, as she intentionally worked to keep people at a distance after her experience of trauma.

I didn't tell people when I was feeling sad, when I was really anxious about a paper. I just wanted them to accept me. I was like, "If I say something, that's going to scare them away." That's still my thought process of right now…”I have to be careful so I don't scare people away."

Although participants had many reasons to pull away from relationships, they also had reasons to draw themselves nearer to others. In Tyler’s case, supportive others allowed him to stay focused on achieving future goals. He talked about the many supportive staff members and professors on his campus who were fundamental in “[pushing] me to go into all of these leadership positions and to not let my dreams subside.” Additionally, Tyler was anxious to get back to college and re-engaged in his fraternity. He cited these connections with his friends at school with his ability to start trying to resume his life again and that the support of friends allowed him to “explore” more than he was feeling his family or doctors were letting him do in moving forward in
his recovery. As Tyler was drawing friends closer, he was also pushing family further to the distance – a process he felt he needed to do to regain his independence.

Aria became even more aware of the importance of interpersonal connection in their life through their experiences of trauma. In particular, Aria became grateful for significant mentors who helped them through the process, which inspired a desire in Aria to connect to others and help when the opportunity arose.

My conceptualization of me as a mentee became even more so post-trauma because, during the trauma, they were always supporting me. I really appreciated them. I think it was really after that I began to develop a respect and appreciation and…this notion of wanting to pay it forward.

Jessica also relied very much on the support of people in her college environment to help her get through her experience of trauma. She was connected to many people on her campus through her involvements as a student leader and said she needed and appreciated the people who kept checking in on her. In fact, being able to rely on those relationships was critical for Jessica through her traumatic experiences. She shared that, “It was hugely important. That support network was a huge thing for me. All 4 years, but especially when I was going through all that shit.”

Living “outside the realm of collective experience.” Erikson (1997) noted that the process of identity development is made all the more challenging once we consider not simply our own evaluations of our identity, but also how others perceive us. As Erikson explained, “The greatest problem we encounter is who we think we are vs. who others may think we are or are trying to be” (p. 110). Participants in this study faced
distinct challenges connected to the perceptions of others that often originated from the realities that participants had lived through something many others had not. As participants were in an already active state of meaning making of a new post-trauma context, how they were perceived by others took on heightened importance.

A significant challenge that participants faced in this study related to others’ reactions was a general inability for many others to know what to do to support the participants through trauma. Many participants noted that the people who knew what to do were those who had also experienced trauma, while others often had no idea where to start. Beth talked about this challenge with her boyfriend at the time of her dad’s suicide and how “he just really couldn’t be there for me.” Meanwhile, when Robin told a professor she had been up crying the night before an exam, the professor was perplexed to learn Robin was crying about her dad’s death since “that was two months ago.” Zoe felt another student whose father was also battling Parkinson’s disease could understand her experience, but most of the other students she told had no framework to understand what that meant for her daily experience. Thus, an immediate challenge participants had to navigate was living through something others could not understand.

Liv was confronted with this reality early on, as she soon came to the awareness that she had moved beyond the collective experience level of her friend group. And, even after she transferred to a new school and time had passed since her friend committed suicide, Liv continued to anticipate the reality that many of her peers would not be able to understand what she lived through. She described this process as alienating:
I had my close friend group but, now, all of a sudden, I was the only one in that friend group who would have this experience and who is struggling with this, specifically at that time. That was really alienating because I couldn't find that comfort in those relationships like I had been. That was the first time that I had experienced something that was out of the realm of our collective experience. It was just hard to work through some of those relationship pieces and those friend pieces. I think that when I went to [my new institution], I probably still had some of those feelings of nobody has gone through this, nobody can really understand what this impact had on me because that's an experience that I had with my friend group.

Robin felt similar challenges that others did not know what she was going through. In her case, she had one friend who had experienced a similar loss and she could connect with him, but she was very aware of the limited circle of peers within which she could be understood. She explained that, “When it first happened I remember thinking, I was like, nobody understands how sad I am and just nobody has gone through this. I have gone through the worst thing ever and just feeling super alone.” This became especially poignant for Robin as she grappled with the reality that her best friend at the time was unable to really grasp how she was impacted by her father’s illness and death. Robin was retrospectively able to realize that it was in large part due to the fact that her friend had lived a privileged life free from trauma:

That was really hard because that was the person I was closest to at the time. I was like, "It's effecting me in ways that you aren't able to understand and I see
that now." What she had told me about her life, but she has not had any sort of traumatic experience whatsoever. She came from a very wealthy family. Her siblings are healthy, her parents are healthy. It's very loving and supportive. Her mom is her absolute best friend, which just wasn't my experience at all. Looking at it I can see why it's hard to see it from anyone else's point of view if you've never had any major heartbreak or negative experience happen to you. I think that's part of why I am able to put myself in other people's shoes so often is because I've had a pretty great deal of it.

**Experiencing kinship.** Across participants’ stories, there was a general sense that each person’s experience of trauma made them feel more understanding of others experiencing struggle. It was not always the case that participants felt a strong affiliation with those others who experienced their exact type of trauma, but there was an overarching sense that living through trauma made each participant feel much more connected to others who had lived through trauma generally. In essence, a feeling of kinship with others living through challenge emerged.

Robin explained that she has deeper connections to others who live through struggle as a result of now knowing it from the inside. As she articulated, “I’m much more able to connect with people who have had something like this happen instead of just looking in from the outside because I had gone through this.” Natasha noted that her feelings of connection with others who have lived through trauma is in part dependent on a mutual recognition of trauma – that they can validate hers as she can theirs. But, when Natasha feels that connection with another purpose who has endured trauma and that her
own trauma is validated it manifests in her being able to see the similarities. “I can see them. I can hear the same language as me or things I've said before.” Meanwhile, Liv recounted that she feels she is able to connect with others around their struggles and “have meaningful conversations…because of my experiences.” This was a sentiment echoed by Jessica who reported that she felt “like now I can relate to other people a little bit better. I have a little bit more empathy.”

Aria’s collective experiences of trauma led to a profound realization of kinship and connection that was illuminated in a group therapy setting. As Aria explained it:

Prior to my first session of group therapy actually, I always thought that my experiences would isolate me from others. I think that's really because I always grew up very isolated because of my difference was made to be isolated. After I went to group therapy in particular, I realized the possibility of kinship within mental health and across other identities that I hadn't thought about as deeply before. I think at some point, I don't know where in my life, I had accepted the fact that because of who I am, I was never going to fit.

Violet also remarked that she felt a new sense of connection with others who had lived through trauma. She noted that it was almost something that defied words. Instead, she described it as an experience or sensation:

I don't think it's even something that you can talk about and communicate. It's the weird moment where both of your eyes lit up, oh my God you do that too and the same way that somebody might be like oh my gosh red nail polish is my favorite, oh my God mine too…A lot of it has to do with shame, but I think a huge piece of
connecting with people who have been traumatized especially in the sexual space of it or physically assaulted, it's just talking about it. Sometimes you don't even realize how liberating that is until someone opens up.

The Negotiated Self

Participants were embedded in environments, relationships, and discourses that challenged how they were able to make meaning of their traumatic experiences. The negotiated self site captures aspects of post-traumatic experience in which survivors were navigating aspects of the self interacting with surrounding contexts. Specifically, three themes emerged in this area. First, survivors were faced with challenges in terms of deciding when and where they were able to disclose their trauma. Second, participants expressed how their experiences of trauma heightened their vulnerability generally, but also how this could be amplified in particular settings and situations. Finally, participants articulated the need to conceal aspects of their experience from others either in the form of not being able to bring their full selves into interactions and/or needing to put on a performance.

Navigating disclosure. A significant theme that emerged across all participants' stories was that of the often complicated task of figuring out how to disclose their trauma to others. Participants had to weigh a variety of factors in their decision-making concerning this process. Generally, navigating the process of disclosing trauma was highly contextual and situational.

The first task confronting survivors about disclosure was that of how to navigate the difficult terrain of determining when and where to disclose their stories. Aria noted
that “where I still have trouble disclosing is for me, I’m still learning how to navigate
dehow much is too much.” And, perhaps a very big barrier to disclosure for participants
was a reality that SJ expressed of the intense resistance against stories of trauma. As she
said, “I feel like trauma is a big elephant in the room that people just don't talk about.”

Disclosure could be complicated by perceived unspoken rules about (a)
appropriateness; and (b) how others will react. Lauren was challenged by figuring out
the when and where of disclosure based on how it might impact her ability to be accepted
by a community. She confronted questions of “Do I tell them that I've been through this?
Do I tell them that in order to be accepted or do I want to ease into the community at
first?” Meanwhile, although SJ really wanted to be able to share her story with a
professor, she was reluctant. As she explained it, “a part of me just wanted to spill it all
out and just tell her….Some part of me felt like it wasn't appropriate. I don't know why. I
think because of the taboo that's in it.” Beth was reluctant to tell significant others in new
relationships out of fear that they would think she had “severe daddy issues.” Finally,
Robin felt that some spaces just were not appropriate for her to disclose, particularly in
professional settings.

At others times, disclosure was a matter of determining trust. As Beth put it, “I
have to trust somebody like 110% to tell them what exactly happened.” Robin was able
to tell a mentor about her trauma because of that trust and comfort level. She shared that,
“I felt like she was invested in me and cared about me, which is usually when I will either
bring it up or say something about what I've gone through. When people show that
they're a safe person to talk to, I suppose, I'll open up about it.”
An additional theme that emerged around disclosure was that of forced disclosure. This represented situations in which the survivor was compelled to share their story not necessarily of their own choosing. It was clear that this added a different dimension to traumatic meaning making.

Because of the visibility of Tyler’s trauma in the form of scars, he was often confronted with situations of forced disclosure when others saw his injuries. He shared stories of being in professional spaces with new people or in public spaces like grocery stores where he would be aware of others looking at his scars and then the inevitable question of “If you don’t mind, can I ask what happened?” And this would instantly put Tyler into scenarios of feeling that he then had to disclose what happened or choose being seen as rude if his response was that he did mind. He explained that those curious others, “don't know what can of worms [they] could be opening for somebody, but people do it.” As he described it:

When it comes from people that are insensitive, even if they don't mean to be insensitive, it's just a, "I want to know what happened to you." That's when I get disappointed because I may not be in that space to share, depending on where I'm at, and I may not be in the mindset to share. Usually I can talk about the accident without getting triggered, but depending on the space and the time, and who's around and how deep they go, I think people don’t always recognize what they're digging up.

Although there were many elements of these situations of forced disclosure that were difficult for Tyler, he also noted that in some respects it pushed his recovery
forward too. He was clear in stating that he did not appreciate being in situations of
forced disclosure. However, there were also elements of that that resulted in him needing
to come to terms with the situation sooner than perhaps he would have otherwise.

People will always ask. People will always be insensitive. People will always
stare. So if I don't reconcile, then I'm almost doing myself a disservice. I don't
appreciate that that's the way it is to a point. Because again you're forcing
yourself to get to a certain point without you actually being willing to do it
yourself sometimes.

The other side is, I looked at it as if I don't reconcile this on my own….Then I'm
going to be unhappy every single day. Instead, by reconciling with it and by
accepting this “I'm going to be different,” and accepting that people are going to
ask me about it, then I can go to the store and not necessarily be like, "I hate my
life, I hate my life, I hate my life." Instead, I'm okay, it's probably going to
happen. Just suck it up and get through it. It's a two-fold thing. It's a double-
edged sword. I don't appreciate it, but you also pushed me forward because now
I'm in a better place because I'm just going to accept it.

Forced disclosure also occurred for participants through formal processes and
procedures. For example, Aria noted a struggle with health forms that may force
disclosure of mental illness, particularly as part of professional opportunities. Aria’s
need to indicate a mental illness is intricately connected to layers of their traumatic
experience that they may or may not want to disclose and process. Additionally, Aria
then wonders if they experience exclusion from certain opportunities because of their
disclosure.

SJ confronted similar challenges connected to academic and financial aid
procedures at her institution following her sexual assault. As a result of SJ’s traumatic
experience, her grades dropped, which resulted in her needing to explain this to people at
her institution with whom she would never otherwise have wanted to be vulnerable. SJ
shared two very poignant examples about experiences of forced disclosure. The first
example was about SJ’s experience of needing to explain to a professor why she was
struggling academically after being sexually assaulted:

Me going into talk to [my professor] is something I definitely would not have
chosen if I had the choice. I almost felt like I had to force myself to open up in a
sort of way even though I did have the desire to open up when I was there to tell
her something, but in another way I also felt like it was like I had to force myself
to open up a bit in order to just plea for sympathy or understanding why I did a
certain way in the class. It felt like I had to strip myself to someone that I didn't
even know and that bothered me. I felt very bothered by that.

Unfortunately, the intense vulnerability of forced disclosure in the academic
environment did not end there for SJ. As a student with a scholarship, she was also faced
with needing to explain to the financial aid office at her institution why her grades had
dropped. What likely seemed just a straightforward procedure from an administrative
perspective, resulted in an extremely difficult situation of forced disclosure for SJ that
produced intense emotions:
I had to put in an appeal for my scholarship… I had to sort of explain what had happened sophomore year and just get a note from [my counselor and academic support] and documentation to my appeal. I'm literally telling my story of what I went through to people in financial aid that I don't even know, I will not know probably. It's like stripping yourself vulnerable.

Just typing those 3 words like, "I was raped," just to type those 3 words out, 3 short small words, there's so much that's within that. Seeing myself type that, it was just like, "Wow." I felt anger for how it could be put so simply.

**Navigating vulnerability.** It was evident that many participants felt a heightened sense of vulnerability as a result of their experiences of trauma. What was present for many participants in the study was a sense of having different kinds of vulnerabilities in their lives post-trauma than might have been present prior to trauma. Particular contexts, particular things that might be said, and particular events, may all bring up vulnerabilities connected to the participants’ experiences of trauma.

Jessica felt a vulnerability connected to her experience that prompted her to feel that it was not something that she could just share with anyone. As she explained, “I just feel like it's definitely something vulnerable to talk to someone else about. You don't want to just ... I don't know ... just show your wounds to anyone.”

Both Robin and Liv had examples of their increased vulnerability in classroom spaces that was taken for granted. Robin was in a class where the lecture on cancer was framed by the professor in terms of how “cool, and this is the way it works.” Robin remarked that the professor was “not really even aware that maybe she should rephrase
those a little differently because maybe there are people who have firsthand experience with it, and yes the science of it is cool, but the disease itself is not.” In Liv’s case, she was sitting in a psychology class when the topic of suicide emerged and the professor’s treatment of the material brought forth intense vulnerability for her.

We talked about it quite a bit, and especially in normal psychology, just like the clinical, that suicide was talked, was hard, because cognitively I understand that all what the textbook is talking about suicide, it's different if you know a person and you're trying to fit them into that mold…I still don't understand why this professor asked if people had personal experiences or something.

For Tyler, vulnerability came through reconciling his diminished capacities with the comparison of his previous self. He struggled considerably with how he could be vulnerable while simultaneously being a leader. As Tyler explained, “That's where it's just like, okay, how do you mitigate being vulnerable, being a leader, and then also trying to also be your old self, if you will, where people don't view you as just handicapped?”

Lauren has a heightened vulnerability in new religious communities now as a result of her experience of trauma. Because of what she lived through, there is always the question of whether she will be accepted and whether she will be safe. Lauren shared that “The memories of the trauma, so definitely contributing to, and still today contributing to, this feeling of I'm not safe in some spaces.”

Navigating performance. For many participants, experiences of trauma created scenarios moving forward in which the individual survivor was unable to bring their full self into interactions with others. In some instances, this was because others did not
know what they had lived through and the meaning it carried. In other cases, survivors very actively created a “show” or performative part of self when they wanted to avoid getting into the nuance of their experience.

Tyler talked about the “façade” that he put on in the hospital during the day so his family and visitors would not know if he was in pain or struggling. Then, he would process things more authentically at night when he was alone. Although this seemed to work for him in the hospital, the “façade” upkeep proved very challenging once he returned to school and was with people all day long.

Here in college, now it was like, "I have to figure out how to either cope by myself, or somebody's going to know." Because throughout the day, it just got taxing. It's like, how do you hide it for twenty-four seven that you're scared about losing your leg or whatnot?

Part of what compelled Tyler to feel that he could not present his authentic experience to others was connected to his worries about how he would be perceived. Tyler was a leader in a variety of capacities on his campus and he was nervous about how this social role might be impacted if people saw what was truly going on for him. However, the process of needing to hide and put on a façade took its toll on Tyler:

It was so awful, because there were times where I just felt so alone. I wasn't alone, but it was just because me being happy all the time made me close off so many people in the way of talking about the accident, or talking about the feelings I was having. As far as they were concerned, I was resilient. I was happy. I was recovering. I was healing. I was determined, motivated. Whatever word you
wanted to put in there, that was me. Behind closed doors, I was sometimes a totally different person, because I was the one looking at my leg. I was the one dealing with it, and I didn't want anyone else having those feelings or seeing me in that state, I guess.

SJ was in a very similar situation as a student leader. As a resident assistant, she felt she had certain obligations as a leader to seem like she was fine on the outside and not let her residents know what was really going on. SJ talked about how in public she was “pretending to be happy, but I felt everything. But inside, was just hard itself, especially being around school where I'm a resident advisor.” However, one day she ended up in a situation that burst the performance wide open.

I was crying. I don't know why. I would just stay and just cry and keeping to myself. I was like, "Maybe I'll just step outside for some fresh air," and when I went out into the hallway, I just cried more. I don't know why. I know some of my residents saw. I felt like I didn't want a pity party. I'm supposed to be the RA. I'm supposed to be there for them. I felt defeated. That was one of the moments when I realized, "Oh yeah, I think I definitely need some help."

…I think also with stepping out into the hall after that day and crying and crying, realizing and knowing that they're there, I feel as though I wanted to be honest, that I was in pain and that I was going through something. I was also tired of just closing my door and hiding my tears all the time. I was really sick of it.

Aria cited that authenticity was an important value for them. However, Aria’s experiences of trauma prompted them to more carefully examine what authenticity meant
in their life connected to trauma. Aria explained that people may know the facts of their trauma, but that does not equate to others really knowing Aria or what those facts mean, which prompted questions of authenticity. As Aria pondered, “Am I truly being authentic because people can name a lot of things about me, but they don't actually know me?”

Aria likened this to a history major who can tell you all the dates of when things happened, but without being able to complement that knowledge with the “why” of how those events transpired. Thus, this created an incompleteness for how Aria could show up with others, because very few understood the true impact of Aria’s trauma. This seemed somewhat welcome for Aria, however, because Aria sensed that their trauma would actually be overwhelming to most people, so it was almost best that others did not know.

I would say very few of my friends know how some of these things have fundamentally changed me. They just know it happened. They can make assumptions about it. For the most part, and this is where it becomes helpful for me, is most people are uncomfortable with asking about the how's and the why's and all of that. So I benefit from that because most of the time if I shared the thing, people are so overwhelmed by the fact that they don't bother to ask for the details, which is kind of great.

**Developing a Post-Trauma Lens on Identity**

The post-traumatic experience for participants in this study unearthed two important findings about the outcomes of post-traumatic experience in regards to identity
and continued identity development. First, participants overwhelmingly expressed the notion that their traumatic experience was a part of who they were, but did not define their full self. Second, the experience of trauma and the meaning making that occurred for participants in the identity sites resulted in a lens that informed how participants understood who they were as an individual in relation to the world moving forward.

**Trauma as Part of Self**

Other scholars have suggested the potential for traumatic experience to cause extreme disruption to a person’s identity. Indeed, Erikson’s original inspiration for the concept of an identity crisis emerged from his observations of traumatized victims of World War II who exhibited evidence of identity confusion (Côté & Levine, 2002). Some have even suggested the presence of an entirely new self, or a second or trauma self, that emerges and must be re-integrated into an individual’s identity (Caruth, 1995a).

However, results of this study did not support a disruption of that magnitude to participants’ identities in which there was a dramatic alteration of who they were as a result of trauma. Instead, participants expressed the reality that their experience of trauma was part of their story and consequently of their sense of self, but was not their whole self. Trauma, alone, did not define them. As Violet framed it:

I think that it's worth noting that anyone who survived anything, you were still you despite the things that you've been through because…it doesn't have to define you…I don't feel that it has defined my personhood or my college experience.
Beth expressed something very similar to Violet that she was not completely changed because of trauma. However, she struggled slightly with that notion, because there were still changes, it just did not mean she was entirely different because of trauma:

I think I mentioned this in my follow up, and also something that I struggle with after everything with my dad, it's like, I'm still the same person, if you will. I'm still Beth, and I was just Beth who had something happen to her. I wanted to really make sure that that was captured in the visual image, that I look the same, and I sounded the same, and I have the same social security number...I looked the same, but, on the inside, I was pretty raw and pretty different, and how I saw myself and how I saw my future and how I saw my familial relationships was totally different; and that's not something you can see just by looking at somebody.

Additionally, participants strongly resisted what Jessica called “a one dimensional picture of myself.” In other words, participants did not want to be seen solely through their trauma. Jessica did not “want to be the sad girl who bad things happened to” in a similar way that Robin was worried that “I’ll forever be seen as the girl whose dad died in college and she never got over it, poor thing.” Zoe mentioned that her trauma “isn’t the most pertinent thing about my life that I feel like it’s always necessary to talk about it.” Aria’s desire expressed something similar by always wanting to acknowledge that the traumatic experiences would be part of them, “but are not the central components of my life.” Meanwhile, Tyler resisted being labeled by others as “victim” or “survivor” in
terms of what they conjured up about him that might only represent part of his experience.

The idea that trauma is part of the self, but not the full self is perhaps best captured in a couple of powerful metaphors offered by two participants, Beth and Violet. Violet gave a metaphor of dye in water to describe how trauma had become a part of her experience but did not solely define her:

It's like food dye where it squirts up and I don't have control over what it's going to effect or the intensity of water effects and sometimes it dries up and I won't notice it for extended periods of time. Then it will shoot up again. I just learned to be patient with the way the things are and understand that it is a present aspect of my experience as a person. Sometimes that will alter or inform other behaviors or experiences, but it is not the everything and it is not the most interesting thing about me.

Meanwhile, Beth offered a storm metaphor (that was introduced in chapter one) to capture how her trauma was part of her but not all of her:

Have you ever seen a tree that was hit by a hurricane when it was a sapling? The tree bends, and it rights itself and grows back straight, but there's a little nick and bump in the tree. You look at it, and you're like, "Oh, it underwent something really nasty, but it kept going." I feel like that's how I see myself…I'm still the same person, I just have a little bump.
**Traumatic Lens on Self and Self in Relation to the World**

Despite the fact that participants expressed they were not solely defined by trauma, they simultaneously noted that trauma shaped how they expressed and understood themselves. Aria noted that the combination of their traumatic experiences “really shaped and informed a lot about how I look at myself, but a lot about how I also understand my other identities now.” This is echoed in Lauren’s summation about her trauma that “because of that experience, I was able to bring out more of my full self.” Meanwhile Robin observed that her trauma “completely shaped my outlook on things…and a lot of my personality has just changed and become a lot softer because of it.”

This is consistent with what some scholars have noted about the nature of traumatic experience. Specifically, experiences of trauma have the potential to become a lens on future experience. Van der Kolk (2014) explained that he has learned from his work that:

…traumatized people look at the world in a fundamentally different way from other people. For most of us a man coming down the street is just someone taking a walk. A rape victim, however, may see a person who is about to molest her and go into a panic. A stern schoolteacher may be an intimidating presence to an average kid, but for a child whose stepfather beats him up, she may represent a torturer and precipitate a rage attack or a terrified cowering in the corner. (p. 17)

The foundation of identity is an individual’s response to the question of “who am I?” (Jones & Abes, 2013; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). In the current study, it
was evident that this question is answered for survivors of trauma in the form of a new lens through which survivors conceptualize who they are in the world. This lens develops as a product of the meaning making that occurred for survivors after their traumatic experience.

The notion of a “who am I?” question undergirding identity development can be misleading, as it connotes a process that seems internal and restricted to the level of the individual. However, many identity scholars have emphasized the reality that identity is one of the self interacting with the social and with contexts (e.g.: Erikson, E. 1982/1997; Kroger, 2007). This study supports this conceptualization of identity as something that does not exist in the vacuum of an individual, but rather is understood at the level of the individual in terms of the self in interaction with the world.

The lens that developed for survivors in this study is subjective and is one that is shaped and informed by their unique experiences of trauma. As participants worked through meaning making of their traumatic experiences over time, this lens could be re-shaped and informed in new ways. This lens becomes the framework that survivors look through in seeking to understand their worlds thereafter. As it pertains to this study in particular, this post-traumatic lens is what survivors use to understand their identity post-trauma and their understandings of “who am I?”

Aria likened their relationship with self in the world after trauma as something similar to the movie Back to the Future. Aria talked about how the characters end up in an alternate reality to the one they knew. For Aria, this parallels experiences after trauma
where Aria has a new frame or lens on how to understand their life. Aria described it this way:

I feel like now I'm living in a second reality…It's not to say that the second reality doesn't contain components of the first reality, but it's like if the underlying assumptions are like the frame for a canvas and that shapes what you can put in your canvas, my frame changed. So what could be put into my canvas changed. That's why I kind of like saying it's like a time warp and it's like a second reality that I now live in.

This lens is informed by how survivors make meaning of their experiences across each of the three identity sites (psycho-physical, relational, and negotiated). For example, in the psycho-physical self, survivors arrive at a nuanced understanding of self that incorporated the new information they have worked through in reconciling their post-trauma realities of the body, emotions, and abilities. In the relational self, the work survivors did in making meaning of their post-trauma relationships informed what they will come to expect from others moving forward. Finally, in the negotiated self, tasks that the survivors worked through contributed to how they understood moving through the world with a refined sense of their own authenticity.

It was evident that the trauma lens that participants used to understand themselves and the world around them was subjective and personal. For many participants, the lenses they developed to understand identity in context produced desirable outcomes. Juan Carlos, Aria, and Tyler all developed lenses that contained elements of appreciation for what they had learned on the other side of trauma and offered them clarity moving
forward. For example, Tyler’s lens became one of the self with agency. He spoke of his ongoing early struggles with authenticity after trauma, because for a variety of reasons he felt that he needed to hide pieces of himself from others. However, he finally reached a point of realization once he became more comfortable letting others see his scars. Tyler explained this new agency lens in the following way:

I looked at it as, if I don't reconcile this on my own, and I don't figure out how to at least get to a good sense of terms, even if you want to call yourself at 80, or 85, or 90 percent. Then I'm going to be unhappy every single day. Instead, by reconciling with it and by accepting this “I'm going to be different,” and accepting that people are going to ask me about it, then I can go to the store and not necessarily be like, "I hate my life, I hate my life, I hate my life." Instead, I'm okay, it's probably going to happen. Just suck it up and get through it.

Robin, Beth, and Violet all spoke about how trauma made them much more comfortable with ambiguity. For each of these participants, trauma brought with it the awareness that life was not linear and predictable and they were able to find peace with this on their own terms. Violet’s lens on self reflected this new comfort with ambiguity, especially in terms of her self. She noted that ambition and drive had been a big part of who she was prior to trauma, but that trauma had offered her a new motivation and understanding of herself. As Violet articulated, “I think that I would be so driven by the things on paper and I've learned to be a lot more patient with myself because some things just don't fit or don't work out and there's no rhyme or reason or narrative to them. They just don't.”
However, the lenses produced as a result of trauma were not all filled with hope and optimism and resilience. For example, an element of SJ’s lens was that of fear. She talked about the ways in which she felt much more vulnerable in the world after her trauma and how it changed the way she moved through her world and trusted others. For SJ, the lens was one of the self as at risk.

Summary

The emerging theory presented in this chapter has three major components. First, orienting systems that exist prior to trauma shape how an individual will make meaning of traumatic experiences. These orienting systems include social identities and social discourses. Second, after trauma, various trauma-related tasks and negotiations emerge that offers sites where identity-related work will occur. Specifically, survivors work to make meaning of the question “who am I?” across the psycho-physical self, the relational self, and the negotiated self. Finally, the outcome of these orienting systems and identity site processes is twofold. First, trauma becomes a part of the self, but not the full self. Second, the outcome of these processes is a trauma-informed lens on identity and self in the world.
Chapter 5: Discussion

In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk (2014) recounts the deep impact one of his greatest teachers, Elvin Semrad, made on him during his residency training. Van der Kolk explains how Semrad often encouraged the new psychiatrist trainees to avoid reading psychiatric textbooks, and instead focus on the most important source of information in front of them – the patients themselves. I was reminded of the beauty of this perspective very often in the course of this study. Sometimes, what I was learning from participants was confirmed in literature I had read, while at others times participants shared experiences that either was not represented in the literature with which I was familiar or contradicted it completely. The exquisiteness of a grounded theory study was the possibility to hold all of these pieces of experience up as valid – to understand trauma not through the work of others, but through the experiences of those who endured trauma.

Thus, the work I have presented here offers much to future policy, practice, and research for both identity development and trauma of college students through the eyes of those who have lived experience as student survivors of trauma. In this chapter, I interpret the emerging theory presented in the previous chapter in terms of both the research questions and existing literature that undergirded this study. Additionally, I
draw on both the findings and processes of this study to offer implications for future higher education policy, practice, and research.

**Interpreting Emerging Theory in Relation to Research Questions**

Literature supports a synergistic relationship between trauma and identity (e.g. Brison, 2002; Brown, 2008; Erikson, 1968/1994; Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Stewart, 2014), but scant research specifically investigates the impacts of trauma on development in early adulthood (Maercker, Solomon, & Schützwohl, 1999; Ogle, Rubin, & Siegler, 2013; Wilson, 2006). Using a constructivist grounded theory design, informed by situational analysis, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how college student identity development is impacted by experiences of trauma in college. This study was anchored by two research questions: (a) How do experiences of trauma in college affect identity and identity development?; and (b) How is traumatic experience in college incorporated into self-definition of identity? Both of these research questions are discussed below in terms of the emerging theory presented in the previous chapter.

**How Do Experiences of Trauma in College Affect Identity and Identity Development?**

Experiences of trauma in college affected identity and identity development primarily by generating trauma-specific circumstances that provided rich material for identity work. At an intrapersonal level, participants in this study worked through managing emotions, experiencing embodiment, and re-negotiating ability. At a relational level, survivors confronted living through an experience many others did not understand,
navigated needing others and needing to push them away, and felt a sense of kinship with others who had lived through trying times. At the level of contextual negotiations, survivors navigated disclosure, vulnerability, and performance. All of these tasks across the identity sites that were identified in this study collectively provoked survivors to re-evaluate and refine their understandings of “who am I?”

Generally, it did not seem that participants in this study had an entirely new identity develop as a result of trauma. Instead, experiences of trauma catalyzed exploration of identity-related dimensions of experience for survivors that led them to understand aspects of their identity in refined ways, while maintaining a fundamental sense of self through the process. This runs counter to what some trauma scholars have suggested. For example, Robert Lifton speaks of the second self or trauma self that emerges after traumatic experience and needs to be re-integrated into experience (Caruth, 1995a). However, the findings in this study that trauma generates material to catalyze exploration and refinement of some aspects of identity while certain other identity dimensions remain stable is perhaps more in line with foundational notions of identity and identity development as outlined by Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1968/1994; Erikson, 1982/1997; Kroger, 2007). What can be imagined from the results of this study is trauma creating additional psychosocial tasks that foster identity development, but do not result in an entirely new self developing as a result.

However, it is important to consider the participants who would choose to take part in a study such as this. Participants in this study were well into their processes of recovery and able to articulate and make meaning of their traumatic experiences. The
outcomes of the affects of trauma on identity development may look different if evaluated in the immediate aftermath of trauma as opposed to after some distance from trauma had been realized. It might also look different for participants who were traumatized in ways that dramatically impeded their lives. Although every participant in this study experienced deep struggle and pain through their traumas, each of them was simultaneously resilient and able to persevere as evidenced by their abilities to persist through college at the very least.

In regards to the question of how trauma affects identity development, it also is evident through this study that trauma can act as a magnifier on experience. For example, the emerging theory of this study notes the role of social identities and social discourses as orienting systems that framed the meaning participants would begin to make of trauma. While this is true that these social constructions framed trauma for participants, it is simultaneously true that experiences of trauma brought these social constructions into heightened visibility.

For example, Aria’s experiences of trauma catalyzed Aria to investigate the ways messages from their cultural, racial and gender identities had previously limited how they understood their body and their ownership relationship with it. Lauren had a parallel experience in that her identification as Christian and queer informed her trauma experience, but her experience of trauma also heightened an exploration of how these identities were being constructed and understood by others across a variety of spaces that prompted her to explore her own social identities in different ways. Notably, Lauren arrived on the other side of trauma exploration with a deeper sense of the interconnection
and intersectionality of her Christian and queer identities. As Lauren explained in her second written response of her post-trauma reality, “my Christian identity and my queer identity are intertwined—they are not mutually exclusive.”

Finally, trauma affects identity and identity development by becoming a lens on future experiences. This finding is one that emerged strongly across participants’ experiences in terms of trauma being part of the self but not all of the self. This finding will be discussed in greater detail below in relation to the second research question of how traumatic experience is incorporated into self-definition of identity.

**How is Traumatic Experience in College Incorporated into Self-Definition of Identity?**

It was made abundantly clear across participants’ stories that trauma is not all that they are defined by. Instead, trauma becomes a part of the self rather than the full self. Beth provided a very poignant metaphor that captured what others were describing in this respect. She spoke of the sapling tree that survives the hurricane. It may have a slight bend in it where it was hit by the storm, but it corrects itself and continues to grow upward. That resilient tree with the bump in it very eloquently captured what many participants articulated in many other ways. Trauma was incorporated into the story of who they were and would always be a part of that narrative. Yet, the tree was still a tree and still growing upward. They were still fundamentally who they were going into the trauma and did not become the trauma.

Despite this overwhelming theme of trauma as a part of identity but not the totality of identity, survivors did incorporate their traumatic experiences in different ways.
into identity and self-definition. This comes, perhaps, as no surprise because the meaning made of traumatic experience emerged as a subjective process made sense of at the level of the individual. Thus, no two participants incorporated trauma into their identities in exactly the same way.

For some, trauma was a welcome experience that survivors described as changing them in ways that they would not want to be without. For others, the trauma was neither welcome nor a necessarily desirable piece of self with which to move forward. Ultimately, there seemed to be an evolving process for all survivors in terms of how they incorporated trauma into their identities. Change and different meanings were made over time. Certain aspects could be static, while others evolved and changed.

Finally, although trauma was an aspect of self, but not the totality of self, the trauma became something for participants to see themselves and the world through moving forward – a lens on self and experience. Robin captured this well in noting that her experience of trauma had “completely shaped [her] outlook on things” but simultaneously noted that “it has shaped [her], but it didn’t mold [her] whole being.” Additionally, in member checking of preliminary results, the participants who responded with feedback identified strongly with the idea of a traumatic lens on self and experience moving forward.

**Interpreting Emerging Theory in Relation to Existing Literature**

Two broad domains of literature were particularly significant in design and interpretation of results in the current study. These included identity development and trauma theory. Below, I discuss the emerging theory presented in the previous chapter in
terms of these two domains of literature. Specifically, I draw attention to the ways in which results of this study suggest implications and points of consideration for future theory.

**Identity Development Theory**

Results of this grounded theory study suggested several key aspects of identity development that support existing literature in some ways and extend it in others. First, the orienting systems that emerged in the current theory support the intersecting roles of contexts and social systems with identity development. Second, themes that emerged in the identity sites suggest unique identity-related work that emerged for survivors of trauma in this study that also extend notions of holistic development of college students. Third, participants indicated that trauma was part of who they were but not their full identities. The lens that emerged after trauma suggested elements of both stability and change of identity. Finally, trauma can be interpreted in the emerging theory presented here as developmental tasks. I discuss each of these themes in relation to existing theory below.

**Social systems.** It was evident in the emerging theory that participants’ meaning making of their traumatic experiences was shaped at the outset by socially constructed systems. Specifically, both social identities and social discourses framed how survivors began the process of understanding their traumas. The presence of these social systems as a part of meaning making connected to identity development supports what other scholars have noted. For example, as Jones (2009) observed, “The complexities of identity development in a postmodern world are not fully captured without attention to
multiple and intersecting identities and the sociocultural contexts in which identities are constructed and negotiated” (p. 287). Certainly, the importance of social identities and discourses that emerged in the current study adds support to the need to explore the landscape of college student identity development within the context of the constructions and negotiations embedded within larger systems of power and privilege.

This finding is consistent with one of the primary theoretical frameworks used in the current study, the MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Indeed, in college student development literature, the MMDI was among the first identity theories to explicitly discuss how both context and social identities interplay in identity (Jones, 2009).

However, the importance of social identities and discourses and their roles in meaning making that arose in the emerging theory equally highlights their absence in two of the other developmental models used to frame the current study, self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2009a, 2009b) and Chickering’s theory of identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Other scholars have also illuminated the absence of an explicit discussion of issues of power and privilege in self-authorship theory (e.g. Jones, 2009). Given the emerging theory presented here, there is additional evidence to suggest that social systems of power and privilege, explored here in terms of social identities and social discourses, must continue to be investigated in future student development theory. Of particular note to self-authorship, the current study demonstrated the ways in which these social constructions play an early and active role in shaping meaning making, a key component of self-authorship.
**Holistic development.** The emerging theory discussed in the previous chapter also draws considerable attention to the need for expanded definitions of holistic student development. Student affairs practice and student development theory have evolved with an emphasis on development of the whole student (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; Braxton, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). This is an emphasis that is echoed in broader higher educational missions. However, as Baxter Magolda (2009b) observed, past efforts in student development theory have often approached the topic of holistic development through separate theoretical strands that fail to explore the intersections present within and across various developmental dimensions.

More recent theory in the college student development landscape has endeavored to better complicate this issue and has explored the holistic intersections of development. Notably, two theories used to frame the current study have contributed to an increasingly complex and intersected perspective of holistic development in college students. These include Baxter Magolda’s (2004, 2009a) theory of self-authorship, and Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity as well as the revised model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013).

In pondering the future of identity development theory, Torres, Renn, and Jones (2009) observed that “it seems likely that the productive tension between understanding the whole student and understanding what identities constitute that whole will stimulate new ways of understanding students and their development” (p. 593). The results of the current grounded theory study contribute to this productive tension by not only looking at the unique identity experiences of student survivors of trauma, but also by illuminating
dimensions of holistic experience that must be further explored in college student identity development theory.

Indeed, the salient identity dimensions of the physical body and emotions that emerged within the current study are not adequately addressed in holistic college student development theory and notably absent from self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2009a) and the MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) that framed the current study. Although Chickering’s theory of identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) does mention the body and emotions, it does not unearth the level of nuance that was illustrated in the current study. Chickering and Reisser (1993) primarily framed the body in college student identity development in terms of its potential for physical and artistic competence and emotions in terms of the need for students to identify emotions and regulate how they are enacted. Instead, the current grounded theory study suggested additional complexity to how the physical body and emotions operate within identity development.

The psycho-physical self emerged as an important site of meaning making after trauma in the current study. Specifically, participants were confronted by extensive meaning making and re-definition of self along dimensions very closely connected to the physical body and the emotional self. There is an intuitive sense that the body would and should play an important role in identity. Yet, the body remains absent in many discussions of identity in college student development literature (Carlson & Kiemele, 2016).

Freedman and Holmes (2003) noted that their book *The Teacher’s Body* highlights that:
….even though a teacher cannot be dismissed simply for being married, disabled, pregnant, queer, old, or ill – in short, for having a body – teachers, students, and administrators are still unsure of how to talk through, around, and about the bodies that lie between us…we haven’t found a satisfactory mode for talking through the embodied dynamics in any academic setting.

Having loudly articulated our commitment to conceptual and statistical diversity, as many of our campuses have, we have often not stopped to think on a local level about what the daily praxis of the inclusive classroom really involves or had satisfying conversations about how to work through the problems that arise when we let our bodies into the academy. (pp. 259-260)

Similarly, it seems that we have yet to fully explore the implications of the body in student development theory. In the current study, the body brought forth identity-related explorations for survivors of trauma. However, there is a need to further examine the role of the body in college student development theory more broadly than simply within the student population of survivors of trauma.

Additionally, although emotions are mentioned in Chickering’s theory of identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the emotional dimension of college student development is not one that receives explicit attention in much other college student development literature. Yet, based on the results of this study, there is some additional work needed to understand how emotions shape identity in college students. Certainly, there is evidence from psychological studies to suggest that there may be an association present. Past research has found that emotions, particularly those that are negatively
charged, lead to increased self-focused attention and self-awareness that is connected to aspects of self-concept (Silvia & Eddington, 2012). Thus, the current study also underscores the need to consider the emotional landscape of college students’ experiences in terms of their identity development.

**Stability and change.** Erik Erikson (1968/1994; 1982/1997) proposed a perspective of identity development across the lifespan that included elements of both stability and change. For Erikson, although change and growth occurred in an individual’s identity over time, there also remained underlying dimensions of consistency. Certain elements remain while new aspects of identity evolve.

The results of this grounded theory study very strongly supported Erikson’s (1968/1994; 1982/1997) notion of identity as simultaneously comprised of both stability and change. As addressed in more detail above, although participants in this study experienced changes in how they thought of themselves after trauma, they overwhelmingly also stated that they were fundamentally the same person after trauma. There existed elements within each participant’s story of change after trauma, but the underlying sense of self had remained stable. Thus, this study adds to this Eriksonian perspective of identity development in college students in terms of the presence of both evolution and stability.

**Trauma as developmental task.** Finally, the results of this study suggest the possibility of framing traumatic experience in future theory as producing developmental tasks for college student survivors. Similar to Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) finding of unique developmental tasks arising from their participants’ experiences of racism, the
current study suggests that trauma can also produce unique developmental tasks for those who endure it. Research exploring the factors that lead to rapid growth in self-authorship during the college years may support this hypothesis. For example, a recent longitudinal qualitative study found that one of six areas that led to rapid self-authorship growth in college students was that of experiencing tragedy or significant personal challenge (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013). Many of the examples that were clustered in this category such as death, illness, and injury could certainly have been experienced as traumatic. Thus, the Barber et al. (2013) study suggests a relationship between potentially traumatic experiences and holistic development in which trauma may produce catalyzing circumstances that promote developmental progression.

In the current study, it is evident that trauma produced several tasks for survivors to navigate that parallel negotiations in the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions that Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2009a, 2009b) outline as the connected threads of holistic development. For example, the “how do I know” question that undergirds epistemological development (Baxter Magolda, 2004) was kindled for survivors grappling with making sense of and naming their trauma. For several survivors, this “how do I know” process was connected to a general sense making of their traumatic experience and was very often connected to validation from others. For example, SJ and Violet both articulated the importance of their trauma being confirmed by others for them to begin the work of accepting and making sense of what had occurred.
Within an interpersonal dimension of development, trauma produced circumstances that resulted in survivors actively drawing others near while at other times actively pushing others away. This tug-and-pull of interpersonal relationships after trauma is well documented in other scholarship (e.g. Erikson, 1995; Herman, 1992/1997) and was supported in the current grounded theory study. What these interpersonal negotiations suggest are unique interpersonal tasks for survivors that result as a process of navigating these simultaneous repulsive and attractive needs with others that are induced after trauma.

Finally, there are ample examples in the current emerging theory that indicate the developmental tasks produced in terms of intrapersonal dimensions of identity for survivors of trauma. The participants in the current study had to confront several new realities that challenged their notions of self in relation to others. For example, participants in this study had to renegotiate their abilities, understand their body and emotions in new ways, and mediate a world that did not always understand what they were living through (i.e. the challenges that emerged for survivors in the negotiated self identity site). Thus, the traumas that participants in this study worked through produced a variety of developmental tasks seemingly unique to the processes of traumatic recovery.

**Trauma Theory**

There are participants in this study whose trauma would no doubt be contested by some. And, many of these participants were well aware of that. On the other hand, there were some participants in this study whose trauma would likely not be contested and yet even they were wondering if their trauma was terrible enough to count. I am reminded of
Judith Herman’s (1992/1997) quote that “simplistic efforts to quantify trauma ultimately lead to meaningless comparisons of horror” (pp. 33-34). Yet, there somehow remain forces actively trying to restrict what counts as trauma and what does not or to find ways to create linearity of trauma in some rank order fashion. Indeed, there are many who agree with what McNally (2006) insisted is a problem of “conceptual bracket creep” (para. 2) with broadening definitions of trauma that threaten “the credibility of our field [psychology]” (para. 7).

Brown (1995) observed that, “‘Real’ trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of trauma” (p. 102). This politicization and resistance to certain forms of trauma being acknowledged as “real” occurs across a variety of experiences. For example, significant barriers and resistance in educational, psychological and legal communities have existed in relation to connecting experiences of racism to experiences of traumatic stress (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Carter & Helms, 2009), despite research that makes clear connections between the two (e.g. Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Truong & Museus, 2012). Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) highlighted a barrier to acknowledging racial trauma as that of it posing a threat to existing conceptualizations of trauma. As they explained, “This conception, which is based on the belief that sympathy and resources are limited, is destructive. Which gatekeeper will determine who are the real victims?” (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005, p. 485).
What emerges from the current study is evidence to suggest that broadened definitions of trauma are needed. Critical trauma theory has worked to interrogate how trauma is understood and to draw attention to the reality that trauma is demarcated by cultural categories that inherently make certain forms of trauma visible and others invisible (Stevens, 2011). Implications of the current study suggest that trauma has a subjectivity to it that cannot exclusively fit into the boxes of many existing criteria, particularly in terms of dominant criteria to define trauma such as those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Another implication of the current study connected to trauma theory is a critique of conceptualizations of trauma that rely on notions of a cleanly delineated before (pre) and after (post) trauma experience (e.g. Brison, 2002; Caruth, 1995a; Maercker, Solomon & Schützwohl, 1999; Stewart, 2014). It became clear across this study that, even for those participants whose trauma was event-based, trauma did not operate so seamlessly in many instances. For example, many participants in this study were not experiencing trauma for the first time in college – they had had encounters with trauma as children and adolescents. Additionally, for several participants in this study whose trauma was more identity-based or pervasive, the pre- and post- construction proved an uneasy and contrived fit.

What becomes problematic in this framing of trauma is that definitions of trauma become almost exclusively tied to an event-based approach. However, this approach to trauma is incomplete at best. As Erikson (1995) cautioned, “In order to serve as a generally useful concept, ‘trauma’ has to be understood as resulting from a constellation
of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening, from a persisting condition as well as from an acute event” (p. 185). It is the persistent condition of trauma that seemingly cannot exist within the framework of trauma distinctively before and after and as event-specific.

In its focus on a specific happening or a series of happenings, the event-based approach to conceptualizing trauma emphasizes and produces a subject grappling with the sensational. It closes up the possibility of experiences that we consider more ordinary in general discourse from being traumatic. As Casper (2014) explained, “in theorizing disruptions, breaks, shocks, and ruptures, ‘trauma’ marks a deviation from situations that are perceived as normal or mundane. The naming of something—an experience, a memory, an encounter, an interaction—as trauma denotes a before and after, a changed subjectivity, a revised embodiment.” In other words, conventional framings of trauma brings with them certain assumptions of what occurs as a result of trauma, as opposed to recognizing the cultural and social work at play in how trauma can be used to create certain subjectivities. Future trauma theory needs to continue to explore the cultural work being done by trauma.

Implications for Higher Education Practice and Policy

Emeritus professor of psychology, Dr. Michael Cole, once wrote that, “ideas are only as important as what you can do with them” (Cole, 1979, p. vii). Thus, the importance of the current study rests in how it can be used to inform higher educational practice for the many student survivors of trauma working to heal on college campuses
Supporting Students Through Trauma

Many participants in this study were the beneficiaries of phenomenal people in their higher educational environments who offered the kind of support that they needed through traumatic recovery. These supportive others proved fundamental in many ways in helping participants make meaning of and wade through their traumatic experiences. This is congruent with the plethora of other research that has noted the critical role that supportive relationships can play in recovery and growth after trauma (e.g. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; Maercker & Horn, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014).

In considering implications for higher educational practice, supportive relationships are certainly something that emerged as important in this study. Faculty and staff all have the potential to be the right support at the right time to a student recovering from trauma. I want to highlight two particular forms of interpersonal support in the educational environment that emerged across participants’ stories: being validated and being listened to.

Validation was something participants needed from others and for several participants it came through people at their institution. For example, both SJ and Violet struggled to name their experiences of sexual assault until others were able to help them do that. For SJ, it was in the form of a therapist she sought at her institution. For Violet, it was via friends whose reactions to what happened provided enough dissonance for
Violet to realize what had really happened to her. Natasha, meanwhile, spoke of a supervisor who through a simple head nod and supportive body language allowed her to feel validated and supported. And for Lauren, being validated by a different Christian group after her trauma was huge. As she explained, “Those were the moments that told me that it's okay to be authentic. It's okay to actually be who I am.”

Meanwhile, support could also come in the simple form of listening. Robin benefitted from two key staff members at her institution who listened to her when she needed to share what was happening. More specifically, these staff members followed Robin’s lead for what she needed. While Robin felt others in the institution were pushing her towards things that were not helpful to her, these two staff members supported her choices and listened to her when she expressed what she needed and did not need in her healing process. Robin also acknowledged that her own experience of trauma helped her understand the power of listening. As she explained of difficult or traumatic experiences, “Now I understand that most of the time people don't really want you to do something for them. They just want someone to listen or to talk about it with them.”

Supporting students through trauma must be envisioned at an institutional level. As the above examples illustrate, many participants were able to find the supportive people they needed within the higher educational environment. Yet, Robin’s example and those of other participants also draw attention to the reality that we cannot expect all faculty, staff and students on a college campus to intuitively know what to do with trauma. Instead, mechanisms must occur at institutional levels to infuse trauma-informed
practices into the environment. I discuss trauma-informed practice in greater detail in the section that follows.

**Increasing Faculty, Students, and Staff Knowledge**

It was evident across participants’ stories that part of their challenges in making meaning of trauma and integrating it into their self-concepts was the difficulty of interactions with others who did not understand trauma. As Liv put it, her trauma meant that relative to her peers she had “experienced something that was out of the realm of our collective experience.” Generally speaking, that may be an inevitable reality. Individuals will have life experiences that may be unique to a particular context that others will not understand. However, in the higher educational environment, there is rich potential for trauma-informed education and practices that minimize the type of alienation that many participants in this study experienced in their trauma journeys.

Certainly, there is more that can be done within higher education practice to educate students around trauma so that peers can support one another. However, the more critical need seems to be in terms of faculty and staff education. Participants in this study often benefitted from connections with faculty and administrators who did understand their trauma or at the very least were comfortable enough to sit with it. For example, Tyler was overwhelmed by how supported he was by so many people when he returned to campus. And, as was mentioned above, Robin described two very significant staff members at her college who were instrumental in helping her work through her experience of trauma.
However, there were also many examples for participants where they felt misunderstood by faculty and staff or that their trauma was invisible. For example, Tyler was intent on pushing through his trauma and wanted to return to normal. However, despite submitting a paper to stay caught up on his schoolwork after his accident, Tyler received a note back from the professor saying, “come see me.” Tyler said he went to see the professor and she told him that she had, in fact, not read the paper and that she was just nervous about his ability to finish the class. Tyler was angered by this interaction. As he recounted:

I think I was so infuriated by that comment, because I was just like, "Who the hell are you to tell me that I can't do something when I've put the time in? Then, the fact that you're now taking your anxiety out on me without even giving me the chance.

Meanwhile, Liv really wished she had been able to communicate with her professors about what had happened, but she did not know how to share that information. She suggested that her patterns of engagement in classes had changed, but this is likely something her professors did not notice or inquire about. As Liv explained, she wished that she had “let a couple of my professors know at least that I was going through some things so that if I wasn't participating in class or something, it was just that my mind and heart couldn't be in that room.”

Liv experienced a deeply upsetting situation in a class that was ultimately very connected to the fact that her professor did not know what had happened, but also that perhaps the professor had not considered the possibility of the impact that their question
might have on students who had lost people to suicide. While in an introductory psychology class, the topic of suicide came up and the professor asked if anyone had personal experience with it. The conversation that ensued became deeply upsetting to Liv. As Liv concluded, “I still don’t understand why this professor asked if people had personal experiences.”

What is evident in the above examples is that faculty and administrators do not, universally, know to look for trauma in the college environment or to anticipate it. Thus, an immediate recommendation that emerges from this study is the need for higher educational institutions to consider continued ways to adopt trauma-informed practice. One framework to consider trauma-informed practice through is a 2014 report published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). In this publication, SAMHSA introduces a trauma-informed care framework that includes three components. First, institutions must be aware of the prevalence of trauma. Second, institutions must understand how trauma impacts individuals within the organization. Third, institutions must put this knowledge into practice.

In higher educational practice, this translates to the following. Institutions must first acknowledge the prevalence of trauma on their campuses. Whether this is through national statistics that identify the prevalence of trauma or locally developed instruments that map the landscape of trauma unique to a particular college, institutions must find ways to confirm for themselves that trauma is embedded in their environments. Second, knowledge and education about the impacts of trauma is fundamental to a trauma-informed system. This must include both how trauma impacts survivors, but also how it
impacts all others in the system, also. Finally, higher educational institutions need to find ways to embed this trauma knowledge into practice, both in terms of the interactions that occur in the higher educational environment and the policies that drive behavior.

**Interrogating Policy Through a Trauma Lens**

An unexpected finding in the current study was the degree to which the higher education environment and the policies and practices that construct it can be re-traumatizing to survivors. What can appear as straightforward policies and practices can in fact wreak havoc for those in the midst of trauma recovery. “Neutral” policy may not be so neutral when evaluated through a trauma-informed lens.

SJ shared one of the most powerful examples of this problem in describing her experience with a scholarship that was dependent on her GPA. SJ’s grades suffered her sophomore year after she was sexually assaulted. In the context of her experience of trauma, that is understandable. However, it was not that simple in terms of her scholarship. What many would have taken for granted as a simple and neutral policy, became a re-traumatizing experience for SJ. She had to make an appeal to keep her scholarship because of her suffering grades, and her appeal had to include an explanation of what had happened to result in the grade deterioration, in addition to supporting documentation, which included a letter from her therapist. The process was deeply harmful to SJ. As she explained, “I'm literally telling my story of what I went through to people in financial aid that I don't even know, I will not know probably. It's like stripping yourself vulnerable.”
SJ confronted similar hurdles in needing to meet with faculty to explain why her grades had suffered and discuss options after her assault. She spoke of meeting with one faculty member who was perhaps the most empathetic in the situation, but how SJ felt she “had to force myself to open up a bit in order to just plea for sympathy or understanding why I did a certain way in the class. It felt like I had to strip myself to someone that I didn't even know and that bothered me.”

In re-reading SJ’s transcripts, I could not help but notice a violence embedded in these institutional policies and practices. She used words like “forced” and “stripping” and “vulnerable” in discussing these institutional interactions that struck me as being very parallel to the actions she had endured being sexually assaulted. The institutional policies were neutrally looking at her grades as a problem to be addressed without sensitivity or concern to the origin of this “problem.” In fact, a student other than SJ was responsible for the “problem” – the student who assaulted her. But, these institutional policies were only flexible enough to hold SJ accountable in this situation and in the process induced a new experience of violence.

I am not suggesting institutions do away with accountability measures for students simply because some students may face extenuating circumstances. Instead, I am suggesting the imperative need that a story like SJ’s suggests for why all faculty and staff need to have a baseline understanding of how trauma operates in institutional systems in an effort to interrogate and refine existing policy and practice from a trauma-informed perspective. Policy is rarely neutral and in the case of trauma, there is much more work that can be done to explore policies from a trauma perspective.
Confronting Disembodiment in Academia

Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, and Gildersleeve (2012) reminded readers of the strong Cartesian Duality that undergirds both teaching and research in higher educational practice. The mind and body are separated, with a primacy placed on the importance of the mind in academe. As they highlighted, the postsecondary academic environment is one of “overemphasis of the mind at the expense of the body” (p. 36) with corresponding implications for where focus is placed in both teaching and research.

In the current study, experiences beyond the rational mind emerged as significant for participants. Those who had endured trauma experienced it cognitively, certainly. However, the participants in this study also experienced and made meaning of their traumas within relationships, culture, the body and emotions. However, the higher education milieu is perhaps less attuned to students’ experiences in these latter two dimensions.

One of Robin’s experiences draws particular attention to the disembodied experience that permeates higher education. Shortly after the death of her father, she was struggling to prepare for an exam the following day. However, when she explained to her professor that she had been up crying the night before the exam, Robin was met with confusion and disbelief. The professor remarked, “that was two months ago” about Robin’s father’s death and seemed perplexed by Robin’s continued struggle.

Trauma brings embodiment to the forefront of experience and perhaps offers a reminder that students are more than their minds. Notions of holistic development permeate the higher educational space (King, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009), yet
trauma and experiences such as Robin’s bring forth questions of how that mission is operationalized in practice. Are we interested in the holistic growth across all dimensions of student experience (including the body and emotions) or are we interested in “holistic” growth simply at the level of the cognitive and rational?

The Need for Broad Attention and Conceptualizations of Trauma

The need to better understand the impact of trauma on college students is perhaps more timely than ever and is gaining increased attention on campuses across the United States, particularly in terms of certain types of traumatic experience such as sexual assault. The work of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) emphasized the persistence of sexual violence on college campuses and the imperative need for trauma-informed training of campus officials, as a result. These calls for trauma-informed work in higher educational environments are promising developments, but have largely focused on trauma related to sexual assault rather than trauma broadly. Thus, it is positive movement that trauma-informed perspectives are increasingly infused into higher educational practice, and we need to do more to broaden definitions of trauma-informed.

Findings in this study underscore this need. For several participants, terms such a “survivor” or “victim” of trauma proved uneasy fits. This serves as a reminder than even elements such as the terminology of trauma may be taken for granted in ways that do not capture the breadth of traumatic experiences. Simultaneously, several participants expressed their challenges in trying to find space for their experiences against mainstream definitions of trauma. As Natasha expressed she is not, “the poster child for trauma” and this has complicated others being able to identify with her story or to name her trauma. Thus, when we consider trauma-informed services and approaches on college campuses,
are we holding space for all forms of trauma from suicide to illness to loss to identity-based trauma, to many other traumas?

Critical trauma studies draws attention to expanding conceptualizations of trauma and recognizing the power and cultural structures that have restricted what is considered traumatic (Stevens, 2011). The current study supports the need for these broadened conceptualizations in the higher educational environment. Participants here illustrated “complicated” forms of trauma, but “complicated” only because several participants’ experiences do not fit the traditional mold of trauma. Regardless, participants experienced similar challenges and struggles in moving through their experiences of trauma while in college whether they were recognized as such or not.

It was complicated for me as a researcher to hold all of these forms of trauma together within a grounded theory framework that is at times trying to move towards cohesion rather than complication. Yet, situational analysis was able to offer a solution in accounting for additional “complications.” We face a parallel challenge within higher educational practice. It can be complicated to hold multiple forms of trauma up together within policy and practice, yet student survivors desperately need us to create more flexibility in our definitions of trauma. I was reminded of how complicated it can also be for many survivors pushing up against narrow definitions of trauma when at the end of an interview one of my participants turned to me and thanked me for allowing space for his experience to be validated as trauma. “Thank you,” he said, “I thought I was just weak.”
Implications for Future Research

Several directions for future research emerged from the current study. First, as discussed above in relation to existing literature, the emerging theory suggests a need to re-conceptualize notions of holistic development of college students. Notably, the current grounded theory highlighted two dimensions that are particularly in need of additional attention in future college student development theory research - the physical body and emotions. Both of these aspects of experience played fundamental roles in how survivors of trauma made meaning of their identities; however, these are dimensions that are present for all college students, not just those who survive trauma.

Second, there has been increased attention concerning sexual violence on college campuses that has led to heightened awareness of the need for trauma-informed practice (e.g. White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). This is a positive development, as sexual violence exists as an all too common form of trauma occurring on many college campuses. Alongside this increased attention on sexual violence and its connection to trauma, we must also increase awareness and research for other forms of trauma that college students endure. As Zoe suggested, certain forms of trauma get attention on college campuses while many others are left invisible. For example, in the current study, identity-based trauma emerged as a form of trauma that is particularly underexplored in broader conversations about college trauma. We need to continue to expand the research body around multiple forms of trauma that impact college students to better understand both the needs of college student survivors and the effects of trauma on their collegiate experiences.
Finally, an important finding in the current grounded theory study was that of the lens that survivors of trauma develop that informs how they understand who they are in the world after trauma. An interesting dimension of this lens to explore further is that of what it means to have or not have an awareness of this trauma lens. For example, an aspect of the trauma lens that develops for SJ is fear. She spoke of feeling much more afraid to travel alone since her sexual assault and afraid of being sex trafficked. SJ developed an awareness of the world as a dangerous place. Meanwhile, an aspect of Aria’s trauma lens is gratitude and trust. Aria spoke of the experience of trauma as having prompted explorations of self that Aria is appreciative to have gone through. Aria did not want to minimize the difficulty, but recognized the good that came as a result of the traumatic experience too. Aria described being “broken in a way that was beautiful.” Aria’s lens after trauma was that of being “less afraid now that the process will end badly” and a comfort in ambiguity.

The question that begins to emerge is does an awareness of this lens matter and how does it matter, particularly connected to ongoing identity development? Aria and SJ experienced similar traumas at face value, but also very different experiences of trauma in many other respects, not to mention the differences of their own life experiences. Their trauma lenses are very different – SJ looks through a lens of fear and Aria looks through a lens of trust and comfort. Does it matter that each individual understands what this lens is and how it emerged?
Reflections on Research as Process

The topic of this study, trauma, as well as the grounded theory and situational analysis methodology, brought forth some distinct tensions for me as a researcher that I worked to make meaning of throughout the process. Broadly, two forces gave me reason for considerable reflection about research generally over the course of this project. At times, these forces operated within the study, while at other times they seemed instead to hover above or around the project. Regardless, they were both very present for me across the study and I offer them here as reflections for similar studies exploring potentially sensitive and personal topics. First, I was frequently exploring how my positionality was operating in this study. Second, I became aware at various points of the research that the topic of trauma, itself, produces anxiety.

To explore how my positionality interacted in this study, I return first to a quote from Adele Clarke (2005) that captures the inherent tension of qualitative research, certainly, but I would argue research in general:

How can we be present and hold ourselves accountable in our research? Without discrediting our research through “personal bias”? And without displacing it with what Daly calls an “intellectual narcissism” that goes over the reflexive edge to produce a study that becomes too much of “us” and too little of “them”? (p. 13)

This tension of the balance between the “us” and “them” in research was something with which I continued to be challenged throughout the course of this research study. My own experiences of trauma provided me with a lens to initially understand trauma, but I have been committed throughout my work in trauma studies to continue to
challenge and disrupt how I understand to ensure I can see experiences of trauma through lenses beyond my own, in addition to my own. Thus, at many times, I erred on the side of pulling back from my instincts of trauma, assuming that my instincts are rooted in my unique experience rather than a more broad interpretation. As this work has progressed, I have found more ways to bring my own story to bear in the work, but I have more frequently felt nervous than comfortable about this.

One of my peer debriefers challenged me on this point. He suggested I consider bringing more of my personal story of trauma into the dissertation, and I expressed my reluctance to do so in terms of not wanting the dissertation to be about me and rather keep the emphasis on my participants. I did not want to disrupt a balance that I believed needed to tilt much more towards an emphasis on the participants than on me. However, this debriefer pushed me on this and questioned if my reluctance was not at least in part very parallel to the story SJ had shared. SJ was in a class when she witnessed a classmate very bravely sharing a story of being sexually assaulted. However, a few moments later, another student remarked in a small group discussion that the student who shared the story was clearly just trying to get attention and sympathy. This incident was very present for SJ after she experienced sexual assault and gave her pause in feeling that she could share what happened with others for fear of having similar reactions to what she witnessed in the classmate’s response.

My debriefer asked me if I was struggling with the same – hearing the voices of how others react to “me-search” and being reluctant to share my own story, as a result. As he posed that question to me in the middle of Starbucks, I was instantly paused. Yes,
that was exactly what had happened. I had chronicled the external voices and discourses that challenged how my participants were able to make sense of and give voice to their traumas, and yet failed to see the parallel process that was impacting my own trauma voice in the process.

I have never been ashamed or afraid to speak of my trauma and the details about what happened to me, but I was reluctant to bring it to this project, because I had a myriad of collected voices in my head denouncing researchers who engage in narcissistic projects of their own experiences. And my motivation to want to avoid those critics in this project had much less to do with my own ego than it did with concern for an invalidation of my participants’ voices. Lauren said that her motivation to participate in this study was so that others experiencing something similar would know they were not alone. As she told me, “This experience right now, talking with you, is very much about letting people know that they're not alone.”

Many other participants echoed this sentiment. Throughout the process, I was humbled to have these strong individuals sharing their stories of struggle and resilience with me. And, I believed, as they did, that this project could help others. Thus, my fears were rooted in my desire to avoid anything that would diminish the co-constructed work that had come out of the lives of these very brave individuals’ experiences.

As I reflect on this as a researcher, I know it means I have to continue to stretch myself to model comfort with the personal in the academic. And, in terms of research more broadly, this also emerges as a reminder to continue challenging the possibility or desirability of objective research. Emerita professor of psychology and education, Dr.
Lee Knefelkamp is reported to have said that all theory is autobiographical (Jones & Abes, 2011). I would parallel this statement in saying that all research is autobiographical. We make decisions that are informed by our experiences - there is no way to disconnect one from the other.

Another element of this study that caused me to reflect was connected to the topic area and how others were going to arrive to it. I encountered a few minor bumps across the course of this research that arrived very unexpectedly to me. I had prepared myself for challenges in this study because of the content of the stories I would learn about – an emotional preparedness to sit with people who have experienced profoundly difficult situations in their lives. However, I had not prepared myself for the fear that others around the study would have about the content of the study. I came to learn relatively early on that the “t-word” (trauma) was a scary and disarming one for some of the decision makers around this study.

One particularly salient reminder of this for me came through a research grant to which I had applied. I learned early on in the process that there was plenty of funding available and I was optimistic about being able to secure funding from this source, particularly because my project so strongly aligned with the overall purpose of this grant. In the end, I did not receive the grant and some of the rationale I learned about behind that decision was troubling to me. Notably, it seemed the decision had been made because there was not sufficient evidence to suggest that this study would not inflict psychological harm to participants. I learned that the deliberations cited the fact that my primary recommender for the grant had not discussed how I would not inflict
psychological harm to participants in their letter to support my application. I must note that nothing in the criteria or application information suggested anything about needing to address this type of concern, nor did the grant committee reach out to me or to that recommender for clarification at any point in the process. I would learn that another individual had been consulted about my application and that this person provided a detailed list of reasons they felt the application demonstrated sufficient evidence that the risk of harm to participants was minimal. And, naturally, the Institutional Review Board ultimately made the determination of minimal risk of harm in approving my study. However, the grant was denied, and I cannot help but think that a large part of that decision was fear-based rather than fact-based about the nature of the study.

What this example illustrated to me was the simultaneously critical need for and resistance to research that investigates aspects of life that we would rather pretend do not exist. This is consistent with what other trauma scholars have noted around resistance to hear about life in its raw forms (e.g. Herman, 1992/1997). Yet, it makes me aware of the reality that this resistance and reluctance may be a significant deterrent to research that needs to continue to happen to better understand the experiences of college student survivors of trauma.

**Strengths and Limitations**

As with all research, the current study has both strengths and limitations. One important consideration in the current study is that it is unique to a particular group of individuals at a particular time who are informing an understanding of this topic in a particular way. Charmaz (2014) makes it very explicit that constructivist grounded
theory “assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (p. 17). Thus, the findings presented in this study are inherently subjective and informed by both the subjectivities of participants and researcher in iterative processes of co-construction.

Another limitation in the current study is a notable lack of gender diversity across participants. I actively tried to recruit male participants to the study, but found difficulty doing so. And, when I thought I was close to having a more balanced sample in terms of gender, I had two male-identified participants decide to opt out of the study (one before consent, and one after the first interview). I attribute this difficulty to many things. First, studies suggest men are at decreased risk of traumatization in the form of PTSD relative to women (Breslau, 2009). However, I believe this finding to also be connected to broader patterns of gender socialization that make it difficult for men to be vulnerable and discuss topics that might be perceived as demonstrating weakness (Edwards & Jones, 2009), which may have reduced the number of men who would have wanted to participate in this type of study.

A significant strength of this study was connected to data collection methods. There were multiple interactions (e.g. three interview model with two activities in between, and ongoing member checking across interviews and a formal member checking of results after data collection) with participants embedded in this study across different data sources (e.g. interviews, visual maps, written responses). This allowed for a strong degree of trustworthiness in this study, as participants had multiple opportunities
to clarify their experiences as well as contribute to co-construction of results and emerging findings.

Another strength of this study was the ability to capture broad definitions of trauma. Some may consider this a limitation and suggest it would have been better to offer a clear and narrow definition of trauma against which to measure. However, drawing on critical trauma theory (e.g. Stevens, 2009, 2011), I feel very strongly both from a conceptual and political standpoint that trauma needs to be understood in broad and subjective interpretations. Given that, holding space for broad definitions of trauma to emerge in this study was a significant strength that contributes to future trauma theory in important ways.

Finally, an important strength of this study emerged as a product of the study design, particularly through the use of constructivist grounded theory and situational analysis as complementary methodological frameworks. The combined capabilities of these approaches allowed for data collection, analysis, and theory generation that was able to accommodate complications and differences. The emerging theory presented here was able to account for participants’ experiences of different intensities across traumatic meaning making and resulting nuances which demonstrates a strong model with broad application potential.
Conclusion

*What we call the beginning is often the end*

*And to make an end is to make a beginning.*

*The end is where we start from.*

(excerpt from T.S. Eliot’s (1943/1971) *Little Gidding*)

As I bring this dissertation work to a close, I am drawn to Eliot’s words as a meditation on the work presented here. The beginning is an end. The end is where we begin again.

These words have perhaps resonated for me as I conclude this work for both obvious and less obvious reasons. Certainly, these wise words help to capture my affective and intellectual attachments to this project. Although I am certainly bringing closure to this study, I am simultaneously left full of questions and new lines of exploration as a result. This ending will be the beginning of projects and thoughts and inquiries to follow.

However, Eliot’s words have equally resonated with me for deeper and more symbolic reasons. These words appear in *Little Gidding*, a poem inspired by Eliot’s experiences as an air raid warden during the German Blitz of England during World War II (Reynolds, 2006). And, so, I cannot help but see the traumatic origins of these words for they not simply capture the oscillations of a research study, but the continued ebbs and flows and ups and downs of the traumatic process, also. The roller-coaster of trauma, as Aria described it.
In the spirit of endings as beginnings, I will find conclusion where this began with Beth’s metaphor of trauma as the sapling that endures the hurricane. It continues to grow as a tree, but with a small bump that stands as a marker of what has been endured and what has changed. The emerging theory presented here captures those elements. First, orienting systems that existed prior to trauma shaped participants’ experiences and meaning made of trauma. Then, trauma produced many unique circumstances that resulted in identity-related negotiations and understandings across three predominant identity sites (the psycho-physical, the relational, and the negotiated). The outcome of this process was twofold. First, participants arrived on the other side of this process with a trauma lens that informed their understandings of self and self in the world moving forward. Second, and perhaps most importantly, trauma was a part of who participants defined themselves to be, but not the full self-identification. In other words, there was a bump, but the tree remained a tree.

The question in front of those of us working in higher educational contexts either as educators, researchers, or policy makers is how to ensure space for that kind of resiliency to emerge. For many participants in this study, supportive people and policies in the higher educational environment fostered their continued growth and meaning making after trauma. For others, however, people and policies added additional complications to the journey.

Trauma is a present condition on university campuses, embedded in the experiences of college students (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Read et al., 2011). This we know to be true. As the results of this study suggest, we also know that the world looks
different to those who have endured trauma, a perspective also acknowledged by other literature (e.g. van der Kolk, 2014). Our future work in higher educational environments must include developing the capacity to better see and understand the trauma students endure and to nurture the possibility of resilient development after trauma as an aspect of the holistic growth institutions aspire to foster in their students.
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Appendix A: Sample Interview #1 Protocol

Below is a sample of topics to be covered in this interview.

Interview #1:
*Approximate Length:* less than one hour  
*Focus:* Building rapport

- Review research protocol (go over scope of the study and what to expect)
- When did you graduate/when will you graduate/current class year?
- Can you tell me a bit about why you were interested in being a participant in this study?
- I’d love to spend some time in this first interview just learning about you and your process getting to college
  - Take me back to your time in high school, how did you decide you wanted to go to college?
  - How did you decide where you wanted to apply to college?
  - How did you make your decision of where to attend college?
  - What were your first weeks of college like?
  - What most stands out to you about that time of your life?
- What about your childhood? What kind of kid were you? What did you enjoy? What were you looking forward to in the future?
- Is there anything else you want to add?
- Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix B: Sample Interview #2 Protocol

Below is a sample of topics to be covered in this interview.

Interview #2:

*Approximate Length:* 90 – 120 minutes  
*Focus:* Trauma narrative, aspects of self-identification, how spent time pre and post trauma

- Summary of some of what we discussed before and what was represented in your visual  
  - (tell me about how your visual works)

- Tell me about your life (in college or shortly before) prior to your traumatic experience in college. What were you doing/how did you spend your time? What was important to you? What activities/involvements/interests were significant to you? What people and relationships were important to you?

- When you think about your life story, what would you mark as “significant experiences” that have changed you in a profound way? (i.e.: is trauma a provocative experience?)

- To the extent you want to share, can you tell me about your traumatic experience?

- Tell me about your life after your traumatic experience in college. What are you doing? What is important to you? What activities/involvements/interests are significant to you? What people and relationships are important to you? What, if anything, has changed across any of these domains?

- What was significant to you in your recovery? How was this impacted by being in college? What was challenging? What was surprising? What was significant?

- If I met you before your traumatic experience, how would you have described yourself at the time?

- How do you describe yourself now? i.e.: Who are you? (Are there variations of this answer at different point in time? Different contexts?)
• How would you define trauma? What has contributed to you defining and understanding trauma in that way? Is this different from how others define trauma? (Those near you and broader messages and discourses, too). Did you have this definition/know what trauma was/given it much thought before your experience?

• Is there anything else you want to add?
• Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix C: Sample Interview #3 Protocol

Below is a sample of topics to be covered in this interview.

**Interview #3:**

*Approximate Length:* 90 – 120 minutes  
*Focus:* Follow-up on emerging themes, roles and social identities, trauma meaning-making

- Summary of some of what we discussed before and some preliminary findings – any reactions to any of these??
- Follow-up on visuals #1 & #2
  - What is at your core – how has this been constructed? Where did these elements come from?
  - What is salient and what is not?
  - Will this look differently down the road? (i.e.: are you who you want to be/what do you want to be?)
  - When you think about yourself as someone who has lived through trauma, what difference (if any) does it make that you are [gender/race/SES/nationality/etc.]
- How have social identities impacted your experience of trauma? How has trauma impacted your experience of social identities?
- What are some of the significant roles you play in your life (ex: son/daughter, friend, partner, employee, etc.)? How have these been affected by your experience as a survivor? How have these roles impacted your experience of trauma?
- How do you think about your traumatic experience? How do you make sense of what happened to you?
  - Are there particular people/places/things/events/experiences that have contributed to this?
- What is your day-to-day experience as a survivor of trauma?
- How has your traumatic experience impacted the way you interact with the world? How have your interactions with the world impacted your experience of trauma?
- How has your traumatic experience impacted what you see in your world/life? Do you see anything differently as a result of your experience of trauma? How
has what you see/pay attention to in the world impacted your experience of trauma?

• How do you “name” your traumatic experience? How do you “name” yourself as someone who has experienced what you have? Do you? What labels do others assign to you and to your experience?

• If you could go back to meet with yourself before your traumatic experience occurred, what do you know now that you wish you could tell yourself then? What difference might that make?

• How do you think you are perceived by others?
Appendix D: Visual/Writing Activity #1 Protocol

Map #1:

*Focus:* Pre-trauma self

1) **Create a visual model of your identity pre-trauma.** You may (…or may not – it is entirely up to you!) want to consider some of the following elements as you consider how you self-identified prior to your college trauma experience:

   - **Core:** What personal attributes and qualities were at your core? What did you consider as your “core sense of self”?
   - **Social Identities:** What social identities played a role in your self-definition? (e.g. race, gender, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, language, sexual orientation, ability, etc.)
   - **Social Roles:** What social roles played a role in your self-definition? (e.g. brother/sister, daughter/son, co-worker, friend, etc.)
   - **Salience:** What aspects of your identity were most salient/which were not? How and why were they salient?
   - **Context:** What contextual influences were important in terms of your identity? (e.g.: family, experiences, media, sociocultural influences, etc.)
   - **Other aspects that were important to your identity that are not captured above**

2) Once you have completed your visual, please **write a response (as brief or as long as you would like) to the following 2 questions:**

   - What is noteworthy to you in your visual representation?
   - How does your visual representation work?

3) Once completed, please **submit a scanned copy or photo of your visual and a copy of your written responses to Tricia** via email
Appendix E: Visual/Writing Activity #2 Protocol

Map #2:

Focus: Post-trauma self

1) Create a visual model of your identity post-trauma. You may (…or may not – it is entirely up to you!) want to consider some of the following elements as you consider how you self-identified after your college trauma experience:

   • Core: What personal attributes and qualities are at your core? What do you consider as your “core sense of self”?
   • Social Identities: What social identities play a role in your self-definition? (e.g. race, gender, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, language, sexual orientation, ability, etc.)
   • Social Roles: What social roles play a role in your self-definition? (e.g. brother/sister, daughter/son, co-worker, friend, etc.)
   • Salience: What aspects of your identity are most salient/which are not? How and why are they salient?
   • Context: What contextual influences are important in terms of your identity? (e.g.: family, experiences, media, sociocultural influences, etc.)
   • Other aspects that are important to your identity that are not captured above

2) Once you have completed your visual, please write a response (as brief or as long as you would like) to the following 2 questions:

   • What is noteworthy to you in your visual representation?
   • Thinking about this model and your previous model together, what do these models capture for you connected to your traumatic experience?
   • What is missing in these models about your traumatic experience?

3) Once completed, please submit a scanned copy or photo of your visual and a copy of your written responses to Tricia via email
Appendix F: Recruitment Email

Subject Line: Request to participate in research study

Dear [],

My name is Tricia Shalka and I am a doctoral candidate in the higher education and student affairs program at the Ohio State University. I would like to request your participation in a study that I am conducting for my dissertation research under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna. The study investigates the impact of trauma on aspects of identity and self.

The criteria to participate in this study includes the following:
- You must be a current college student or a recent graduate (up to 5 years since graduating)
- You must have experienced something traumatic while in college

Additionally, I will be seeking to put together a diverse sample of participants. Thus, I will seek to identify participants who in addition to meeting the above criteria also represent a range of social identities and types traumatic experiences.

If you meet these criteria and are interested in participating in the study, your participation would include 3 interviews and 2 short mapping/writing activities between interviews. These interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. Interviews can be completed in person or via phone. The first interview would be less than an hour in length and serve mostly to review the study with you and begin initial conversations about your college experience. The second and third interviews would each be about 90 to 120 minutes in length and focus more specifically on your experience with trauma and how it has impacted your sense of self and identity. Writing activities will depend on how much time you wish to take, but can take as little as 10-15 minutes each to complete.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you would be free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. No incentives are being offered for participating in this study. As part of your participation, you would choose a pseudonym that would be used as an identifier on your transcript. All data collected through the study will be kept secure.
If you are interested in participating or have any further questions, please let me know. I would be happy to discuss additional details of the study with you!

If you are interested in participating and do not have additional questions, please use the following link to complete a pre-screening survey for eligibility for the study: [SURVEY LINK]

Thank you for considering this opportunity!

Sincerely,
Tricia Shalka
[CONTACT INFORMATION]