

## Stories of Family Context at a Regional Campus

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### Abstract

Participants wrote open-ended essays about family context to explore meaningful themes stemming from the family of origin. The purpose of the study was to illustrate and classify formative thematic commonalities in the family-focused narratives of Appalachian/rural college students at a four-year regional campus. Results indicated family stories of hardship. Underlying themes of coping and resilience also emerged. The severity of the hardship themes and the advantages of quantifying these themes are discussed.

### Introduction

You can take the child out of the family but you cannot take the family out of the child. That is the premise of this investigation; at the very least, historical family influence is an autobiographical and cultural remnant which remains in adulthood as a memory; at the most, themes of family context are the preponderant of the individual's very identity. In either case, for better or worse, family context is the environmental bedrock of our origin. Sarangi (2006) considered the family the central micro institution that is the fundamental social institution of our lives, one "that mediates the individual and the social, with identifiable structures, functions, and hierarchies" (p. 403). This investigation examined family context by asking regional campus students at a four-year university in Appalachia to write about their families in a meaningful and formative way. The task was guided by the projective hypothesis (Frank, 1939) that states when asked to choose something (in this case a family context) from the full repertoire of personal experiences people reflect and draw from significant feelings, needs, prior conditioning, and thought processes. The writing assignment required student-authors to make sense of family context by drawing from the full spectrum of their past experiences; projecting, presumably, a valued theme.

Historically the essays began as a course assignment. When strong negative themes emerged over time it warranted a formal investigation to assess the extent of the consistent reported hardships. The goal was to quantify the prevalence and types of themes in order to better understand student backgrounds, values, and experiences from the strongest socializing agent in life - family. Such information would be valuable to educators for the purposes of better managing and serving students.

### **Defining Family Context**

Family context is a set of circumstances and conditions, often generated by the environment or by family members, which in-part defines the people within it. Family context has the ability to change the people within it by providing some level of self- and family definition or meaning. It is therefore non-trivial and formative. Additionally, family context often dictates life chances. Life chances are the opportunities to pursue social mobility through education, economic advancement, to secure medical care and preserve health, to marry and have children, to have material goods and housing of desired quality, and so forth (Steinberg, 2011). Family context is a socializing agent with identifiable structures and functions (Sarangi, 2006) that impact the lives of the family members over time. Johnson and DelPrete (2010) described family context as long standing patterns of interaction among family members which exist on a wide spectrum of shared history and engagement. For the purposes of this investigation it is assumed that thousands of interactions result in the generation of meaning. In turn, themes will be reported as historically important and subsequently meaningful.

Family context is found in a myriad of literatures to address manifold environmental influences. For example, it has been long established that hostile family interaction styles enacted by parents negatively influence children's problem solving ability reared in those families (Forgatch, 1989; McColloch, Gilbert & Johnson, 1990; Rueter & Conger, 1995; Vuchinich, Vuchinich & Wood, 1993). Child compliance and dependency has been shown to be impacted by family context, specifically reinforcement schedules and rules set by responsive parents (Wahler, 1997). Family environmental factors in families affect preschoolers' motor development, often thought to be the domain of genetics (Venetsanou & Kambas, 2010). Broader findings show neighborhood contextual factors on parenting behavior (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001), supporting Bronfenbrenner's contextual perspective. The breadth of family contextual

research is extensive and overwhelming: adjustment (Halpern, 2004), classic attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958, 1969, 1973, 1980), problem solving (Cassidy, 2009), maltreatment (Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, & Atwood, 1999; Main & Hesse, 1990), or the transmission of culture (Yoshida & Busby, 2012; Semenova, 2002). This study was open-ended with regard to specific factors and family context, allowing participants to choose what they considered important, naturally illustrating the connection to their lives whether positive or negative.

### **A Model for Context**

The parameters of context help define human experience in short-term (e.g., home court advantage) and long-term (e.g., work ethic) capacities. Context remains difficult to define because its nature is fluid, far reaching, and can be as diverse as individual perspective. For the purposes of this investigation context was built upon bioecological theory due to its deep social context roots. It was applied to the student author's family story as a guideline for understanding the deep and interrelated influences between one's family and other systems: personal or personality, interpersonal, institutional.

Bronfenbrenner's contextual perspective, also known as bioecological theory, posits that the individual is a component of the environment instead of a separate entity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Furthermore, every organism, especially children, develop within ecological systems that support or stifle its growth. Bioecological theory posits that development occurs through processes of regular, two-way interpersonal interactions between the developing child and the immediate daily environment as well as more unique environmental experiences which periodically influence the organism. Bronfenbrenner considered such multitude contexts critical defining features of the embedded individual. These layered contexts address the interlocking systems that form the most intimate to the broadest and least intimate environmental influences: microsystem (direct face-to-face interactions between child and others and most intimate), mesosystem (linkages between two or more microsystems), exosystem (linkages between two or more settings), macrosystem (cultural factors including values and customs), and chronosystem (the effects of time on subsequent developmental systems and least intimate). This investigation was largely confined to the microsystem and mesosystem levels but the general principles of Bronfenbrenner's contextual perspective generally set

the parameters of family context. Bioecological theory functioned as the guiding parameter for the student author's writing process regarding context and should bridge the gap between these stories and their thematic connection to the broader educational system.

Regional culture within Bronfenbrenner's framework would be considered a macrosystem and one that would include beliefs, value systems, and influences broader than the immediate family. This is important to the current investigation because it sampled student-participants from a regional campus located in Appalachia which were emulated by family units. The unique characteristics and heritage of Appalachian history and cultural heritage are well documented (Abramson & Haskell, 2006; deMarrais, 1998; Drake, 2001; Jones, 1994; Obermiller & Maloney, 2002; Toepfer & Dees, 2008; Williams, 2002) but some evidence suggests Appalachian/rural groups have resisted attempts to classify them (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999), making this study a unique foray into a difficult to penetrate culture. The results could provide singular insights into familial experiences of regional-campus college students from Appalachian/rural settings.

## Methods

### *The Family Context Assignment*

The Family Context essay started as a class paper in the Human Development and Family Studies course *Interpersonal Relations and the Family*. The assignment was intended to help students understand context through the prism of Bronfenbrenner's contextual perspective by applying personal life experiences to course content. The open-ended writing assignment allowed students to choose any context they desired with the additional task of explaining why their chosen context was important and formative. As a method writing was the ideal vehicle for the open-ended model and simultaneously offered robust evidence of its power to solidify and organize the author's thoughts. The highly structured nature of both writing and talking create a narrative that generates understanding and meaning (Singer, 2004; Smyth et al., 2001), provides definition and a sense of control over emotion and experience (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), and integrates memories with self-understanding (Blagov & Singer, 2004).

Family context was defined as a non-trivial and formative set of circumstances and/or conditions, often generated by the environment, the family, or individual family members which in-part defines the people within

it. Numerous examples of context and family context were provided (e.g., race/ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, historical events, family vacations, the home court advantage, cohort effects, the Great Depression, etc.) over the course of a lecture. The related concept of life chances, as an important antecedent and product of family context, was also defined and explained. Participants studied the components of context with an emphasis on familial context as detailed in this study.

### *Participants*

Participants were undergraduate college students at a regional campus of a large Midwestern University located in Appalachia. They were asked to participate by volunteering essays written for a class assignment. The assignment required they write about a *formative family context*. In return for offering these assignments for the study they received extra credit at the end of the semester. An alternative assignment was offered for those who did not wish to submit the writing assignment. Participants were informed about the nature of the study including confidentiality procedures and the option to withdraw. A small percentage of students from each class submitted a paper.

Data was collected from students between 2009 and 2012. The greatest return was in 2009 with 11 of the 32 final cases included in the final analysis. To get a snapshot of the subject pool much of the demographic data was drawn from the 2009 University's Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness database. A total of 6.25% (2 cases) were male and 93.75% (30 cases) were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 with a mean of 24.5-years. The total sample was composed of 92% Caucasian, 6% African-American, 1% ( $n=3$ ) Hispanic, and 1% ( $n=2$ ) who self-identified as "other." Enrollment was comprised of a large proportion of first generation college students.

### *Instrumentation and Scoring*

The *Scoring Rubric for Family Context Stories* (SRFCS) instrument was constructed in-house to qualitatively score the essays for thematic content (see Appendix A). The instrument provided 22 potential themes, 19 predetermined, and 3 for "other" options, all of which could be scored as positive, negative or neutral. The rare neutral scores were dropped from the analysis as determined by the two raters. Categories included job/career, life chances, various relationships, socio-economic status, War/Military, Winnings, Family tradition/influence, abuse, loss, poverty, substance abuse,

enjoyment, growth, and success. In most cases these could be scored as either positive or negative depending on participant experience.

Each essay was assigned a case number by the primary investigator, identifying information (e.g., cover page, name, names of persons within the body of the essay) removed, and thereafter assigned to two raters for blind review. The raters were trained to use the SRFCS and scores checked by the primary investigator. Raters read the essays, placed context themes in the appropriate category, assessed the themes as positive or negative, and listed key words for each case.

### *Inter-Rater Reliability Analysis*

A Cronbach's (1951) alpha coefficient analysis was conducted for inter-rater reliability. The reliability analysis focused on case-scores for positive versus negative themes as scored by the two trained raters. Reliability scores ranged from .71 to .98. Specifically, the two raters agreed as follows: primary positive 0.98, primary negative 0.98, secondary positive 0.93, secondary negative 0.71. Alpha scores indicate high internal consistency.

A potential shortcoming of the reliability should be considered. The Cronbach Alpha is extraordinarily high in 3 of 4 reliability analysis. This could be considered a good result, and most likely is, but Tavakol and Dennick (2011) suggest if scores are above .90 it may be due to items that are redundant and are testing the same fundamental question. This may be the case as the instrument used for this investigation was a so-called "in-house" product to glean qualitative themes from the essays. Future studies would benefit from an item-analysis and improved instrument scrutiny. Additionally, a more rigorous process might include separating the writing assignment from the class, more thorough background information, and more robust demographic data including a more diverse sample.

## **Results**

Results took two forms: frequencies of positive versus negative themes and key words. Of the positive and negative themes there were three categories: 1) Total scores comprised of all positive and all negative themes generated, 2) Primary themes that were scored as central to the essay, and 3) Secondary themes that were scored as relative to or of lesser importance to the primary theme.

Each paper generated at least two themes with an average of 2.97 themes per case, a range of 2-5 themes across all three categories, and a sum of 95 total themes from 32 essays.

*Table 1: Frequency & Percent of Themes*

Number of Themes	Frequency	Percent
2	10	31.3%
3	15	46.9%
4	5	15.6%
5	2	6.3%

Frequencies of positive and negative themes were analyzed for the three categories and are shown in Table 2. The near 1:1 ratio remained consistent across the three categories with negative themes always outpacing the positive by a small margin.

*Table 2: Themes by Positive, Negative, & Rank Hierarchy*

Total Themes		Primary Themes		Secondary Themes	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
46 (48%)	49 (52%)	26 (45%)	32 (55%)	18 (49%)	19 (51%)

Key words, as determined by two raters, were wide and varied across cases but there were strong clusters of similar terms. Key words appeared in the writing and were simply identified by the raters as important to the story. The complete list of key words (including "family") is as follows, by case: 1) Biological Father, Real Dad, Family, Mother; 2) Depression, Family, Grandparents; 3) Education, Tradition, Family; 4) Divorce, Remarriage, Family, Choices; 5) Emotion, Work Ethic, Relationships, Self-Confidence; 6) Depression, Family, Kid's Treatments; 7) Son, Sister, Family, Emotions; 8) Reading, Baby, Family, Escape; 9) Money, Family, Self-Sufficiency, Education; 10) Money, Want, Guilt; 11) Alcoholic, Marriage; 12) Adjustment, Family, Responsibility; 13) Family values, Traditions, Growth, Teaching; 14) Education, Family Tradition, Change, Goals; 15) Divorce, Children, Single-Parent; 16) Family, Choices, Togetherness; 17) Great Depression, Money, Death; 18) Marriage; 19) Commitment, Quitting, Divorce, Jobs; 20) Alcoholism, Mother, Choices, Sister, Recovery; 21) Religion, Holidays, Mother, Children; 22) Sports, Family, Leadership; 23)

Money, Values, Motivation, School; 24) Great Depression, Frugality, Parents, Risk; 25) Poverty, Family, Interdependence, Addiction; 26) Addiction, Family, Divorce; 27) Health, Victim, Disease, Blame; 28) Health, Diabetes, Family, Dependence; 29) Family, Time, Responsibilities, School; 30) Family, Communication, Mental Health; 31) Judgmental, Poverty, Abuse, Food stamps; 32) Car Crash, Health, Grandmother, Blame, Poverty.

Notable clusters of 3 or more included: Family = 18, Parent/Father/Mother = 5, Children/Babies = 5, Divorce = 4, Choices = 3, Poverty = 3, Marriage = 3, Education = 3. These clusters indicate consistent content themes across participants.

## Discussion

The overall themes of family context are almost evenly split with 46 (48%) respondents being positive to 49 (52%) negative. Initially this could be mistakenly interpreted in one of two ways as a 1:1 ratio, with negative themes being slightly more common. First, it could appear the results are no different from chance, similar to the probability of flipping a coin 32 times (the number of cases) where the results would approximate a 50-50% outcome. Unlike chance occurrences where there are only two outcomes, participants subjectively drew from their entire history of life experiences, choosing significant and non-random events to report. Second, the 1:1 ratio may mislead one into thinking this indicates a "balanced" experience between positive and negative family life. Because this is the first study to examine positive-negative family context themes with written stories, therefore denying the direct thematic comparison with other samples, insights are best derived from other interpersonal-based literatures.

Compared to other social science evidence on family related themes of positive verses negative experiences the 1:1 ratio found in this sample looks not like balanced family experiences but something more alarming. The robust literature on married-couple communication and conflict (where conflict generally approximates negative themes) is an important starting point because it delineates a threshold for destructive family experiences; destructive being defined as the point of divorce. Carrère and Gottman (1999) examined affect in marital conflict in 124 newlywed couples over a 6-year period and were able to predict divorce based on a 3-minute exchange between husband and wife in their lab. Similar to the current investigation, couples in the Carrère and Gottman study were asked to discuss the context of when they first met. The results allowed the researchers to predict marital stability rates with 90% accuracy 6-years later. They could predict



whether couples would stay together or divorce depending on a ratio of positive to negative affect during the exchange. Other research in the literature provides ratios that quantify the specific number of positive to negative exchanges between couples (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Gottman, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, & Carrère, 1998). The base-ratio required 5 positive for every 1 negative interaction, a 1:5 difference. The 1:5 threshold was necessary for a married couple to maintain stability and remain married. Put another way, the 1:5 negative:positive ratio indicated couples that were barely keeping the marriage together, generated high levels of negative emotion, and therefore risked divorce. Conversely, couples that flourished showed a negative:positive ratio of 1:20. These couples exhibited 20 positive interactions for every 1 negative. The thresholds of these ratios are far higher and significantly more positive than the 1:1 ratio shown in the current investigation. This propensity suggests a severity of the negative family experiences which appear in this sample and generates questions about the deleterious possibilities. Granted, the research has a different focus, but it suggests the Appalachian/regional family background of the participants had formative experiences that were highly negative. If the present ratio is taken at face-value it warns of the potential for instability. There is another alternative.

Numerous author's have examined the concept of post-traumatic growth as the result of hardship that help people stand more firmly against problems than those who have not had to manage significant difficulties and trauma (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2002; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998; Tennen & Affleck, 1998; Updegragg & Taylor, 2000). Hardship has great value because psychological resilience is partly learned. The exploration of post-traumatic growth based on family context could provide a great deal of information. In fact, one of the participants in this study directly addressed this when she commented on her upbringing with an alcoholic mother. She stated, *"It [mother's alcoholism] has made me a stronger person as well. I am thankful to my mother for making me who I am today. She showed me who I don't want to be as I get older and who I need to be. When I have children I do not want them to go through what I did as a child."* This sentiment was common. Many of the participants talked about a difficult historical family context that acted as a springboard for positive change. Opportunities for post-traumatic growth may be present but they will need support. The idea is compelling but at this juncture is only conjecture.

Finally, the Appalachian student literature echoes these themes of hardship. According to Hand and Miller-Payne's (2008) research, teaching Appalachian students means working with those who lag behind economically, culturally, and academically. According to the thematic hardship shown in this study, such students may have additional and legitimate needs. College may be the most significant "life-chance" some of these students will have to capitalize upon. But they may lack the fundamental tools to do so. Additional resources may be required to supplement, at the very least, a lack of social support and cultural capital unavailable from the family of origin. In more extreme cases, counseling services may be recommended if students are coping with severe hardships like substance abuse, abandonment issues, or abuse. Practically speaking, students with backgrounds of hardship like those found in this study may require more authoritative guidance. Examples of authoritative guidance may include, but are not limited to, peer mentoring, tutoring, empowerment, increased advising, individual student strength identification, and efforts to increase belongingness on-campus. This study suggests that half of students with a similar background may benefit from improved relationships with the university. A holistic approach, as viewed through the lens of family context, may be more critical with a non-residential population that attempts to fulfill their needs off-campus, only to find their families unable to do so. If, as London (1989) describes first-generation students, they are "delegates" of the family, it is the business of educators to understand the context that partially defines them and which they inexorably represent.

### *Future Directions*

Establishing whether or not the 1:1 ratio stands up to further inquiry while quantifying the thematic ratio of other populations is the necessary next step. Future research could extend the findings of this investigation by comparing a sample similar found here to another type of group: non-college students of similar age, incarcerated individuals, students at a private/residential or non-Appalachian college. A quantitative component could be useful for a detailed look at variables associated with post-traumatic growth as a mediator of growth in some but not in others (personality variables, resiliency, emotional resources, defense mechanisms, parenting styles, etc). The results of this investigation constitute a beginning. Are these college students better off because of their backgrounds of hardship? Do hardship experiences continue to restrain

them and if so, why? How, if at all, do these themes inform us about who may experience post-traumatic growth as opposed to destructive outcomes. Is success or retention influenced by backgrounds of reported hardship? What is the ratio of a highly positive family context? These are all questions in wait of further evidence. The current investigation has opened the forum for such discussions. It has provided new insights with a new method for thematic investigation of family context.

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**Appendix A**

**Scoring Rubric - Family Context Stories**

**KEY WORDS/THEMES:** Assign key words for each case. Print in this box below:

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**Scoring:** When appropriate place the +/n/- notation in the R (rate) column for each theme. Rank order the themes by either "Primary" (P) or "Secondary" (S). Most cases will have a single primary theme and a short secondary list.

	R	P Primary	S Secondary	Notes
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<b>POSITIVE or NEGATIVE</b>	1. <b>Job/Career</b>			
	2. <b>Life Chances*</b>			
	3. <b>Relationships</b> (Use this line for "other relationships")			
	• 4. Divorce			
	• 5. Marriage/Remarriage			
	• 6. Family (Birth, vacations, painful road trips, etc)			
	7. <b>SES</b> (Income, Social Standing, Insurance, Medical, etc)			
	8. <b>War/Military</b>			
	9. <b>Winnings</b> (Lottery, ownership, scholarships, birth, etc)			
	10. <b>Family Tradition/Influence</b> (Right-passage, etc)			
	11. <b>Other:</b>			

<b>NEGATIVE</b>	12. <b>Abuse</b> (Neglect, Physical, Sexual, etc)	X		
	13. <b>Family Dysfunction**</b> (Not abuse or Divorce, other)	X		
	14. <b>Loss</b> (Job, friend, purse, limb, etc)	X		
	15. <b>Poverty</b>	X		
	16. <b>Substance Abuse</b> (Alcohol, Caffeine, Nicotine, etc)	X		
	17. <b>Tragedy</b> (Car accident, illness, injury, death, etc)	X		
	18. <b>Other:</b>	X		



<b>POSITIVE</b>	19. <b>Enjoyment</b> (Hobbies, leisure activities, etc)	X		
	20. <b>Growth</b> (Personal improvement, gain, etc)	X		
	21. <b>Success</b> (New Job/Career, Degree, Activity, etc)	X		
	22. <b>Other:</b>	X		

**\*Life Chances:** The opportunities that exist for a social group or an individual to pursue education and economic advancement (social mobility), to secure medical care and preserve health, to marry and have children, to have material goods and housing of desired quality, and so forth.

**\*\*Enabling, codependency, scapegoating, etc.**

**Theme Total:** Write the number of positive vs. negative themes below. Circle the PRIMARY theme.

Positive:	Neutral:	Negative:
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### Autobiographical Information

**Dr. Steven Toepfer** is an Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Kent State University-Salem. He enjoys teaching a variety of classes and challenging his students in the process. His research focuses on intentional activity and well-being, family cohesion, and the merits of multi-method assessment. He has published a book and a variety of papers in professional journals on these subjects. He lives in North-East Ohio with his wife, two irrepressible but stalwart boys, and a fabulous cat named FattyLumpkin (stoepfer@kent.edu).

**Elizabeth Horner** is a junior at Kent State University-Salem, she is majoring in Human Development and Family Life Education. This is her first research paper. Her plans include participating in future research and a career in the education field. She lives in North-East Ohio with her husband and son along with two cats and three dogs.